



# Notebooks and Letters

## Prologue

### Prologue

*Time it was and what a time it was*

-oooOOOooo-

July 21, 2007

The woman with the long, curly brown hair clutched the book to her chest as she left the bookstore. Since she bore little resemblance to the girl who had played her in the movies, there was no chance that she would be recognized, but nevertheless she did not linger, and quickly made her way home. There she placed the book on the bookshelf with the six others. She would read it later when she had some time to herself. She sighed. This was the last one – it was finally over. Now perhaps the whole thing would die down.

-oooOOOooo-

*A time of innocence*

*A time of consequences*

-oooOOOooo-

Two years later

“Mummy?”

Hermione looked up and smiled at her daughter, although she had a pretty good idea of what was coming.

“You said we would read the story when I was older. I think I’m old enough now.”

“I think you are too, Rosie. Come sit by me and we’ll read the books together. Then we’ll talk about them.”

It took several weeks as they read during the evenings, but eventually they neared the end of the last book. Her daughter’s mood had gradually changed during the story, from excited and happy early on, making comments about the foolish antics of the characters, to more somber and worried as the story turned darker, and now she was quite agitated.

*‘I’ve had enough trouble for a lifetime.’* Hermione read with a tone of finality in her voice.

“Is that it?” the young girl asked anxiously. “Is that how it ends?”

“No, there’s an epilogue,” Hermione answered. “It’s entitled, ‘Nineteen Years Later’.” She paused and waited for the bright girl to recognize the incongruity. It didn’t take long, as Rose’s eyes narrowed immediately.

“But that’s not possible!” she objected. “It hasn’t been that long yet.”

“You’re right, it hasn’t,” Hermione responded, but said no more, letting her daughter draw the obvious conclusion.

“But that means – she made it up?” the child concluded in surprise. Hermione smiled at the offended tone in her daughter’s voice, a tone she knew would have been present in her own voice at that age, at the thought that someone would put something in a book that wasn’t true. She nodded in confirmation.

“But, what about the rest of it? Did she make that up too?”

“Parts of it. The first four books were pretty accurate.”

Rose thought back over the story, then looked up at her mother with a sly grin. “So, you really did go to the ball with Viktor Krum, and you really did snog him?”

Hermione put on an affronted air. “I went to the ball with him, yes. You don’t need to know about the other part.”

“Mum!”

Hermione laughed as she dropped the act and reached an arm around her daughter, hugging her to her side. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t a ‘scarlet woman’ or anything. It was just a simple goodnight kiss. I was so surprised I didn’t even kiss him back.”

The young girl folded her arms across her chest in satisfaction. Children were never comfortable with the thought of their parents kissing anyone other than each other. “Good.” Then she frowned again. “And what about ...”

“Like I said, a lot of the last three books were fabrication,” Hermione interrupted to head off this line of questioning. “But yes, your mum and dad did kiss other people on occasion.”

Her daughter wasn’t satisfied with that response, but put it aside for now and turned her questioning to one of the other things that had been bothering her. “So in the sixth book when you were acting so weird?”

Hermione nodded, glad that the girl had picked up on that. “You’re right, that wasn’t really me. The story got further and further from reality as it went along.”

“So the last book ... how much of that was real?” Rose demanded.

“Well, we did spend a large part of the year roaming around the countryside living in a tent,”

Hermione allowed. “But a lot of it was changed. We weren’t as clueless as she made it seem, and a lot of the things that seemed to just happen to fall together at the end we actually figured out earlier. Many of those ‘convenient coincidences’ were actually the result of research and hard work.”

“Why?” her daughter asked. “Why did she change it so much?”

“Well, she had her own ideas about how the story should end,” Hermione explained. “She was quite fixated on fate and had this grand messianic story in mind. She wanted to make it seem like things just happened to us without our understanding what was going on or being able to control it. Plus, from the point of view of telling the story, you don’t want to give some things away until the end, so she couldn’t put them in any earlier or it would have ruined the surprise ending.” Rose frowned for a bit as she thought about this explanation. “Basically, if something sounded ridiculously implausible or impossibly contrived, it probably was made up.”

“Like what?” the inquisitive girl wanted to know.

Hermione thought a moment and came up with a particularly egregious instance. “Well, for example, a person can’t learn to speak Parseltongue just by hearing someone else speak it a few times. It’s a talent you have to be born with, or have the power transferred to you somehow.”

Hermione could see that this satisfied her daughter somewhat, but not completely, and continued. “As far as the romance was concerned, she had this idea of a fairy tale ending, where the beautiful princess sits in her castle and waits for the hero to rescue her and save the day. And she wanted one big happy family at the end. It rarely happens that way in real life. Love develops gradually as you get to know each other and begin to care for each other.”

“But how was she allowed to just ignore the way it really happened?” Rose complained. “Couldn’t you make her tell the truth?”

Hermione sighed. That decision had been made years ago, and she wasn’t sure if she would change it even if she could. Perhaps it was better that the whole world didn’t know how their lives had turned out. When they were preparing for the Horcrux hunt she had been trying to think of possible sources of cash. Moving her parents to Australia and setting them up with completely new identities had depleted most of her family’s funds. Ron’s family certainly didn’t have any money to spare, and contrary to what some people thought, Harry wasn’t about to inherit a fortune when he turned seventeen. He had plenty of Galleons in his vault in Gringotts, but extended traveling would be expensive.

She had come up with the idea that Harry’s story might have some value as a muggle fantasy book. After contacting several book publishers she finally had one express some interest. They informed her that they were considering a story from an unknown author that was very similar to her tale. This author was a good storyteller but weak on details. In subsequent meetings they finally agreed to use Hermione’s notes as source material. In return they gave her an advance of 5000 Pounds and a small percentage of future royalties. Harry had trouble believing that anyone would be interested in his story, but gave his OK when Hermione convinced him they had nothing

to lose. Ron thought the whole thing amusing but also went along with it.

The author adjusted her storyline and the first book, about Harry's early life and first year at Hogwarts, was published soon after. It was successful, and the next three books came out in relatively short order. At this point the author balked. The books were selling beyond anyone's wildest imagination, and suddenly a lot of money was at stake. And she didn't like the way Hermione's tale had turned out, as it was contrary to her initial ideas for the story. There was a much larger time gap between the publication of the fourth and fifth books as these issues were argued. Finally Hermione gave in and let her do it her way, realizing that the contract they had signed would lead to that result anyway if they fought it in court. From then on the author used her notes only for the basic plot and technical details.

"When we sold the story to them we gave her the right to tell it whatever way she deemed fit," she explained to her daughter patiently. "We needed the money and had no idea that it would sell as well as it did. You have to admit that she turned it into a very entertaining story. And with it selling so well the small percentage we receive has turned into a nice income for us, which has come in quite handy over the years." *A nice income indeed*, Hermione thought wryly. A few percent of hundreds of millions of Pounds was still quite a lot of money.

The young girl conceded that point, but was still unhappy about not having the real story. Knowing that she was about to become inundated with a barrage of questions, Hermione interrupted with another suggestion to quell her curiosity. (And do what she had intended all along.)

"Look, why don't I tell you the way it really happened and that should answer most of your questions, OK?" Rose nodded and settled back on the sofa while Hermione left the room, returning in a few minutes carrying a stack of notebooks and a box of letters. She sat back down beside her daughter, lifted the first notebook from the pile, and brushed the dust off of it. On the cover bold letters in the handwriting of a young girl proclaimed, 'The Journal of Hermione Granger – Book 1'. Hermione smiled as she recalled how full of herself she had been at that tender age, to choose such an ostentatious title for her diary. She opened the notebook to the first page.

-oooOOOooo-

*Long ago, it must be  
I have a photograph*

-oooOOOooo-

September 19, 1990

*Today I learned that I am a witch.*

Hermione flipped quickly through the pages, pausing on one that read:

*I've been reading about the wizarding world in my new books. One of the most important events in recent history seems to be the defeat of a wizard referred to only as 'You Know Who' or 'He Who Must Not Be Named'. He must have been truly dreadful if people won't even write his name down. In any case, the most remarkable part of the story is that he was defeated ten years ago by a baby! I don't understand how that could be possible, and no one really knows how it happened. But the evil wizard was destroyed and the baby lived. In fact, they refer to him as The Boy Who Lived. Strangely enough, no one knows what happened to the boy, whose name is Harry Potter. The most interesting part is that he is my age, and if he's still living in Britain and comes to Hogwarts he'll be in my class. I can't wait to meet him!*

A bit later there was a picture of her eleven-year-old self in her new wizarding robes and hat, standing between her parents.

"Mommy, is that you?" her daughter asked excitedly. "And is that Grandma and Grandpa?" Hermione looked sadly at the picture of the happy girl with her proud mother and father. Their relationship had been strained by the events of the war, and they had not been close since. They had found a new life in Australia, and were it not for wanting to see their granddaughter, they would not have had much contact with Hermione these days.

Hermione was brought back from her musings by Rose's giggle. "You really did have big teeth back then, Mommy."

"Hush child," she scolded with a friendly smack to the smiling girl's shoulder. "You just be glad you didn't inherit them from me." She continued flipping through the pages, pointing things out to her daughter, describing the terror of facing the troll in the bathroom that Halloween night, and the fast friendships that had arisen from that incident, Harry's first quidditch match, the growing suspicions about the Philosopher's Stone, and the final quest as the trio fought their way through the obstacles and challenges. She dwelled for a moment on the memory of her final parting with Harry after she solved the potions riddle, when she had thrown her arms around him, telling him he was a great wizard, and her unknowingly prophetic words. *"there are more important things – friendship and bravery and ..."*

"Friendship and bravery and ..." Those would become apt words indeed to describe the trio over the next few years, with that unspoken 'and ...' hanging in the air, as time waited to discover what other feelings might develop between Hermione and the two boys.

Hermione picked up the second notebook and reviewed with her daughter the year that followed, beginning with the panic she felt when Harry and Ron didn't make it aboard the Hogwarts Express, the crash of the flying car into the Whomping Willow, (skipping over the embarrassing crush she had had on Gilderoy Lockhart), the mystery of the Heir of Slytherin and the Chamber of Secrets, the polyjuice potion brewed in a deserted bathroom.

“Mommy, why don’t you have any pictures of what you looked like as a cat,” teased the impish young girl. Hermione laughed and swatted her again, thanking the stars that Colin had not been allowed into the infirmary with his camera. Then she noted the large gap in the dates in the notebook that corresponded to the time when she had lain petrified in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing, followed by the entry describing how she had run into the Great Hall and jumped into Harry’s arms. Afterwards she had gone back and filled in Harry and Ron’s description of the parts she had missed.

The following year had been dominated by dementors and the fear of the escaped Sirius Black, but for Hermione it had also been the year of the time turner and the year her two best friends had stopped talking to her for almost two months. The notebook was filled with careful notes of where and when she had been with the time turner, so as not to inadvertently reveal the secret.

It also told the heartrending story of a lonely girl who desperately missed her best friends, and feared that their abandonment of her would be permanent. But they had eventually been reconciled and the year ended with the astonishing turnaround tale in which the alleged traitor Sirius Black had been revealed to be the victim while the rat Scabbers was unmasked as the real traitor, Peter Pettigrew.

During the summer before fourth year the next journal included some musings by the now fourteen year old girl about how her feelings might be changing toward her two male friends. At this point it was mostly speculation on how each one might be as a boyfriend, but in the section that described the dress robes she had purchased she was clearly hoping that one of them would escort her to whatever event required the formal apparel.

The description of the Quidditch World Cup was obviously written by a non-quidditch fan, as more space was devoted to Mr. Crouch’s treatment of his house elf than to the match. The dominant topic, though, was the demonstration by the former Death Eaters and how it might be related to Harry’s hurting scar, his vision, and the appearance of the Dark Mark.

The year that followed was the most eventful yet. There was a buildup of excitement with the arrival of the flying Beauxbatons carriage and the Durmstrang boat, but it all went crashing down in dismay when Harry’s name came out of the Goblet of Fire on Halloween night. From then on it was an anxious recounting of Hermione’s efforts to keep Harry alive through the three tasks, interrupted briefly by the drama of the Yule Ball.

“Mommy, you looked so pretty!” gasped her daughter when she spotted the picture of Hermione in the periwinkle gown, on the arm of a scowling Viktor Krum. As the figures in the photo moved, Hermione kept shooting nervous glances off to the side, likely toward Harry and/or Ron, while Viktor looked at her, annoyed that he wasn’t receiving her full attention.

“It certainly would have been nice if a couple of other boys had thought so,” sighed Hermione.

“Oh, I think you know that they did,” Rose objected with a gleam in her eye. “At least one did.”

The year ended with Hermione’s horrified account of the third task, her panic at the thought that

Harry was gone when he disappeared at the end, and her immense relief when he reappeared, so overwhelming that it had made her dizzy. Relief that quickly turned to anguish when she discovered the terror that he had been subjected to, and the gut-wrenching news that Voldemort had been resurrected.

Finally, Hermione opened the fifth notebook, which began on the first day of the summer break between fourth and fifth years. This was where the story began to significantly diverge from the published account, and where she would now take up the tale for her daughter.

-0x0x0-

July 1

*Today I kissed Harry.*

-oooOOOooo-

*Preserve your memories  
They're all that's left you*

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## Notebooks and Letters Taking the First Steps

### Chapter 2, Taking the First Steps

*“Bye, Harry!” said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek. – final page of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, Year 5

July 1

*Today I kissed Harry.*

It had been an unusual car ride back home from the train station this year. Normally, Hermione was eager to tell her parents about the things that had happened during the school year, recounting what she had studied in her favorite classes and sharing with them amazing tales of the adventures she and her two best friends had undergone. Of course, she usually toned these down a bit. She had managed to describe how the three of them had solved the mystery of the Stone and the traps protecting it during their first year to defeat the wizard that was seeking it without mentioning that Harry had killed a professor in the process. Likewise, her petrification by a basilisk during second year had been brushed off as a minor setback, not at all life threatening, along the way to deducing the mystery of the diary, the Monster of Slytherin, and the Chamber of Secrets. The account of how the escaped prisoner Sirius Black had turned out to be innocent and actually Harry's godfather had somehow glossed over her nearly having her soul sucked out by a dementor.

But this year she had been rather subdued, telling them a few details of the end of the tournament, and that Harry had won. She didn't mention that one of the champions had died. She didn't reveal that Harry had been kidnapped at the end and forced to participate in a ritual that had restored Voldemort, the evil wizard who had killed his parents, to life, or that the Minister of Magic had refused to believe his story. There would be time later to carefully reveal that information.

She also didn't tell them that Viktor had invited her to Bulgaria, but instead responded to her mother's question about him that nothing had come of that relationship. Her parents already knew

that Viktor had taken her to the Yule Ball, and that he had subsequently had to ‘rescue’ her from the lake during the second task of the tournament. She allowed her parents to conclude that her restrained manner was due to the ending of her first teenage romance. She was fairly certain that they were quite relieved about that, not being comfortable with her dating someone three years older than herself, and were therefore perfectly willing to let the subject drop and not press her for details.

In addition, they were distracted by what had happened to her front teeth. With everything that had happened since she’d ‘fixed’ her teeth the previous fall, she had almost forgotten about it. She had nervously explained that they had been damaged in a magical accident, growing to more than a foot long, and that when they were restored they had come out looking normal. They eventually accepted the new look, and her father even joked that magic had saved them an expensive orthodontics fee.

During dinner she had turned the conversation more towards Harry and how she had helped him learn and practice spells for the tournament. How amazing it had been that he had won despite the handicap of being so much younger and less experienced than the other champions, and what an accomplished wizard he was becoming. By the end of the meal her parents were starting to get the feeling that they had been concerned about the wrong boy.

Now Hermione was in her bedroom, sitting at her desk and had officially begun the latest volume of her journal. She leaned back in her chair and regarded what she had just written. *Now what?* she thought to herself. *Now do I write about how wonderful he is and that I’ve finally found my true love? How trite that sounds.* She sighed, then bit her lower lip in concentration as she pondered how to describe the thought process that had led her to this point.

She had gone into the year wondering if one of her two male best friends might become something more. Of the two, she had always been closer to Harry. They shared a similar background, and so tended to think alike and respond alike to situations. Even when they disagreed, they could each understand the other’s point of view. Such was not the case with Ron, who just couldn’t comprehend some of the things that were most important to her. But Ron could be sweet, and made her laugh, and had several times shown a protective instinct towards her, and she certainly cared for him.

However, Ron had taken himself out of the running early on, with his abandonment of Harry after his name came out of the Goblet of Fire, and his infuriating criteria for picking a date to the Yule Ball – take the best looking girl he could find. The fight he had picked with her at the ball itself, going into a jealous rage when she turned up with Viktor, and the insulting accusation he had made – Hermione felt that he was implying that she was obviously so unattractive that the only possible reason Viktor would want to be with her was to get an advantage over Harry in the tournament – had been the final nail in the coffin. And it was just as well. The two of them simply annoyed each other too much. A relationship with him would be a battle of constant criticism, each of them unhappy with the other’s perceived faults. She also had a hard time handling Ron’s ogling of pretty girls while he was with her, Fleur being but the most blatant example.

On the other hand, Harry had developed a crush on Cho Chang, and hadn’t given Hermione any

evidence that he had any such feelings for her. Despite the fact that they had spent more time together this year than any other, and had clearly grown closer, he may have firmly placed her into the ‘only a very good friend’ category. If she wanted any more from him, she would have to open his eyes to other possibilities. She hoped that her farewell kiss at the station had been a start.

Ironically, her relationship with Viktor had clarified her feelings for Harry. She had been mortified when she discovered that she was considered to be ‘the thing that he would sorely miss’. Honestly, they had just gone on one date together! But then it occurred to her that if that was supposed to make them a couple, if she was that important to him, and she cared MUCH more for Harry than for Viktor, what did that say about her relationship with Harry. Why weren’t *they* dating? After all, Rita Skeeter certainly thought that they were.

So, as the year progressed she began to think about her feelings for Harry in this light. He was certainly the most important boy in her life. Did that mean she loved him? But might it be only in a non-romantic sense? The night of the third task had settled it. The ache in her heart when she thought that he might be dead revealed her true feelings. She could not bear the idea of her life without Harry in it. She loved him.

A wry grin crossed Hermione’s face as she realized that she had already filled several pages in the new notebook.

But how to proceed? She wanted to write him a letter right away, but what would she say? *Dear Harry, I suppose you’re wondering why I kissed you goodbye today. I was wondering if you liked me, you know, as a girlfriend?* No, she just couldn’t see herself being so forward. The kiss on the cheek had been just the right initial gesture. Somewhat suggestive but still within the bounds of friendship. She *could* write and ask him if he had got home OK, and if his relatives were treating him all right. That would be safe.

But as she began to compose the letter, she realized that she didn’t have a way to send it to him. It occurred to her then that Hedwig always seemed to turn up when she wanted to send a letter to Harry. That interesting connection certainly was worth pondering sometime. Hedwig seemed to like her a lot. Did that mean something? Now that she thought about it, Crookshanks liked Harry, too. Certainly far more than he liked Ron. And Harry got on well with the half-kneazle, again unlike Ron. But for now she had other thoughts on her mind. Pushing away the quill and parchment, she rose and left her room, seeking the advice of her mother.

Returning downstairs, she found her parents in the living room watching the telly. “Hi,” she said as they looked up. “I, ah, thought I’d get a little something to drink. Do we have anything in the fridge?” Her mother looked up and noticed Hermione’s nervousness – the way she was shifting uneasily and playing with the hem of her shirt – and had an inkling that there was something else on her daughter’s mind.

“Oh, let me help you find something,” she replied as she rose to her feet. “Dan, should we bring anything for you?”

“Hmm? Oh, sure, whatever you’re having Em.”

Once in the kitchen, Emma Granger opened the refrigerator and withdrew a pitcher of unsweetened lemonade as Hermione got three glasses from the shelf. Before she handed her daughter the beverage container, she paused and gave her a quizzical look. “Something on your mind, Honey?”

Hermione took a step back, startled that her mother had caught on so quickly. Glancing up at her face, she saw a look of understanding in her eyes and shrugged. Then she hesitantly carried the glasses over to the table and sat down, while her mother poured the lemonade and then sat down beside her.

“Mom, is it possible to love a boy without being in love with him?” Hermione blurted out.

Emma caught her breath and forced herself to remain calm. While she had guessed what it was that was troubling her daughter, she hadn’t expected it to have gotten this serious yet. She raised her hand to her head and ran it through her hair a few times. While she had the same curly brown hair as her daughter, she wore it cut shorter. She was also fighting a battle with some encroaching gray threads, and decided that this topic was likely to generate a few more.

“This isn’t about Viktor, is it,” she stated, stalling for time as she gathered her thoughts. Hermione shook her head. “Harry?” Hermione’s head shot up, and Emma had her answer even if her daughter had tried to deny it. Knowing her mother already had figured it out, Hermione nodded somberly.

“It’s possible, but not all that common,” Emma began carefully. “Usually if your feelings are that strong they move on to something deeper. If you remain just platonic friends, you’ll probably move apart as you meet and fall in love with other people.” Hermione’s eyes widened and she grimaced. “That thought bothers you?” Emma noted. “The idea that you might eventually drift apart?” Hermione nodded again, her stomach clenching.

“Do you remember the movie, *When Harry Met Sally?*” Emma inquired. Hermione nodded again, a small smile finding its way to her lips. That movie had been famous for the scene in which the female lead loudly faked an orgasm in a diner. While Hermione had been frightfully embarrassed by that scene, she had also admired and envied that character for having the audacity and self-confidence to pull that off, being quite timid and unsure of herself at the time she watched it. She had never dreamed that she would one day be in a position to compare her relationship with a boy to the one depicted in the movie. The key theme had been exactly the question she was currently pondering – was it possible for a man and a woman to feel affection for each other in a brotherly/sisterly way without it eventually turning into romantic love? For that movie, at least, the answer had been ‘no’.

“I think that eventually you have to talk to him about it,” Emma suggested. She tried not to smile at the look of panic that flashed onto Hermione’s face. “Find a way to broach the subject, gradually feel him out as to whether he might be willing to consider the idea. Even if he balks initially, you’ve planted the seed. You can back off and let him know you’ll still be good friends. But he’ll know that you’d be receptive, at least, if his thoughts turn in that direction eventually. Boys don’t usually figure these things out as soon as girls do.”

Hermione was now nodding thoughtfully, so Emma continued. "I saw that goodbye kiss this afternoon." She smiled again as her daughter flushed lightly. "Perhaps you can give him more hints like that and see what his reaction is."

Finally Hermione managed a response. "One problem is that he's got a lot of other things on his mind right now. He saw ..." She paused, trying to work out how much to say. "He had a pretty awful experience at the end of that tournament. I didn't want to alarm you before, but one of the other contestants was killed at the end." Emma gasped, and clutched her glass tightly, but didn't say anything, hoping her daughter would continue to confide in her. Seeing that her mother wasn't going to freak out, Hermione continued. "It turned out that the whole reason Harry was in the tournament in the first place was that it was an elaborate plot to kidnap him. He and the other boy were captured and taken away, where the other boy was killed. Somehow Harry managed to escape. He even brought Cedric's body back with him." Tears were now trickling down her face. "Oh, Mum, it was horrible! Why do things like that have to happen to Harry? He's such a good person!"

Emma moved to pull her crying daughter onto her lap, hugging her and rubbing her back. Once she had calmed down she made a suggestion. "We can talk more about this later, but I think that he would need affection and comfort even more now. Perhaps you can invite him over for a visit. Do you know how far away he lives?"

"He lives with his aunt and uncle in Surrey," Hermione replied as she sniffed away the last of her tears. "And that's another part of the problem. They hate him and resent that he has to live there in the summer. He's certainly not going to get any comfort from them."

Emma frowned as she realized that this situation was more complicated than she had first thought. "Well, the first thing to do is let him know that you care about him and are there for him if he needs anything. But no pressuring him Hermione," she finished sternly.

Hermione managed a guilty smile. "You know me pretty well."

Emma smiled back and nodded, then gestured to the telephone. "Why don't you ring him up? You could just say you were thinking about him and wondering if he made it home all right, and then see where the conversation goes."

Hermione mentally berated herself. Living for so many months in the wizarding world caused her to forget about such simple means of communicating. Here she had been fretting about not having an owl and Harry was just a phone call away. She also reflected that her mother's suggested choice of topics had closely matched her own ideas, and felt more confident in her planned course of action.

Emma took Dan's lemonade out to the living room as Hermione got in touch with directory assistance for the Dursley's phone number. Unfortunately, things didn't go very well after that.

"Hello, Dursley residence."

“Hello, may I speak to Harry please.”

“What! Why do you ...? I mean, there’s no Harry living here. Who is this?”

“This is Hermione Granger. I’m a friend of Harry’s from school and ...”

“WHAT!! How dare you? You freaks stay away from here. We don’t want anything to do with your kind. Don’t you dare call this number again.”

Hermione winced as she heard the receiver slam at the other end of the line. *So much for that idea!* She decided to return to her room and update her journal while she pondered what to do next.

She hurried back upstairs without saying anything to her mother, who was sitting quietly on the sofa in the living room next to her father, trying, no doubt, to assimilate the shocking things Hermione had just told her. They would talk again in the morning, she knew. When she re-entered her room, to her surprise she found Hedwig perched on the back of her chair looking at her as though to say, *‘Well, you needed me here, let’s get on with it.’*

*Dear Harry,*

*Hedwig has to be the smartest owl ever! Somehow she seems to know when I want to send you a letter and shows up here to take it to you. I just wanted to check to see that you got home all right and how you were doing with your relatives.*

*Actually, I’m worried about you. You’ve been through a horrible experience and you need to have someone to be there for you. I know you tend to bottle things up inside, but if you need someone to talk to, you know I’ll listen. I care about you Harry, a lot. You’re one of the most important people in my life. I was so scared during the tasks of the tournament that I might lose you, especially when you disappeared after the last one. I don’t even want to think about what my life would be like without you in it.*

*Harry, I’m so sorry that you have to be cooped up there this summer, and I wish there was something I could do about it. Remember what I said when we left the station? I meant it, Harry. My mum suggested that I invite you to come visit us. What do you think? I know I’d love to have you here and I’d certainly enjoy spending the time with you. And I promise not to make you do any homework while you’re here. (Unless you want to.)*

*By the way, in case your uncle says anything, I tried to call you earlier, but he hung up on me. I hope I didn’t get you into trouble. Perhaps it would help if you told him that my family is ‘normal’ and he doesn’t need to worry about us doing something odd when we come to pick you up, if you think a visit might be possible.*

*Well, that’s all for now. Hedwig is looking impatient. Hope to see you soon.*

*Love from,*

Hermione reread the letter carefully, concluding that she had been subtle enough but had also let him know that he was very important to her. She had also managed to remind him of her goodbye kiss at the station without explicitly bringing it up. All in all, a pretty good start, she thought.

She did fret for some time about how to close. She had always ended her letters ‘Love from’ without giving it a second thought. But now she worried that Harry would read something into it. She sort of wanted him to and sort of didn’t. It was very confusing. But if she changed it, he might notice that she signed it differently and read something into that. And she didn’t want that either. Finally, she decided to just leave it and hope for the best.

Harry sat in his room, staring out the window into the darkening sky, wondering where Hedwig had got off to. She had suddenly demanded to be let out about an hour ago, a bit before his Uncle Vernon had come up to yell at him about a phone call from one of his freaky friends. He wondered if Ron had attempted to call him again. Or possibly Hermione.

Truth be told, his female best friend had been on his mind all day. The two of them had grown closer this year than they had been in the past. He had certainly spent more time with her this year. Last year he and Ron had avoided her for nearly two months because of the Firebolt incident and Scabbers/Wormtail, something that he was rather ashamed of now. And the year before that she had spent a large part of the second term in the Hospital Wing, first because of the botched Polyjuice potion and then because she had been petrified. But this year, she had devoted herself to him, helping him learn spells for the tasks in the tournament day and night. When even Ron had abandoned him, she had been there for him. He was firmly convinced that he would not have survived the year without her. One might even go so far as to say that she had been more important to him than Ron was. That thought reminded him of the second task of the tournament. While he would have been embarrassed to death if it had happened, it would probably have been more accurate if Hermione, rather than Ron, had been the person that he would ‘sorely miss’ that he had to rescue from the lake.

This was also the year that it had become blatantly obvious that she was a girl. The way she looked at the Yule Ball had been quite an eye-opener. And male friends didn’t kiss you goodbye. If he closed his eyes he could still remember the feel of her soft lips against his cheek. He wasn’t sure exactly what to think about that. The possibility of a boyfriend-girlfriend type of relationship with her hadn’t really occurred to him before now. It was not that it was an unappealing prospect. She had a lot of qualities that he would want in a girlfriend, now that he thought about it. She wasn’t as pretty as Cho, but then, just how much did he know about Cho? She was pretty and she played quidditch. However, after what had happened to him in the past week Harry had begun to reevaluate what things were really important to him.

But it might also be awkward – he wasn’t certain how a couple went about moving from a ‘just friends’ relationship to a dating one. If something like that were to happen with him and

Hermione, he would want to be careful not to mess up what they already had. On the other hand, it appeared that she was already in some sort of romantic relationship with Viktor Krum. Hadn't he invited her to visit him in Bulgaria?

Harry's musings were cut off by the appearance of Hedwig at his window, with a parchment attached to her leg. Opening it up he immediately recognized Hermione's handwriting. After scanning it once making sure there was no emergency, he read it through carefully, frowned in thought, and read it through again. It included the kinds of things he expected to hear from Hermione, but there were a few unexpected items as well including some that suggested that her feelings for him might be stronger than 'just good friends'. He decided he'd better sleep on it before he wrote her back.

The following morning, Harry carefully composed his reply.

*Dear Hermione,*

*I was so glad to get your letter yesterday. Believe it or not, I had been thinking about you when Hedwig arrived. And before I forget, no, I didn't get into trouble about the phone call. Uncle Vernon just yelled a bit. I wasn't sure if it was from you or not, because he just went off about my 'freaky friends'. I think my relatives will pretty much try to ignore me this summer. If I turned invisible they would be thrilled.*

*Like I said, though, I've been thinking about you. I really appreciate what you did for me this year, spending so much time with me and helping me learn stuff for the tournament. I'm afraid I've often taken you for granted and not let you know how much your friendship means to me. I'm also sorry for not standing up for you more often when you argue with Ron, especially that time at the Yule Ball. I can't believe I was such a berk that I didn't even dance with you that night. I think dancing with you would have been loads better than it was with Parvati. I really did enjoy all the time we spent together this year. You're one of the most important people in my life also.*

*I would love to come and visit you, but I'm not sure if I'd be allowed. I'll write a note to Dumbledore and ask. I don't think that my aunt and uncle would mind. They'd be glad to be rid of me. When would be a good time for you? Is your family taking a trip this summer? I also recall that you mentioned going to visit Viktor.*

*As far as the other thing, I'm doing pretty good. I try not to think about that night too much. Mostly I'm nervous about what's going to happen next. I'm going to start taking the Daily Prophet to try to keep up with what's happening. Do you have any ideas about what will happen next?*

*Even if the visit doesn't work out, please keep in touch. I promise to write more than I've done in the past. You mean a lot to me.*

*Yours,*

*Harry*



Harry nodded in satisfaction with what he had written. He had managed to get across the message that he cared for her without going overboard about it. And he'd also worked in an innocent query about her relationship with Viktor. He quickly wrote a note to Dumbledore and gave both parchments to Hedwig.

"Take the one to the Headmaster first, then the one to Hermione. You can wait and rest there a while if she wants to send another letter."

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 2

*He wrote back! Oh, this is just what I was hoping for. I'll need to clear up things about Viktor though. I wonder if that's what he was trying to get me to do. I'm going to show his letter to Mum to see what she thinks. I immediately began another letter, but the look Hedwig gave me convinced me to wait until tomorrow to send it.*

-000-

*Dear Harry,*

*I'm so happy to hear from you so soon, and that everything's going well. I was also thrilled to read what you wrote. I enjoyed spending all of that time with you as well. I feel that we're closer now than we've ever been.*

*I guess I should have been clearer in my letter. No, I'm not going to visit Viktor. I told him the day he left that I just wanted to be friends with him, but we're still going to keep in touch and write to each other. Mum and Dad don't have any firm plans for a holiday this summer, so we're pretty flexible. If it works out, it would be nice if we could get together for your birthday. I bet you've never had a real birthday celebration, have you? Let me know as soon as you've heard from Dumbledore.*

*I think that's a great idea you had to get the Prophet. I'm getting it too, as you know. I've been doing some other reading as well ...*

-000-

*Dear Hermione,*

*Bad news. Dumbledore said I have to stay here for most of the summer because it's safer. He said I might be able to go to the Weasley's later. It sounded from what he wrote that you'd be going there also. Do you know anything about that?*

*If you wanted to send me one of those books you mentioned I think I'd enjoy reading it too. It would be fun to read a story about wizards and dragons. I've never heard of a hobbit before, though. There's nothing much to read here, since I only get things that Dudley's tired of and he's*

not much of a reader. And yes, I've started on my homework. Are you serious about checking over my essays when I've finished them? If so, I'll send them along with Hedwig. Still nothing happening here, and no news either. It's kind of frustrating. I'm so glad I have you writing to me.

Yours,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

I'm so disappointed that you won't be able to visit. I was really looking forward to seeing you. I had another idea though. There's no reason I can't come to visit you, right? Mum could bring me over and we could have an outing. I'm sure that Dumbledore doesn't expect you to stay inside the house all summer. We've checked on the map and LittleWhinging isn't too far of a drive from here. If you're interested, let me know and I'll have Mum call your aunt or uncle. She's pretty good at dealing with snobby people. (Don't tell your relatives I said that!)

I did get an owl from the Weasleys. They seem to think that I should spend the whole rest of the summer with them. Honestly, I do have a family of my own! Since I stayed at Hogwarts over the Christmas holiday, I haven't seen them much since last summer. So I politely declined, and told them I might come for a visit at the end of the summer, especially if you were there. (I thought a hint along those lines might help – I mean, you're the one who needs 'rescuing' from your relatives, not me.)

I'm sending along the first book – actually, it's kind of an introduction book before the main story. I think you'll like it. And of course I'll check over your homework. I'm glad you're writing to me too, and even happier that you're enjoying my letters. I know I tend to go on a bit sometimes.

I miss you.

Love from,

Hermione

-000-

Dear Hermione,

Your idea sounds brilliant! (I know, what else should I expect from the cleverest witch of the age?) I had no idea you lived close enough to drive over. Do you have any idea of what you'd want to do? Would your mum drop you off and pick you up later or would she stay with us? (Either way would be fine with me, though I wouldn't object to having some time with just the two of us.)

I agree that you should be with your parents this summer. You know how much I envy you and Ron for your families. You definitely haven't had much time with them this year.

*Don't tell Ron, but I stayed up halfway through the night reading your book. It's really interesting. I found it intriguing that Gandalf uses a staff instead of a wand. (Oh no, I'm starting to discuss books with Hermione Granger. What am I getting myself into? I'm afraid you must be starting to rub off on me.)*

*I'm including my Transfiguration essay and my Charms essay with this letter. I'm dreading the Potions one so I'm saving it for last, and I don't think you want to see what I wrote for Divination.*

*Thanks for your attempts to get me out of here early, but I'm not very hopeful. I get the feeling that there's something else going on that no one's willing to tell me. Sirius wrote me a letter and hinted as much. Ron wrote too, but didn't really say anything. Your letters are the ones I most look forward to, though. And I don't mind that you go on about things. It's part of what makes you who you are, and I happen to like who you are.*

*I miss you too.*

*Yours,*

*Harry*

Emma Granger smiled at the squeal she heard from her daughter's room, followed by the pounding sound of running feet coming down the stairs. It sounded like she'd be having a phone call to make, and an hour-long drive in the near future.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 15

*What a great day! Mum had no trouble convincing Mrs. Dursley to let us take Harry out for the day. Harry certainly appeared to be very happy to see me, and even hugged me back enthusiastically. Once we had Harry in the car, Mum suggested that we go to the nearby mall. Her idea was that we could buy Harry some nicer clothes, then have lunch, and go to a movie in the afternoon. Harry was hesitant at first, but the two of us were quickly able to persuade him. He didn't want us to pay for him, but the only money he had was wizarding currency. Mum said that was fine, that he could give me the Galleons, which would help us both out, because we could avoid the exchange fee at Gringotts. So we traded 500 Pounds for 100 Galleons, and he had plenty of money to spend. We negotiated a bit before we agreed that Mum would pay for lunch and Harry would pay for the movie tickets. Then we proceeded to buy him a completely new wardrobe.*

*Harry let me pick the movie, so I chose the new Disney movie 'Pocahontas'. The best part was when he put his arm around me during the sad part. I thought about holding his hand while we were walking around the mall, or during the movie, but I decided that would be too forward. The most amusing part of the day was when we were shopping and we got to the underwear section.*

*"Boxers or Briefs?" Hermione grinned at Harry as they finished putting the last of the socks he*

had picked out into the shopping cart. Her grin transformed to an all out giggle as Harry opened and closed his mouth looking like a guppy, then turned bright red. He quickly grabbed two 3-packs of plain white cotton briefs and tossed them into the cart, then turned to hurry away. But Hermione stayed there and after looking around for a few seconds, grabbed another 3-pack of colored briefs (one red, one blue, one black) in the same size and added them to the cart.

“Hermione, I can’t wear those!” Harry moaned, attempting to remove her additions to the cart and return them to the shelf.

“Nonsense. They’ll go perfectly with those tee shirts you just picked out,” Hermione explained as she stopped him.

“Hermioneeeee,” he whined. “What will the other guys think?”

“Do you mean to tell me that none of your dormmates wear anything other than plain white underwear?” she countered.

“Well, Dean does ...” Harry began, then stopped and glared at her. “Hermione, this isn’t fair. How would you feel if I insisted on picking out underwear for you?”

Hermione merely raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Oh? Do you want to pick out underwear for me?”

“No! That’s not the point,” Harry objected as his face turned red again. “I ...”

“Look,” Hermione interrupted. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll buy a set of red underwear and I’ll wear it to the Gryffindor quidditch matches this year and you’ll wear these red ones with your red tee shirt also. It’ll be a way of showing house spirit.” Harry tried to object again but realized that he was fighting a losing battle as Hermione and Emma moved to the junior women’s lingerie section of the store. Even though Hermione teasingly offered to let Harry help them pick something out, he adamantly refused to even enter the department, instead busying himself looking at some camping equipment a few aisles over. However, Hermione noticed him cast several covert glances at the bright red bra and knicker set lying in the shopping cart as they made their way to the checkout counter. She smiled contentedly to herself at the success of the ploy to get him thinking of her in a very different way than he was accustomed to.

All in all we had a wonderful time. And not only did I get to spend the day with Harry, my mum had a chance to get to know him as well. And at the end of the day when we dropped him back at his aunt and uncles he thanked us and said he had a wonderful time and really enjoyed spending the day with me. Then he kissed me on the cheek!

Mum asked me if I would really have let him help me shop for underwear, and I admitted that I had been bluffing. But I was quite certain that he wouldn’t take me up on it. Then she agreed that it had been a clever way to get him to think of me as a girl. She also said she liked him a lot and thinks we would be a good match.

-000-

Dear Hermione,

Well, there was some fallout from our outing the other day. I want to assure you that I liked it a lot, but some other people weren't too thrilled. I just got a message from Sirius saying that I'm not allowed to go out like that any more. Dumbledore says I have to stay closer to the house. Sirius was sympathetic about it though. Said he would have done the same thing. He said that spending a day with a pretty girl is always worth getting into trouble for.

They continue to keep me in the dark about what's happening. Dumbledore's orders, from what I can make out. It's getting me really annoyed. I mean, I'm the one who faced him, right? Aren't I entitled to know what's going on? Ron added a note complaining about having to do a lot of cleaning. I get the impression that he's not at the Burrow. Wherever they are, he must be at the same place Sirius is. Do you know any more about that?

Thanks again for taking me to the mall. It's really nice having clothing that fits, and shoes that aren't taped up. I haven't got up the nerve to wear some of the things I bought yet, though. (There followed a line that was scratched out that Hermione guessed had said, 'How about you?') Lunch was also nice and going to the movie with you was great. I'd like to do that again some time, but I get to pick the movie. Perhaps when things calm down and I don't have so many restrictions we can go to another one together.

I'm ready for the next book. I can't believe the first one ended like that, with them splitting up. I'm worried about Frodo and Sam but I also have a bad feeling about what's going to happen to the others.

Hope I get to see you again this summer somehow. Will you be going to visit Ron next month?

Yours,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

I agree with you completely about being kept in the dark. I would be annoyed too. You certainly deserve to know what's going on if anyone does. And I don't understand how it could be so much safer hanging around your aunt and uncle's house than going to a mall. Do you know if there are special wards of some kind on the house? Do you want me to write to Dumbledore and ask him?

I accept your offer to take me to a movie the next time we get an opportunity. No horror movies, though. I might get scared and end up sitting on your lap. Hmm, perhaps that wouldn't be so bad after all. You'd keep me safe, right?

Mrs. Weasley has owled me again and asked me when I was going to join them. If you're going to

*be there too I'll definitely go as well. It would be nice to visit with Ron and Ginny. But I'm going to stay here at home at least through the end of this month. Right now I'm thinking perhaps the last two weeks before school starts.*

*I'm sending you the second book but you've got to promise to finish that Potions essay. I think you did a great job on all the other ones, and you just have to buckle down and do it. I know you don't like the class, but try to write it without thinking about how horrible the instructor is. The subject itself isn't that bad.*

*I'm glad you liked the new clothing so much. I bought some new tank tops the other day. They're pretty bare at the shoulders and back, but they're really nice with this hot weather we've been having. I've also spent time at our neighborhood pool. Have you ever been swimming? (Besides in the lake at school during the tournament. I don't consider February to be an appropriate time of the year for swimming.)*

*Hope to see you soon.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

*-000-*

*Dear Hermione,*

*Uncle Vernon just shocked me senseless. He asked if I would invite you and your parents over for dinner sometime! Can you believe that? It seems that Aunt Petunia was telling him about how impressed she was with your mum and he got a strange look on his face and asked me what your dad's profession was. When I told him your parents were both dentists he realized that your dad is in some club or organization that he's been trying to get into. Now all of a sudden he wants to get on your parents' good side. So, what do you think? Would you and your folks like to come over for dinner? (Please say yes!)*

*Yours,*

*Harry*

*P.S. – No, I've never been swimming (except for that one time) but I must admit that the thought of going swimming with you is a very pleasant one. Perhaps one of these summers we'll be able to do that together.*

*-000-*

*Dear Harry,*

*Of course I'd love to come and see you again. And if I have to put up with eating dinner with your aunt and uncle to accomplish that, well, that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make. Actually, Dad told*

*me the club your uncle mentioned is for London area business professionals and he's on the membership committee this year. Now, don't tell your relatives this, but he said that based on what Mum and I have told him about them there's no way he wants anyone like that in his club, but he and Mum are certainly willing to sit through an evening with them so that I can spend some time with you.*

*Now, as far as a date is concerned, how about doing it on your birthday? At the very least it would force your aunt and uncle to celebrate it for once. (Pretty tricky of me, don't you think?)*

*Oh, and one more thing. I just bought a new summer dress and I'm going to wear it when we come over. I really like the way it looks on me and I can't wait for you to see it. Actually, I also can't wait to see you again.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*

## **Notebooks and Letters**

### **Unwelcome Visitors and Change of Plans**

#### **Chapter 3, Unwelcome Visitors and Change of Plans**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 1

*What a bizarre night! I'm still trying to sort it all out this morning. It started out with us going over to Harry's house for an ordinary dinner and ended up with him back here sleeping in our guest bedroom right down the hall from me. I have no idea what will happen now.*

*The evening started out nice enough. Harry couldn't take his eyes off my new sundress. It's a light blue print with spaghetti straps and fits very snugly up top. It comes down to just above my knees and I also wore a cute pair of strappy sandals so my legs looked pretty good too. It took Harry a while before he noticed that though – he stared at the top so much I started blushing.*

*I couldn't stop smiling when I first saw him and I held onto my welcoming hug quite a while. Everyone was polite with the introductions and Mrs. Dursley told us Dudley wouldn't be joining us for dinner because he was having tea with his friends and then going out later. Harry later told me what they really did was go out and vandalize the park and terrorize the kids in the neighborhood, but we all smiled and said it was too bad we wouldn't get to meet him. Personally I was relieved that he wouldn't be there to eye me up and try to look down the top of my dress.*

*After dinner the adults retired to the living room to discuss things about Dad's club and Mum suggested Harry and I go out for a walk. As soon as we were out the door there was a loud bang like a car backfired on the street and Harry grabbed my hand and pulled out his wand. I teased him about being jumpy and he calmed down, but he asked me if I had my own wand. I showed him how I had it tucked away in a hidden pocket of my dress and he was impressed. It also gave him a chance to look more closely at my dress again, which was fine with me. And neither of us let go of the other's hand, so we walked down to the park holding hands in the warm summer evening. It was wonderful. I think we both know that something is happening between us, but neither of us want to push it too fast. That's fine with me; we'll probably be more comfortable if it develops gradually.*

*When we got to the park we sat on the swings for awhile, just talking about the things we had been doing this summer and our reading, and I sympathized with him again about how frustrating things were for him. Then Dudley and his gang showed up and things started going wrong. Harry and I decided to leave before they could come over and harass us, but halfway back to his house*



*we heard them split up for the night and then Dudley started to overtake us. Harry really didn't want to run into him and turned down an alleyway to avoid him but before we had a chance to get away something horrible happened.*

Harry and Hermione stopped abruptly as soon as they entered the alleyway. The sky had suddenly become pitch black and the warm summer evening had turned bitingly cold. Hermione wrapped her arms around herself to keep warm and Harry instinctively put an arm across her bare shoulders and pulled her close as they both darted their eyes anxiously around the alley. Neither wanted to voice it aloud, but each knew where they had felt this before. It was the night that the dementors had attacked them and Sirius out by the lake at Hogwarts.

Dudley's terrified voice broke the silence. "Wh ... what are you doing, you freak? St ... stop it!" Both of them turned toward the intrusion, wands out and ready.

"Shut up, Dudley," Harry hissed, "we're trying to listen ..." He was cut off and staggered as Dudley, running toward them following the sound of his voice, crashed into him in the dark even as Hermione gasped beside him. But not before they had both heard the telltale raspy breaths accompanied by feelings of dread as they felt all the happiness being sucked out of them.

*"Expecto Patronum!"* Hermione called out while Harry scrambled around on his hands and knees, searching for the wand that had been knocked from his hand by the collision with Dudley. She had read up on the spell after she and Harry had encountered the dementors at the end of third year, but while she knew the incantation and wand movements she had not yet become proficient with it.

A thin white mist streamed from Hermione's wand but failed to take shape. Dudley, completely misreading the danger, shouted, "No! Get away from me!" and turned to run away from whatever spell the witch was casting at him. He didn't even make it to the end of the alley before they heard a terrified scream. At the same time the other two felt a creeping chill behind them and instantly realized that there was more than one dementor.

*"Expecto Patronum!"* Hermione cried again, but with the same result. The thin mist briefly halted the advance of their new attacker, but a stifled scream from Dudley indicated that it had no effect on the other one.

Frustrated with his futile efforts to locate his wand in the pitch black darkness, in desperation Harry called out the illumination spell. *"Lumos!"* To his amazement it worked, and his wand tip lit up inches from his hand. Quickly he snatched it up, and still on his knees he turned and saw a hooded figure right before him. It was reaching for Hermione who had slumped to her knees beside him, weakened from the effort of attempting the two spells.

*"Expecto Patronum!"* A silver wisp now issued from his own wand and the dementor backed off briefly, but resumed its horrible quest as soon as the mist faded away. Desperately, Harry tried to focus on a happy memory. Then he had it – the day he had spent with Hermione two weeks previous.

“Expecto Patronum!” This time a bright silver stag erupted from his wand and charged the dementor, crashing into it and hurling it away. Before the stag could make a second attack the dementor fled, disappearing into the black sky.

“Hermione!” Still on his knees, Harry wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to himself in a panic, while the silver stag wheeled around, sensing another foe, and charged down the alley toward the dementor attacking Dudley. “Are you all right?!”

“I ... I’m OK,” Hermione panted against his chest. “But what about your cousin?” Both of them looked up just as Harry’s patronus reached the struggling boy. He had curled up in a ball, his massive arms wrapped tightly over his head, and the dementor had just pried them away when it was struck by the antlers of the charging stag and thrown into the air. Like its companion, it quickly faded into the night, fleeing from its powerful foe.

*After that the sky lightened up again and we hurried over to Dudley. He was curled up on the ground shaking, but we could see right away that he hadn’t been Kissed. Then all of a sudden an old woman came running up to us. More surprises – she was Mrs. Figg, a lady who used to look after Harry when he was younger, and it turns out that she was a squib who was assigned by Dumbledore to keep an eye on him while he was growing up! She was going on and on about wanting to kill some bloke named Mundungus who apparently was supposed to be ‘on duty’ watching Harry tonight. Honestly, why didn’t these people tell Harry about all this! What good is it doing anyone to keep him in the dark about everything?*

*Anyway, Harry and I mostly had to carry Dudley back to his house, and when we got there everything went crazy. Harry’s uncle started screaming at us for whatever we were supposed to have done to Dudley, then my dad stepped in because it looked like he was actually going to take a swing at us and that gave us a chance to tell what happened. It didn’t help though, because Mr. Dursley started screaming about unnatural freaks and how he wasn’t going to put up with this unnatural behavior any more.*

*Somewhere about this time an owl arrived from the Improper Use of Magic Office and that set him off again. But we weren’t really listening because the message was just awful – it said Harry was being expelled and having his wand snapped because he violated the Statute of Secrecy. But that didn’t make sense because I cast the same spell and the letter didn’t say anything about me. It was almost as though they were waiting for a chance to catch Harry at something to get him in trouble.*

*Well, then things really turned bizarre. Harry panicked and started talking about running away, but then another owl arrived from Mr. Weasley telling him to stay put and not let the Ministry take his wand. How exactly he was supposed to accomplish that wasn’t clear. Mr. Dursley continued blustering and screaming, Dudley finally recovered his wits and started telling about the dementors, and that set Mrs. Dursley off. She seemed to know more about the wizarding world than she had previously let on, blaming her sister and ‘that awful boy’ (presumably Harry’s father) for telling her about things. And then another owl arrived from the Ministry.*

*This one rescinded the threats of the first one, but said Harry has to go to a hearing and that until*

then he was suspended. This was the last straw for Harry's uncle and he started screaming at Harry to get out. It didn't help when another owl showed up, this one with a message from Sirius telling Harry not to leave the house, whatever he did. That just made Mr. Dursley more adamant though. Once he found out that Dudley had been attacked by dementors, he concluded that they were after Harry (actually, I'm fairly certain that he was right about that) and that Dudley was almost killed because of him. When Harry said he thought the dementors' attack was related to Voldemort being back, Mrs. Dursley went pale. I guess she recognized his name as the one who killed her sister. Then Mr. Dursley told Harry to get out and never come back.

At that point, my dad stepped in and told Harry he could come home with us. Harry was pretty anxious to get out of there as well by that time, and only hesitated because of Sirius and Mr. Weasley's letters. Then the Howler came. I don't know who had the dumb idea to send a Howler to the Dursleys, but it was the worst thing they could have done if they wanted them to keep Harry there. Well, all it said was 'Remember My Last, Petunia'. That's it. Everyone just stared at it as it burst into flames. Then Mr. Dursley started yelling again. "Remember my last? What the hell is that supposed to mean? My last what?" For the first time all night I actually agreed with him. Whatever it meant it didn't have any effect on his determination that Harry leave, so Harry finally gave in and he and I hurried up to his room to pack his things. Harry and Dad hauled his trunk out to the car, Harry sent Hedwig with a message to Sirius to tell him where he was going, and we drove away as quickly as we could.

And so now here we are. Earlier this summer I would have been thrilled to death to have Harry staying with us, and I'm still glad he's here and not in that awful situation with his aunt and uncle, but with this cloud hanging over him we're all pretty subdued. Like I wrote before, we have no idea what's going to happen next, but we do know that he has a hearing in ten days.

I'm scared.

-0x0x0-

"Don't you dare, Albus Dumbledore," hissed an irate Assistant Headmistress the next day. "Don't you dare take away that girl's prefect badge. She earned it and you know it. She had every right to go and visit him if she wanted to. And there was nothing wrong with their decision for Harry to leave those awful muggles. Since you've never explained why he had to stay there you can't expect them know why it was so important. It's bad enough you overrode my recommendation of Mr. Potter for the male prefect ..."

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 5

Harry's gone.

It finally happened tonight. After waiting and wondering for four days (Harry didn't even unpack his trunk the whole time and we couldn't go out and do anything because we kept expecting someone to show up at any minute) a group of witches and wizards appeared and announced that

*they were going to fly us to a place called ‘headquarters’. The only one I knew was Remus Lupin. Alistor Moody was there, too, but I can’t say that I know him since the ‘Professor Moody’ we had last year turned out to be an imposter. There was also an imposing looking black wizard named Shacklebolt and a friendly younger witch with purple hair who went by her last name – Tonks. There were nine of them in all. They were all there as sort of an honor guard, although Moody treated it like a dangerous clandestine mission. They even all disillusioned themselves before they took off. That was eerie.*

*It turned out they expected me to come along, but with the way Moody kept making it sound so dangerous my father said no, I couldn’t go. I don’t really blame him but I wish I could have gone along with Harry. Now it will be almost a whole month before I can see him again. Hopefully we can at least meet in Diagon Alley when we go buy our books. I made him promise to owl me straight away when he has his hearing to tell me how it turned out, and he asked me to try not to worry. Like I could ever not worry about Harry. It’s a full time job with that boy!*

It was in some ways the most relaxing and in other ways the most tension filled four days of the summer. The warm and welcoming atmosphere at the Grangers was the exact opposite of the open hostility Harry faced from the Dursleys. The whole family engaged in pleasant conversations at mealtimes, and they all helped prepare and clean up after the meals. Dan and Emma were honestly interested in getting to know Harry and made him feel as comfortable in their house as he had ever been anywhere. Best of all, Harry and Hermione were able to be together, from the time they rose in the morning until they turned in late at night, talking about everything, anything, and nothing at all. Harry listened without complaint while Hermione speculated about the upcoming school year and what OWLs would be like. She smiled while he expressed his delight with the books she had given him to read and tried to guess how the saga would turn out, but she refused to give anything away. They both discussed the lack of news, both in the muggle papers and in the *Daily Prophet*, trying to work out what was actually going on and why the paper was painting Dumbledore and Harry in such an unfavorable light. And sometimes, they just quietly enjoyed each other’s company.

But the time was also full of uncertainty. They didn’t know if Harry should just hide in the house, or if they could go out and do things. They ended up playing it safe and either stayed inside or in the back yard. On the day after the attack Hedwig returned with a message from Sirius.

“What’s it say?” Hermione asked anxiously as she watched his face fall.

“He says some people there are pretty upset with me for running off like that,” Harry replied sadly. “It doesn’t really say where ‘there’ is.”

“Well, honestly, what did they expect you to do?” Hermione demanded in an affronted tone. “It’s not like your uncle gave you any choice.” Harry smiled gratefully for her support and gave her hand a squeeze before continuing.

“Well, the way he said ‘some people’ makes it sound like *he* understands, at least,” Harry suggested. “He also says that someone will be coming by to pick me up, but doesn’t say when or

who it would be.”

“What is the problem with those people!” Hermione fumed. “What are we supposed to do? Is there some invisible person here watching you like there was back at Privet Drive? Why can’t they tell us anything? It’s so infuriating!”

“Welcome to my world,” Harry said somberly, then smiled at her again to try to break the mood. Hermione huffed once more but allowed herself to be led outside where they walked around the garden while pondering the things that hadn’t been said in the letter.

It went on like that for the entire time Harry spent at Hermione’s house. When they tired of sitting in the comfortable living room, they went out and reclined on the deck chairs on the porch, or wandered around the back yard where they might lie out on the grass under a tree and look up through the green canopy of leaves at the cloudless blue sky. As it was still sweltering outside, they didn’t stay out long, but it did give Hermione an excuse to wear her new tank tops and shorts. Harry noticed these outfits appreciatively, and Hermione appreciated his notice. More than once she had to repeat something she said when Harry’s attention drifted to her bare shouldered top or her nicely tanned legs. Their final afternoon together found them sitting out on the porch swing where he got up the nerve to put his arm around her shoulders and she leaned her head up against his shoulder. They remained that way for nearly an hour, neither daring to say anything to break the spell. A few hours later they were waving goodbye to each other as Harry disappeared and Hermione was trying not to cry.

-000-

*Dear Hermione,*

*We arrived here safely – but I can’t exactly tell you where ‘here’ is. I understand a bit now why Ron’s letters were so vague. We’re not at the Burrow. The house is protected by a charm so that I ‘can’t’ tell you, but it’s where Snuffles grew up. It’s a dark, dreary old house. Mrs. Weasley has had Ron, Ginny, Fred, and George cleaning it for the past month, but it’s still dreadful. There are other former associates of my parents (you may remember Dumbledore referring to them as the ‘Old Crowd’) here occasionally too, as well as the people you met yesterday.*

*Ron and Ginny both wish you were here (of course I do too!) and don’t understand why you didn’t come. I tried to explain that you wanted to spend the time with your parents, but they can’t seem to believe that anyone would want to live in a muggle house if they didn’t have to. I decided not to argue with them. Ron gave me an odd look when he found out that you’d visited me and that I’d spent four days at your house. I think he felt left out. That’s something I think we need to watch out for if we – well – I guess I mean that we just need to take his feelings into account.*

*I guess that’s all for now. I’ll be able to tell you more when we see each other again.*

*Yours,*

*Harry*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 10

*Today is Harry's hearing. I'm so nervous I can scarcely breathe. I've researched the law and it's quite clear that he should be acquitted. If the charge is underage magic there's an exception for self-defense, which that night clearly was. If it's breaking the statute of secrecy, the only witnesses were Dudley and Mrs. Figg, both of whom already know about magic. I'm worried though, that the whole thing was a setup and they're going to find him guilty regardless of the evidence. Oh, I dearly hope that I'm wrong.*

*Oh, here comes Hedwig, but he's early – Harry's hearing shouldn't be over yet. Please let that be a good sign.*

-000-

*Dear Hermione,*

*I GOT OFF! I figured I should say that straight away so you'd start breathing again. Breathe, Hermione. And you can stop crying now. That phrase also came to my mind because Fred, George, and Ginny have been jumping up and down shouting 'He Got Off!' ever since I got back.*

*The whole thing was just weird. Mr. Weasley took me with him to the Ministry this morning. The Ministry is a strange place, but I'll tell you about that later. Things went badly at first – they changed the time and location of my hearing without telling me and it was only by luck that I even made it there on time. It was supposed to be at 9:00 AM in Amelia Bones's office but it ended up in a large courtroom in front of the whole Wizengamot at 8:00. They didn't tell Dumbledore either, he showed up just as the trial was starting.*

*At first Fudge kept interrupting me and not letting me explain, but eventually Dumbledore took control and insisted that it was legal for me to cast that spell. He brought in Mrs. Figg to testify that she saw the dementors too, since Fudge was claiming that I made that up. I wondered why he didn't get you to testify, but I guess he figured if they didn't believe me they wouldn't believe you either, since you're my best friend. And if you'd testified you would have admitted that you used magic too, so you might also have been in trouble. What clinched it was Madam Bones, who was very fair and supported Mrs. Figg's testimony. At the end she called for a vote to clear me of all charges, and it passed easily. Out of about 50 Wizengamot members only about a half dozen voted against me, including Fudge and his assistant. But the final strange thing was that Dumbledore left without talking to me, or even looking at me. I reckon he's still mad at me.*

*I'm sure you're anxious to get this so I'll send it off right away. Too bad I couldn't tell you in person. I reckon I might have got a hug out of it.*

*Yours,*

*Harry*

-000-

*Dear Harry,*

*Oh my God, I'm so relieved! That's such wonderful news. I couldn't stop shaking while I was untying the parchment from Hedwig's leg. And yes, I was crying when I read the first line, you prat! I'd like to say of course you got off and I knew it all along, but I'm not so sure. I still think it was a setup and someone was trying to get you into trouble and what you said about them changing the time at the last minute supports that. But that's all over and done with now and you've been cleared. I can't tell you how much better I feel. I was so worried that you wouldn't be coming back to Hogwarts with us this fall. I would have missed you so much.*

*I'm glad that Dumbledore was able to get there in time. It sounds like he knew what to do to persuade the Wizengamot – he'd been Chief Warlock for a long time. Of course I would have testified if I needed to, even if it would have got me in trouble too. You know I would do that for you, don't you? Oh, and I think the Amelia Bones you mentioned is related to Susan Bones. She's in our year, in Hufflepuff.*

*OK, I'll send Hedwig back now so you can tell me more about what you've been up to. For example, you're making sure Ron has his homework done since I'm not there to nag him about it, right? Let me know when you're going to Diagon Alley and I'll make sure we go the same day so we can meet you there. Mum and Dad send their congratulations as well. And you better believe you would have got a hug if I'd been there. I guess I'll just have to save it for the next time I see you.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

-000-

*Dear Harry,*

*Did you get your Hogwarts letter today? I got mine and I'm a prefect! You're the other one, right? I'm sure you must be, you're the obvious choice. Oh, I'm so excited. We'll be able to patrol together and everything. I'm making this short because my parents are taking me out to dinner to celebrate. Please write back right away.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

-000-

*Dear Hermione,*

*I'm sorry to disappoint you but I didn't make prefect. Ron got it instead. I was trying not to say*

anything because I didn't want to make it look like I was jealous of him, but when I got your letter I figured I could talk to you about it. Please don't tell Ron I said this, but I feel really bad. I don't understand why it wasn't me. I just thought I – you know – had done more to deserve it. But then I feel guilty for thinking that I'm better than him. I don't know what I should think now.

It helps a little that I'm not the only one. You, of course, seem to agree with me, and Fred and George said it right out. They joked that there'd been a mistake; said no one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect. Then they said they thought it would be me for sure. Later Ron said pretty much the same thing, but I tried to brush it off and said that I'd caused too much trouble and congratulated him for getting it. We had a big celebration dinner here too. Mrs. Weasley was almost hysterical she was so excited.

The adults were talking about it later. Tonks (she's the one with the purple hair – it turns out she's a metamorphmagus) said she wasn't made a prefect because she couldn't behave herself. Sirius said Lupin was the prefect in their year because he and James were in detention too much. Then Lupin said he reckoned Dumbledore made him prefect to keep Sirius and James under control. Do you suppose that's why Ron was picked? Does Dumbledore think I need to be kept under control? Anyway, I also heard Lupin and Shacklebolt (he was the tall black man who came to pick me up) talking later and Shacklebolt didn't understand why Dumbledore didn't give it to me, to show confidence in me what with everything the Daily Prophet's been printing. Lupin just said Dumbledore would have his reasons. If he's trying to make some sort of point I wish someone would tell me what it is.

The other disappointing thing is that I won't be able to meet you in Diagon Alley. Mrs. Weasley's going to go in and buy all of our books and supplies. I guess they think it's not even safe enough for us to do that. I don't know why not. All the other students will be out getting all their stuff. She's also going to get Ron a new broom for being made prefect. I'm happy for him for that at least.

Well, I guess that's it. Thanks for being the kind of friend that I can say all of this to. I really feel like I've let you down and I'm so sorry. And now I won't be able to see you again until we go to King's Cross.

I miss you.

Yours,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

Oh, I'm so sorry. I feel like I made it even worse by what I wrote. Please don't feel like you've let me down. This has nothing to do with anything you've done wrong. I'm disappointed, but I'm not disappointed in you, if you can understand the distinction. If anything I'm upset with McGonagall



*or Dumbledore or whoever made the decision. I'm disappointed that you won't get the recognition you deserve. I'm disappointed that we'll lose the opportunity this would have given us to spend more time together. But I'm proud of you and everything you've done. I'm also proud of the way you're handling it. And don't worry, I'll keep what you wrote in confidence between us. In fact, what you wrote about Dumbledore having his reasons has given me something to think about. I'm not sure what I'm going to do about it yet, though.*

*I'm sorry about not being able to get together with you guys in Diagon Alley as well, but I guess there's nothing we can do about it. I'll for certain be looking forward to seeing you at King's Cross. You better be ready for a really big hug then because I really miss you too.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 30*

*This has been one of the toughest decisions I've ever had to make. I talked it over with my parents, and although they were shocked they told me they'd support me either way. I hope I'm doing the right thing. I also hope Harry understands and doesn't blame himself for it. For that matter, I hope Ron doesn't get angry with me either. I can see how this might hurt his feelings. But sometimes you need to make a stand for what you believe in.*

*-000-*

*Dear Professor McGonagall,*

*I'm sorry to write this at so late a date, but it's taken me a while to make this decision. I want to thank you and Headmaster Dumbledore for offering me the Fifth Year Prefect's position but I'm afraid I've decided to decline. When I first received the letter I was thrilled, but since then I have reconsidered my response. Initially I was under the impression that prefect positions were awarded based on merit, including things like academic achievement, responsibility, and leadership. When I discovered who had been named to be the male prefect for Gryffindor, however, I realized that this was not the case.*

*Everyone who is familiar with our class knows very well who the obvious choice for prefect should have been – Harry Potter – and he was not chosen. Not only that, but even though he is a close friend of mine, I can't think of any boy in our year who is less suited to being a prefect than Ron Weasley. This caused me to ponder what the real criteria are for filling these positions. The only thing that Ron and I have in common is that we're Harry Potter's best friends. That being the case, it appears that we have been selected either as a reward for being close to Harry or with some expectation that we will keep him in line. I'm afraid that I must reject either of these reasons. Even if there is some other agenda behind this decision, I still must protest the injustice being committed against Harry.*

*Again, I'm sorry to put you in the difficult position of having to pick another prefect at the last minute. But one of the things the headmaster said at the end of last year was that the time would come when we had to make a choice between what is right and what is easy. The easy thing would be to overlook my doubts and accept this badge. But it wouldn't be right.*

*Yours,*

*Hermione Granger*

The heated discussion between the Headmaster and the furious Assistant Headmistress that resulted from the receipt of this letter was so impressive that it was the subject of conversations among the castle portraits for several days.

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione closed her journal and turned to her wide-eyed daughter.

“Mummy! Are you serious?” Rose asked in amazement. “You turned it down? But that’s what you always wanted! How could you do that?”

She wrapped an arm around the young girl and hugged her to her side. “Like I said, I thought it was the right thing to do,” she answered. “And with everything that happened that year, it turned out to be a good decision.”

“Ooh ... let’s read some more then,” Rose begged.

“Oh no, young lady. You still have some homework to do.”

“Muuuum!”

“Go on now. We’ll read some more tomorrow evening.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters Trouble With Umbridge

### Chapter 4, Trouble With Umbridge

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 1

*My, but this was an eventful day. I hadn't even got to the train before I ran into Parvati and Lavender and had to explain why I wasn't a prefect. It seems that Lavender just got a letter with the badge yesterday. While they were both excited about Lavender getting it, they had obviously expected it to be me. I told them that I had asked not to be considered (which was sort of true) but that I'd had no idea which of them would be selected and I hoped Lavender would do a good job. I explained it by saying I was concerned about having enough time to study for OWLs and they somewhat skeptically accepted that. Then I subtly changed the subject by saying that Harry hadn't been selected either and I wondered if it was because of all the negative publicity he'd been getting. They were both as shocked as I was that Harry hadn't been named a prefect, confirming my feeling that there was something suspicious about it. Lavender had mixed feelings about Ron being the male prefect.*

*I was getting more worried by the minute as it got closer and closer to 11:00 when Harry finally came through the barrier, and I practically knocked him down with my enthusiasm. Once he recovered, he hugged me back just as hard as I was hugging him, so much that I think we made Mrs. Weasley a touch uncomfortable. Sirius was with them in his dog form and he jumped up on both of us, which finally broke us apart. I swear his barking sounded like he was laughing at us, which I suppose he was.*

*When I asked where Ron was Harry told me they had come in three different groups – something to do with Mad-Eye Moody's paranoia. Ron and Ginny came through a bit later, followed after a few more minutes by Fred and George. It was just as well, I guess, that Ron and Harry arrived separately, because I think Ron might have been put off by my greeting of Harry. As it was, he was quite upset when he found out I had turned down the prefect badge.*

“Shall we go and find a compartment, then?” Harry asked. Ron gave Hermione a look and she realized that she couldn't put off telling them any longer.

“Hermione and I have to go to the prefect's carriage,” he announced as he put his hand on Hermione's arm somewhat possessively to guide her away.

“Actually, I don’t,” Hermione corrected, pulling away and moving closer to Harry. “I decided not to accept the prefect position.”

“What!” three different voices chorused, Ron’s being the loudest. “What do you mean, you turned it down?” he continued. Harry didn’t say anything further but Hermione knew that he expected an explanation as well.

“I thought about it for a while and I decided that I didn’t want it after all,” Hermione retorted. “It occurred to me that I was mostly impressed with what an honor it was, and then I determined that the honor didn’t mean that much to me. My studies and other things are more important.” Harry’s head jerked up a bit at that the words ‘other things’, and Hermione noticed it because she was watching closely for his reaction, but neither Ron nor Ginny did.

“Are you sure it wasn’t ...” Ron began but broke off at the glare Hermione sent him, one that communicated that she had said all that she was going to say on the subject.

“Ron?” Lavender appeared in the corridor wearing an impatient look. “We need to get going to the meeting.” Ron’s expression changed from irritation, to confusion, to one of comprehension as he realized that Lavender must be the other Gryffindor prefect now. As he looked at her more closely the others could see that it was occurring to him that there was some advantage to being co-prefect with his attractive blonde housemate. With one last uncertain glance at the other three he followed her toward the front of the train.

*Once that little drama was concluded, Harry, Ginny, and I looked for a compartment. We finally found Neville and the four of us joined an odd-looking girl sitting by herself. She had straggly, waist length blonde hair and eyes that gave her a permanent look of surprise, and she was reading a magazine upside down. Later I noticed that she was wearing a necklace made of butterbeer caps. Interestingly, Ginny knew her and it turned out that they lived near each other in Ottery St. Catchpole. Ginny introduced everyone, but of course Luna already knew who Harry and I were. Later it turned out that she knew Ron too, which was to be expected I suppose, but she also seemed somewhat taken by him. Her odd questions and statements certainly left him flustered.*

*We also had a few other interesting encounters on the train. Susan Bones passed by and looked into our compartment, surprised that I wasn’t at the prefect’s meeting. Her best friend, Hannah Abbott, is the fifth year prefect for Hufflepuff so she was killing time until the meeting was over. I invited her in and introduced her to Harry. It turns out I was right about her being related to Amelia Bones. She is Susan’s aunt and Susan is actually named after her, as Susan is Amelia’s middle name. Susan informed Harry that her aunt had been impressed with him at the trial, that he kept his cool despite Fudge’s provocation, and that he could perform a corporeal Patronus.*

*When she mentioned that it prompted me to give Harry’s arm a squeeze to show him how proud I was of him. This in turn prompted some raised eyebrows from Susan and Ginny. I just smiled knowingly which raised their eyebrows even more. I have a feeling I’m going to be interrogated by Ginny soon about what’s going on between Harry and me. To move the conversation along I told Susan that I had cast the charm too and wondered why I hadn’t been charged as well. She agreed with me that it seemed suspicious, but I asked her to keep it to herself and she promised not to get*

*me into trouble.*

*A bit later Cho stopped by the compartment. Apparently she's not a prefect either.*

Neville was just describing the properties of his *Mimulus mimbletonia* plant when the compartment door slid open, revealing a very pretty girl with long, shiny black hair.

"Hi Harry," she said breathlessly. "Um ... are you busy?" she added as she looked around the compartment with a bit of disdain for its other occupants. Harry blinked once as he looked at her. She was possibly even prettier than he remembered, but somehow that didn't seem all that important now. He shot a glance at Hermione that was uncertain and questioning and she managed a slight smile. He returned a small apologetic shrug and stood up. Cho gave him a dazzling smile but his return smile was merely polite and a bit forced. Hermione found that she had been holding her breath and let it out as the compartment door closed. Neville continued to stare at the door while Luna's head was buried once more in her magazine, but Ginny raised a questioning eyebrow once more, which Hermione answered with but a shrug.

A few seconds later Harry returned with a relieved look on his face and shot Hermione a smile more genuine than the one he had given Cho, and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze as he took his seat beside her. Hermione noticed Ginny's eyes widen. Harry leaned closer to Hermione and whispered, "I think she was interested in starting up something but I let her know I wasn't interested," and Hermione smiled broadly. Then, as though it had been only a minor interruption, Harry urged Neville to resume his explanation of his plant's stinksap defense mechanism. Neville proceeded to poke it with a quill to demonstrate. Fortunately, Hermione had read about these plants as well and managed to cast a shield around it, preventing any of them from getting hit with the foul smelling fluid.

*Eventually Ron came back and he was in a bit better mood. Evidently he had enjoyed patrolling with Lavender, and Harry had bought a whole assortment of sweets for him from the snack cart. Then he started talking about how he was going to get Crabbe and Goyle. This is exactly the kind of thing I expected would happen when I protested his appointment. I started to snap at him but Harry put his hand on my arm to calm me down. Then Ron did an imitation of Goyle doing lines that was rather funny, and Luna cracked up. I took the opportunity to shoot a smile at Harry thanking him for his intervention.*

*There was one final oddity at the end of the trip. When we were getting into the carriages to ride up to the castle Harry stopped and stared at the front of our coach. When I asked him what was wrong he pointed to the empty space and asked me if I could see it. Well, I couldn't see anything, but with all the criticism he's received accusing him of making things up I didn't want to say that. Then Luna said she could see whatever it was and that they had always been there. I would have shrugged it off as another one of her fanciful creatures but Harry was really distressed about it. He described them as scaly winged horses. I shook my head that I couldn't see them but whispered to him that I'd look into it and try to figure out what was going on. Then I pulled him into a carriage and since it was dark I snuggled up to him and held his hand and he calmed down.*

*The welcoming feast also provided a few items of note. First of all, Hagrid's not here; Professor Grubbly-Plank is teaching Care of Magical Creatures. But possibly even more distressing is that a witch named Umbridge is teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry said she was one of his inquisitors at his trial, and she backed Fudge completely. He thought that she was Fudge's personal assistant, and she denied that dementors could have been anywhere near Little Whinging. She was one of the few that voted to convict him, so she probably has it in for him. That makes me very nervous. To top it off, she stood up and interrupted Dumbledore and gave a long speech, the gist of which was that the Ministry's going to try to interfere with what's taught at Hogwarts. I have a very bad feeling about this.*

*Oh, and the Sorting Hat's song seemed to be saying that this was a dangerous time for Hogwarts and that the houses need to work together. It doesn't look like that's going to happen anytime soon either.*

*When the feast was over, I had to remind Ron that as a prefect he had to show the first years how to get to Gryffindor Tower. He grumbled about it, but Lavender grabbed him and they got to it, although he insisted on calling the new students midgets. I am more and more glad that I turned down that prefect badge. I think if I had to nag him about his duties all the time I'd be ready to kill him by the end of the year. On the bright side, this gave me a chance to talk to Harry alone for the first time today. I knew exactly what would be the first thing he would ask.*

A lot of students were whispering and staring at Harry as they left the Great Hall, but Hermione's glares had them turning hastily away. This was exactly what both of them had been worried would happen as a result of the Ministry and the Daily Prophet's smear campaign over the summer. To her relief Harry took her hand and pulled her into a concealed shortcut to Gryffindor Tower and they found themselves temporarily alone.

"Are you going to tell me why you really turned it down?" he asked abruptly.

"I think you know," she responded as they stopped and she turned to face him.

"I don't want you giving this up for me," he protested with mixed feelings. Part of him was glad that she would do this just for him but part of him felt bad for her missing out on something she had wanted so very much.

"I gave it up in protest of an obvious wrong," she explained. "I feel very strongly about that and I decided that I needed to act on my convictions. Besides, part of the reason I was excited about the badge was that it meant spending more time with you. Now, giving it *up* means spending more time with you." They both fell silent at the frank admission and subconsciously began to move closer together. Just then another group of students entered the shortcut and they quickly broke apart and resumed the trek toward their dorm.

"OK, what's going on between you and Harry?"

Hermione had nearly finished writing in her journal and was alone in her dorm room as Lavender hadn't finished with the first years yet and Parvati was waiting for her in the common room. Ginny took this opportunity to corner Hermione and came bursting into her room demanding an explanation of their behavior on the train.

"Well, it hasn't gone too far yet but something's definitely starting," Hermione admitted with a shy smile. "We wrote to each other a lot this summer, and I went over to visit him twice and then he stayed at my house those four days after the dementor attack. We've been hinting to each other that we're interested and the hints have gradually gotten stronger. I think we're both nervous about it and we're both taking it nice and slow. It's sort of by unspoken mutual consent."

"And you're sure you're both on the same page about this?" Ginny wondered.

Hermione smiled, thinking of the looks the pair of them shared, knowing what each other was thinking without speaking. "I'm sure. You saw what happened when Cho stopped by the compartment." Ginny nodded. "I knew exactly what he was thinking when he left and when he came back he told me she had expressed interest in them getting together but he turned her down."

Ginny was amazed at this but had to admit that Harry and Hermione were often on the same wavelength about things and had demonstrated this ability in the past. Then she frowned.

"You know this is going to be a problem for Ron, don't you?"

Hermione hesitated. "Well, I expect there will be some adjustment on his part, and a bit of awkwardness as he gets used to us ... you know ... doing things, but I don't think ..."

"Hermione, it's more than that," Ginny insisted.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, now worried about what Ginny was implying.

"Well, I think he has ideas that you and he ought to be together," the younger girl revealed.

"What! What makes you think that?"

"Well, he was really looking forward to you being with us this summer, and he was pretty upset when you didn't come," Ginny explained. "And he was even more upset when he found out that you had been with Harry instead."

"Well, if he's interested in me that way, he certainly has a strange way of showing it," Hermione declared.

"Why?" Ginny asked. "I mean, I know he's not the smoothest guy in the world when it comes to dealing with girls, but ..."

"Ginny, don't you remember the way he indirectly insulted me when he was talking about asking a girl out to the Yule Ball last year, and the way he actually did ask me as a last resort?" Hermione snapped.

“Yeah, but ...”

“And remember the way he treated me and insulted me to my face the night of the Ball itself?” she continued.

“Yeah.” Ginny was starting to see her point.

“So Ginny, would you want to have a relationship with a guy who treats you like that?”

“No,” Ginny admitted, shaking her head. “But I still think you’re going to have a problem. I don’t envy you having to break this to him.”

Ginny left then, and Hermione sat thinking for a while before returning to her journal. This complication was going to make things more difficult than she had thought.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 2

*I was worried about how to tell Harry my concerns about Ron but it turned out I needn’t have. When we met up this morning in the common room I gave his hand a quick squeeze as we were leaving, then let go and nodded forward to Ron, who had already gone through the portrait hole. Harry understood immediately and nodded back, then brushed the back of his hand reassuringly along my arm as we followed him, and we avoided any other contact after that. He stayed a bit closer to me than he might have done last year, but otherwise we acted normally when we were in front of other people. I guess we really are on the same wavelength. I like that we can communicate like that but eventually we’re going to have to talk about this.*

*Ron and Harry told me that Seamus was among those who didn’t believe Harry (or at least his mother didn’t), which evidently made for an uncomfortable situation in their dorm. We also discovered that Fred and George seem to be a lot farther along in setting up a joke shop business than we suspected. They’re recruiting test subjects. At least they’re farther along than Ron and I suspected. Harry didn’t seem surprised at all. I think something’s going on there, and I think I know what it is. If I’m right, it’s just one more example of what makes Harry so wonderful.*

*Binns was as boring as usual, and Harry and Ron goofed off most of the period. When I scolded them afterward, Ron was as defiant as ever but Harry looked contrite and gave me a little nod, letting me know he’ll try harder to pay attention. Snape was his usual malicious self. I had thought with us all joining together to work against Voldemort he might be more reasonable, but I guess I was wrong. I know he has to keep up his cover but that’s no reason for him to act the way he does. I wish there were something I could do to help Harry in Potions. He’s really not that bad at it, it’s just that he lets Snape’s animosity get to him and then he makes mistakes.*

*Harry also pointed out something that I have to work harder at. I never realized just how much Ron and I bicker with each other, but we seem to be doing it constantly, and Harry finally snapped today and shouted at us to knock it off. He’s right, I guess. He’s under enough pressure without*



*having to referee Ron's and my quarrels. After he stormed off I followed him and found him sitting alone in a corridor. We both apologized and shared a hug, then went down to lunch. Ron and I both agreed to try to get along better, although Ron gave us a suspicious look when we came into the Great Hall together.*

*The biggest problem of the day was Defense Against the Dark Arts. This is really unfortunate, because in the past it has been Harry's favorite subject. It turned out to be every bit as bad as I feared. We were astounded that Professor Umbridge expects us to just read about spells in a book and never actually practice them in class. Of course, that didn't go over well at all with Harry, or any of the rest of us for that matter. He eventually got into an argument with Umbridge and I immediately backed him up.*

Dolores Umbridge was rapidly losing control of her class. She had already fielded hostile questions from Dean and Parvati as well as complaints from Harry, Hermione, and Ron. Having just taken ten points from Harry for bringing up Voldemort's return, Umbridge turned to the rest of the class. "You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead." She shrugged off Harry's interruption and continued. "That is a lie."

"It is NOT a lie!" Harry shouted back. "I saw him! I fought him!"

"Detention, Mr. Potter!" Umbridge snapped back, proud of herself for baiting him into his outburst. "Tomorrow evening. Five o'clock. My office. I repeat, this is a lie. The Ministry of Magic guarantees ..."

"It's the Ministry of Magic that is spreading all the lies," Hermione interrupted hotly. Around her, a flood of gasps came from the other students. Hermione Granger never talked back to a teacher! "They've been spreading horrible rumors about Professor Dumbledore and Harry just because they have the courage to tell the truth about ..."

"That's enough!" shrieked Umbridge, losing her cool at last. "Miss Granger, I see that you wish to join Mr. Potter in his detention. I'm sure that I will be able to accommodate both of you."

"Better make that three then," Ron broke in, rising to his feet. Umbridge glared at him and then returned to her sweet voice.

"I see. I've been informed about this trio of Gryffindor troublemakers. I suppose it is appropriate for you to share detention as well."

"Count me in too." Neville now rose and moved to stand on Harry's other side.

Umbridge now dropped the fake smile and snapped. "Very well. Will there be anyone else?"

The other students exchanged looks and Dean rose, followed by Parvati. Lavender took a look at Parvati, then shot a glance at Ron and stood as well. Finally Seamus, looking terribly conflicted, joined them. In a remarkable show of house unity, every Gryffindor in the class was offering to

share in Harry's punishment.

Completely red-faced now, Umbridge pulled out a roll of parchment and scribbled on it for a while, hesitated, then handed it to Lavender. "In that case, you are all dismissed and will receive failing grades for the day. Please take this to your Head of House. Now get out of my classroom."

*Needless to say, McGonagall was not thrilled that her entire fifth year class had got into trouble on the first day. She read Umbridge's note and informed us that she would be supervising the detentions for everyone except Harry and me, and that the two of us would be in detention with Umbridge every night this week. Ron started to object but then remembered the quidditch tryouts on Friday. Harry immediately told him that he needed to go to those, but that Harry could afford to miss them since he already had a spot on the team. Ron was relieved to hear that, and reluctantly gave in. Neville was a bit more stubborn about it, but McGonagall held firm.*

*At that point she told us all that we needed to avoid any more confrontations with Umbridge and dismissed everyone but Harry and me. Then she elaborated for us that we needed to be very careful around the woman, and mentioned her speech at the start-of-term feast. When I offered my interpretation she agreed with me and told Harry she hoped he realized how fortunate he was to have me as a friend. Of course, that made me blush and I blushed even harder when Harry responded that I was a treasure that he cherished more than she knew. He took hold of my hand as we left her office and suddenly the day didn't seem so bad after all.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 3

*I never would have believed how evil that foul toad woman could be. She made Harry and me write lines using a quill that carved words into the backs of our hands. Harry had to write 'I must not tell lies', which had to kill him because that accusation has been haunting him all summer. For me it was 'I must refrain from contradicting my betters', which was also quite difficult for me to swallow. At the end of the night she told us that we must not have got the message yet, and that she would see us again tomorrow.*

*I insisted that we had to report this to McGonagall. Harry resisted at first, but I eventually convinced him. I'll be visiting her first thing tomorrow. I have no idea when we're going to get our homework done this week. I told Harry we'd cooperate and do it together. I helped him with Vanishing spells before we went up to bed and he drew two bowtruckle sketches while I worked on Arithmency. We'll have to get up early to do the rest in the morning.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 4

*McGonagall was incensed when we told her what Umbridge had made us do and how long she had kept us. But later this afternoon she informed us that Dumbledore told her there was nothing he*

could do about it. I could tell that she wasn't happy with that response, but her hands were tied. Things must be worse between Dumbledore and the Ministry than I thought. The lines were just as bad tonight. I think Umbridge plans to keep it up until the words are permanently carved into our hands.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 6

Thank God that's over with. Tonight was our last detention with Umbridge. As I suspected, the phrases we've been writing now stay cut into the backs of our hands. Some good news is that Ron made Keeper on the quidditch team. When we got back from our detention everyone was celebrating. I noticed Lavender hanging on Ron's every word. I'm not happy with the job they're doing as prefects, but it looks like they're at least getting along.

Harry and I begged off after a little while, saying we were exhausted. I was a bit nervous about suggesting to him that tomorrow would be a good day to catch up with our homework, but he gave me a tired smile and said as long as he was with me it wouldn't be so bad. I smiled and told him that was the right answer and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before we went up to our dorms. That boy can be so sweet sometimes. I need to make sure we finish in time for him to go flying with Ron a bit before quidditch practice. He really could use the break, and I can relax up in the stands and finish my reading assignments.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 7

Today went as well as could be expected. Harry and I got caught up with our essays, although he's still behind in the reading. I'll finish that on my own and try to fill him in on the critical points. At lunchtime he told me that he saw one of those winged horses flying over the forest while he was out practicing with Ron. I'd completely forgotten about that, and headed for the library straight away. I discovered that there really are flying horses called Thestrals that are invisible! Harry will be so glad to hear that he's not seeing things. I guess that Luna Lovegood's not as batty as I thought. The reason neither I nor the others could see them is that they're only visible to people who have seen someone die. Harry can see them now because of Cedric. I wonder who it was for Luna?

I enjoyed the quidditch practice more than I usually do. Malfoy and a group of Slytherins showed up to heckle the team, but especially Ron. I took care of that with the silencing charm we're learning this term. It took several minutes for them to figure out that he couldn't hear them at all. Then they were quite annoyed and started to threaten me but Harry had been keeping an eye on me while he was flying over the pitch and was there instantly with his wand out. Within seconds the rest of the team was hovering over them and the Slytherins realized they were badly outnumbered. I refused to lift the silencing charm, and none of them were able to break it, so they all stalked back to the castle. The only bad part was that Ron really wasn't too good at Keeper. Harry says he just needs more practice.

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 8

*One week down. Today was the best day so far. Ron had put off his homework so he was stuck inside all day. Since Harry and I had caught up we were able to take advantage of the nice bright sunny day and we took a walk around the lake. It was the first time since early August that we've been able to have a private conversation.*

They began with Hermione giving Harry a brief synopsis of the reading she had done, and answering his questions until he was satisfied that he had the gist of it. Then she told him what she had learned about the Thestrals and Harry was so relieved that he hugged her for a good long while. Then they went on to catch each other up on their thoughts about what was going on with Umbridge, Dumbledore, and the Ministry. By that point they had reached a private spot, and sat down under a tree at the edge of the forest by the shoreline of the lake. Harry stretched out his arm around Hermione's shoulders and she snuggled into him and sighed contentedly.

"So," Harry began hesitantly after a comfortable silence. "Do you want to talk about – you know – us?"

"Yes, I think so," Hermione answered softly.

"I ... I like what we've been doing lately. I feel pretty comfortable with you," Harry offered. "We seem to be closer than we were last year, and I like being able to tell you things and I can trust you not to laugh at me or tell anyone else." He paused, then continued. "I .... um ... also think the physical part's nice."

"Me too," Hermione agreed. "I especially like that you trust me with things, and I feel the same." She reached out and took his other hand and put it in her lap, shyly tracing the back of it with her finger as her cheeks turned pink. "Do you think you'd like to take this a bit farther?"

"I ... yes, I would ... eventually," Harry stammered. "I just don't want to do anything that would make us feel awkward around each other."

"I agree," Hermione replied, affirming his concern. "I think I'm ready to move forward but I'm in no hurry because I'm enjoying what we have now. Let's just take it one step at a time and see how it goes. If either of us gets uncomfortable we'll let the other know."

"Sounds good to me," Harry declared. He paused nervously, then leaned over and gave her a little kiss on top of her head. Hermione lifted his hand from her lap, interlaced their fingers, and gave it a squeeze.

"How much do you want to let other people see?" Hermione asked next. "For example, Ginny has pretty sharp eyes for this sort of thing and she's already asked me about it. Don't worry," she reassured him quickly. "I just told her we were only starting to explore if we wanted our

relationship to go in this direction. But she told me something we'll have to watch out for."

"Ron?" Harry guessed. Hermione nodded. "I've noticed that too. I think we have to give him time to notice that we're growing closer together, and when he asks be honest with him. In general, maybe we should keep this – he gave her hand another squeeze – and this – he hugged her more tightly to himself for a few seconds – for when we're alone."

Hermione nodded again. "And we could gradually increase the amount of our physical contact, when we're sharing a sofa in the common room for example." Harry smiled and leaned his head over to rest on top of hers and gave her shoulder another squeeze. After a moment Hermione added teasingly, "Just as long as all the other girls understand that you're mine."

*The only thing that clouded the day was a letter Ron got from Percy. It was incredibly pompous and basically warned Ron to distance himself from Harry. It also hinted at some changes in the offing that Percy knew about. To Ron's credit, he tore it into pieces and threw it into the fire.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 9

*This is getting tiresome. Another week's worth of detentions with Umbridge. I have got to learn to keep my mouth shut in that class. Whenever Umbridge insults me Harry can't help coming to my defense, and then he gets in trouble. But the problem is that we aren't learning how to do anything! Actually, I'm toying with the idea of asking Harry what he thinks about us organizing an independent study group.*

*The situation with Umbridge keeps getting worse, irrespective of our detentions. Today it was announced that she has been appointed Hogwarts's Grand Inquisitor, and will be inspecting classes. That must be what Percy's letter was referring to. What I suspect it means is that she'll be trying to get some professors fired. I can't imagine why Dumbledore's letting the Ministry get away with this. What kind of game can he be playing at? Is he trying to wait until they go too far and then expose their foolishness? But what about all the damage they'll do to Hogwarts in the meantime? There must be something else going on here that we don't know about.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 15

*I am such an idiot! Harry found me knitting hats (well, they were supposed to be hats – I suppose they looked more like misshapen lumps) in the common room this evening and asked me what I was doing. I proudly announced that I was going to use them to free house elves, by leaving them out for the poor enslaved creatures to pick up. He laughed at first and I glared at him, but when he saw that I was serious he gave me an odd look and then told me it wouldn't work. He reminded me that when he freed Dobby, he had to trick Lucius Malfoy into giving the sock to Dobby. It wouldn't have worked if Harry had given it to him, since Harry wasn't the one who owned him. Since I don't*

own the Hogwarts house elves, it won't free them if I give them the hats.

*I was so embarrassed I almost cried. Harry quickly sat down beside me and put his arm around me to comfort me. Then he commented that this wasn't like me – usually I thoroughly research something like this before I do it. He suggested that I was being overzealous about this issue and it was affecting my judgement. That did make me cry a little, but partly it was because he was being so nice about it. It makes me even happier about our relationship. I was very fortunate that Ron was on prefect duty during this incident. I'm certain he would have had something insulting to say and he would never have let me hear the end of it. And I know that I can trust Harry not to mention it to him.*

*After he was finished consoling me, I asked Harry again about him leading a defense study group. He was reluctant the first time I brought it up, but after two weeks of Umbridge's non-lessons I think I have him convinced. I assured him I would help him research spells and decide which ones to teach. I also persuaded him to open it up to more students than just me and Ron – whoever wants to learn. I told him I would try to set up some kind of organizational meeting during the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 19

*Harry remembered my birthday today! He gave me a book entitled 'How to prepare for OWLs Without Going Mad'. I'm embarrassed to say that I probably need it. He also gave me a box of sugar quills. I told him my parents would kill him if they knew, but he just grinned at me. Ohhh, that grin makes my knees go weak!*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 4

*We had quite a successful visit to Hogsmeade today, in more than one sense. Harry and I had our first 'date', and we managed to organize a Defense study group. The former just sort of came together.*

As the students were waiting in the Entrance Hall for the carriages to Hogsmeade, Ron approached Harry and Hermione. "Lavender and I have to wait until everyone's loaded before we leave. I'll catch you up later, OK?"

"Sure thing," replied Harry agreeably. Hermione moved closer and lowered her voice.

"If we don't see you beforehand, we'll meet you in the Hog's Head at noon," Hermione reminded him. "Don't forget to spread the word among the other prefects." Ron nodded and then hurried off to resume his duties with Lavender.

As they disembarked in the village Harry leaned in close to Hermione. “Too bad they don’t have a movie theater here. I could take you to a scary movie and if I was lucky you might end up on my lap.”

Hermione laughed and hit him on the shoulder, then looked up at him quizzically. “Mr. Potter, are you suggesting that we treat this as a date?”

Harry stopped and looked at her nervously as the rest of the students in their carriage moved away. “Maybe. If ... er, if you wanted to, that is.”

Hermione decided to lighten the mood. “Great idea!” she declared enthusiastically. “Now, since this is an official date ...” she paused and gave him a knowing smile, “... and there’s no movie theater for us to snuggle up in, where are you going to take me?”

Harry played along. “Hmm. I suppose we ought to go to places you’d like and not just where I’d like.”

Hermione nodded. “Very good. You’re off to a great start. But we can go somewhere you’d like too.” They joined hands and began to walk along the path into town.

“And I thought lunch in the Hog’s Head Tavern would be appropriate,” Harry joked. Hermione responded with a groan, and Harry laughed and went on. “But the tricky part will be finding a secluded place for the goodnight kiss at the end of the date.” Even though he had said this in a bantering way, he held his breath waiting for her reaction.

A nervous tension suddenly enveloped the couple, but Hermione deliberately kept her response lighthearted even though her pulse had quickened. “Harry Potter, what kind of girl do you think I am? I don’t kiss on the first date!” In fact she would have liked very much to kiss him, but she was worried about moving forward too quickly, especially with the uncertain situation with Ron.

Harry was actually somewhat relieved, but kept up the teasing tone of the discussion. “Oh well, guess I’ll have to wait till next time then.” Both of them relaxed and smiled at each other. What hadn’t been said was just as informative as what had been. They had managed to broach the issue and had dealt with it with minimal awkwardness. And both were able to communicate that kissing was something that each was interested in, and would come into their relationship eventually. For her part, Hermione was also very glad that Harry had not brought up her Yule Ball date with Viktor Krum.

By unspoken agreement the pair took the long way into the village, detouring past the Shrieking Shack, so as to extend their private time together, and before they came out into the main street Harry stopped and pulled Hermione into a brief, tight hug.

“Was that for anything special?” Hermione smiled up at him as they broke apart and headed for the first shop.

“Just for being you, and to let you know that I appreciate everything you do for me,” Harry

responded.

They stopped for some sweets in Honeydukes, and then checked out Scrivenshaft's where Hermione picked out a black and gold pheasant feather quill, which Harry insisted on paying for as a token of their first date. They spent the rest of the time before noon in a bookshop across the street, and then moved on to the Hog's Head for their meeting. Ron spotted them as they came out of the bookshop.

"Oh, there you are. No wonder I couldn't find you. Figures that Hermione would drag you into a bookshop on a Hogsmeade visit." Ron muttered. Harry and Hermione exchanged grins and followed him towards the decrepit building that housed the somewhat dodgy pub they had picked out for its relative seclusion.

*I was surprised at how many students showed up, but Harry was positively astounded. We hadn't been quite sure how the attacks on his credibility had affected the older students who knew him and what he'd done over the years. It was gratifying to see all the Gryffindors from our year, and other years besides. But there were also all four fifth year prefects from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw along with some of their friends. I had expected Susan Bones to be there, but Luna Lovegood was a bit of a surprise. In all there were twenty-five, not counting Harry, Ron, and myself.*

*Harry still had some misgivings that they were looking for a 'freak show' as he put it, and there were some snide comments from Zacharias Smith, but the rest of them seemed genuinely appreciative of what he'd accomplished and were interested in learning from him. There were quite a few ooh's and ahh's when he admitted to some of his exploits. That darling boy is so modest! I am somewhat unhappy about the looks Cho Chang was giving him, though. I'm going to have to keep my eye on her.*

*We finished up by agreeing to meet once a week, and I had everyone sign a parchment. I feel a little guilty for not telling them that the parchment had a confidentiality hex on it, but I had to do something to protect Harry from getting into any more trouble. We both agree that Umbridge would not be happy to discover that we're practicing spells behind her back. I'm still trying to decide if I should let McGonagall know what we're doing.*

*The meeting finished off on an amusing note, when Ron discovered that one of the boys who came, Michael Corner, was Ginny's boyfriend. He hadn't even realized she was going out with anyone! As I expected, he ranted about it all the way back to the castle. What I found most interesting is that he acted the same way as he was last year when Viktor was interested in me. That makes me wonder if he doesn't understand just how he feels about me. He may be confusing brotherly affection for romantic interest.*

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## Notebooks and Letters Working Some Things Out

### Chapter 5, Working Some Things Out

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 6

*There are just too many suspicious things going on this year! There must be some relationship between them.*

- 1. Umbridge handed down another Educational Decree today disbanding all student organizations, and requiring her permission to reform them or form new ones. It's clearly aimed at our defense study group. Someone must have tipped her off about it. She's also obviously targeting Harry specifically.*
- 2. We know from Sirius that the Order was also tipped off about our meeting. Is there a connection there?*
- 3. Sirius let slip that Molly was 'on duty'. Harry says that's not the first time he's heard that expression. Tonks mentioned being too tired to go on duty for Dumbledore once this summer. Earlier Sirius had told Harry that Voldemort was after a weapon. We think the Order is trying to keep him from getting it.*
- 4. An Order member was arrested in the Ministry late at night. Is the Order guarding the weapon in the Ministry or is the Order trying to steal it from the Ministry?*
- 5. Dumbledore and the Ministry have been at odds since July. Harry saw Fudge talking to Malfoy. Umbridge and Fudge are clearly trying to get rid of Harry. Whose side is the Ministry on? Fudge and Umbridge are apparently worried that Dumbledore's raising an army against them. Is he?*
- 6. Harry is having dreams about walking along a long corridor. He's also getting twitches of Voldemort's emotions through his scar, but these seem to be two different things.*
- 7. Hedwig was attacked and injured. Owl post is no longer secure .*
- 8. Sirius was almost caught talking to us through the floo in our common room. Therefore floos are also no longer secure.*

*9. Dumbledore hasn't spoken to Harry since June. He didn't want me to see him this summer. He didn't give Harry a prefect badge, but awarded them to Ron and me instead. If I had taken it Harry would have been alone a lot. We've generally been kept in the dark about what the Order's doing.*

*10. These things taken together all suggest that Harry is being isolated. Why? He and Dumbledore are supposed to be on the same side!*

Hermione gathered up her things and slipped down to the common room, where she found Harry asleep by the fire where Crookshanks was purring contentedly.

"Hey Crookshanks, are you down here watching over Harry for me?" Hermione asked softly while scratching the thick fur at the back of his head. Crookshanks opened one eye to acknowledge her, then closed it again. Hermione sat down next to Harry and fondly watched him sleep, then sighed and decided to wake him up. She leaned over and kissed him on the head, then whispered in his ear.

"Harry ... Harry, wake up."

"What? Who's there?" Harry awoke with a start and blinked a few times before he realized where he was and then realized that Hermione was leaning over him. "I almost had it," he muttered.

"Had what?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not sure. Whatever is on the other side of the door in my dream."

"Do you think you should tell Dumbledore about it?"

Harry frowned. "I would but he's avoiding me, remember." He turned towards her. "What are you doing down here so late?"

"I've been thinking about all the things that have been happening this year and making a list and trying to make some sense of it. I wanted your input on it. Look at what I've got so far." Harry sat up and Hermione moved right up next to him, and he automatically put his arm around her. He scanned down the list in her journal.

"I think you're on to something," he agreed. "I didn't make the connection before but seeing it all here together makes me wonder." He leaned back and rubbed his forehead with his free hand while Hermione looked up patiently.

"Voldemort has some kind of plan and it's not going well. I can tell by the feelings of frustration I'm getting from him. So whatever the Order's doing, it seems to be working. And with all the things you've pointed out here, they're clearly trying to cut me out of it. That must be part of their strategy." Hermione nodded; that had also been her conclusion. She was afraid to make the logical follow-up though.

"Every plan of Voldemort's seems to involve me and I don't think this one's any different," Harry

continued. “And it’s obvious the Order’s afraid of letting me know what’s going on. Here’s what I think. They’re worried that my link with Voldemort goes both ways. They think he’ll try to get information about this weapon out of me – that’s why they’re isolating me. As long as I don’t know anything about the weapon it can’t hurt them.”

“That’s what I thought too, but I was hoping I was wrong.” Hermione admitted. “Do you think he’s breaking into your mind?”

“I don’t think so, not yet anyway. Everything so far seems to be me seeing or feeling what he’s doing or feeling. If that’s so, these dreams like I just had where I want to get through the door must reflect his desire to get what’s behind the door. As long as he doesn’t get through it we’ll know we’re still OK. If I ever actually make it through the door in the dream and find something we’ll know it’s time to take action.

“That makes sense to me,” Hermione agreed, but noticed Harry still frowning. “What else?” she asked.

“What if they’re worried that he’ll possess me like he did Ginny? That might be why Dumbledore’s staying away from me and why I’m being isolated. Maybe he thinks it’s not safe for you and Ron to hang around me so much.”

Hermione scowled for a moment, but then hardened her face in determination. “If that’s the case they don’t know us very well. I’m not giving you up that easily.”

“But ...” Harry began to object.

“Harry Potter! I’ve told you, you mean everything to me. I’m sticking with you no matter what,” Hermione declared in a voice that left no room for argument.

Harry looked away, not wanting her to see the emotion on his face that she had raised with her heartfelt pledge. “Thank you.”

Hermione hugged him tightly, then announced, “Come on, it’s late. You need to get to bed.”

Harry tightened his arm around her for a return hug before they got up, but as he released her they were startled by a loud pop. Whirling around, they spotted something moving toward them in the shadows.

“Dobby has your owl, Harry Potter sir!” The eager elf paused to look back and forth between the two students. “Oh, but Dobby did not mean to disturb Harry Potter and his Miney.”

Hermione blushed and rose to her feet while Harry took Hedwig and stroked her head. She asked Dobby about Winky and was disappointed to hear that the former Crouch family elf was still not taking well to freedom. Harry picked up Hermione’s journal and was about to hand it to her when his eye caught the first item on the list and he was reminded of the difficulty their defense group would be having trying to meet without Umbridge finding out.

“Dobby, there’s something else we need.”

*Dobby, of course, was delighted to be of use again and excitedly told us about a hidden room that sounds like just the thing we need. He called it the ‘Come and Go Room’ or the ‘Room of Requirement’. Apparently it turns into whatever you need it to be. Since we need a place to practice spells without anyone knowing, that’s what we’ll get. Harry and I will check it out tomorrow, and if it looks OK, we’ll have our first meeting the following night.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 8

*We had our first defense club meeting tonight. I think it’s going to work out really well. The Room of Requirement is absolutely amazing! And all the students were quite enthusiastic, and want to meet at least once a week. I suggested we officially elect Harry leader, and choose a name. We’re going to call it the DA. Cho came up with the name ‘Defense Association’, but Ginny suggested we call it ‘Dumbledore’s Army’. That girl has a pretty sharp wit.*

*Harry decided to start with Expelliarmus, which is a pretty basic dueling hex. Zacharias Smith, who is turning into quite a pain, complained about it being such a simple hex, but Harry shut him up by saying he used it in his duel with Voldemort. I added that Snape had used it when he dueled Lockhart our second year, and it’s commonly used to end a duel. Fred then commented sarcastically that any moron ought to realize that if you could get your opponent’s wand away from him you’d have quite an advantage. (He actually used a more colorful phrase than ‘quite an advantage’.)*

*It turned out to be a good idea, because most of us were frightfully bad at it. Many times the spell missed and hit something or someone else. Sometimes mispronunciations caused something entirely different to happen. Harry beat me the first time, but after that first round when we discovered how much difficulty people were having I practiced with Ron and Neville while Harry went around the room helping people. I won almost every time. Ron claimed he got me a few times, but once was when he stumbled and knocked the wand out of my hand, and another was when I was distracted. I couldn’t tell him why, though. I was watching Harry at the time and he was helping Cho. She was acting all helpless and cute so he stopped to show her what she was doing wrong. She even made him stand behind her and put his arm around hers to show her the wand movement. I finally interrupted them by shouting to Harry that it was getting late. Next time I’m going to duel her and knock her on her cute little arse!*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 15

*Second meeting of Dumbledore’s Army. We finished up with the Disarming Hex today. Ron got really annoyed that I beat him so often. He tried to claim that he was going easy on me because I was a girl, but I just gave him a look that told what I thought of that excuse. Then he told me*

Neville needed the practice more than he did and stomped over to join Lavender and Parvati. Unfortunately, Neville was really no challenge for me. Finally I found Harry and asked him to practice with me a while. I didn't realize it at first but everyone stopped to watch us.

He got me the first few times – he is just too fast for me. Then I suggested he just dodge while I tried to hex him. Finally I disarmed him and I was so pleased I jumped up and down and clapped my hands. Then he surprised me by giving me a hug! It was only then that we noticed everyone's eyes on us. We broke away quickly and he announced that my idea was excellent and that everyone should try having one person do the hex while the other one dodged, as that would be good practice too. I went back to work with Neville at that point and he finally managed to disarm me by the end of the meeting.

When we were finishing up Harry announced that we would move on to restraining spells – Incarcerous and Petrificus Totalus – since that was the logical next step after you disarmed an opponent. Cho piped up teasingly that Harry could tie her up any time he wanted to. That little flirt! But it did get a round of laughs and Harry turned red. Then Ginny shot back that she would be glad to tie up Cho, if she could include a gag as well. It was quite a clever putdown, but then Ginny's pretty good at that. I wondered at why she jumped into that situation so quickly, though. Was she trying to help me out? It almost seemed like she was protecting her own turf, but I thought she had given up her crush on Harry. After all, she's dating Michael Corner now.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 23

Different night for the DA this week due to a quidditch practice rainout. It's probably a good idea for us to meet on different days anyway, to minimize our chances of being caught. I passed out fake Galleons that I charmed to communicate the date and time of the next meeting, which will also help avoid suspicion that would arise from constantly passing messages back and forth across the Great Hall.

Ron went right to Lavender as soon as we broke up into pairs to practice, and Harry noticed the disappointed look on my face, so he quickly announced that everyone should mix up and use different partners than they had the first two times. I stopped to surreptitiously give his hand a squeeze and whisper 'thank you' into his ear before I found another partner. (Surreptitiously is a relative term, I suppose. Many of the girls noticed, but I don't think any of the guys did.)

I tried to partner up with Cho, but Padma got to her first. Too bad – I was hoping to body bind her permanently so that she wouldn't be able to flirt with Harry. I ended up with Luna. She really is a strange one. She was quite good when she put her mind to it but she's easily distracted, and she makes the most outrageous comments. I almost wonder if the whole 'Loony' personality isn't an act. I've been able to do Petrificus Totalus since first year, so I had no problem with that. Incarcerous was more difficult since it's a NEWT level spell. By the way, the Room of Requirement is incredible. It provides very well cushioned floors and lots of pillows, which came in very handy when people were petrified and fell over.

*After we all got back to our common rooms Lavender and Ron announced that the Gryffindor prefects were planning a Halloween party next week. I'll talk to Harry tomorrow to see if he thinks we can attend as a couple.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 24*

*Harry informed me this morning that Ron told him last night that he was taking Lavender to the party. So Harry told him that he would probably be taking me. That apparently really set Ron off. He said some things to Harry that Harry didn't want to repeat to me – the gist of it was that he accused Harry of stealing me from him. Where does he come off acting like that? He never actually showed any interest in dating me, and now he has a date with Lavender. What is his problem? I griped to Ginny about it and she shrugged and said that's just the way Ron is. I have to agree that Ron has always found it easy to become jealous of Harry. At any rate, he avoided us all day.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 31*

*The DA meeting tonight went well, at least. I finally got to duel with Cho. I sequentially disarmed her, slapped her in a body bind, and tied her up. Then I leaned in close and told her to stay the hell away from my boyfriend. I didn't mean for anyone else to hear me, but as I walked away Katie Bell gave me a wink and Ginny slapped hands with me in a high five. Harry and I stayed behind after everyone left to make sure everything was in order and I told him what I'd done. He laughed and gave me a hug and said he didn't mind me being protective, but that he had to be nice to her in the meetings. I allowed that he was probably right.*

*Things went downhill from there. When we returned to the common room the party was already in full swing.*

*On the way back to the common room Hermione decided to vent her frustrations with Ron. "I've about had it with him," she complained as Harry nodded sympathetically. "What am I supposed to do? If I do something better than him he sulks. But he's not willing to work at things as hard as I do. Does he think that he's just naturally entitled to be good at magic because he's a pureblood and I'm muggleborn?" Harry frowned and shook his head in support. "And because he's a guy he's allowed to go after any girl that catches his eye, but I'm not allowed to be interested in another guy?" Harry started to respond but Hermione cut him off. "And don't say it's just because it's you; he was the same way with Viktor last year." Harry cut his response short, as that had been exactly what he had been about to point out, but of course she was right, as usual.*

*"Come on," he urged as they approached the portrait hole. "Let's forget about this for a while and enjoy the party." They broke apart as they entered the common room and hurried up to their dorms to change into some nicer robes.*

Harry was back down to the common room before Hermione and what he saw stopped him in his tracks. On the couch in the corner, but in full view of the rest of the common room, Ron was wrapped around Lavender Brown so tightly that it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began.

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” Ginny’s voice came from his side. “It looks like he’s trying to eat her face.”

Before Harry could answer, he heard a sharp intake of breath behind him followed by a muttered, ‘That hypocrite!’ He turned around just in time to see Hermione’s mane of bushy brown hair disappear out the portrait hole, which slammed behind her accompanied by a loud complaint from the Fat Lady. He quickly excused himself from Ginny and hurried to follow her.

He didn’t have to look far. He found her in the first empty classroom he came to. She was standing at the front of the room, coldly and methodically casting *Incarcerous* spells on the desks and chairs in the first row, leaving each one neatly and tightly wrapped in sturdy looking ropes. Harry decided it was fortunate for Ron and Lavender that she was taking out her anger on classroom furniture rather than them, or they would have ended up rather uncomfortably bound together. He couldn’t help but admire the accuracy and thoroughness of her spellwork under such stressful circumstances.

“Hello Harry,” she said evenly. “I thought I’d get a bit of practicing in. I find it helps me calm down.”

“Nice work,” he noted. “Good thing you didn’t decide to practice your *Reducto* hex, though.”

Hermione managed a tight smile. “I thought about that, but I decided that the professors might not appreciate having an entire classroom turned into kindling.” Harry moved next to her and took hold of her other hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“Ron seems to be enjoying the party,” she sniffed at last. Harry nodded and moved closer and released her hand in order to wrap his arm around her waist. Finally Hermione turned to him and sobbed, “It’s not fair!” Harry responded by pulling her close as she buried her head into his chest.

“It’s just not right,” she continued. “We’ve been leaning over backwards to avoid any displays of affection around him, but the first chance he gets he snogs her brains out right in front of the whole common room. Why do we have to be so careful about his sensibilities because he supposedly has some sort of *thing* for me, but he’s under no such restrictions? We don’t even hold hands in front of him but he can just kiss a girl any time he feels like it!” She pulled away and continued her rant. “And they’re both prefects! They’re supposed to enforce the rules, not break them.”

“That’s been hard for you this year, hasn’t it?” Harry gently pointed out as Hermione nodded glumly. “You can’t help but think of how you and I would have handled a situation and it bothers you that they don’t take their responsibilities as seriously as you would have.” Hermione nodded again and a small smile crept onto her face. Harry certainly was good at understanding her and making her feel better. She gave him another hug, this time with warmth and affection.

Harry put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her back so that he could look in her eyes. “What do you say we don’t worry about what they’re doing for a while? I do believe this is our second date now Miss Granger. And we seem to be alone in this classroom.” Hermione’s eyes now shone brightly and she shyly nodded her assent and licked her lips nervously. Her eyelids fluttered shut as Harry lowered his head to hers.

The door behind them burst open and to their horror, Ron came in laughing, pulling Lavender by the hand. He instantly drew up short at the sight of them and his eyes narrowed as an angry look filled his face. Lavender took one look at the three of them and backed out of the room, the door swinging shut behind her.

“I knew it!” Ron shouted. “I knew you two were up to something. I knew you were going to steal her ...”

“Ron!” Hermione cut him off. “Nobody *stole* anyone! In case you don’t remember, you decided to date *Lavender*. Harry and I have been developing feelings for each other for a while now and he *told* you we were going to this party together. And I *never* belonged to you!”

“You knew I was interested in her!” Ron spat at Harry, ignoring Hermione’s words. “You always get everything I want and now you’re taking Hermione, you traitor!” He moved menacingly toward Harry but before he could do anything Hermione’s voice rang out.

“*Petrificus Totalus! Incarcerous! Silencio!*” In quick succession Ron was struck rigid, bound, and unable to speak. Hermione would have let him crash to the floor but Harry darted forward and caught him, then propped his rigid form up against a desk.

“Is that what I am to you, Ron?” Hermione hissed. “A prize? Some sort of trophy? What was I supposed to do Ron? Wait around while you worked your way through all the good-looking girls first? What exactly is my function in your life? Someone to bicker with until you need something from me? You’re always making fun of me for studying so much, but it doesn’t seem to bother you when you want to copy my homework. You criticize the amount of time I spend working on my spells, and then pout and sulk when I can do them better than you. Harry and I have been bending over backwards to avoid making you feel uncomfortable about our relationship, but you can do anything you want right in front of the entire house. Well that’s not what friendship is about, Ronald Weasley. It’s a two-way street.”

Hermione stormed out of the room and the door slammed behind her. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Harry approached Ron. “Hermione and I are trying to work out what we feel for each other,” he said slowly, in a low, even tone. “But my feelings for her or hers for me have nothing to do with you. We didn’t decide to get together because of you or to spite you or to cut you out or for any reason involving you at all. It’s between us and we both hope you can accept whatever comes of it, just like we’d accept any relationship you have with a girl.”

He turned away and walked to the door, then turned back. “I’m sure Hermione’d prefer to leave you like this all night, but we have a quidditch match tomorrow and I want you ready to go. *Finite Incantatum*.”



From the Journal of Hermione Granger – November 1

*Can things possibly get any worse?*

*The day started out well enough. I met Harry in the common room this morning before we went down to breakfast and asked him if he was displaying proper house spirit for today's quidditch match. He gave me a blank look for an instant before he figured out what I was getting at, then he broke into a sheepish grin and nodded. Then I pulled the collar of my robes away from my neck until he could see my red bra strap and said, "Me too!" That really got a smile out of him. Unfortunately, it was the last time I saw him smile all day.*

*Ron ignored us at breakfast, but at least he wasn't glaring or shouting at us. Instead, he was more worried about the match. It was a very bad sign when he couldn't eat. Ginny went over to try to cheer him up, but it didn't seem to help much. I'm afraid our confrontation last night made things even worse. His performance in practice had been uneven – sometimes he'd make great saves but other times he got flustered and botched things horribly. Harry told me that Fred and George were concerned about how his play would be affected by the taunting he was likely to get from the Slytherins. Well, they were right.*

*I knew we were in trouble when I spotted the badges the Slytherins were wearing. They all said, 'Weasley Is Our King', and I was certain that they weren't meant to be complimentary. I warned Harry not to let Ron see them, then I gave him a kiss on the cheek, wished him luck, and headed for the stands. It turned out that the badges were in reference to a viciously insulting song. Ron fell apart and couldn't stop anything, but fortunately Harry caught the snitch before Slytherin got too far ahead, and Gryffindor won handily. That's when disaster struck.*

*After Harry caught the snitch, even after the whistle blew, Crabbe hit a bludger that knocked him off his broom. Since the match was over, Harry wasn't paying that much attention. He wasn't very far off the ground, so he didn't get hurt, but Malfoy was still flying along after him and managed to knock him down again as soon as he got up. Then the two of them got into a shouting match. Fred and George flew down to support Harry, and Malfoy started taunting them too, with his usual insults about the Burrow. Harry held George back, and Angelina grabbed Fred, but Malfoy's taunts just got worse and worse. He made fun of Mrs. Weasley, then switched to Harry's mother, and finally said something disgusting about me. (Harry refused to reveal what it was.) George lost control with the remark about his mum, and Harry couldn't restrain himself either, and both of them began pummeling Malfoy. The fight was broken up in seconds, and McGonagall hauled them into her office. She gave them both a weeks detention, which I admit (and I think Harry would agree) was fair. But it didn't end there.*

*Umbridge cited yet another Educational Decree and overruled McGonagall's punishment. She announced that Harry and George would be banned from playing quidditch! That's outrageous! The whole thing was instigated by Crabbe and Malfoy. I'm tempted to think that it might even have been staged. Even more outrageous is that she banned Fred too – she said he would have attacked Malfoy too if his teammates had not restrained him. There's no way she should be able to do that.*

*Dumbledore simply must do something about this!*

Late that evening in the common room, Harry and Hermione sat by the fire, surrounded by the rest of the quidditch team. Angelina was in a daze, still not able to grasp what had happened to her team. “No Seeker and no Beaters,” she kept repeating, “what on earth are we going to do?”

Alicia complained about the how unfair it was that Crabbe had gone relatively unpunished. Ginny, sitting on the other side of Harry, reported that he had just got lines and that the other Slytherins were laughing about it. Eventually, after Harry remained silent and continued to stare into the fire, she got up and went to look for Ron. Soon after, the others gradually drifted away leaving Harry and Hermione alone before the fire.

Finally Harry spoke up. “I just don’t know if I can take it anymore Hermione,” he whispered miserably. “If it wasn’t for you I don’t think I could keep going.” Hermione laced her fingers into his and gave his hand a long squeeze.

“Harry, you’re the strongest person I know,” she assured him. “You’ll get through this, I’m sure of it. And you know I’ll be here for you, doing whatever I can to help.” She moved closer and leaned her head on his shoulder and he dropped her head on top of hers.

Just then the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Ron and Ginny climbed into the common room. Ron looked terrible, as though he had been wandering outside for hours, but now he was deathly pale and clearly alarmed. Harry and Hermione quickly broke apart as the siblings came in and rose to their feet.

“Bloody Hell, Harry!” Ron exclaimed. “Is it true? You’ve been banned?” Harry nodded his head glumly, but a small part of him was glad that this incident was causing Ron to overlook his anger with the two of them for starting a relationship. Beside him, Hermione caught his eye and he knew that she was thinking the same.

Ginny poked Ron with her elbow. “Er ... I was going to tell you that I’m resigning from the team but ...” he began before Hermione cut him off.

“But you can’t do that now because the team needs you and the rest of you have to pull together,” she insisted. Ginny was nodding before she had finished, and Harry joined in as well. Ron looked unconvinced but the other three stood firm.

“But what are we going to do for a Seeker?” Ron moaned. Out of the corner of his eye Harry noticed Ginny nodding thoughtfully to herself and he nudged Hermione to call it to her attention. To his surprise she gave him a ‘we’ll talk about it later’ look. For his part, Ron trudged toward the stairs and up to their dorm, and after a final quick hug from Hermione, Harry followed him.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – November 2

Dumbledore never said a word about what happened yesterday. Harry says he's not surprised – the headmaster not only hasn't said a word to him all year, he hasn't even looked at him. I simply don't understand why he's sitting back and letting Umbridge take over the school.

Harry is absolutely despondent about the whole thing. He said that without quidditch, and even more so without his broom and the ability to go flying, he feels like he's lost a part of himself. I think I understand what he means. He's felt so trapped all his life that flying is a release for him – it makes him feel free and unfettered. I wish I enjoyed flying as much as he does – it would be something nice to do together. Or it would be if he still had a broom. That's another thing – how can she justify taking his broom away? Even if it was legal for her to ban him from quidditch there's no way it should be possible to ban a wizard from flying! I swear that when this is resolved I'm going to go flying with him more often. Perhaps with both of us sharing a broomstick – that sounds romantic.

As far as that's concerned, Harry and I have gone back to a 'no public display of affection' understanding, so as not to alienate Ron again. Harry is so depressed now that I don't want him and Ron to be at odds as well.

I explained to Harry this morning about Ginny and quidditch. (Harry and I usually have a few minutes to ourselves in the mornings before Ron comes downstairs. That's been our private 'alone' time all term.) Ginny's been desperately hoping to get on the quidditch team ever since she's been at Hogwarts. So I bet she was thinking of trying out as the replacement seeker, but she didn't want to say anything in front of Harry last night. She's as quidditch crazy as the rest of her family. She told me she's been breaking into the broom shed at home and sneaking out to ride her brothers' brooms since she was six! I made him promise me he'd keep her secret and he assured me he would. He told me to let her know he's fine with her trying out – he'd just as soon it be her as anyone else in Gryffindor.

On top of everything else that's happened, Hagrid came back last night. We went to see him today to warn him about Umbridge, but he just brushed it off. He says he has lots of 'interesting' creatures for us to study. I'm afraid that his idea of 'interesting' is going to get him fired. What I don't understand is why Professor Dumbledore doesn't say anything to him about his lessons. Hagrid would certainly listen to him. Sometimes it seems like Dumbledore doesn't care anything about the quality of education here.

It won't help that Hagrid looks like he's been in a nasty fight. That will give Umbridge even more reason to claim that what he's doing is too dangerous for students. As it turns out, he and Madame Maxime have been meeting with the giants, trying to win them to our side. They evidently weren't successful. From the look of him, one of the giants beat him up pretty badly. The curious thing, though, is that his injuries look very recent.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – November 4

Hagrid showed us thestrals today. It was actually a very good lesson, although Umbridge ruined it

by insulting him about his speech and acting like he was too stupid to understand her questions. Of course she got Malfoy and Parkinson to back her up. I was furious with her by the end of the lesson, but Harry and Ron kept me from saying something that would get me another detention. I'm afraid that if she can even make one of his better lessons look bad, he hasn't got a chance. Oh, it turns out that Neville can also see thestrals. I made a really insensitive comment about wishing to be able to see them too. Harry quietly pointed out just what I was wishing for and I felt really bad. He just gave my hand a squeeze and told me it was OK though. He's nice that way.

Ginny made the quidditch team. She wanted to be a Chaser, and Angelina briefly considered switching Katie to Seeker, but during the tryout Ginny did well at Seeker so they put her there. And this way they don't have to break up the Chaser combination that's been together for 4 years. Unfortunately, Harry says that Fred and George told him Ron is still shaky, and that the replacement Beaters aren't very good.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 1

Things have settled down quite a bit – at least no new things have gone wrong. The DA continues to go well. We've finished with defensive type spells and are starting offensive ones – *Impedimentia* and *Stupefy* this month. Harry is a great teacher! He's always going around showing the students how to do the spells better, giving them tips on wand motion and aiming and so forth. Cho continues to flirt shamelessly with him. Honestly, she knows very well that he and I are together! She probably thinks that a pretty girl like her can lure him away from plain old me. Fortunately, Harry's not the kind of guy who will switch girlfriends that easily, even if we weren't already best friends.

Harry and I have even more time to ourselves now that Ron and Ginny have quidditch practice and he doesn't. I feel so badly for him, and would even be willing to give up the extra time alone with him if it meant he would be able to fly again. At least he's staying caught up with his homework, and most evenings we have a chance to cuddle together on the sofa in front of the fire for a bit.

Ron is further behind than ever what with quidditch and his prefect duties. He's now really regretting getting the badge, and even joked the other day that I had the right idea in turning it down. He's mostly put aside his unhappiness about Harry and me being together. It would probably be more accurate to say that he's ignoring it, and we're making it easy for him to act that way by refraining from touching each other in front of him. I think part of it is also that he needs my help with his homework. It's not a stable situation for the long term, though. I want to start moving our relationship forward soon. I'm considering plotting a way to get Harry alone in a room for that kiss that Ron interrupted.

I'm really going to miss Harry over the holidays. I'm going skiing with my parents, and he's going to the Burrow with Ron. It's an indication of just how badly this school year is going that Harry told me that he's looking forward to getting away from Hogwarts. As soon as he said it, though, he got a panicked look on his face and hastened to reassure me that he didn't mean that he wanted to get away from me. He's so cute.

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 18

*Oh Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! I finally kissed Harry tonight! I feel like that song in My Fair Lady – I Could Have Danced All Night. It starts out ‘Bed, bed I couldn’t go to bed; my head too light to try to put it down!’*

*Breathe, Hermione. OK, here’s how it happened. It was the last DA meeting of the term tonight and Harry announced we’d just be reviewing what we’d learned so far, then start new stuff after break. I’ve become quite good at Stunning spells. I stunned everyone I went up against. Harry wouldn’t let me duel Cho, though. I’m fairly certain he knew I wanted a piece of her – justifiably so, I think, given what she tried to pull later.*

*Anyway, Dobby had decorated the room for Christmas, with mistletoe and ornaments hanging from the ceiling with Harry’s face on them. Naturally, Harry was embarrassed to death about it and I helped him get them down before the others arrived. I deliberately left a sprig of mistletoe though. It almost backfired on me. At the end of the meeting Cho hung around, obviously hoping to get Harry alone. Of course, I wasn’t about to let that happen, so I stayed behind to help clean up a bit.*

Harry approached Cho to see what she wanted, but when she turned to face him tears were pouring down her face.

“What ...?” he began, not knowing what to do. She was just standing there, crying silently.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head and wiping her eyes on her sleeve. “I was just thinking of ... him, and whether he knew all this stuff and if it would have helped ...”

Harry moved closer, reassuring Cho that Cedric had indeed known all these spells and a lot more besides. They exchanged a few more words and Harry began to move away, aware that Hermione had stopped stacking cushions and was keeping a close eye on them.

“Oh, don’t go,” Cho pleaded quickly. “I didn’t mean to get all upset. What I really wanted to do was thank you. You’re a really good teacher, you know.” Harry had been told this by Hermione as well, but had tried to brush it off. Of course his best friend would say something like that. He smiled as he pictured her now saying, *‘I told you so!’*

Cho was emboldened by Harry’s smile, and shot back a smile of her own, the tears now forgotten. “I’ve never been able to stun anything before,” she continued, moving closer to him.

Harry swallowed hard, trying to think of something to say, and how to get out of this situation. “Oh, I don’t know about that,” he stammered, trying to make a joke of it. “I’ve thought you looked stunning from the first time I saw you in a quidditch match. I had trouble concentrating on the game.”

Over by the cushions, Hermione groaned to herself. Why did Harry have to be such a nice guy? He was just trying to be polite, but everything he said and did was encouraging her.

Cho glanced up, causing Harry to follow her gaze. “Mistletoe,” she said quietly. Harry gasped as he wondered where the heck that had come from. When he looked back at her it was quite clear to him what she expected to happen next.

“Oh!” he said nervously. “Well, then, Happy Christmas, Cho.” Then he quickly kissed her on the forehead and stepped back before she could do anything more.

As soon as Cho pointed out the mistletoe Hermione gave up all pretense of tidying up, and quickly slipped over to where the two of them were standing. Just as Harry moved back from the pretty Chinese girl, Hermione came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, smiling sweetly at her over his shoulder. “Yes, Happy Christmas, Cho,” she repeated brightly.

For her part, Cho shot Hermione a vicious glare, but realizing she had lost this contest, whirled, flipping her long black hair behind her, and quickly exited the room.

Harry turned to face Hermione with an apologetic look on his face. Hermione smiled shyly at him, though. “You know, that mistletoe’s still up there,” she whispered.

Harry broke into a nervous grin. “Probably full of nargles, though.”

“Well,” Hermione declared as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Luna just happened to tell me the best way to ward off nargles.”

“What ... what’s that,” Harry murmured as he bent his face close to hers.

“This.” Hermione closed the remaining distance and pressed her lips to his. With hearts pounding they each tentatively explored the other’s mouth. Harry couldn’t believe how soft and inviting Hermione’s lips were; Hermione wondered how the room had suddenly become so warm. Eventually the need for air caused them to reluctantly break contact.

Very satisfied with herself, Hermione smiled broadly at the dazed look on Harry’s face. It had been wonderful, and easily lived up to their expectations, but both now wondered what would happen next. As usual, Hermione came up with a clever solution. “Now, Professor Potter,” she teased. “What do you always tell us we need to do in order to master a new skill?”

Harry’s face broke into a wide grin. “Practice,” he answered. “Repetition is essential.” Then they promptly followed his excellent advice.

Some time later the couple finally made it back to Gryffindor Tower. As the portrait hole opened, Hermione, whose arm had been firmly wrapped around Harry as they huddled together under the invisibility cloak, gave him one last hug and hurried toward the stairs. Ron, who had been waiting for them, caught only a glimpse of her.

“Hermione, where are you off to in such a rush?” he called out.

“Oh! I ... er ... need to write ...” she didn’t want to reveal to him that she was keeping a journal – he would tease her about doing something so girly as writing in a diary and she’d never hear the end of it. “I need to write a letter,” she blurted out and raced to her room

Still in a bit of a daze, Harry sank into the armchair next to Ron’s, who was muttering about Hermione probably writing to Krum again.

“What kept you?” he asked suspiciously, as he noticed Harry’s flustered state. Harry paused to gather his thoughts. He and Hermione had vowed not to lie to Ron about what was going on between them, and it was now definitely clear that they were in a serious relationship.

“Well, um ... Hermione and I ... we ... well we decided ...”

“You kissed her.” Ron said accusingly. Harry nodded, bracing himself for Ron’s reaction.

Ron slumped back into his chair unhappily. “What about Cho?” he demanded.

“Huh?” Harry asked in surprise, not expecting this line of questioning. “I haven’t been interested in Cho for ages. What made you think ...?”

“Well, she’s obviously interested in you,” Ron responded. “I noticed her hanging back after the meeting. Thought she was going to try to corner you under that mistletoe or something.”

“Oh.” Harry had the feeling that Ron had been hoping this would happen, and turn Harry’s attention away from Hermione. “Well, actually she did, but ...”

Ron gave him a shrewd look. “But Hermione broke that up right quick, I reckon.”

Harry’s face broke into a goofy grin, which did not make Ron happy at all. “Yeah, and then ...” Harry began, but Ron waved him off before he could say any more.

“Please, I don’t want to hear the details,” Ron declared with a scowl. The two boys sat silently for a few minutes, avoiding each other’s eyes.

“Look Ron,” Harry said finally. “We’ve been moving in this direction for a while now, and you know it. We’re hoping you will accept us being together. We’re still best mates and Hermione considers you as much of a friend as she always did.”

Ron didn’t say anything, but finally shrugged. After a few more minutes the pair went up to bed in an uneasy silence.

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione looked over at her daughter, who was unable to restrain herself from bouncing up and down excitedly on the sofa next to her while clapping her hands.

“Ooh Mummy, that’s so romantic! Your first kiss was under the mistletoe.” Hermione smiled and nodded wistfully. “And so the book was wrong?” Rose continued. “He never kissed that Cho Chang?”

“Well, not that time,” Hermione answered with a slight frown. Then she caught sight of her daughter’s wide-eyed stare. “Never mind about that right now. It’s time for you to be getting to bed.”

“Mum!”

“Go on. Scoot.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## Notebooks and Letters Unpleasant Holliday Happenings

### Chapter 6, Unpleasant Holiday Happenings

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 19

*Harry is missing! Neville found me in the common room this morning worrying about why he hadn't come down yet and told me that he had had an awful nightmare. It was so bad that Neville had to go get McGonagall, and then she took Harry and Ron to Dumbledore's office. At first I was afraid that Harry had finally been possessed and had attacked Ron, but Neville assured me that nothing like that happened, and that Ron went along to help Harry get there. However, neither of them returned to the dorm. Then I discovered that Ginny is gone too.*

*Next I went to see Professor McGonagall but she was reluctant to tell me anything. She could see that I was becoming frantic, though, and told me she would speak to Dumbledore about informing me what had been done. She did confirm that Harry, Ron, Ginny, Fred and George were no longer in the castle. I've been a wreck all day – I haven't been able to concentrate on classes at all! It just feels wrong to be sitting there without Harry next to me. Umbridge was furious about Harry leaving, but I honestly told her I didn't know anything. I don't think she believed me though.*

*This afternoon I went to see Hedwig and asked her to find Harry. She seemed to understand and took my note and flew right off.*

*Dinner was the worst. Lavender and Parvati sat by me, and Neville too, since they could all see how lost I felt without Harry, Ron, and Ginny. No one else seems to know any more about what happened. I asked McGonagall again if she could tell me anything, but she said Dumbledore told her it had to remain confidential for now. I can't believe that he wouldn't at least let me know what's going on, even if I'm not allowed to tell anyone else!*

*Now it's bedtime already, and still no word. I'm afraid I'm going to start crying any minute. I can't believe how I could have been so happy just 24 hours ago and be so miserable now.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 20

*Harry wrote back! Hedwig came right into my room this morning without waiting for the normal*

owl post at breakfast. I don't think I've ever been happier to see her! It was just a quick note saying he's all right, but that something awful happened and he experienced it personally. Then he said he couldn't tell me where he was but if I tapped into my marauding nature that I might be able to work out how to learn more about it.

After reading that I tapped the parchment and said 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good' and another message was revealed. He got Sirius to charm the parchment for him. The nightmare was even worse than I had imagined. Harry thinks he somehow became Voldemort's snake, and attacked Mr. Weasley! Ron assures him that he never left the dorm room during the nightmare, but it was so realistic he's still worried. At any rate, when they got to Dumbledore's office the headmaster immediately talked to some portraits and they reported that Mr. Weasley had in fact been attacked at the Ministry, and they were able to cause someone to discover him and take him to St. Mungo's. Then Dumbledore sent Harry off with a portkey before Umbridge could find out, and Ron, Ginny, Fred, and George as well so they could go visit Mr. Weasley in the hospital. He's going to be all right – thank goodness they got to him in time!

After I read the note I went to McGonagall again and told her what I knew. She took me to the headmaster's office once more and he still didn't want to tell me everything. He tried to tell me not to worry, everything's all right. Well, I wasn't going to take that anymore – I knew Harry needed me. This time McGonagall supported me and Dumbledore eventually relented. Harry is at the same house he went to at the end of the summer and it's under the Fidelius charm, as I suspected. Dumbledore is the secret keeper and he told me. I'm going there today as soon as we're dismissed for Christmas break. I'm going to take the Knight Bus. Hedwig agreed to take a letter to my parents telling them I wouldn't be coming skiing with them after all. I hope they aren't too upset, but I tried to explain to them that I have to be with Harry.

Hermione arrived at Grimmauld Place and watched the Knight Bus disappear with a bang. Then she walked up to the empty space between No. 11 and No. 13 and thought about the words Dumbledore had spoken to her – 'The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London'. As she stood there the building appeared and she hurried up the steps, gave a look of disgust at the twisted serpent shaped door knocker, and rang the bell.

"Hermione, what are you doing here?" Sirius asked in surprise as he cautiously opened the door, holding his wand in one hand and a Christmas ornament in the other. Her reply was cut off by a loud shriek from a painting in the entrance hall.

"Filth! Scum! Begone from this place! How dare you defile this noble house you mudblood filth. You ..."

"Shut up you horrible old hag, shut UP!" Sirius shouted as he struggled to close the drapes over the painting.

Mrs. Weasley appeared and hustled Hermione through the door at the end of the hall.

“What on earth was that?” Hermione asked in a low voice, shaken from the experience.

“A portrait of Sirius’s mother. An extremely unpleasant woman, as you’ve seen,” Molly answered. “But that’s a long story. Now, what brings you here? We weren’t expecting you.”

She led Hermione into another room, where the Weasley children were decorating a Christmas tree. They all turned toward her with similar looks of surprise, and Ron quickly moved across the room to her side. “Did you hear about Harry?” he asked anxiously.

“Yes, that’s why I’m here,” she responded, answering both his question and the original one. “Where is he?”

“He’s shut himself up in one of the upper rooms and won’t talk to anyone,” Ron replied as the others nodded in agreement. “He’s pretty shook up about ... what he saw.”

“And you’re just leaving him by himself?” Hermione demanded. “Why doesn’t someone do something to help him?”

“You know him,” Ginny shrugged with a resigned expression. “There’s no getting through to him when he gets in one of his moods.”

“Oh honestly!” Hermione snapped, and then whirled and swept out of the room. Ron and Ginny shared a look, then Ron picked up her bag and they followed her. Fred and George exchanged a smirk at the scene they had just witnessed. Hermione had dropped her bag right where she stood, and hadn’t even taken her coat off, in her haste to get to Harry. It was quite clear what her most important priority was right now.

Back in the entrance hall Sirius had managed to close the drapes over his mother’s portrait, but Hermione swept by with only a nod of acknowledgement and hurried up the stairs. Ron and Ginny followed, but stopped on the second floor.

“He’s up in the room on the top floor with Buckbeak, but he’s ignored everyone who’s tried to talk to him,” Ron informed her. “We’ll just wait down here for you.”

Hermione raced up the rest of the stairs and pounded on the door of the room Ron had indicated. “Harry, it’s me. I know you’re in there,” she called out. “Will you please come out? I want to help you.”

“Hermione! What are you doing here?” Harry gasped, pulling open the door. “I thought ...” He was interrupted by a mass of bushy brown hair in his face and a pair of trembling arms that wrapped around him in a crushing hug. He responded with a desperate embrace of his own, holding on to her like a lifeline. Harry had never been so glad to see anyone in his life. Hermione wouldn’t be afraid to be around him. She would be able to figure out what was happening to him.

Finally they broke apart and stepped back from each other, but Hermione didn’t let go of his hands. Only then did Harry notice that there was snow in her hair and her face was pink with cold,

and realized that she had rushed up to find him without even taking her coat off first.

“I knew you would need me here, so I sent Hedwig to my parents telling them I wouldn’t be joining them after all,” Hermione explained while she shrugged her coat off. Harry reached out to help her and as soon as the coat hit the floor she was back in his arms again. “Oh Harry, why do all of these things have to happen to you?” she moaned into his shoulder. A warmth filled him as he remembered the last time they had been together. Had that really been only two days ago?

“I came on the Knight Bus,” she continued as they settled into a comfortable embrace. “Dumbledore finally told me this morning where you were and I came straight here as soon as term officially ended. I was only just able to persuade him to let me know what was happening. It was fortunate that McGonagall took my side. Honestly, it really seems as though he doesn’t want me to be so close to you.” Harry frowned, but it wasn’t the first time that the two of them had voiced that suspicion. “Come on, let’s go see Ron and Ginny and sort this out,” she finished, taking his hand and leading him back to the second floor.

*Ron and Ginny were rather chagrined that I had managed to get through to Harry so quickly. They were sitting on Ron’s bed waiting for us, so Harry and I sat on his bed. Ron pretended not to notice that we were holding hands, but Ginny gave me a little smirk. At first, things were a bit tense. Ron and Ginny claimed that Harry was avoiding everyone (which he was) and Harry shot back that they wouldn’t even look at him. I made a little joke that perhaps they were taking it in turns to look and kept missing each other. That got a little chuckle out of Harry and things settled down.*

*Harry admitted that he didn’t want to talk to anyone because he was afraid he was being possessed. Then Ginny pointed out (with her usual sarcastic tone) that he was being stupid because she was the only one he knew who had been possessed by Voldemort (she said You-Know-Who, of course) and that she could have told him what it was like. That really got his attention. He apologized immediately for not realizing that, and then they compared notes.*

*Ginny informed us that there were big blank periods where she couldn’t remember what she had done, and she would find herself somewhere and not know how she’d got there. That wasn’t the case at all with Harry. And Ron assured him that he’d never left his bed.*

*Then Harry revealed what had him so upset – in his dream he’d actually been the snake. He could feel his fangs sink into Mr. Weasley’s body, and could feel his ribs splinter and the warmth of his blood gushing out. The rest of us were horrified and agreed at how awful that would have been for him. I put my arms around him and hugged him tight, and Ginny moved over to his other side and hugged him too while Ron muttered something he meant to be comforting. Then I asked him if he would classify this as more of a vision than a dream, and Ron and Ginny wanted to know what I was talking about.*

“Harry’s been having this recurring dream about a long corridor,” Hermione explained. “We think it’s in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic. And we think that there’s a weapon

there that the Order's been guarding. That's probably why your dad was there that night."

"But why would Harry be dreaming about that?" Ron asked in puzzlement.

"It's coming from Voldemort," Harry answered and the two Weasleys shuddered. Harry's mouth twitched slightly at Hermione's predictable huff of annoyance at their reaction to the name. "We think he wants whatever's down there and I'm picking up on it somehow. You know how we have this connection," he pointed at his scar. "Well, sometimes I get twitches of his emotions when he's feeling particularly strongly about something, and sometimes I actually get visions of things that are happening. Those are always from his point of view, like I'm in his mind. Lately, I've been dreaming of this corridor. Hermione and I have decided that I'm tapping into his thoughts about it because he wants it so badly."

Ron and Ginny sat open-mouthed through this explanation, and Ron shook his head when he finished. "Life just never gives you a break, does it mate?" he observed sympathetically. Harry shot a glance at Hermione as if to say, 'Well, there's one part that's going nicely,' and she blushed. On his other side Ginny elbowed him in the ribs and he winced while she rolled her eyes at him, indicating that she had picked up on exactly what he had been thinking. Fortunately, Ron missed all of this interplay.

Hermione cleared her throat to get them back on topic. "So, this appears to fall under the category of 'vision of something that's actually happening'. It's different in that Harry was experiencing it from the snake's point of view, but I think that must have been because Voldemort was actually possessing the snake at the time. They must share an extremely strong connection for him to do that, as I've never read about a wizard being able to do that with his familiar."

The four of them concluded that this was the correct interpretation, and that while extremely unpleasant, this ability of Harry's to pick up Voldemort's thoughts and sometimes even see what was happening was extremely useful. They also agreed that there was no evidence so far that the dark lord was possessing Harry or reading his mind, but the other three vowed to be alert for any signs of it.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 25

*After everything that's happened, we were fortunate to have a rather nice Christmas. Sirius has been tireless in trying to make sure everyone enjoys themselves, and has been having the lot of us cleaning and decorating for days. We all exchanged presents this morning. I got Ron and Harry talking homework planners as a bit of a joke, teasing them that now I could nag them about doing their homework without even being present. Ron's reaction was to throw it at me, but they were both amused. I also got Harry a new watch, (he'd never replaced the one that got ruined in the lake during the second task of the tournament) and he got me a locket with a picture of us in it. Of course, many people got me books, and Harry got defense books from Remus and Sirius. The most amusing was a necklace Lavender gave Ron that said 'My Sweetheart'. He was so embarrassed! And of course everyone got hand-knitted jumpers from Mrs. Weasley.*

*There is a house elf here named Kreacher who is rather creepy. Or as Ron puts it – completely nutters. I asked Harry why he hadn't mentioned him in any of his letters last summer and he sheepishly admitted that he didn't want to set me off and have to read me ranting about house elf freedom. I must admit that even I have trouble feeling sorry for this one. He's constantly saying really foul, loathsome things to me. But even so, I think it's because of the way he's been treated. Sirius is quite nasty to him. I tried treating him kindly, and even got him a Christmas present, but it didn't help – he still insulted me.*

*Mr. Weasley is recovering satisfactorily, and we all went to visit him after lunch. He was in good spirits, and had been talking with his healer about the possibility of using stitches to close up his wounds. Mrs. Weasley, however, thought that was simply an absurd idea.*

*We also ran into Neville. He was there to visit his parents, who have been in the long-term spell damage ward since they were tortured into insanity by Death Eaters when he was a baby. He was embarrassed to have us find out, but his gran was proud of it. Harry later told me that he had already known – Dumbledore had told him and it had been BellatrixLestrange who'd done it.*

*The only unpleasant incident of the day happened this afternoon when Mrs. Weasley caught me 'thanking' Harry for his gift upstairs in his bedroom. The curious thing was that her reaction seemed quite excessive for an adult catching two teens kissing in a bedroom. Honestly, I can understand that she considered it to be an inappropriate setting, (although I would think she knows Harry and me well enough to trust that we wouldn't go too far) but she began to loudly berate us for 'betraying' Ron and Ginny. It was as though she had the idea that I was dating Ron and Harry was dating Ginny. I have no idea what could have given her that idea, and when Ron and Ginny showed up wondering what all the shouting was about, Ginny quickly set her straight.*

*But then she turned on Ginny and said something about ruining all of her plans, and Ginny turned bright red and immediately went silent. Then she shot a look at me that I didn't understand at all – sort of a guilty look combined with being terrified about being found out. Later when we were alone I asked her what that was all about but she turned pale and refused to talk about it. The only thing I can think of is that Mrs. Weasley knew that Ron was interested in getting together with me, and of course everyone knows that Ginny used to have a massive crush on Harry. I thought she was over that though. Apparently Mrs. Weasley doesn't realize that yet. But even if she still has some feelings for him, I know Ginny would never try to steal Harry from me.*

*It's probably just as well that I'll be leaving tomorrow to spend the rest of the holidays with my parents. That will give Mrs. Weasley a chance to calm down. I'll miss Harry, but I know he'll be fine now, and will have a good time with everyone else. And Sirius can really use the company. He's been so excited to have us all here, but especially Harry. I told Harry I'd write and check up on him to make sure he's done all his homework, and he hugged me and promised he'd do it.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – January 12*

*We're back at Hogwarts now. We really needed the break from all the problems we've been having*

this year. Unfortunately, it looks like they'll be starting right up again. After I gave him a rather enthusiastic greeting, Harry led me to a corner of the common room and told me about an unpleasant event that happened yesterday. It seems that Sirius had been gradually growing more morose as the holidays came to an end, and Harry was quite concerned about him. I can understand why he would have been feeling down – he really loved having Harry and the Weasleys there. That house must be unbearably gloomy for him when he's living there by himself. Harry thinks that partly contributed to the unpleasantness that followed.

First, Harry was summoned to the kitchen to meet with Snape, who informed him that he was to begin studying Occlumency. He didn't ask him if he wanted to, mind you, or give him any choice in the matter, he just stated that Dumbledore had ordered it. It's like Harry's a pawn that the headmaster can move around whenever he feels like it. I've half a mind to suggest to Harry to tell the old man to stuff it, but I suspect that he feels the same way and he might take my suggestion literally.

I'm going to have to read up on Occlumency, but basically it's protecting your mind against external penetration. That fits precisely with what Harry and I suspected that the adults are worried about – that Voldemort will take possession of Harry's mind and force him to do something. Well, so far that hasn't been a problem – it's been more that Harry's been penetrating Voldemort's mind. And frankly, that's been rather useful at times, despite how unpleasant it's been for Harry. I'm certain that Harry would gladly trade a nightmare for Mr. Weasley's life.

The most unpleasant part of the incident was that Snape couldn't resist taking a cheap shot at Sirius, trying to set him off. The two of them nearly came to blows. Of course Snape managed to insult Harry and his father as well. I swear, that man is despicable. And I just know he's going to make these lessons as miserable as possible for Harry and will use them as yet another opportunity to torment him.

Perhaps as a result of that confrontation (or possibly he'd planned it anyway) Sirius gave Harry something that would allow them to communicate – charmed mirrors. At first, Harry wasn't even going to open the package they were in, worrying that whatever was inside would get Sirius into trouble, but I argued that he should at least know what it was. I finally talked him into opening it this evening by pointing out that he could always decide then not to use it if he didn't want to. Sirius said Harry was to contact him if Snape gave him a hard time, but I pointed out that Harry could use them to contact Sirius just to talk. Harry readily agreed, and commented on how that might help Sirius not be so lonely. I had to give him a big hug for that.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – January 14

Harry had his first Occlumency lesson last night, and it was as awful for him as I had feared. Snape didn't give him any instruction at all other than 'Clear your mind' before mentally attacking him. He basically forced Harry to relive all sorts of painful memories (and unfortunately Harry has plenty of them) while Harry tried to force him out of his mind. And of course, he taunted him the entire time about how weak-minded he was. He claimed that Voldemort would find Harry's

*mind especially easy to penetrate because he was so emotional. Harry was exhausted and his mind was in tatters by the time they finished.*

*Something about this doesn't add up. It seems to me that Harry is penetrating Voldemort's mind, not the other way around. And it happens when Voldemort is feeling strong emotions. So by Snape's argument, is Voldemort weak-minded? (I'm glad Harry didn't ask him that last night – Snape would have been furious.) So why is Dumbledore so insistent that Harry learn this? We have no indication that Voldemort is reading Harry's mind, do we? Harry says that Voldemort doesn't even seem to notice he's there when he breaks into his thoughts. It would make things so much easier if they would just sit down with Harry and tell him what they're worried about and what they're trying to prevent.*

*When he got back to the common room Harry had another flash of emotion from Voldemort – he said he was extremely happy about something. At first I wondered if the session with Snape had actually weakened Harry to the point that he was more open to Voldemort's thoughts, but this morning we discovered that it might have been just a coincidence. The top story in the Daily Prophet reported that several Death Eaters escaped from Azkaban last night. It was all anyone could talk about today.*

*A total of 10 escaped, and the Prophet had a small bio of each one. They were all horrifying to read. Some students had a more personal interest in the story. Susan Bones came up to us during Herbology and talked to us about it, and pointed out that one of them had killed her aunt, uncle and cousins. She commented that now she realized somewhat how Harry felt with the unwelcome attention she was getting. The Lestranges, who tortured Neville's parents, also were among the escapees. It turns out that the only woman Death Eater involved was Sirius's cousin, BellatrixLestrangle. She seems to be especially sadistic. As one might expect, Neville is particularly shook up about all this.*

*“Harry, when are we going to start up DA meetings again?” Susan asked in a low voice after she had finished explaining about her family. “I think it's more important than ever now that we learn to defend ourselves.” Her voice started to quiver as she went on, “especially for me. Aunt Amelia is certain to be a target and they'll probably come after the rest of my family too.”*

*Hermione moved around the table to try to comfort Susan as Harry considered her question, somewhat flustered. Crying girls always made him nervous. “I'm not sure,” he responded. It's tricky finding a night when everyone's free.”*

*Fortunately, Susan pulled herself together and even had a good suggestion. “Why not do it more than once a week? Those of us who aren't playing quidditch or who aren't prefects can come more often, and those who are busier can still come at least once. I know you have five quidditch players from Gryffindor, but Zacharias is the only quidditch player from Hufflepuff, and Cho and Michael are the only ones from Ravenclaw.”*

*Harry and Hermione shared a look. Since he was no longer on the quidditch team, and neither of them were prefects, they did have more time. However, those times when Ron was otherwise*



occupied had been their ‘alone’ time, and extra DA meetings would cut into it. Finally Hermione nodded to him. They would just make do – this was important.

“That’s a really good idea, Susan,” he replied. “Hermione and I should be able to handle at least two meetings a week. We’ll check with the others and get back to you.” Then Susan embarrassed him by giving him a big hug, which caused several heads to turn in their direction and Lavender and Parvati’s eyes to go wide. Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation and moved closer to Harry and entwined her arm in his, signaling to every female present that he still belonged to her.

Back in the Gryffindor common room, Neville was equally enthusiastic. “Please consider it, Harry,” he urged. “I need all the help I can get. I only wish ...”

Harry nodded sympathetically. He understood the desire for revenge all too well, but didn’t want Neville to get carried away. “You’re doing great Neville,” he encouraged. “By the end of the year you’ll be as good as anyone. But don’t even think about going after them. They’re all cold-blooded killers who have years of experience on us. The Aurors will be after them; let them do their job.” Neville nodded hesitantly, and Hermione gave Harry’s hand a squeeze. In this instance, she knew that Harry needed to heed his own advice. She received a return squeeze as he signaled that he understood.

They were interrupted by a commotion across the common room – Fred and George were demonstrating their latest creation.

“Headless hats?” Hermione breathed in amazement as several girls screamed when Fred’s head disappeared. “That’s impressive magic. To extend an Invisibility Spell beyond the boundaries of the charmed object. I wonder ...” Harry grinned as his girlfriend’s mind analyzed the spellwork that went into the prank. The twins were indeed talented at charms, and Hermione had often bemoaned how much they would be able to accomplish if they’d only take their studies seriously. But he could see where her thoughts were headed this time. If the field could be extended even further they would have an alternative to an Invisibility Cloak – one that left your hands free to cast spells. She turned to him with a thoughtful look on her face, and he smiled back, appreciating her inquisitive nature as she continued her commentary. “I’d imagine the charm wouldn’t have a very long life though ... What?” she asked indignantly, finally noticing his grin.

“Don’t ever change, Hermione,” Harry teased as he wrapped her up in a hug.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – January 20

*Harry’s so cute. We were talking about the next Hogsmeade weekend, and what we were going to do, when he realized it was on Valentine’s Day and immediately turned pale. He’s afraid he’ll mess up this whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing and I’ll get mad at him. I reassured him that whatever we did, as long as we could spend the time together, it would be fine with me, and he should just get me something simple. I don’t think he’s convinced, though.*

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – January 31

*About the only thing that's going well these days is the DA. The twins report that the Gryffindor quidditch practices are miserable. The replacement beaters hit their own teammates as often as not, and Ron has been terribly uneven. When he's not self-conscious, he's fine, but as soon as he feels he's being watched he falls apart. Fred suggested that they ask the spectators to turn their backs whenever the quaffle is in our end. On the other hand, Ginny's doing pretty well.*

*Harry is making no progress at Occlumency. I've checked out a book on it and it certainly seems to me that Snape's doing it wrong. Harry actually thinks things are worse now than they were before he started. His scar prickles nearly all the time now, and it's particularly bad after one of his lessons. I'm beginning to question just what Dumbledore is trying to accomplish with this. He must know how much Snape hates Harry. Is he trying to open Harry's mind up to Voldemort's thoughts like some sort of aerial (that was Harry's term for it) antennae? Is he using Harry to keep tabs on what Voldemort's thinking, but telling us the opposite in order to keep us in the dark? He's still never talked to Harry this entire year.*

*At least we have the DA! We've expanded the meetings to twice a week – now it's easier for everyone to make at least one of them, and some students (Neville and Susan most notably) have been coming to both every week. It's amazing how much Neville has improved! After learning a few jinxes and counterjinxes, Harry showed us the Shield Charm this week. Neville was the second one to master it after me, and Susan was not far behind him. Then Harry had the two of them duel each other, with rather interesting results.*

*"Stupefy!" "Protego!"* Susan called out the stunning spell, but Neville blocked it. They continued to circle each other as the other students cheered them on.

*"Expeliarmus!" "Protego!"* This time Neville led with a disarming spell but Susan raised a shield in time to retain possession of her wand. By the informal understanding of the duel it was now Susan's turn to cast first.

*"Expeliarmus!" "Expeliarmus!"* To Susan's surprise, Neville ducked to the floor, letting her disarming hex pass over his head while simultaneously launching his own. Caught by surprise, Susan was thrown back against the cushioned wall while her wand flew into the air. Before it even hit the floor, though, Neville was rushing forward, skidding to his knees in front of her.

*"Susan, are you all right?"* he gasped, as he grabbed her arms and ran his hands up to her shoulders and back down. Unwittingly, he brushed his fingers against her chest briefly as he did this, and Susan turned bright red. Quickly, she raised her own hands and caught his in them before he could do it again, then pulled them both to their feet.

*"Yes, yes, I'm all right,"* she managed, not letting go immediately. His initial panic abated, Neville finally realized what he had just touched, and also noted her hands in his, and blushed

furiously. By this time Hannah Abbott had joined them and they moved apart. Hannah grinned broadly as she led Susan away, while Neville stood there a moment longer with his mouth working silently. A couple of the guys slapped him on the back, congratulating him on his victory. Then Susan turned back.

“Nice move Neville,” she said in a low voice and a smile. “You really got me with that one.” A few knowing smiles were exchanged among the other students, along with some chuckles at the possible double meaning, while Harry called out the next pairing. Neville’s gaping look turned into a sheepish grin, and he had trouble concentrating on anything other than Susan’s soft curves for the rest of the evening.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – February 14

*Well, this was an interesting day, to say the least. To begin with, when I came down to the common room Harry met me at the foot of the stairs and handed me a red rose. That was so sweet! Then he leaned in and whispered in my ear, asking if I was wearing anything special today (meaning my red underwear). I blushed and whispered back that I was, and he told me he was also. Then I got him back by asking if he wanted to see them and he turned bright red. I told him I was only teasing and gave him a quick thank you kiss, then ran back upstairs to cast a preservative charm on my rose and put it in a vase by my bed.*

*Then, at breakfast I finally heard back from Rita Skeeter. I had been trying to set up a meeting with her to see if she’d be willing to tell Harry’s side of the story in print. She agreed to meet with us today in Hogsmeade.*

*Next, I discovered that Lavender had convinced Harry that he just had to take me to Madame Puddifoot’s tea shop for our date. It was the ‘girliest’ place I’ve ever seen! Everything was covered with frills or bows, and it was apparently decorated even more for Valentine’s Day. There were little golden cherubs hovering over each of the tables occasionally throwing pink confetti over the people sitting there.*

*Both of us looked around uneasily, then sat down at the last available table. Unfortunately, it was right next to Roger Davies and a pretty blonde girl. It wasn’t so bad at first, as they were only holding hands, and Harry took my hand also as we exchanged embarrassed smiles. Actually, the entire place was filled with couples, and all of them were holding hands. But then after Madame Puddifoot brought us our tea Roger started kissing his date.*

*Harry cocked a questioning eyebrow at me and I knew exactly what he was asking. I glanced around the tearoom and noticed that many of the other couples were doing the same thing. On the other hand, quite a few of the rest were watching our table. I turned back to Harry and gave a small shake of my head. He allowed his eyes to dart around the room and realized my concern about not wanting to give the rest of the room a show – seeing the two celebrities snogging would be quite a tasty news item back at the castle. He looked back at me and nodded, then smiled and squeezed my hand to let me know he understood. Then he shot me a sly grin as if to say, ‘I’ll make*

*it up to you later when no one's watching'. All in all I thought it was pretty impressive that we conducted that whole conversation without exchanging a single word.*

*Shortly after that I nodded toward the door and he almost jumped to his feet and quickly tossed some money on the table. The relieved expression on his face was just too much! I managed to hold back until we were out onto the street, but then we both burst out laughing.*

"Well, that was quite an ... experience," Hermione laughed as they took each other's hands and began walking back. "I never figured you for the ribbons and bows kind of guy, Harry."

She was rewarded with a loud groan. "Lavender ..." he began, then just shook his head. "That's the last time I get dating advice from her. Hermione, I am so glad that you're not like that."

"Like what, Harry?" Hermione asked with an innocent expression. However, she couldn't maintain a straight face when she saw the panicked look that appeared on Harry's face at the thought that he had just insulted her, and pulled him into a reassuring hug.

"And I'm glad that you don't expect me to be like that," she confirmed. "I like to dress up and look nice on occasion, but that sort of thing is just too much."

"So, where to next?" Harry wondered, glad now that they were on the same page.

"Well, why don't we check out the shops for a while, and then I've made arrangements to meet someone at noon," Hermione suggested, feeling somewhat nervous about what his reaction would be. When she had decided to surprise him with her plan it had seemed like a good idea, but now ...

"Who?" Harry asked the obvious question, and Hermione decided that it was better that they have this discussion now, instead of in front of Rita.

"Rita Skeeter."

"What!" Harry nearly shouted, causing a few passers-by to turn their heads. "Why would we want to talk to her?"

Hermione pulled Harry's arm to move them to a more private spot, taking them into the side street that led to the Hog's Head tavern. "Because I'm hoping to convince her to write your side of the story. People need to know the truth, Harry, and they certainly aren't getting it from the *Daily Prophet* !" Harry calmed down a bit and thought about her proposition.

"What makes you think she'll write it?" he countered. "And what makes you think she'll write the truth? You know better than anyone about all the lies she wrote last time."

"I think I can persuade her," Hermione responded. "She hasn't published anything since the end of last year, and I'm counting on her being desperate to get her name in print again. Also, I still have the whole illegal animagus thing to threaten her with. And finally, Luna's father is going to run the story in the *Quibbler* , and that will help us maintain final control over what's printed."

Hermione paused while Harry considered her points, then made her final argument. “Please Harry, I’m doing this for you, but it will also benefit everyone. Trust me?”

Harry’s shoulders relaxed, and Hermione, recognizing that he was giving in even before he answered her, threw her arms around him his neck and hugged him tight.

“OK. I trust you,” he said simply. Then he kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

After a nice long cuddle, the two of them meandered back through the town, waving to Ron and Lavender who were headed in the opposite direction. They shared a chuckle about how poor Ron had no idea what was in store for him at the frilly tea shop. Finally, they made their way into the Three Broomsticks at the appointed time.

There, at a table in the back, sat one of the unlikeliest pair of drinking mates Harry could have imagined: Luna Lovegood and Rita Skeeter. Apparently Luna had been expounding on some of her bizarre conspiracy theories, or perhaps describing some unusual magical creature or other, because Rita had an expression of total disbelief on her face. Harry and Hermione shared a glance and began to chuckle – compared to what Luna was probably telling her, Harry’s tale would seem to be the most logical thing in the world.

“Hello, Rita,” Hermione said sweetly as they sat down across from the other two. “Have we got a story for you!”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters Battling Umbridge

### Chapter 7, Battling Umbridge

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – February 21

*Gryffindor lost to Hufflepuff in quidditch. As Fred and George feared, the replacement beaters were awful, and Ron was just as bad. I'm really worried about how he's going to take it. Ginny did manage to catch the snitch, but Harry would have caught it sooner. He pointed out to me where it was several times during the match. I was amazed that he could spot it so well, especially considering how blind he is without his glasses. As it was, we only lost by 10 points, so if Harry had played we probably would have won.*

“Cheer up Harry, it's only a game,” Hermione suggested as they descended the quidditch stands. That comment brought Harry up short, and he turned and shot a look at her like she was crazy. But Hermione didn't flinch, and held his gaze without backing down. Pretty soon Harry softened his stance and forced a chuckle.

“Hermione, you just don't understand quidditch,” he commented while shaking his head. By now they were alone as the rest of the crowd moved ahead, and Hermione slowed in order to keep them by themselves as they walked back to the castle.

“I really think that it causes too much tension and bad feeling between the Houses,” Hermione persisted. Harry didn't react to that statement at first, thinking about it in silence before replying.

“I don't think that's necessarily true,” he countered. “Most of the time the bad feeling's already there for other reasons. Quidditch actually gives us a way to let it out without resorting to hexing each other. There are also examples of positive interactions that come out of the matches. Remember what a good sport Cedric was when he offered to replay our match third year when the dementors came out onto the field? I had a lot more respect for him after that, and I think it was at least part of why we got along well during the tournament last year.”

Harry paused for a minute, and Hermione nodded that he had a point. “Now, I'll admit that my fight with Malfoy after our first match this year does tend to lend support to your argument,” he continued sheepishly.

Hermione stopped again. “Actually, you could also use that as an example of what you’re saying,” she pointed out. “The animosity between the two of you goes far beyond any quidditch rivalry. In fact, before this year, quidditch gave you an acceptable outlet for your ill feelings toward him. And even that fight didn’t really have anything to do with the match.” She paused and smirked. “I would have been tempted to hit the little creep for mouthing off like that myself.” Then both of them grinned at each other, remembering the time Hermione had smacked Malfoy third year when he had insulted Hagrid and gloated about Buckbeak’s pending execution. Then they took each other’s hands and resumed walking back to the castle, and ended up agreeing that both of their viewpoints had some validity.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – February 23

*The issue of the Quibbler with Harry’s interview came out today. To say it had quite an impact would be an understatement. Luna says it sold out and her father’s reprinting it. Umbridge had a fit, of course. Before the day was out she came out with another educational decree banning anyone from reading or even possessing a copy of the Quibbler under pain of expulsion. (Is it my imagination or do nearly all of her decrees seem to be aimed at Harry? Evil, foul woman!)*

*Of course, her banning it just guaranteed that everyone would read it. I must say, my fellow Hogwarts students are proving to be quite imaginative in finding ways to disguise the issue as ordinary reading material. Not to mention the creative ways our professors are finding to award Harry house points. I’m beginning to feel that things might not be quite so hopeless after all. On the other hand, Dumbledore hasn’t said a word about it, or even shown any reaction at all! Perhaps this is some sort of test for Harry, so he’s sitting back to see how Harry handles it?*

*Harry had another vision, and it seems to be related to the dream he’s been having. A Death Eater named Rookwood was telling Voldemort that something about his plan wouldn’t work. That sounds like good news, since it means he’s had a setback in his search for that weapon he wants so badly.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 2

*Some rather disturbing issues arose from Harry’s Occlumency lesson this evening. As usual, Snape berated him for not making any progress. Actually, he is doing better since we read my Occlumency book together, but Snape would never admit that. It now takes him several seconds to break into Harry’s mind and it doesn’t take Harry as long to throw him out as it used to. But he’s still exhausted both mentally and physically after each one.*

*Tonight Snape discovered Harry’s thoughts about the dreams he was having and became very interested in them. He accused Harry of wanting to have those dreams in order to feel important, and that the whole purpose of the lessons was to prevent him from seeing what Voldemort is telling his Death Eaters. Well, at first I was incensed that he would accuse Harry of wanting to feel important, but then I realized that we did in fact consider that those dreams were useful. Then*

*it hit me. We thought the Occlumency lessons were to prevent Voldemort from breaking into Harry's mind. But Snape seems to be saying they're to prevent Harry from breaking into Voldemort's mind. How does that make sense?*

*Well, an obvious reason that we can think of for Snape wanting to keep Harry out of Voldemort's mind is because he's actually on Voldemort's side. We know he's acting as a double agent. What if his real loyalty is to Voldemort rather than Dumbledore? Is he trying to keep Harry from finding something out? It's possible, I suppose, that Snape is jealous of his role as a spy, and doesn't want anyone else interfering with it, but it's hard to believe that's the only reason.*

*Every time anyone questions Snape's loyalty, Dumbledore always says he trusts him without reservation. Why? We know he used to be a Death Eater. What can he have done to make Dumbledore trust him so much? It's hard to believe that Snape could be fooling Dumbledore, but is it any harder than believing he's fooling Voldemort? I just wish Dumbledore wouldn't be so secretive about what's going on.*

*Here's something else that may be important. On the last time Snape attacked his mind, Harry managed to throw him out and then entered Snape's mind! Hah! Who's weak-minded now? Harry saw some memories that Snape clearly wouldn't have wanted him to see. But there must be some memories that are even more secret, because Harry says he removes them from his mind and puts them into a pensieve every time they meet. I wonder what those are about? But the memories he did see showed that Snape had a rather miserable childhood.*

*Now, since they've been having these lessons, Snape has seen dozens of similar unhappy childhood memories of Harry's. He certainly can no longer believe that Harry was pampered in any way. Wouldn't you think that since they had that in common, Snape would be more sympathetic to Harry? But no, he's as nasty as ever. What does he have against Harry that makes him this way? Perhaps it's related to those memories he doesn't want Harry to see?*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 9*

*Umbridge finally got rid of Trelawny today. I confess I have mixed feelings about that. I'm glad it wasn't Hagrid, since he seems to be her other main target. She's been popping in on both of their lessons all term. (Since all she does in her own lessons is have us sit and read all period, she has plenty of time to go make life miserable for the other teachers.)*

*While I feel the course is total rubbish, I don't think Trelawny is that bad of a teacher. Well, yes she is, but at least she's knowledgeable about her subject. I wonder why Umbridge picked on her. I know she hates Hagrid for being a half-giant, but as far as I know Trelawny is a full-blooded witch. There are other incompetent teachers she could have gone after – Binns, for example. But I suppose he is teaching a 'Ministry Approved Curriculum', even if it is horribly out of date.*

*The evil woman just had to do it in the most humiliating manner possible, of course. She made a big spectacle of it, right in the Entrance Hall. Trelawny was wailing and moaning about what she*



*was going to do now. I genuinely felt sorry for her at that point. We students don't always realize that for these teachers who have been here for decades, Hogwarts is their home.*

*But then Dumbledore appeared and told her she didn't have to leave, even if she wasn't on staff any more. Umbridge immediately challenged him on it, but he revealed that he had already secured the services of another Divination teacher, and he wouldn't require Trelawny's living quarters. Then he shocked everyone, especially Umbridge, by bringing in Firenze, the centaur! He couldn't possibly have picked a better candidate to infuriate Umbridge, since she regards centaurs as sub-human. For her, he would be even worse than Hagrid.*

*The whole scene ended rather touchingly, when McGonagall comforted Trelawny and helped her back to her room. That impressed me about McGonagall's character, since I know the two of them don't like each other much.*

*After everything calmed down, and we all had a chance to think about it, Harry brought up an interesting point.*

“Wow, did you see the look on the toad's face when Dumbledore brought Firenze in?” Ron crowed. “Priceless!”

After the excitement had died down, everyone had returned to their common rooms, and the fifth year Gryffindors were sitting in a cluster discussing the day's events.

“Never mind her,” Lavender sighed dreamily, “Did you see Firenze?” Ron turned and gave her an odd look.

“I bet you wish you hadn't given up Divination now, don't you Hermione?” Parvati smirked.

Hermione's response was an unconcerned shrug. “Not really. I don't expect I'd enjoy that course no matter who was teaching it.” She cocked her head at her two dormmates who were giggling at each other and frowned. “I thought you two liked Trelawny. Aren't you upset that she's gone?”

“Of course!” “We are!” the pair protested. “We went right up to her office to see if she was all right, and took her some flowers,” Lavender added. “But Hermione, this isn't about teaching. He's a centaur!”

“A gorgeous centaur,” sighed Parvati.

Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head, about to make a snarky reply, but then noticed that Ron was starting to get upset at his girlfriend's behavior and decided on a different tactic. “Well, I don't really care about that, as I've already got a boyfriend.” She shot a smile at Harry and squeezed his hand, but noticed for the first time that he wasn't following the conversation. Rather, he was staring thoughtfully into the fire. He did respond to her gesture, though, and automatically looked up and smiled back. Hermione put her curiosity about this aside and continued addressing Lavender. “And so do you.”

Only now did Lavender notice Ron's annoyance. "Well ... yes ... of course," she stammered. "It's only that ..."

"He'll be naked in class." Hermione finished. This got quite a reaction, from gasps from the girls to choking noises from the boys. Lavender and Parvati turned bright red while Ron went pale. It got her Harry's full attention as well, and she smirked at him and then continued, now on a roll. "Of course he's only human from the waist up. You could get the same effect by putting any of these guys up there with their shirts off. "Hmm," she pretended to ponder while looking each of the guys up and down. "Harry's pretty scrawny ..." This earned her a playful punch in the arm from her boyfriend, as he pretended to be insulted. " ... but Ron's pretty well put together. What do you think, Ron? Want to try teaching Divination? Take off your robes and shirt and let's see if you qualify."

Ron was incoherent by now and could only sputter. Lavender was blushing harder than Hermione had ever seen. The looks she and Ron were shooting at each other made it clear that she had already seen Ron with his shirt off, and had no intention of allowing the other two girls the opportunity. Harry was grinning from ear to ear, and moved closer to Hermione, wrapping his arm around her in admiration. Seamus and Dean were laughing heartily at Ron and Lavender's discomfort and Neville stared at Hermione in dumbstruck silence, shocked at seeing this more daring side of her personality.

The conversation then disintegrated into some back and forth teasing, until Seamus offered the opinion that it would be rather pleasant (and considerably more revealing) if they had a female centaur teach the class. This earned him glares from all the girls, and when Parvati pulled out her wand he took off, as she chased him across the common room. Dean hurried after in case he needed rescuing, and the rest drifted away as well, Ron and Lavender deciding they needed some 'alone time'. Soon Harry and Hermione were by themselves on the sofa before the fire.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, now that she had the opportunity. "What's on your mind?"

"Dumbledore," he replied simply. "He finally did something."

Hermione immediately realized where he was going with this thought process. "So, why now?" she responded. "After letting her walk all over him all year, why take a stand for Trelawny?" Harry nodded. Dumbledore hadn't interfered with their worthless Defense lessons, hadn't interfered with the blood quill punishments, hadn't interfered with her harassment of Hagrid's lessons, or those of any of the other teachers.

"Why is she so important?" Harry voiced the question that was on both of their minds. "Why does she need to stay at the castle?"

"Why is such an incompetent teacher here in the first place?" Hermione continued the line of inquiry. "Does she have some hold over him that allows her to keep her job?"

"You could ask the same question about Snape," Harry pointed out. "In his case, he's spying for the Order now. But what about before that? What made Dumbledore hire and keep on such an

incompetent Potions teacher?”

“I wonder if there’s some relationship,” Hermione mused. “I find it inconceivable that Trelawny was a former Death Eater, but perhaps she knows something or saw something important at some point in time. It might be worth checking into their employment histories.”

At that the couple fell silent, and snuggled together in front of the fire for the rest of the evening, deep in thought.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 10

*We learned more about Firenze today. Divination is now held in a first floor classroom that is enchanted to look like a forest. Harry took me down and showed it to me before dinner. Firenze is now an outcast, as the rest of the centaurs refuse to have anything to do with humans. After class he said something strange to Harry. It was a warning to pass on to Hagrid that his attempt was not working, and to abandon it. Harry, Ron, and I talked about that and concluded that Hagrid was keeping some dangerous creature in the Forbidden Forest, and the centaurs are upset about it. That would also explain the injuries that Hagrid has all the time. We have no idea what sort of creature it could be, and Hagrid continues to be close-mouthed about it.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 16

*I think we’re going about this the wrong way. We’re being too passive with Umbridge. It’s time to start making things more difficult for her.*

“Harry, can I borrow your mirror?” Hermione asked as she met him at the bottom of the stairs to the boys’ dorm the next morning.

“My mirror?” Harry asked in puzzlement. “What ... oh ... that mirror. Sure, um, what do you need it for?”

“I want to ask Sirius something,” Hermione answered with a sly smile. “It’s a secret, but you’ll find out soon.”

The mystery was revealed the following morning at breakfast when a delivery owl dropped a long narrow package in front of Hermione.

“Hermione! What are you doing with a broom?” Ron asked in amazement as Hermione unwrapped a new Nimbus.

“Oh, I decided that it was time I had one of my own,” Hermione answered nonchalantly, as Harry, Ron, and Ginny gaped at her. She inclined her head slightly toward the head table where Umbridge

regarded them suspiciously. “It’s something every witch should own, don’t you think?” Then she lowered her voice. “And there’s nothing in the rules against loaning it out to a friend occasionally.” Harry’s eyes lit up, followed by Ginny’s, while Ron remained skeptical.

“But you don’t even like flying,” he protested.

“No time like the present to change that, is there?” she smiled.

That afternoon at the Gryffindor quidditch practice, Hermione sat in the stands while Harry flew high above the pitch, giving Ginny pointers. At the end of the practice, Umbridge was waiting for them, fuming.

“Mr. Potter! You have been banned from playing quidditch,” she snarled. “I believe another detention seems to be in order.”

“Harry wasn’t playing quidditch, Professor,” Hermione pointed out politely. “He was just flying around, and watching our house team practice. He hasn’t been banned from flying, and students from our house frequently come out to watch our team practice.”

She was rewarded with a glare from the toad-like witch, who turned and stormed back up to her office. In no time another Educational Decree appeared, restricting participation in quidditch practices to official team members only, making it clear that flying alongside the team was considered participation. While this pronouncement was greeted with groans by the rest of the students, Harry and Hermione only smiled.

Later that week, at the next Gryffindor quidditch practice, Harry and Hermione were there again. This time both of them sat in the stands, and periodically Harry would mount Hermione’s broom and take off in the direction of the lake, performing some intricate maneuver or other, while Hermione watched intently. Then he would return and Hermione would take the broom and fly out in the same general direction and back, but making no attempt to do anything fancy. On the other hand, Ginny would also watch Harry’s maneuver closely, and when he was finished she would try to copy it. This went on for the entire practice.

Once more, an extremely irritated Professor Umbridge met them as they returned to the castle. “Mr. Potter!” she shouted again. “What do you think you were doing!”

“Giving Hermione flying lessons,” Harry answered politely. “She’s not very good at it and since she has this new broom she wants to get better and ...”

“Enough!” Umbridge screamed, cutting off his explanation. As she stomped away the grinning members of the Gryffindor team all congratulated Harry and Hermione, with the girls adding hugs for both of them. As everyone expected, another educational decree was soon forthcoming.

**Effective immediately,  
flying instruction is restricted to class sessions**

**and official quidditch practices only.**

The following week Umbridge sat in the stands for the entire Gryffindor quidditch practice. Harry and Hermione were there as well, watching Ginny fly on Hermione's new broom, practicing the moves Harry had showed her the previous two sessions. At the end of the practice, Ginny smiled and waved to Umbridge, who could only fume and hurry back to the castle. But later that week she spotted Harry and Hermione flying together on the new Nimbus, and immediately waddled out to the quidditch pitch.

"Potter!" she began to rant, before being cut off by Madame Hooch, who had appeared as soon as Umbridge reached the two of them.

"Is there something I can help you with, Professor?" she inquired.

"What are those two doing?" the frustrated High Inquisitor shouted.

"Miss Granger has signed up for Remedial Flying Lessons, Professor," Hooch explained. "And Mr. Potter has kindly consented to act as my teaching assistant. As I'm sure you know, offering remedial lessons is well within the job description of every Hogwarts professor, as is employing upper year students as assistants. And since Mr. Potter offered his services at no charge, I'm certain you'll agree that this is an ideal arrangement."

Umbridge merely stared at her for several moments, and then turned once more toward the castle in frustration. She was forced to acknowledge that there was nothing she could do to interfere with the Flying Instructor's decision, since her mastery of her discipline was beyond question, and indeed she had given her a top rating earlier in the year.

When she was gone Hooch turned and gave a wave to the pair of students up in the sky, and followed her inside. High above Harry wrapped his arms around the girl in front of him on the broom, and she leaned back and smiled. "Do you want to try another dive?" he asked with a grin of his own.

"Only if you hold me tight," she replied slyly. "I'm afraid I'm going to need these lessons for the entire rest of the year before I'm really comfortable."

"Whatever it takes," he responded, adding a little kiss to the top of her head. "I'm all yours." And he put one hand over hers on the broomstick and pushed them into an easy dive, while keeping the other arm wrapped tightly around her waist.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Thursday, April 2

*The DA has been going very well. Easter break begins tomorrow, and we have covered the entire year's material now. There will be plenty of time for students to review everything before OWLs.*

*Tonight Harry announced that we will begin attempting the Patronus charm after break.*

*Speaking of OWLs, I'm going to make study schedules for us to begin to prepare for them over break. It will also be a good opportunity to complete our investigation of Trelawny and Snape.*

It was now the end of the break. Despite some grumbling (good natured on Harry's part, somewhat less so for Ron), Harry and Ron had accepted the study schedules, and they had made good progress in preparing for the OWLs. Hermione had also been successful in gathering some background information on Trelawny and Snape.

"OK, according to what I've found out Trelawny was hired in 1980, and is the great-great-granddaughter of the famous seer Cassandra Trelawny," Hermione announced.

"That's the year we were born," Harry noted. "So she's been teaching here as long as we've been alive."

"Snape's been here almost as long," Hermione added, restraining herself from pointing out that *she* had actually been born in the fall of 1979. "He was hired in 1982. Rather remarkable, actually, since he was in the same class with your parents and they'd only graduated three years earlier."

"And he was a Death Eater during that time," Ron reminded them.

"Let's focus on Trelawny first," Hermione recommended. "Evidently Dumbledore was hoping she had inherited her ancestor's talent. But clearly he was wrong. I don't see how he could have failed to realize in fifteen years that she's a fraud. I doubt if she's ever made a real prophecy."

"Well," Harry corrected. "There was the one ... wait a minute!"

"What?" Hermione and Ron chorused.

"Remember, the night in third year when Sirius escaped? That afternoon during my Divination exam she went into a trance and made an actual prophecy about what happened that night."

"That's right, you mentioned that on the train ride home," Hermione recalled. "So, you think that's reason enough to ..."

"No, no," Harry broke in. "I also told Dumbledore about it, the next day. And he was rather amused and said it brought her total of real predictions up to two." Hermione's eyes widened as she realized what he was suggesting.

"So, we were speculating that she might have seen something or overheard something that Dumbledore doesn't want anyone to know about," Hermione reasoned aloud. "What if instead it was that other prophecy? Maybe Dumbledore hired her on the condition that she wouldn't tell anyone else about it."

"Except that she didn't even know she'd made a prophecy when she did it last year," Harry

countered. “So she might not know about that one either.”

“Then how did Dumbledore know about it?” Ron asked.

The three of them pondered this question for a few moments. “The only thing I can think of is that he heard her make it,” Harry suggested.

“Unless he found out about it because he read it someplace,” Hermione offered. “But if it’s public knowledge why bother with hiring her to keep it secret?”

“I think the Ministry keeps records of prophecies,” Ron informed them. “I’ve heard my dad mention it. It’s called the Hall of Prophecies or something like that. If I remember right it’s in the Department of Mysteries.”

“Harry! The corridor in your dreams!” Hermione gasped as Harry came to the same realization. “Didn’t you say you thought that was in the Department of Mysteries?”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Ron objected. “You said it was a weapon You Know Who was after. What kind of weapon is a prophecy?”

No one had any answers to that question, or how they could learn any more about Trelawny’s first prophecy. Hermione thought about owling the Ministry to inquire about it, but wasn’t sure how they could do it without Umbridge finding out, since all of their owl post was being opened and read. Harry suggested that they ask Sirius to do it the next time they talked to him, but Hermione wasn’t certain that they wanted the Order to know about the inquiry either, since they were guarding the alleged weapon and were intent on keeping the students in the dark about it.

“It’s like we’re in a police state here,” Hermione grumbled in reference to the intercepted communications. Harry nodded his agreement but Ron was puzzled.

“What’s a ‘police state’?” he asked.

“Never mind,” Hermione said dismissively. “Let’s talk about Snape.” The boys both agreed.

“So, we know he was a Death Eater at one time, but he must have changed sides if Dumbledore hired him, and brought him into the Order,” Hermione began. “And he’s said numerous times that he trusts him completely.”

“From what it sounded like last year when they all got together in the Hospital Wing after ... well after Fudge left, Dumbledore sent him out on a spying mission,” Harry added as Hermione took his hand in a comforting gesture at the memory of that horrible night. “And it seemed like it wasn’t the first time.”

“You mean he’d spied before, and it must have been when You Know Who was in power before, well, before you defeated him,” Ron clarified. Harry and Hermione both nodded.

“So, you think Dumbledore recruited him as a spy even before my parents were killed?” Harry

wondered. Hermione thought to herself that it was interesting how differently the two boys referred to the same incident. “That would mean he was a Death Eater for only a couple of years before he turned. I wonder what happened to make him change his mind so fast.”

“Hmm,” Hermione mused. “I wonder if it has anything to do with those memories he doesn’t want you to see.”

“It sure would be nice if we could see what they were,” Harry commented. Ron wholeheartedly agreed but Hermione frowned. “I know,” Harry sighed upon seeing her reaction. “It would be an invasion of privacy and it would be wrong.”

“Yes ... no!” Hermione changed her mind in mid-sentence, causing the other two to regard her in confusion. “He invades your privacy every lesson,” she objected hotly. “Does he offer you the opportunity to protect some of your secrets from him when he’s invading your mind? Why should you give him that consideration if he won’t do it for you?”

“You mean ...” Harry stammered. “You mean you think it would be OK for us to try to see those memories?” Hermione nodded firmly.

“Hermione!” Ron blurted out. “What’s gotten into you? What happened to the girl who was terrified of breaking any rules?”

“I grew up,” Hermione answered. “And I found some things are more important than rules.” She caught Harry’s eye and he understood. He reached out to squeeze her hand affectionately as Ron coughed and looked the other way.

“Now, all we have to do is figure out how to accomplish that,” Harry concluded.

Just then they were interrupted by a grinning pair of red-headed twins.

“A word of advice,” Fred offered.

“Seeing as how Mr. Potter is the toad woman’s favorite target for punishment ...” George began.

“... excepting when she can pin something on Miss Granger ...” Fred broke in.

“... which is difficult because Miss Granger never breaks any rules ...” George pointed out.

“... or at least never gets caught at it ...” Fred amended.

“... the three of you might want to make sure you’re in the Great Hall early for lunch today,” they finished in unison.

Hermione narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “And just what might be happening that we might get in trouble for?”

“You’ll see,” they smirked.



Hermione stood and folded her arms across her chest and appeared to be considering her next course of action. Taking a cue from her, Harry and Ron moved to either side of her and drew their wands. The smiles immediately vanished from the twins' faces and they began backing up slowly. They were well aware from the DA sessions that they could not out duel Harry, and that Hermione knew more hexes than anyone in the school, and that Ron was no slouch with a wand either.

"Well," Hermione said finally, "it better be good."

"What?" George blurted out, as Fred gaped at her.

"If someone's going to get in trouble, the prank had better be impressive and not just some wimpy little hex," she explained as grins broke out on Harry and Ron's faces. Fred and George turned to face each other and burst out laughing.

"What happened to little Miss Perfect Prefect?" Fred asked.

"But I'm not a prefect, am I?" Hermione explained with a sly smile. "And to tell the truth, I'm feeling a bit ... rebellious today."

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Sunday, April 12

*Well, Fred and George's prank was really quite impressive. They set off what must have been an entire crate of fireworks in the hall outside of Umbridge's office. From there they spread all throughout the castle. The amazing thing was that most of the professors (Snape excluded, of course) didn't appear to mind them too much. Dumbledore actually seemed to be enjoying them. He was overheard standing next to Flitwick, discussing the charms involved in one that was writing swear words in midair. There were even some that followed Umbridge around, making rude comments about her. Afterward Harry and I found the twins and congratulated them, and I told them how impressed I was. They were both pleased at my compliments, I think.*

*I really don't know what to make of those two. Today's display shows that they are very capable wizards. But they treat their schoolwork with such disdain. When we were discussing OWLs over break, they bragged that they had only got three each. Unbelievable! And they joked that they should have received 'Exceeds Expectations' for just showing up to take the exams. They're certainly forcing me to re-evaluate my conceptions of what constitutes success. After all, they're planning to open a joke shop when they leave Hogwarts, and from what we've seen of their products this year, they will certainly be a success at it. Even though no one 'officially' knew who set these fireworks off, they were swamped with orders from the other students afterwards.*

*The most incredible thing that they said, though, was that they were thinking of leaving school early! Without taking their NEWTs! For me that thought was so inconceivable that I couldn't speak for several seconds. They said they were just waiting for the right time, so they could make a dramatic exit. It's hard to believe what could be more dramatic than today's firework display, but I'm not betting against it with that pair.*

*One thing that I admired was that they said they were waiting until after break so as not to disrupt the other students' leisure and study time. As I thought about it, I realized that they actually are pretty considerate of their fellow students. Very few of their pranks over the years were mean-spirited, and most of their 'victims' took it in good humor. And they're perfectly delighted when anyone successfully pranks them back.*

*All in all, it's been a pretty good break.*

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*

## **Notebooks and Letters** **Umbridge Strikes Back**

### **Chapter 8, Umbridge Strikes Back**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – April 13

*This is mind-boggling! Dumbledore is no longer Headmaster, and is in fact a fugitive on the run from the Ministry! Incredible!*

*I suppose the idea that Dumbledore would be replaced as Headmaster shouldn't be that surprising, since that has clearly been Fudge's and Umbridge's goal all year. And he hasn't really been resisting what they've been doing. He'd been replaced as Head of the Wizengamot already last summer. But the way that it happened is such a shock.*

*It all began this evening at the DA meeting. Harry started teaching us Patronus charms.*

“So the key thing is that you have to think of a happy memory, and focus hard on it despite anything else that's going on around you,” Harry concluded, after showing them the incantation and the wand movement. “And the specific thought makes a difference. If you don't have success with one memory try another.” With that he took a deep breath, concentrated on the memory of his first kiss with Hermione, and called out the incantation. “*Expecto Patronum!* ”

A blindingly bright giant stag leapt from his wand and cantered around the room, drawing gasps of astonishment from the other students, and a curious look from Hermione. She had seen Harry's patronus twice before, and didn't remember it being that dazzling.

George was the first to break the stunned silence. “Whoa, Harry! That must have been one powerful happy memory.”

Harry's response was a sheepish glance in Hermione's direction. She immediately understood what he had been thinking of and blushed bright red as their eyes locked. Lavender and Parvati noticed this exchange and quickly figured out who Harry's thoughts must have been on, and began giggling. This reaction spread through the room as more and more of the girls realized what was going on. As the boys also caught on, most of them chuckled or snickered and shook their heads, while Ron grimaced and turned a bit green. Finally Harry ended the commotion by blowing his whistle and gesturing to the students to begin attempting the charm themselves.

Soon the air was filled with shouts of ‘*Expecto Patronum!*’ along with occasional wisps of silvery mist. After a few tries, with her mist coalescing into a more solid looking shape each time, Hermione produced a lively otter that immediately scampered happily about the room. Surprisingly, Cho was the next to get it, producing a lovely swan. Hermione found herself a bit annoyed at this.

*It figures that her patronus would be a beautiful creature, while mine is a plain old rodent*, she grumbled to herself. She wondered what happy memory Cho had used. She consoled herself that at least it couldn’t be a memory of anything involving Harry. Then she felt a bit guilty for having such uncharitable thoughts, reasoning that it was good that Cho was able to perform the difficult charm.

Ginny, who was generating a fairly strong cloud of silvery vapor, sidled up to Hermione with a sly look on her face. “An otter, huh?” she noted. “How appropriate.” Hermione’s brow furrowed, as she tried to work out what the small redhead was suggesting. “You know, a patronus otter,” Ginny hinted. “P – otter? Your protector, you know.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in understanding. “Oh!” was all she could manage as she blushed again. Ginny’s only reaction was a smirk as she glided away. Just as Hermione turned in the other direction she bumped into Harry, who quickly caught her by the arms and gave them a little squeeze.

“Good job,” he said admiringly. “What memory did you use?”

“Something similar to yours, I imagine,” she replied with a gleam in her eye.

A shy grin blossomed on his face and he leaned in close. “I like your otter,” he added in a low voice. “It suits you.” Once more Hermione was lost, trying to reconcile that comment with Ginny’s analysis. *Was he implying that she naturally needed him to protect her?* “You know, playful and mischievous,” he continued.

Hermione’s mouth dropped open in surprise, but she managed to recover fairly quickly. Of course, he would say something like that. He’d never suggest that she was incapable of taking care of herself. It was more that they took care of each other, and both of them were very much aware of that fact. “That’s sweet,” she smiled back at him. “But I think not too many people would use either of those words to describe me.”

“Maybe that’s because they don’t know you as well as I do,” he grinned again, and he shot her a quick wink before moving on to another student who was struggling with the spell. Hermione decided that her patronus form *was* rather nice after all, as she fondly watched it happily cavorting around her.

Suddenly there was a commotion by the door. “Harry Potter sir!” came the squeaky voice of Dobby. “Dobby has come ... come to warn you ... but he is not allowed to tell ...” Dobby broke off and tried to bash his head against a wall, but Harry managed to catch him first.

“Who is it?” Harry asked, trying to think of a way to get around Dobby’s instructions. “Who threatened you?” Dobby hit himself hard on the nose, and Harry grabbed his hand. By this time Hermione had made her way over to them, and she grabbed Dobby around the waist before he could make another run at the wall.

“She ... she ordered Dobby ...”

Both of them quickly came to the same conclusion as to who ‘she’ might be.

“Umbridge?” Harry guessed. Dobby nodded and struggled to free his hand to hit himself again.

“She’s found out about us?” Hermione offered her own conjecture. This time Dobby tried to kick himself. “And she’s on her way here!” she concluded in horror. Dobby wailed loudly and some of the students began yelling in dismay.

“Don’t panic!” Harry shouted. “The room is a secret – she won’t even be able to find it.”

“Hey, Marietta’s not here,” Terry Boot loudly noted. As everyone looked around, Cho went pale. The two of them always attended the DA meetings together, but Marietta had begged off tonight, saying she had something important to do. Hermione immediately locked on Cho at Terry’s words, and Harry hurried up behind her.

“Did she sell us out?” Hermione snapped at the Chinese girl.

“I ... I don’t know,” Cho cried.

Hermione whirled to face Harry. “Even if Marietta doesn’t bring Umbridge in, she could wait out in the corridor if she knows we’re in here,” she pointed out grimly. “Eventually we’d have to come out and then she’d have us.” Before she had even finished, Harry had pulled out the Marauder’s Map and activated it.

“OK, listen up,” he called out to the nervous students, who quieted enough to be able to hear him. They began to cluster around the pair, amazed at what they were seeing. Hermione thought to herself that they would have a lot of explaining to do if they got out of this safely. “She’s still two floors down, and coming up from the direction of her office,” Harry continued. “If we head off in the other direction, we’ll be all right.” He paused to consult the map again. “Fred and George, take all the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs to the secret passage that leads to the Entrance Hall. You know which one I mean?”

“Right,” “No problem,” the for once completely serious twins chorused. “Come on, this way.” They opened the door and raced down the hall, turning right at the end of the corridor, with the members of those two houses at their heels.

“Ron, you take all the Gryffindors down to the kitchens, following this route,” Harry instructed, tracing his finger along the map, “then up this way to Gryffindor Tower.” He knew Ron had been along that passage many times. Ron nodded and jumped up, then hurried out the door with his

housemates and down the corridor, turning left at the end.

Harry next turned to Dobby. “Thanks, my friend,” he said to the small house elf. “But you’d better get out of here now too. Get down to the kitchen and don’t tell anyone you warned us. And no punishing yourself!” Dobby looked like he wanted to object, but then gave in and after hugging Harry’s leg disappeared with a pop.

Hermione and Harry followed the others out into the hallway and waited there until the rest of the students were out of danger, huddled over the map watching the dots moving in different directions. When it became apparent that everyone had made it back safely, Harry leaned against the wall and breathed a sigh of relief. But suddenly Hermione grabbed his arm and pointed at their position on the map, choking back a horrified gasp. Umbridge was now on their corridor and would be within view in seconds.

Thinking quickly, Hermione ran back and forth in front of the hidden entrance three times while Harry cleared the map and then looked up quizzically, wondering what she was attempting. As soon as the door appeared, she shocked him by throwing her arms around him and kissing him!

“Caught you!” Umbridge shouted triumphantly, before breaking off abruptly at the sight before her. Beside her Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson had disgusted looks on their faces at seeing the pair of Gryffindors making out.

“Oh please,” Draco moaned. “Do we have to watch this? Potty and the Mud ...”

“What are you doing!” Umbridge shrieked. “Where are the rest of them?”

Harry and Hermione flew apart, and Hermione made a very good show of nervously straightening her robes and being totally embarrassed while Harry just looked stunned.

“Wha ... others?” Harry stammered.

“We were just ...” Hermione blurted out awkwardly. “We wanted some privacy, you see and ...”

“You’re lying!” the toadlike witch hissed. “You’ve been meeting with a secret illegal group of students in this room right here. And now you’re going to pay for it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” insisted Hermione, while Harry followed her lead and shook his head dumbly. Angrily Umbridge threw open the door that Hermione had summoned and stormed inside the room on the other side.

There they found a small, cozy space that could only be described as romantic and intimate. There was an inviting sofa with comfortable looking cushions, and several candles completed the picture by adding a warm glow. There was no doubt what the purpose of this room was.

“We ... we just wanted to be alone,” Hermione stammered, her face flushed bright red, as Harry wrapped an arm around her possessively. Draco made a gagging noise but Umbridge’s fury continued unabated.

“See if you two can find any more of them,” she snapped at Draco and Pansy. “Potter, Granger, come with me to the headmaster’s office now!” As she hustled them away however, Draco lingered a moment, staring thoughtfully at the room and its doorway.

*There was quite a reception committee waiting for us in Dumbledore’s office. Besides Dumbledore and McGonagall, Fudge and Percy were there, along with two Aurors, one of whom was Kingsley Shacklebolt. I had never been in there before, but Harry later explained some details to me. One thing that caught my eye right away was all the portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses, who were whispering urgently to each other. I had a tight grip on Harry’s arm as Umbridge shoved us into the office, and he had his hand over mine somewhat protectively, which I very much appreciated.*

*Fudge had a very satisfied look on his face, as though he had been eagerly awaiting this opportunity. The realization hit me that he and Umbridge had been attempting to arrange this scenario all year, and were probably behind the fiasco last summer as well. It’s simply astounding to me that the Minister of Magic is so obsessed with discrediting Harry that he’s gone to this much effort. If he’d spend this much energy doing his job the wizarding world would be much better off!*

*I continued to protest that I didn’t know what Umbridge was talking about, and when Fudge started interrogating Harry Dumbledore nodded slightly to me to indicate that we should continue to stonewall. I gave Harry’s hand a slight squeeze to let him know to continue his denial. Fudge got pretty angry that Harry wouldn’t admit anything, and I confess that seeing him lose his cool was somewhat satisfying.*

*I thought it was hopeless, though, when Umbridge produced a list of names of everyone in the group that she had got from Marietta, and then brought Marietta herself in. It was immensely satisfying to see that my secrecy hex had worked, and she had the word ‘SNEAK’ written across her face in ugly purple pimples. Everyone gasped when they saw it, and Marietta cried and pulled her robe up over her face. Harry shot me a look and I could see how impressed he was. It was all I could do to keep a straight face.*

*Marietta had evidently learned her lesson, albeit too late, and refused to say anything. I’m quite proud to say that Umbridge was completely unable to counter my jinx. Umbridge persisted, however and told them all about our meeting in Hogsmeade (note to self – be more careful about who’s listening in when we plan secret stuff!).*

*At this point Dumbledore interrupted and noted that even had this meeting in Hogsmeade occurred, it was not illegal since Umbridge hadn’t made that decree outlawing unregistered groups until the following week, and that she had no evidence that we had met together at any other times.*

*Well, Marietta could certainly have shot down that argument, but she was still refusing to say anything. Harry and I knew it was only a matter of time, though, until Umbridge and Fudge threatened her enough to make her talk. But what happened next was mind-boggling! When*

Umbridge told her to just nod or shake her head, she shook it no, that there hadn't been any other meetings! I could tell that Harry was just as shocked as I was, but from the look in his eye it was clear that he had some idea of what was going on. When we got back to the common room he told me Shackbolt had put a memory charm on her! He'd whispered it so no one but Harry heard him.

Well, Umbridge really went spare at that. She grabbed Marietta and started shaking her, but Dumbledore stopped her immediately. That was the first time he actually looked angry. Up until then he'd seemed amused about the whole thing, as though he'd expected it and was just waiting for the drama to play out. At that point Fudge tried to calm Umbridge down and told her to focus on the meeting tonight. But she didn't have any evidence of that either, since she'd only caught Harry and me, and I'd covered that up pretty well. (When Harry asked me what sort of room I'd asked for, I told him 'a place to make out with Harry'. He was very impressed and said we ought to go back up there and use it for real some time.)

Then Umbridge showed Fudge the list, and he got all excited when he saw the name, 'Dumbledore's Army'. That got Dumbledore smiling again, and he then spun a story about how it was his idea and he'd asked Harry and me to meet with him to organize it, and that he'd contacted those students about joining. So according to him, Harry and I weren't breaking any rules since we were only meeting with the headmaster, and there wasn't anything illegal about that. Then he turned to me and apologized for being delayed, and was glad to see that Harry and I had found something to do to occupy our time. Well, of course, I blushed at that, which only lent more credibility to his story.

Harry saw what Dumbledore was doing and tried to object, but Dumbledore stopped him immediately and Fudge ignored him in any event. Rather strange that he's been so focused on discrediting Harry all year, but all of a sudden he drops it. Was going after Harry just a ploy then, to smoke out Dumbledore?

Fudge then tried to arrest Dumbledore, but the headmaster was having none of that. Quicker than the eye could follow, he'd knocked out everyone but McGonagall, Harry, and me. There was a flash and a bang, Harry pulled me down and McGonagall grabbed Marietta, and when the dust cleared Dumbledore was the only one standing. I can definitely see now why he has the reputation as the greatest wizard alive. He quickly gave McGonagall some instructions, insisted most vehemently that Harry must master Occlumency (but still didn't say why!), grabbed Fawkes and vanished. It was only after he'd gone that I realized that he'd been looking at me when he said it – in fact, Harry pointed out later that he never looked at him once the entire time.

At any rate, when the rest of them woke up, they all raced out the door chasing after him, but of course he and Fawkes were long gone by then. He never said where he was going, which was a good idea, I think, since that way none of us can be forced to reveal it. McGonagall promptly hustled us out of the office and sent us back to Gryffindor Tower before Fudge could get any ideas about detaining us, while she took Marietta back to her dorm.

So, here we are. I suppose Umbridge will take over now. Has this been Dumbledore's plan all along? If so, I hope something good comes out of it. I'm sure the atmosphere here at Hogwarts will be truly dreadful as long as she's in charge.



From the Journal of Hermione Granger – April 15

*It didn't take long for Umbridge to make things even worse. The only bright spot is that she couldn't get into the Headmaster's office. It wouldn't open for her. Of course she was furious, but there wasn't anything she could do about it. Except take it out on Harry, that is.*

*She called him into her office to question him about Dumbledore's disappearance. She offered him some tea that was probably spiked with Veritaserum, but he wasn't fooled for an instant. He told me it was pretty obvious when she'd turned her back to him that she was putting something in it, so he only pretended to drink it and later dumped it out. Even if he had been forced to tell the truth though, he couldn't have told her where Dumbledore was. But then she asked him where Sirius was hiding. Now that worries us – how much does she know about Harry's relationship with Sirius?*

*The major change she's made is to basically abolish the Prefect system. She's created something called the Inquisitorial Squad, whose members have even more power than the prefects had. They can actually take points from students. It's quite apparent that by the end of the year none of the houses will have any points at all except for Slytherin house. By some amazing coincidence all of the Inquisitorial Squad members are Slytherins. Imagine that. One thing I'll say for her, she's managed to unite three of the four houses in a common cause.*

*Malfoy, of course, is being insufferable, and gloats and torments us every chance he gets, taking points for anything that comes to mind. I had to stop Harry and Ron from attacking him for taking points from me for being a mudblood. We need to avoid him whenever possible.*

*Fred and George, on the other hand, are actively resisting. They're hexing the Squad members every chance they get. They even dumped Montague into a Vanishing Cabinet and made him disappear. It's only a matter of time before they get expelled. When I pointed it out to them, they gave me a condescending look and told me that was the whole idea.*

*My first reaction was one of incredulity. I could not believe that they were serious about intentionally getting expelled. They explained that up until now they had always been careful to not cross that line, but they truly didn't care about graduating and taking their NEWTs. That's the same thing they had said when we were discussing the exams over break. I think I'm finally starting to believe them now. And the most amazing thing is, I think I'm starting to agree with them! What's happening to me? (Harry really rubbed it in later when we were alone – he teasingly asked me if I still thought that getting expelled was a fate worse than death. I hit him, of course, the cheeky prat.)*

*The only thing Fred and George are waiting for is that they want to make a memorable exit, and they want to cause as much trouble as they can before they go, sort of in honor of Dumbledore. I have an idea of how we might take advantage of the disruption they'll cause when they finally leave. I'll run it by Harry and see what he thinks, then we'll talk to them about it. I think it will be something they'll be glad to support.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – April 17

*Several DA members have been approaching us and asking about what we're going to do now. Our inclination is to stop meeting. I don't think Umbridge was convinced by either ours or Dumbledore's stories. At the very least we'll lay low for a while.*

*Cho also came up to Harry today and apologized for what Marietta did. Harry graciously accepted her apology. I just stood there and gritted my teeth. Then she pushed it too far by complaining about my curse on the parchment and saying it was unfair. Harry immediately dropped the polite act and defended me. Cho got the message and left quickly. Harry got a big hug from me.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – April 20

*We had Career Advice sessions today with McGonagall. They would have been more pleasant if Umbridge hadn't sat in on them (at least she sat in on mine and Harry's – I don't know about all the other students) although I learned some unsettling things.*

*Before I learned that I was a witch and came to Hogwarts, I had planned to become a doctor, so I told McGonagall that a Healer was one of the options I was considering. She assured me that my grades were quite sufficient for any career I would choose, and for Healer I needed a minimum of six NEWTs, including Outstanding in Transfiguration, Charms, and Potions, which she felt was well within my capability. The good feeling I had about that was quickly ruined by the scoffing noise that came from Umbridge.*

*Next I said that I was also interested in the possibility of doing something in Wizarding Relations, for example dealing with other magical creatures. This time Umbridge coughed loudly before McGonagall could say anything. Then McGonagall reluctantly admitted that even though my grades are topnotch, as a muggleborn witch I would be seriously limited in any career at the Ministry of Magic.*

*I was furious when I heard that, as was Harry when I told him this evening. I don't know why it should surprise me, I suppose, given the attitudes of people like Malfoy. Apparently that kind of prejudice is well-established among the purebloods who run things in wizarding Britain, even if they're not as blatant about it as he is. I guess I never appreciated the attitudes of Ron and the rest of the Weasleys, who are quite out of the ordinary as purebloods who don't act superior to muggleborns.*

*Harry's session with McGonagall wasn't much better. He told her that he was thinking of being an Auror, and Umbridge made it clear he had no chance of working for the Ministry. McGonagall then pointedly noted that perhaps there would be another administration in power by the time Harry graduated, and informed her that in any case she would personally see that he is able to*

*become an Auror if it's the last thing she does. Then Umbridge accused her of trying to overthrow the Minister, along with Dumbledore. His session ended with the two of them in a shouting match. We concluded that if they weren't before, McGonagall and Umbridge are now definitely bitter enemies. I don't know if that's good or bad as far as it will affect rest of the school year*

*After that we made our final plans for him to get a look at Snape's memories. We're going try to do it next Monday during Harry's Occlumency session. The twins eagerly agreed to provide a diversion.*

One week later

Harry tried to calm himself and clear his mind as he approached the dungeon. Snape's Legilimency attacks had become more vicious since Dumbledore had left the castle. Harry had had some success with driving the nasty Potions professor out of his mind, but not before he had sifted through anything dealing with his connection to Voldemort. On one level, Harry understood why he was doing that, as his instructions from Dumbledore probably were to make sure Harry wasn't being possessed yet, but he was certain that Snape was doing it in the most painful way possible. Harry would have given the whole thing up completely except for Dumbledore's last words to Hermione before he left with Fawkes.

Snape had just finished removing the memories he stored in Dumbledore's pensieve during their sessions when Harry entered the dungeon. After his usual insulting remark about Harry's mental capacity he raised his wand. But before he could cast the incantation Draco Malfoy burst into the dungeon, blurting out that Snape's presence was urgently required in the Entrance Hall. Snape took the opportunity to embarrass Harry by letting slip that Harry was in his office for Remedial Potions lessons, and Malfoy smirked broadly before the two of them hurried from the room.

"Ooh, I so wanted to hex that smirk right off his face," Hermione's disembodied voice by the door announced. "But hurry up. I'll only be able to give you a few seconds warning when he comes back."

Harry took a deep breath and plunged his face into the pensieve. After the disorienting feeling of falling through space, he found himself in the Great Hall during an examination. *Oh, this must be an OWL exam. Hermione'd love to have seen this*, he thought to himself. Looking around he found a younger Snape hunched over his desk working furiously on his paper. As he continued to peruse the hall, he gave a start as he spotted himself at one of the desks. No, he realized a moment later, it was his father! Next to him was a good-looking boy with long black hair that could only be Sirius. Eventually Harry also spotted Remus and Peter, and was feverishly searching for his mother when Professor Flitwick called time and *Accioed* the examination papers.

Harry followed the crowd of students out onto the grounds and took a position between Snape and the Marauders, knowing he couldn't get too far from Snape in the memory. After joking with each other for a while, Sirius and James got bored and began looking for some mischief. It occurred to Harry that they really were like the Weasley twins, as McGonagall had once noted, except they were more arrogant. And as he was to learn, nastier as well.

To his horror, they spotted Snape minding his own business, studying for the next exam, and before he could defend himself they had hexed him, disarming him and hitting him with an *Impediment* jinx. It was a cowardly two against one surprise attack. Harry's stomach churned as he realized that his father was every bit as bad as Snape had always accused him of being.

"Leave him alone!" Harry, along with the students in the memory, turned to see an angry red haired girl challenging the troublemaking boys. Harry couldn't help but admire her for standing up to the bullies while most of the other students were too intimidated to do anything. Then he realized who she was. His mother.

James immediately looked contrite, not that it did him any good. It was clear from her attitude that Lily Evans couldn't stand the arrogant snob.

"What's he done to you?" she demanded.

"Well," James replied deliberately, "it's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean." Many of the watching students found this funny, but not Lily, and not Harry. His father didn't even have a good reason for hexing Snape.

"You think you're funny," Lily returned coldly. "But you're just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter."

If he hadn't been so ashamed of his father's actions Harry would have found the way she verbally took him apart a bit humorous. She reminded him of Hermione when she got worked up about something. But James Potter took it completely in stride, as though this were an act they went through regularly. He even had the nerve to ask her to go out with him. This, of course, only made her even more angry.

While everyone's attention was focussed on Lily, Snape managed to free himself and hit James in the face with a cutting hex. James and Sirius quickly responded and once more Snape was disarmed and in addition was dangling upside down in the air so that his robes fell away and revealed his underwear.

Lily was furious. "LEAVE HIM ALONE!" she shouted, drawing her own wand. This made James and Sirius suddenly wary, and Harry found himself wondering if his mum was also like Hermione in that she knew more hexes than anyone in the school, so that her opponents were nervous about what she might do to them. The two bullies immediately backed down and released Snape, who was somewhat less than grateful for being rescued.

"I don't need any help from a filthy little mudblood like her!"

Lily reacted like she had been slapped, and Harry wanted to hex Snape himself. Whatever pity he had been feeling for the boy disappeared immediately. Lily ended up shouting at both of the combatants, telling James that he was as bad as Snape, which clearly struck a nerve. Then she stalked away. Harry desperately wanted to go after her, feeling that she was the only admirable character in this whole unfortunate scene, but he was forced to remain with Snape. And here,

things were about to get truly ugly.

James, who had clearly been hurt by Lily's words, decided to take it out on Snape and turned him upside down again, this time threatening to take off his pants. But before anything more could happen Remus stepped in, finally exerting some control over his two friends, and put a stop to the harassment. Angry and humiliated, Snape stormed back to the castle while Remus restrained the irate Gryffindors and the memory faded out.

Harry found himself back in the Potions dungeon. The twins' exit performance must have been quite impressive, since Hermione hadn't come in for him yet. That memory had certainly been informative, although it was not at all something Harry would have preferred to see. But there were several more memories in the pensieve. More reluctantly this time, Harry plunged his face back in.

This time he found himself inside the castle at the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. There, in front of the Fat Lady's portrait, Snape was trying to apologize to Lily. As the scene played out Harry's mouth dropped open in shock. It was becoming increasingly obvious that Snape and Lily had been friends, but had gradually grown apart as Snape had fallen in with the Death Eater crowd. The incident that afternoon had evidently been the last straw and Lily was now permanently ending the friendship.

"You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine," she concluded.

Snape was desperate. "No ... listen ... I didn't mean ..."

But Lily was having none of it. "You call everyone of my birth Mudblood, Severus. Why should I be any different?" And with a final look of contempt, she turned her back on him and climbed back through the portrait hole. Harry took one last glance at the look of despair and loss on Snape's face as the memory faded out.

"Harry! Harry, come out! He's coming back." Hermione's voice brought him back to the present and he felt himself being dragged away from the pensieve. But before she could cover them with the invisibility cloak Snape was back in the room.

"What are you two doing here?" he hissed at them.

"I was wondering where Harry was," Hermione answered promptly. "I saw you in the Entrance Hall and assumed your lesson was over, but I couldn't find him so I came here looking for him."

"I didn't know how long you were going to be gone, so I waited here for you to get back," Harry added. Snape darted his eyes back and forth between them, his suspicion growing.

"I don't believe you. But I'll soon have the truth. Suddenly he raised his wand and pointed it at Hermione. "Legilimens!"

Hermione's initial shock gave way to panic as Snape began rifling through her memories, but then

she started to resist. She had read up everything she could on Occlumency and attempted to put it into practice. Although Snape's only instruction to Harry had been 'clear your mind', Hermione had learned that that it was easier to free one's mind of unwanted thoughts by focusing on something else. Therefore she concentrated with all her might on the Arithmency formula they had studied that morning.

"Protego!" All of the preceding had happened in less than a second, but that was all it took for Harry to come to Hermione's aid, as he put up a shield in between Snape and his victim. As had happened other times, this caused the mind-reading spell to bounce back on the caster, and Snape was thrown against the wall. He shot back up immediately in fury, only to find both students confronting him with their wands out, crouched slightly, side by side in defensive positions.

"Get out!" he snarled at them. "And I don't want to see you in this office ever again!"

Harry and Hermione hurried back to Gryffindor Tower in silence, then found a quiet corner where he told her what he had seen in the pensieve. Midway through the tale Ron joined them, and they quickly brought him up to date. Horrified by what she heard, Hermione scooted up close to Harry and put a comforting arm around him, while he just stared blankly at the far wall. Crookshanks tried to do his part, burrowing his way into Harry's lap and rubbing up against his hand, trying to get his head scratched. Harry responded absently and the large cat purred his appreciation.

"I just can't believe it," he finally murmured. "Everyone says how wonderful he was, but he was just a bully. And Sirius went right along with him."

"Well, I can't imagine that they're all making it up, Harry," Hermione tried to point out. "And remember, you're only seeing one side of it. It would be like watching Malfoy's memories of you and Ron. I doubt that they're very pleasant. He'd certainly never want anyone to see him bouncing up and down in the air as a ferret. This got a chuckle out of Ron, and but only a small smile from Harry.

"Or the time you decked him, Hermione," Ron added. Hermione huffed in pretended indignation, hoping it would lighten Harry's mood, but while Ron laughed aloud, Harry merely shook his head.

"But both of those times he started it. In this memory Snape was only minding his own business. Dad and Sirius were just bullies. Believe me, I know what it's like to be humiliated in front of a bunch of people. They were no better than Dudley and his gang." This time Hermione's only response was to hug him.

"My mum pretty much said the same thing," Harry continued. "She couldn't stand him either. I can't imagine how they ever got married." He turned and looked at his two friends. "And remember what Remus said this summer, about how he was made prefect to keep Dad and Sirius in line? Stuff like this is probably why. At least he stopped them eventually."

Hermione nodded sympathetically. She very much remembered what Harry had told her about the comment Remus had made. It had been part of the reason she had given up her prefect badge – a decision that she was now very happy she'd made. But right now she desperately wanted to ease

Harry's distress. For nearly five years Harry had been proud of his father, and been happy when people had remarked how much he looked like him. Now the ideal image he had built up was crumbling.

"I still think you should get another point of view," she urged. "Why don't we find somewhere more private than this, and you can call Sirius on your mirror and get his side of it?"

They found a deserted classroom and Ron was stationed at the door while Hermione looked over Harry's shoulder. Soon Sirius's face was looking back at them out of the mirror. Harry quickly filled him in on what he had seen. By the time he had finished, Remus had joined them, looking over Sirius's shoulder. The reaction of the two former Marauders was not what Harry and Hermione had been hoping for. Both of them recalled the incident quite clearly, and were obviously embarrassed by it. Remus began to make an excuse about James being only fifteen at the time.

"I'm fifteen!" Harry snapped. "And I and every other decent kid I know knows better than to act like that." Sirius tried next, explaining that Snape and James hated each other, and both hexed each other every chance they got. Snape hated that James was so popular and good at everything, while James hated that Snape was so into the Dark Arts. This helped somewhat, as did the fact that Hermione began rubbing Harry's shoulders to relieve the tension.

"Yeah," Harry countered. "But on this occasion he just attacked Snape for no reason, just because you said you were bored. And when Mum lit into him, she said you two were always hexing students in the halls whenever you felt like it."

"You're right," Sirius replied, dropping his head. "Those aren't things I'm proud of now. There's no denying that we were a pair of arrogant berks back then."

This admission calmed Harry somewhat, but he wasn't finished yet. "So if he was such a jerk, and my mum hated his guts, why did they ever get married? He didn't ... you know ... force her ...?"

"No!" Sirius and Remus answered in unison. "No, she really did fall in love with him," Sirius reassured him.

"After that year things started changing," Remus added. "Lily stopped hanging around with Snape and James and Sirius grew up and started acting more mature. They stopped hexing people for the fun of it and started sticking up for and defending students that were being attacked by the Death Eater sympathizers in the school."

"They started dating at the beginning of seventh year," Sirius recalled. "Which made Snape hate your dad more than ever."

"So, Mum and Snape were friends at one time?" Harry asked, still having trouble wrapping his mind around the idea that his mother could ever like such an evil person.

"Yeah, all the way from the first day of school," Sirius replied. "We were never sure why, or what

she saw in him. They had nothing in common that we could tell. She was always friendly and kind to everyone – well except for James – and he was always sullen and withdrawn. But they hung around together for five years, until he started spending more time with the Death Eater crowd. I think that finally opened her eyes. By the end of fifth year they weren't spending much time together at all, and the day you just saw was the end of their relationship.”

“Could it be that part of the reason James and Snape hated each other so much was that James was jealous of Snape and Lily's friendship, and Snape was upset that James kept asking her out?” Hermione inquired.

Sirius and Remus exchanged a look. “Could be,” Sirius admitted, and both students could tell that Hermione had hit on an unpleasant truth.

Across the room the door opened a crack and then shut again, Ron's signal that someone was approaching. Harry quickly said goodbye and put the mirror away, and he and Hermione rejoined Ron and made their way back to the common room.

“Bloody hell, Harry! Your mum was good friends with Snape?” Ron asked in amazement. “I mean, if that had continued Snape could have been your father!” Harry's face screwed up in a look of horror and revulsion, but to both boys' surprise Hermione burst out laughing.

“I'm sorry,” she gasped, still trying to control a lingering snicker. “But that just reminded me of Darth Vader and Luke.” She lowered her voice as deeply as she could. “No. I AM your father.”

Harry just stared at her for few seconds, then let loose with a loud snort and shook his head, finally smiling for the first time in hours. “Great, Hermione,” he muttered sarcastically. “Now I have one more nightmare to add to the queue.” Hermione giggled and gave him a quick squeeze, then turned to Ron to try to explain who Darth Vader and Luke were.

Harry's good mood didn't last long. As he began to brood again about what he had seen, Hermione resolved to do something to cheer him up. “Ron, tell us about your brothers' diversion,” she suggested.

“Oh mate, it was brilliant,” Ron began eagerly. “They turned the entire fifth floor corridor in the east wing into a swamp. Nobody could get through. Umbridge and Filch tried to remove it but couldn't. Flitwick pretended not to be able to dispel it, and McGonagall just told the hag it was her problem. That's when she sent for Snape.” Here Ron got a puzzled look on his face. “The thing was, Snape told her there was nothing he could do about it either. I don't think he likes her any better than the other professors do. Anyway, finally Umbridge told Filch he could get the whips – he's been wanting to horsewhip misbehaving students for years. The coolest part was that Fred and George weren't denying it at all. They set up in the Entrance Hall and actually began taking orders for portable swamps!” Ron paused to shake his head in admiration.

“So eventually all the teachers ended up there, and Umbridge told them they were about to learn what happened to wrongdoers in her school.” He snorted. “Yeah, like anyone else believes this is her school now. But they just ignored her and announced that they decided that they'd outgrown



full-time education. Then they summoned their brooms, and they ripped off the wall in Umbridge's office and came crashing right through her door ...”

“Oh my!” Hermione exclaimed. “That’s very powerful magic!”

Ron nodded. “Right. Always knew those two were holding back. So, once the brooms arrived, they mounted them and sailed out the front doors. You wouldn’t believe the cheering from the rest of the students.” Ron slumped back in his chair, shaking his head in wonderment, while Harry and Hermione grinned at each other.

While Harry was still in a good mood, Hermione suggested he play a chess match with Ron and excused herself. While Ron fetched the chess set she took the opportunity to whisper a suggestion to him, and he nodded his approval. She returned a bit later just as Harry was finishing up an inglorious defeat. When Harry looked up to see her she just smiled and held up her broomstick and the invisibility cloak.

“Care for some late night flying?” she asked with a knowing look. The smile that lit up Harry’s face warmed her heart and made the rest of the day seem not quite so bad. The pair donned the cloak and quietly made their way out of the castle and out to the quidditch pitch. Hermione told Harry to drop her off in the stands and do a bit of solo flying to work off the stress while she watched him.

She loved watching him fly, and loved the fact that it gave him so much joy. After thirty minutes of swoops and turns and dives that would have made Hermione nervous if it had been anyone else doing it, Harry returned to where she was sitting and hovered in front of her, his face flushed with exhilaration.

“Hermione, this was such a great idea,” he exclaimed. “Thank you so much for thinking of it.” Hermione beamed at him and nodded to acknowledge his appreciation. “Want to join me for a nice quiet ride to finish up?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she teased.

He took her up high above the castle, where they hovered, looking at the moon reflected in the lake while Hermione leaned back into his arms. “Feeling a little better now?” she asked softly.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. It still bothers me but it’s not the end of the world. There’s a few things I’m wondering about though.” Hermione put her hands over his arm, which was wrapped securely around her waist, and gave it a squeeze to let him know he should continue. “It really troubled me about how my mum could marry a guy who was such a jerk, but then I concluded that he must have really changed like Remus said, or she wouldn’t have. So I decided I just have to think of him the way he turned out, rather than the way he was at fifteen. From what I saw, my mum was pretty strong willed and wouldn’t take anything from anyone, especially him, so I don’t think he could have fooled her. She actually reminded me of you.”

Hermione grabbed Harry’s hand and raised it to her mouth and kissed it. “Thank you. That’s

sweet. I'm honored to be compared to her. But there are still a couple of questions left."

"Such as?"

"Why were your mum and Snape friends from the first day of school? Either they knew each other before they went to Hogwarts or they met on the train," she reasoned. "Since she was muggleborn like me and he was a pureblood, the first possibility seems unlikely, unless they happened to run into each other in Diagon Alley getting their supplies. And Snape wouldn't have been the type to befriend a stranger during a chance encounter, especially a muggleborn. So the only thing I can figure out is that they met on the Hogwarts Express and shared a compartment, sort of like you and Ron, and formed a quick friendship. She would have been overwhelmed by everything, and he might have been a loner who latched onto her. Perhaps someone made fun of one or the other of them and the other stood up for them."

Harry considered this suggestion. "That makes sense. I can see my mum doing that. Hard to imagine Snape defending her though." He sighed. "I doubt if we'll ever know for sure unless we ask Snape, which I don't see happening, or find a diary or something of hers. You keep a journal, right? Maybe she did too." Hermione shrugged to acknowledge his thoughts. "So, what's the other question?" Harry asked.

"Well, we still don't know why Dumbledore trusts Snape so much," Hermione answered. "It doesn't seem likely that it was just because he was once friends with your mother."

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters** **End of Term, OWLs, and ...**

### **Chapter 9, End of Term, OWLs, and ...**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – May 30

*Wonderful news! Gryffindor won the quidditch cup! Both Ron and Ginny were fantastic. Ginny used the new moves Harry taught her and really embarrassed Cho. I must say I didn't mind watching that at all. She caught the snitch in about an hour, and Gryffindor won convincingly since they were also ahead in goals. That's right, Ron finally had a good game. It started out a bit shaky for him, but then he somehow pulled it together. I was so proud of him!*

*Everyone was so excited after the match. I hugged Ron and Ginny hugged Harry. That led to some unhappiness among certain Ravenclaws. Michael Corner was put out first because he lost, and second because his girlfriend was hugging another guy. And he let her know he didn't appreciate it. Ginny of course, doesn't back down from anything, so she let him have it right back. I think that relationship is probably over.*

*Cho was also upset with Ginny, both because she made her look so bad and because she was hugging the guy Cho wanted. Tough luck, sweetie, find your own guy. After all the glaring and shouting died down, Ginny shot me a guilty look, but I told her I was fine with her hugging Harry. He did help her a lot, and we were all in a celebrating mood. Some of the Gryffindors even modified that stupid Slytherin song 'Weasley is our King' to make the words more complimentary. They were singing it on the way back to the castle. (A few of the girls added 'Weasley is our Queen, referring to the fact that Ginny won the match, after all.)*

*Of course, things are never normal with us, and today was no different. During the match, Hagrid came up behind Harry and me in the stands, and asked us to go off with him. Harry looked at him like he was crazy. Interrupt a quidditch match? Hagrid tried to explain that we needed to sneak out while everyone was watching the match so no one would know. Then I suggested that we come down to see him after the match was over, when everyone in the tower would be celebrating the championship (hopefully) or mourning the defeat. We could sneak out under the invisibility cloak like we always do when we go to see him in secret. He wasn't happy about it, but finally gave in.*

*Well, as it turned out that was a good decision. I certainly wouldn't have wanted to miss seeing Ron make all those great saves, or see Ginny fly Cho into the ground. (Harry told me it was his modification of a Wronski Feint.) When everyone finally stopped hugging each other and headed*

back into the castle, Harry and I disappeared and headed down to Hagrid's. I figure if anyone noticed we weren't at the party they'd assume we were 'celebrating privately'.

Well, we finally found out what dangerous creature Hagrid's hiding in the forest. It's his brother! Or, half-brother, I should say. He's a full size giant! It was terrifying. He took us really deep into the forest, which by the way is more dangerous than ever since the centaurs are so angry with him, before we came to the place where he's keeping him. His name is Grawp. He's 'small' for a giant which is one of the reasons Hagrid thought he needed to rescue him and bring him back from his visit to the giants, but he's still at least three times my height and about thirty times my mass. (That's elementary physics – I had to explain it to Harry, but didn't even bother trying with Ron.)

It gets worse. Grawp is rather violent (which is why Hagrid's looked like he's been beaten up all year) and doesn't speak much English. And Hagrid wants us (Harry, Ron, and me) to take care of him. Right. And try not to get squashed in the process. I swear, if we get out of this alive I'll never complain about one of Harry's dangerous ideas again.

The reason Hagrid wants us to take care of Grawp is that he thinks he's about to get fired. Unfortunately, I don't think he's wrong about that. Umbridge is determined to get rid of him, and it's only a matter of time. When I asked Hagrid what, exactly, was involved in taking care of Grawp, he explained that he wanted us to visit him occasionally, and talk to him. Then he woke him up to introduce us.

That didn't go well at all. It took quite a bit of effort to just get him to look at us, then Hagrid told him our names were Harry and Hermy (I had to threaten Harry later that he was under no circumstances to ever use that name for me or let anyone else hear it) but he didn't seem to pay much attention. He did reach down and try to pick me up, which scared me so much I nearly passed out. Harry pulled me behind a tree just in time. When I finally stopped shaking in terror later, I rewarded him rather passionately.

To top it all off, we were intercepted by the centaurs on our way out, and they threatened to kill Hagrid if he continued coming into 'their' woods. Hagrid stood and argued back with them until Harry and I were able to pull him away.

So, Harry, Ron, and I have to somehow sneak out into the ForbiddenForest, get by the centaurs, and talk to a giant who could crush us without even noticing it. And if he doesn't kill us the centaurs will. Great.

Needless to say, Ron was not thrilled.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 1

All the professors announced that we're going to be reviewing for OWLs all of this week. Everyone in our year is starting to panic, even Ron. Unfortunately his solution is to try to find some magical powder or elixir that will temporarily boost his brain power, instead of actually

studying. And there are plenty of older students willing to sell these things, even if they are all completely useless. Harry and I have been stopping it whenever we see it. It's ironic – even though we aren't prefects, we have the respect of the students in our year for the things we've done so that we can almost act as if we were. Good thing too, because Ron and Lavender certainly aren't doing anything. On the other hand, I suppose I can't blame them since Umbridge took away all the prefects' authority and gave it to her Inquisitorial Squad.

Some of the other students – especially the Ravenclaws – are forming study groups and comparing notes. Still others are obsessing about how many hours they're studying. Ernie Macmillan is an annoying example of this. I'm glad I've got Harry (and Ron, too, I suppose, although I'd never admit it to him) to keep me somewhat grounded, or I'd probably be doing the same thing. Possibly even worse.

Even so, I'm sure I'm going to drive him crazy before the exams are over with my stressing out. So far he's being good about it, constantly reassuring me that I'll be fine, I always get 100 percent or better on all my tests, and I know the material thoroughly. It doesn't always help though. Today I really annoyed him when he was quizzing me on Charms, because I kept grabbing the book from him to check my answers. Finally he cast a Calming Charm on me to settle me down, and told me I had them all perfect and that I should be quizzing him instead.

A lot of us are still concerned about Defense Against the Dark Arts, since the DA hasn't met since the night Umbridge found us. Many of the members were asking if we're going to get together to review. We figured out a solution. I've drawn up a schedule where a few people study together each night, so we don't raise suspicion by gathering in a large group. McGonagall and Flitwick are letting us use the Transfiguration and Charms classrooms, so we can legitimately practice spells. After she heard about it, Professor Sprout told us we could 'study' in one of the greenhouses too.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 7

The Board of Examiners arrived this evening. I was so unnerved that I dropped my fork. I think I might have cut the blood flow to Harry's hand off, I was squeezing it so hard. It was good to see that Umbridge was quite nervous to see them as well. I take that as an indication that she won't have any influence over them, and that the exams will be fair.

Griselda Marchbanks, the head of the board, is positively ancient. She commented that she personally examined Dumbledore for his NEWTs! Unbelievable! She doesn't seem the type to be intimidated by anyone. Neville confirmed this. He said she's friends with his gran, and is a lot like her, which means she must be rather formidable.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 8

*We started off with Charms today. I think I did OK. I ran out of time on the written portion, but Harry pointed out that I probably wrote more than anyone else taking the exam. Ron snapped at me when I started talking about it as we left the Great Hall, so I shut up. I've always wanted to talk about exams right afterward, but he always wants to forget them as soon as possible. It's a good thing we're not together. Harry's more willing to listen to me, but he stays pretty quiet himself. He just smiles at me and gives my hand a squeeze when I start to ramble on and on.*

*I think that we all just have different ways of dealing with nervousness. Ron tries to change the subject, I tend to chatter, and Harry tends to clam up and withdraw into himself. It would be good for both of us, I think, if each would rub off on the other a bit. I know I certainly need to calm down. I mean, I know I'm not going to fail, but I just can't help worrying about it.*

*Anyway, the afternoon practical went well. I went first, in a group with Anthony Goldstein, Greg Goyle, and Daphne Greengrass. Harry's group included Pansy Parkinson and the Patil twins. Ron was with Dean Thomas, Lisa Turpin, and Blaise Zabini. Madame Marchbanks, my examiner, told me I did everything perfectly. Harry said he messed up a few, but thought he was OK overall. Ron, as usual, didn't want to talk about it.*

*So far so good. Transfiguration is tomorrow.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 11*

*The DADA OWL was today, and everyone I've talked to said that thanks to Harry they thought they did fine. And they all noticed that the students who weren't in the DA did much worse. Vindication! The best part was that Professor Tofty, Harry's examiner, asked him to do a Patronus for extra credit, and he conjured one right there in the Great Hall. And it was right in front of Umbridge. Take that you toad! I was a little jealous at first, because I didn't get a chance to do my Patronus for extra credit, but I quickly pushed that thought aside. Harry certainly deserves a lot more extra credit than that for teaching all of us.*

*The boys have tomorrow off while I take my Ancient Runes OWL. I suggested to Harry that he borrow my broom and go flying with Ron while I'm taking the exam to work off some stress, since I'll want to go right back to studying when I'm done. I got a hug and kiss for that suggestion! But we do have to study Potions this weekend.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 15*

*Harry wasn't thrilled by the written portion of the Potions OWL, but we all got a chuckle (even Ron) about the question on Polyjuice. After 2nd year we're quite familiar with that one, and could all describe its effects very accurately. Ron teased me that he added a sentence warning against trying to turn into an animal like a cat. Harry managed to stop me from hexing him. The boys all did much better on the afternoon practical, particularly Harry and Neville, without Snape*

harassing them, and brewed the assigned potion successfully.

Tomorrow is Care of Magical Creatures, which we should be OK in, but Wednesday will be our hardest day. Astronomy in the morning, then in the afternoon I've got Arithmency, my toughest subject, while the boys have Divination, which is problematic for them for entirely different reasons. Then at night we have the Astronomy practical. It's going to be a very long day.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 17

*This is outrageous! When is someone going to do something about that evil woman? Professor Tofty even watched it happen! Umbridge and her goons attacked Hagrid this evening during our Astronomy OWL. We saw it all from the Astronomy Tower. She and 5 others snuck down to his cabin. Then all hell broke loose. Suddenly they were fighting, trying to stun him, but they couldn't bring him down because of his giant blood. He knocked down at least two of them.*

*All at once Professor McGonagall came running out of the castle trying to stop them, but then they attacked her ! She was hit by 4 stunners simultaneously. For a minute I thought they'd killed her!*

*In the confusion Hagrid got away, but not before he'd knocked out two more of the Aurors. I just can't believe that this could happen. What is the world coming to when representatives of the Ministry of Magic can just attack someone like that? Granted, Hagrid resisted them, but what grounds did they have to try to arrest him just because Umbridge wanted him sacked? And McGonagall – how can anyone justify their attacking her? I wonder if this government is too corrupt to be tolerated any longer. After what I've learned this year, I certainly don't want to have anything to do with it, and I'm certain Harry doesn't either.*

*After all of that I'm certain we couldn't have done very well on that OWL. But I find myself unable to get too worked up about that. A lot of the Gryffindors sat up late into the night in the common room waiting to hear if Professor McGonagall would be all right. I was so distraught that Harry had to hold me the entire time. Finally Madame Pomfrey sent word that she would recover, and we eventually headed off to bed just before dawn.*

*It's a good thing that History of Magic is the only OWL exam left. We're going to be so tired I'll be surprised if some of us don't fall asleep during it. Ironical, I guess, since most of the students sleep during the course itself. Let's just hope nothing else bad happens.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 19

*Oh my God this is horrible! That had to have been the most awful night of my life! And it must have been even worse for Harry.*

*I'm in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts now, and trying to put everything together. Ron is in the*

next bed over. Everyone else was healed relatively quickly, but Ron and I are going to be here for a while longer. When I first woke up and didn't see Harry anywhere I completely lost it and started screaming "Where's Harry!" Madame Pomfrey had to sedate me again but I wouldn't let her until she assured me that Harry was all right and had been sitting by my bedside for hours. Now I'm awake again and still don't know where he is. Neville went off to try to find him, after Ron and I gave him some possible places to look. Susan and Luna are here too, and Ginny brought my journal so I could try to write down everything that happened. She's not too happy with us right now, though, since we left her behind. But I better start from the beginning.

It started during the History of Magic OWL Thursday afternoon. We were all tired and emotionally exhausted, and I tried to keep a close eye on Harry during the exam. I didn't think it was too difficult, but I could see that he was struggling. We'd been going through all my notes beforehand, but neither of us could concentrate all that well. During the exam he'd stare at the paper for a while, then he'd write something down, then stare at the back of Parvati's head for a bit before writing something else. After about a half hour of this I noticed that he seemed to be just sitting there in a daze. It was only later that I realized that he was having another vision. Suddenly he screamed and fell off his chair and onto the floor.

I leapt to my feet but didn't know what to do, as the exam was still going on. Madame Marchbanks shouted at all of us to remain in our seats and Professor Tofty took Harry out of the room. I finished my exam as quickly as I could (it was the only exam I turned in before the end of the time limit) and hurried out of the Great Hall to see what was going on.

It took me a while to find him, but finally someone said they had seen him running toward the Hospital Wing. I caught up to him coming out of the infirmary and grabbed hold of him. We each managed to calm the other down a bit, me from being frightened about what had happened to him and him from panicking at not finding McGonagall. Madame Pomfrey had just told him that she'd been transferred to St. Mungo's. I'd figured out by now that he'd had another vision, and understood that he'd wanted to tell McGonagall about it. As our eyes met it dawned on both of us that there was no one left in the castle that we could go to. Just then Ron caught up with us and Harry pulled us into an empty classroom.

"Voldemort's got Sirius," Harry blurted out.

"What!" shouted Ron.

"Was that in your vision?" Hermione asked, attempting to remain calm and settle him down.

"Yeah. In the Department of Mysteries. The place I've been dreaming about all year. He finally made it in and he has Sirius with him. The room was full of shelves. They were at row ninety-seven. He was torturing him."

"Harry, calm down and think it through," Hermione pleaded.

"Hermione! He's got Sirius and if he's in that room he'll get the weapon too," Harry insisted. "We



have to figure out a way to stop him but there's no one here to tell. And we can't floo or owl anyone."

"But are you sure it's real?" Hermione persisted. "It could be just something Voldemort wants to have happen."

"How can we risk it?" Harry argued. "Remember my dream about Mr. Weasley."

"I know, I know," Hermione countered. "But that was in the middle of the night. How could they be in the Ministry? Sirius's face has been on wanted posters all over Britain for three years. And Voldemort's face is hard to miss as well. How could they have gotten into the Ministry without anyone seeing them? It's the middle of the afternoon – the Ministry would be full of people."

"She's right, mate," Ron offered.

"But it was so real," Harry insisted. "And it was just like Mr. Weasley. So you think I'm just imagining it?" he asked in increasing agitation.

"No, I don't," Hermione reassured him. "But it could be that you're tapping into his thoughts, seeing what he's planning. Maybe it hasn't happened yet."

"You think Harry's a Seer?" asked Ron incredulously.

"How can we take that chance?" Harry argued. "We just don't know."

Hermione had been holding her hands to the side of her head, thinking furiously. Suddenly she looked up. "Call him on your mirror!"

Harry shot her a startled look for an instant before pulling her into a crushing hug. "You're brilliant!" he announced. Then the three of them were out the door headed toward Gryffindor Tower. They tumbled through the portrait hole and raced for the stairs, Hermione lagging behind the two longer-legged boys.

"Ron, stay out here and don't let anyone in," Harry gasped as he dove for his trunk. A second later Hermione flew by Ron and into the room, not hesitating in the slightest from the fact that she was in the boys' dorm.

"Sirius!" Harry all but shouted into the small enchanted mirror, desperately hoping that his face would appear and that they'd all have a good laugh at the situation. Indeed, the more he calmed down and thought about it, the more absurd the whole thing seemed. How indeed could Voldemort have captured Sirius when he never set foot outside Grimmauld Place?

"He's not answering!" Harry said, turning to Hermione in anguish. "Now what do you think?"

"There must be someone there," Hermione moaned. "The place is their headquarters for goodness sakes. If only we could floo call there." Suddenly her head snapped up. "Umbridge's office," she declared. "We can use her floo."

“Hermione, how are we going to do that?” he demanded.

“Same way we got into Snape’s office,” she returned grimly. “Invisibility cloak and a diversion.”

They were interrupted by the sounds of an argument outside the dorm room. Striding across the room, Harry pulled open the door and quickly waved Ron, Neville, and Ginny in.

“What’s all the excitement about?” Ginny began, as Neville tried to contain his surprise at having two girls in his bedroom.

“We need to try to contact headquarters,” Hermione replied briskly. “Will you help us?”

*For a plan drawn up on the fly, it really wasn’t too bad. Ron was assigned to lure Umbridge away from her office with a story about Peeves smashing up the Transfiguration classroom, Ginny and Neville were going to clear people out of that corridor with a story about a load of Garroting gas being released, and Harry was going to break into her office using the special knife he got from Sirius that had an attachment for picking locks. We figured we only needed five minutes.*

*Well, we managed to get in OK, and Harry was able to get through to Grimmauld Place, but the house elf Kreacher was the only one home – or so he claimed. I suspect now that he was lying, but he told Harry Sirius had ‘gone out’. When Harry tried to press him for details, he clammed up, but made several innuendoes to the effect that Sirius wouldn’t be coming back. Before we could leave, however, Umbridge burst through the door with a group of her Inquisitorial Squad and caught us. Apparently the nifflers Fred and George and Lee Jordan have been sneaking into her office prompted her to put wards on her door, which we triggered. They’d also caught Ron, Neville, and Ginny.*

*She was, of course, her typical nasty self, but this time she managed to be even worse. While she was ranting at us, accusing Harry of contacting Dumbledore, she decided to send for Snape to give us truth serum. I could have kicked myself, and I could see that Harry felt the same way, for forgetting that we could have contacted Snape. I honestly don’t know if he would have helped us though, considering how much he hated Sirius. At any rate, he claimed to be out of Veritaserum, although he freely offered to poison us if she wanted him to. As he was leaving, Harry shouted something about Padfoot being missing. I’m certain that he understood Harry’s reference, but he acted like he had no idea what he was saying. That didn’t help us much, because he would have acted that way regardless of whether he had caught on or not.*

*After he left, Umbridge somehow managed to convince herself that torturing Harry with the Cruciatus curse would be a valid option. I, of course, immediately shouted out that this was against the rules, but it didn’t sway her at all. In fact, she even let slip that it had been her who had sent the dementors after Harry last summer. I knew it was some kind of Ministry plot!*

*At that point Ginny started crying loudly (I suspected she was faking it, which she later confirmed) and then I joined in and screamed at Harry to tell her the truth. He and I proceeded to argue about it, and I could tell that he caught on pretty quickly that Ginny and I were only pretending.*

*Then I mentioned a ‘secret weapon’ we were building that was finished, and told her we had been trying to contact Dumbledore to tell him it was ready. I figured Umbridge would probably believe this, since she already suspected that we were trying to contact the headmaster.*

*She bought it. I also managed to play on her paranoia to convince her that she needed to come alone with us to see it, since no one else could be trusted. Then I took Harry’s hand and walked with him out of the castle, and he trusted me enough to let me lead him without making it look like I was leading him. Part way there he figured out that I was taking them to the Forbidden Forest, and pretty soon he realized we were going towards where Grawp was living. But he might not have realized that I was actually hoping the centaurs would intercept us. I knew that she hated all other magical creatures, and it wouldn’t take long for her to insult them enough that they’d attack her.*

*Unfortunately, it worked too well. They got mad at us too, and wouldn’t let us go. But then Grawp showed up, and they forgot about us in a hurry. Unbelievably, he remembered my name and called it out, but then all hell broke loose. Harry pulled me to the ground as the arrows started to fly, then helped me run away. We got pretty bloody before it was over, which turned out to be helpful later.*

“Hermione, that was bloody brilliant!” Harry exclaimed, as they neared the edge of the forest. “But what are we going to do now?”

“We need to get back to the castle and try to get our wands back, for starters,” Hermione reasoned. “And then we still have to find a way to contact someone.”

“I think we should fly to London ourselves,” Harry declared. “Even if he’s not there yet, I still think that vision meant something. He might try to break in tonight. And you have to admit it’s still possible he does have Sirius. We can borrow Ginny’s broom and with Ron’s and yours the three of us can do it. You’re good enough at flying now ...”

“Harry, wait,” Hermione pleaded. “Even if he has captured Sirius, don’t you think it could be a trap? Maybe he wants you to come.”

Harry slowed down and turned to Hermione, taking her hand. “I know it’s probably a trap, Hermione. I reckon it’s yet another one of his plots to get me. But I have to go anyway. I’d do the same for you if you were captured.”

Hermione had no immediate response to that. She realized that of course he would do that – it’s just the kind of person he was. And she also realized that she’d do the same for him.

“Harry,” she finally replied. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but don’t you think you have something of a ‘saving people’ thing? I mean, it’s quite noble and all, but I think Voldemort’s taking advantage of this to lure you into the trap.”

Harry grinned at her. “Yeah, I reckon I do. But don’t you think the same could be said for you? How many times have you followed after me to help me out of one jam or other?”

Hermione flushed. In her case, it was more of a ‘saving Harry’ thing. She risked her life to save him. He risked his life to save total strangers. But she wasn’t about to quibble about that now. They still had a problem to solve. She gave his hand a squeeze of acknowledgement, and they quickened their pace back toward the castle.

“You know, if you two wanted a private place to snog, you could have found something a bit closer to the castle than this,” joked a familiar voice. In seconds, Ron, Ginny, and Neville joined them, accompanied by Susan and Luna.

The others quickly filled them in on what had happened. Luna and Susan had spotted the Inquisitorial Squad members escorting Ron to Umbridge’s office and had followed at a safe distance. When Umbridge had emerged with Harry and Hermione, they’d drawn their wands and waited, and shortly afterward the group of Slytherins came out holding the other three at wandpoint. A volley of stunning spells from two of the top duelists in the DA had made short work of the captors, and the initial surprise enabled the three Gryffindors to grab their own wands back and finish them off. Then they had come out looking for Harry and Hermione.

“We need to get to London as quickly as possible,” explained Harry as Ron returned his and Hermione’s wands. “We think there’s going to be a break-in at the Ministry and we don’t have any way to send a message.”

“We should contact my aunt, then,” Susan suggested. “If we had an owl we could send it from here in the forest without it being intercepted.” Ron and Ginny had explained the situation about Sirius and his innocence to the others on the hike out from the castle, but Harry was still uneasy about that idea.

“No offense Susan, but your aunt and all the Aurors think Sirius is a Death Eater,” he pointed out. “If they went to the Ministry and found him there with Voldemort, I’m afraid it would be shoot first and ask questions later.”

“How are we going to fly there?” Ginny wanted to know. We only have three brooms between us.” Harry’s attempt to explain that only three of them were going was met with strong resistance. Neville pointed out that they had all trained hard in the DA and they all wanted to help and Susan agreed vigorously. Ginny, meanwhile was locked in a glaring contest with Ron, who insisted that she stay behind.

“We could fly on the thestrals,” Luna offered. “They’re at least as fast as a broom, and should be more comfortable besides. And thestrals can find anything, even in the dark.” Even as she finished speaking, three thestrals emerged from the trees, drawn, Harry and Hermione soon realized, by the blood on their clothing. As soon as Luna pointed them out, Harry and Neville turned in their direction.

“But how are we going to fly on something we can’t even see,” objected Ron.

“Well, three of us can see them,” Luna responded. “Three of the rest of you can ride behind us.”

Harry nervously climbed onto one of the reptilian horses, then turned to pull Hermione up behind him. “Just like on Buckbeak,” he whispered to her, trying to calm his own nerves as well as hers.”

“But I could see Buckbeak,” she squeaked, wrapping her arms tightly around him. In the meantime Luna had gracefully mounted another thestral, and Neville had managed to climb on a third. Before any of the others could move, Susan was right behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist as he blushed furiously.

“You can ride with me, Ronald,” Luna announced, patting the space behind her. Ron shot a look of panic at Harry, but he merely shrugged and nodded. His face bright red, Ron took the hand Luna offered him and swung his leg over what looked to him to be empty space right behind her bum. Initially he slid as far back from her as he could, but she made him scoot up and hold onto her waist, shooting a wink at Hermione as he reluctantly did so. Despite the deadly serious nature of their mission, Hermione couldn’t stop the smile that crept onto her face.

“Wait, what about me?” Ginny demanded, stamping her foot.

“Ginny, Mum would kill me if I let you do this,” Ron declared. That, of course, didn’t mollify her one bit.

“Ginny, you can help by trying to contact the Order,” Harry decided. “Sneak back into the castle, get your broom, and fly somewhere you can use a floo. Then floo your mum or dad and tell them what’s happening.” Ginny was still not happy, but was somewhat placated that she would at least be contributing to the effort. With one last glare, she turned and hurried back in the direction they’d come from.

“OK, let’s go,” Harry announced.

“Wait,” Hermione interrupted, and she tapped him on the head with her wand while she cast a spell. Harry felt the sensation of cold water running down his body that signaled the disillusionment charm. One by one she cast it on all the riders, finishing off with herself. In response to the looks of amazement on the faces of the rest of them before they disappeared she shrugged and said simply, “when Moody did it last summer I thought it looked useful, so I looked it up and taught it to myself this year. Now we don’t have to worry about what would happen if someone were to spot six bodies flying through the air.” In front of her she could feel Harry shaking his head in admiration and she gave him an extra big hug. Then he coaxed his thestral into the sky and they were off.

Harry couldn’t help comparing this ride to the one they had taken almost exactly two years ago. That one had also been to rescue Sirius. But the intervening two years had seen a significant change - the girl that had held tightly to him on that night had been far different from the young woman with her arms around him now, both physically and in the way they felt about each other. The physical difference was particularly evident with the way she was pressed up against his back. Despite the desperate situation they were in, Harry was still a healthy male and he found his thoughts drifting to certain parts of Hermione’s anatomy. In turn, these thoughts caused his body to respond in a potentially embarrassing way. At this point Harry was very glad he was sitting in

front of her rather than behind her.

For her part, Hermione focused mostly on controlling her terror at riding something invisible, and held on to Harry for dear life. Even though she was now much more comfortable riding a broom, this was entirely different. And she immediately realized, to her dismay, that Luna was right, thestrals were even faster than brooms. She pressed her body tightly into Harry's back and buried her head into his shoulder. Eventually though, she also had a few distracting thoughts about how good he felt.

*Night fell while we were flying and after a while I pulled myself together enough to initiate a conversation. Harry and I talked about what we might find at the Ministry and how we were going to deal with the likely trap. Harry also informed me that his scar was still giving a twinge every so often. We concluded that it was Voldemort trying to keep the pressure on. Sooner than we thought possible our thestrals began to descend, and they came to a remarkably graceful landing in London. We had arrived at the Ministry of Magic.*

*There's a lot more to tell, but I'm too tired right now. I'm still not certain of the details of what happened after I was injured. Madame Pomfrey came in and shooed away the others and told me to get some sleep.*

*I hope Harry comes back soon.*

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters A Deadly Trap

### Chapter 10, A Deadly Trap

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 20

*Everyone is back here together this morning except for Harry. I'm getting very worried about him – it's not like him to not be here to look after me. Madame Pomfrey says he was here watching over me last night while I was sleeping, but he left again before I woke up. I need to see him! Neville couldn't find any sign of him. With his invisibility cloak and his map I know he can easily avoid being found if he doesn't want to be, but why is he staying away from us?*

*Oh well – we're continuing to sort through the experience so I can write it all down.*

*Once the thestrals landed the six of us found ourselves in a dilapidated alleyway which Harry recognized from last summer, with overflowing dumpsters and a vandalized telephone box covered with graffiti. After we all dismounted and I removed the disillusionment charms, Harry asked Ron and Susan for advice, which makes sense since they have Ministry employees in their families.*

“Do either of you guys know if there is a better way in than this?” he inquired.

“Not that I know of,” Susan answered while Ron shrugged in agreement. “Most employees apparate in or use the floo.” The six of them gingerly approached the phone booth and crammed themselves in, with Ron and Neville blushing at the rather intimate contact with Luna and Susan, while Harry and Hermione didn't much mind pressing themselves together as tightly as possible. Harry gestured at the receiver and told Hermione to dial 6-2-4-4-2 which activated the recorded message welcoming them to the Ministry. They picked up their badges, which ironically stated that their business at the Ministry was a ‘rescue mission’ and after a few more annoying messages the telephone box deposited them into a completely deserted Atrium.

“This isn't right,” Susan declared, glancing toward Ron for confirmation.

“No, it's not,” he agreed, looking around nervously.

“That security desk is supposed to be manned twenty-four hours a day,” she pointed out, gesturing to the desk at the other end of the hall where Harry had gotten his wand weighed last summer.

The silence was eerie, with the only sound the trickling water in the Fountain of Magical Brethren. Hermione, who was already holding Harry's hand, gripped it more tightly, and Susan moved closer to Neville and took his arm. Ron continued glancing around uneasily, but Luna just gazed unconcernedly at the fountain.

"The floos," Susan blurted out, and she hurried over to the bank of fireplaces along one side of the wide space. "Amelia Bones!" she shouted as she threw some floo powder into one of the fires. But nothing happened. She turned back toward the group in shock.

"I can't believe it. Someone's shut down the floo connections," Ron concluded with alarm. "That's Madam Edgecombe's department, right?" he asked Susan. As soon as he mentioned the name Edgecombe, everyone groaned, remembering Marietta's betrayal. They all shook their heads, wondering at the ominous connection.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Listen, it's getting more and more evident that this is a trap, and that this whole thing was a setup to lure Harry here. But knowing that gives us an advantage. Harry and I have come up with a plan." The two of them quickly explained their idea. After they made their way down to the Department of Mysteries, they would split up. Harry would go in first, seeming to be alone. Ron and Hermione would follow close behind under Harry's invisibility cloak. (Harry had been impressed that Hermione still had it, even after being surprised by Umbridge in her office.) The other three would hang back, out of sight, and under the disillusionment charm.

Once more they crammed together, this time into the lift, and Harry pressed the button for level nine. Soon the calm female voice announced their destination.

"Do you know exactly where we're going?" Ron murmured from beside Harry as they walked down the long corridor toward the black door from his dreams.

"Not exactly," Harry replied. "I only know it's through that door, and then through another one opposite. Have you ever been down here?" Ron shook his head and the two of them turned to Susan.

"Me either," she said. "I only know that there's a lot of secret stuff down here, in several different rooms."

The full impact of that statement hit them the moment he opened the black door. After pausing for a moment staring through the doorway in surprise, he motioned the rest of them forward and they followed him through. They found themselves in a large, circular room with a dozen identical doors spaced at even intervals around the circumference. As soon as the door they had entered through shut behind them the wall began to rotate with a rumbling noise. They all shuddered, and once more hands were clasped tightly and arms were taken hold of, this time even including Luna, who latched onto Ron with her eyes wide. When the wall stopped spinning they had no idea what door they were facing.

"Oh great," Harry moaned. "Now which one?"



Hermione immediately took over. “All right, this is clearly a security measure, but we just need to approach it logically. Everyone spread out and stand by alternating doors. Each person in turn open your door a crack and peek through it. Shut it immediately if there’s danger on the other side, but otherwise leave it ajar. I expect that whoever’s setting the trap won’t spring it until we get to the room with all the rows of shelves.”

“Draw your wands first,” Harry added. “And we’re looking for a room that kind of ... glitters.” They all complied and reported in turn.

“Mine’s locked,” Harry announced. It refused to yield to either his or Hermione’s Alohamora spells, and when he tried Sirius’s knife the blade melted. This effect fascinated Ron, but despite his objections they abandoned their attempt to open it and Hermione marked the wall above it with a large flaming X.

Ron’s doorway led to a long rectangular room with some desks and an enormous tank with something floating in it. As he described it Hermione crossed over to look for herself. “They’re brains,” she announced in an awed voice. “I wonder what they’re doing with them?” Harry joined her and looked over her head.

“It doesn’t matter right now. This isn’t it,” he declared, pulling her away. Ron stayed at that door while Harry and Hermione returned to their own, after Hermione marked it with a flaming B.

Neville’s door turned out to be the way they had come from. Hermione instructed him to hold it open while they checked the other rooms and she marked the wall above it with a flaming E.

Luna went next. Behind her door was a large open room that went down in the center like an amphitheater. Stone benches descended to a stone dias at the bottom, and in the middle of that stood an archway. There was a black curtain hanging from the arch and Luna stepped forward, clearly fascinated.

“The Death Chamber,” she announced. “Father’s always said this was here. It’s where they hold their secret executions.” While the others had become accustomed to her fanciful tales and Ministry conspiracy theories they had to admit that this was exactly what this room looked like.

“Auntie’s never mentioned anything about that,” Susan commented doubtfully.

Luna stared at her as if she were daft. “Of course she wouldn’t,” she explained as though to a small child. “Like I said, it’s secret.” Luna then made as if to move into the room but Ron grabbed her arm. She turned to look at him with her blue eyes wide.

“There are voices coming from the Veil,” she whispered. “Can you hear them? The souls of the lost are calling to us.” Ron shook his head forcefully, clearly extremely uneasy with the whole thing. Now Harry moved forward, straining to hear the murmurs coming from the other side. Immediately Hermione latched onto him to keep him from going any farther.

“Sirius?” Harry called out in a soft voice. Then he turned to Hermione. “Do you think he’s inside

there?”

Something about this room scared Hermione, more than anything they had seen thus far, and she wanted to get out as soon as possible. “No, I’m sure he’s not,” she insisted. “There’s nothing in there. I’m not sure there even is an ‘in there’, and if there were I don’t think anything could come back out.”

“That’s right,” came Luna’s dreamy voice. “Once you enter there’s no coming back. They’re calling us to join them.”

“Harry please, let’s just get out of here,” Hermione moaned. Harry looked at her more closely, and only now did he notice her distress. This brought him back to his senses and a look of concern crossed his face. “Sirius isn’t in here,” she continued in a strained voice. “We have to keep looking.” He nodded his agreement and they moved back out of the chamber, Susan joining Ron to help pull Luna back. Once they were all in the circular room again, Ron shut the door and Hermione marked it with a flaming D.

Susan’s door led to a very dark room that seemed to be a wizarding equivalent of a planetarium. Stars and planets hung suspended in the air, but there was nothing that looked like anything from Harry’s vision. Hermione marked this one with a P.

As soon as Hermione opened her door Harry knew it was the right one. Besides the fact that it matched his description, it just ‘felt’ right. The glittering light from his vision was caused by light reflecting from the surfaces of hundreds of clocks and timepieces of all shapes and sizes. “This is it!” he shouted, and they all hurried inside, with Hermione pausing only long enough to inscribe a flaming T above the door.

“Harry!” Hermione exclaimed as she caught up with him while they hurried down the long narrow space between the rows of clocks. “This is a time room. I think they make time-turners here!”

“That’s great, but I don’t think we have time for that right now,” he shot back. As soon as the words were out of his mouth his lips curled into an involuntary smirk, and Hermione groaned at his inadvertent pun. At the end of the room was a large jar filled with a glittering kind of smoke. They paused only briefly as the glittering smoke coalesced into grains of sand that drifted into a pile at the bottom, which Hermione recognized as the same material that was in her time turner. Inside the jar there was also a small bird – an indicator of sorts, Hermione later decided – that continuously cycled from egg to hatchling to maturity and then back to an egg.

Harry pulled everyone away from this fascinating sight and motioned to the next door. “I think the room with the shelves is through here. Everyone remember the plan.” Hermione accordingly disillusioned Susan, Neville, and Luna, then Ron pulled the invisibility cloak over Hermione and himself. When Harry saw that they were all ready he pushed open the door.

Trying to keep looking in all directions at once, he cautiously crept past row after row of shelves, looking for row ninety-seven. He was pretty much persuaded that Hermione was right, and that this was a trap, but just in case it wasn’t he wanted to get the drop on them if possible. He also

wasn't certain if it would just be Voldemort and Sirius, or if there would be Death Eaters here as well. He and Hermione had discussed all these possibilities on the flight here. It was some relief that he had Hermione and Ron and the others backing him up, as he knew he couldn't take on Voldemort by himself, but he hated the thought that he was endangering them.

As he reached the fateful row his heart dropped. There was no one here. What did that mean? Was it possible that the whole thing was a colossal prank? He couldn't imagine how he could have misinterpreted the vision. Perhaps they weren't here yet? He made his way down the length of the row of shelves and then back to the aisle, only now taking the time to notice that the shelves were filled with dusty glass spheres. Then he felt Hermione's presence behind him.

"Harry," she whispered into his ear, while remaining under the cloak. "He's not here." Harry nodded his head slightly in acknowledgement, still not certain that there wasn't some kind of trap. "But there's something else back here you should look at." Harry made a show of looking around in confusion, just in case someone was watching, then moved back down the row until he felt a slight pressure on his chest from Hermione's hand stopping him.

"Up there on the fourth shelf," came Hermione's whisper again. "It's got your name on it." Harry looked up to see a glass sphere similar to all of the others, but with his name inscribed on the surface. He carefully lifted it down and felt a tingle when his fingers made contact. Then he noted the complete inscription.

*S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D*  
*Dark Lord &*  
*(?) Harry Potter*

"Very good, Potter," came a familiar sneering voice behind him. Now give it to me."

Harry whirled to see Lucius Malfoy standing in the aisle as several more black robed figures shimmered into view behind him, dropping their own disillusionment charms. Startled, Harry nearly dropped the sphere but caught it just in time. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a flash of panic on Malfoy's face, and clutched onto the sphere more tightly with one hand and his wand with the other. Something about this sphere interested Malfoy, and he realized instinctively that he must not let him have it.

"Accio Prophecy!" A dark haired woman just behind Malfoy had evidently lost her patience.

"*Protego!*" Harry shouted, having been on guard for something just like that, and her summoning charm impacted harmlessly on his shield.

"No!" Malfoy shouted at the woman, who ripped off her mask and glared at him. Harry immediately recognized Bellatrix Lestrange from the picture in the *Daily Prophet*. He nervously glanced around as Malfoy berated her for risking damaging the precious prophecy. He was starting to understand what was going on. This must be a prophecy about him and Voldemort. They had lured him here by capturing Sirius to retrieve it. Lucius Malfoy couldn't get it himself or he would have done so long ago. That must have something to do with the tingle he'd felt as he picked it up.

He now had a two-fold mission – rescue Sirius and keep this prophecy out of the hands of the Death Eaters.

“Where’s Sirius?” he demanded, interrupting the squabble among his two opponents. That question only earned him a smirk.

“It’s time you learned the difference between life and dreams, Potter,” Malfoy sneered, and Bellatrix taunted him in an annoying baby voice about believing in scary dreams. Following this, Malfoy adopted the standard strategy of bad guys everywhere and launched into a long-winded explanation about his master’s clever plan. Harry’s mood darkened as he realized he had been duped, but he forced himself to focus on how to get his friends and the prophecy safely out of this trap. His only advantage was that the Death Eaters still thought he was alone.

While the arrogant pureblood continued to rant Harry felt Hermione’s hand on his right arm and heard her whispered voice. “What should we do?” Moving his left hand over to where she was holding his arm, he traced letters onto the back of her hand. S...M...A...S...H...S...H...E...L...V...E...S He paused a moment while he felt her move away, and waited for her to tell Ron.

“Now! *Reducto!* ” he shouted in quick succession and the shelf before him exploded with shards of glass soaring in every direction. Immediately dozens of ghost-like figures emerged from the fragments and began speaking in a cacaphony of ethereal voices. At the same time from behind him came two more of the reductor curses, followed by two more explosions as the shelves on either side disintegrated. “*Protego!* ” he called out again to shield them from the flying debris, and was fortunate that his shield also blocked two stunning spells that shot toward him from the Death Eaters.

“*Stupefy!* ” Three stunning spells suddenly crashed into the black robed figures from behind, felling a trio of them, followed by three more as the confused Death Eaters turned to confront this unexpected threat. Two more stunning spells flashed over his shoulder as Ron and Hermione added their fire to the assault.

“Run!” Harry shouted. While nearly all of the Death Eaters were down, some had dodged or shielded themselves, and he didn’t want his friends exposed any more than necessary. He turned and followed Ron and Hermione the other way down the row, firing two more stunners over his shoulder as he ran. Behind him the remainder of the shelves on either side crashed together, courtesy of Ron and Hermine’s reductor curses, blocking their pursuers.

But when they had reached the end of the row and it looked as though they were going to escape, they heard a scream from behind them, and knew that either Susan or Luna had been hit. “Ron, Hermione!” Harry gasped. “You guys go find the others.”

“No way,” Ron protested.

“Look, they’re after this prophecy. I’ll draw the Death Eaters away – you stay under the cloak and free the rest of them. There’ll probably only be one or two guards on them at most. Then go for help. I’ll hide in these rooms until you get back.”

Ron paused, then hurried off. "I'm staying with you," Hermione insisted firmly. "Don't even try to talk me out of it." While reluctant, Harry saw that there was no point in attempting to persuade her otherwise, or time for that matter. Accordingly, he gave in and taking her hand he crouched low and began to move toward the exit. Occasionally they heard Death Eaters calling to each other as they searched up and down the rows. The pair quickly realized that all of their stunned opponents had been revived and hastily agreed that they needed to do more than just stun them the next time.

"Is this what you're looking for?" Harry shouted, holding the prophecy aloft, when they reached the door. A half dozen of the enemy whirled in his direction, but he and Hermione were through the door and had it shut before their curses reached them.

*For the next half hour we dodged in and out of the different rooms, trying to stay one step ahead of the Death Eaters. Harry and I worked well together, covering each other whenever we encountered them. Between us we must have stunned or petrified at least half of them, and after that first time we stopped to snap their wands whenever we could. Eventually Neville joined us and reported that Ron had freed them, but they'd been caught again before they could get away. Ron and Luna had both been hit, but he thought that Susan had managed to escape.*

*Unfortunately we were surprised by two of them while Neville was telling us this, and the first hit him with a hex that slammed him into a desk, breaking his nose. Harry sent that one crashing into a shelf full of timepieces while I silenced the other in the middle of an incantation. Unfortunately, I turned my attention to Neville to see if he was all right, only to have him gesture frantically behind me. I turned around just as the Death Eater (who Neville later told me was Dolohov) was making a slashing motion with his wand, and a purple flame came out and caught me in the chest. The next thing I knew I was here in the Hospital Wing. But Neville told us what happened next, and I'll remember his words for as long as I live.*

"Hermione!" Harry screamed. He fell to his knees beside her, temporarily forgetting about the Death Eater. But as Neville crawled toward them the Death Eater turned his attention to him, and raised his wand again. This caught Harry's notice and he twisted around, and faster than anyone could believe flicked his wand and shouted, "*Stupefy! Incarcerous!*" The Death Eater fell, immobilized and bound and Neville grabbed his wand and snapped it while Harry whirled back to Hermione, pulling her limp body to himself and cradling her head in his arms.

"Hermione! No, no you can't be dead! Please don't be dead. Oh God no. It's all my fault if she dies! Don't leave me Hermione. I can't go on without you. Please, Hermione! I LOVE YOU!"

*The Hospital Wing went completely silent when Neville said this, and all eyes turned to me. My jaw dropped open as I stared at Neville, but he just nodded and I turned to look at the others. Beside me Ron was white, with a look of shock on his face. Susan was crying, and Ginny had tears in her eyes. She forced a small smile at me and she looked happy but also a little disappointed. She reached out and gave my arm a little squeeze. Luna's eyes were wide and she had a somewhat*

*startled expression, but then again Luna always looks like that.*

*I couldn't believe it. I mean, I'd hoped it was true, but – I guess I didn't dare to believe it. But if it was true then why wasn't he here with me? Then it hit me.*

“Oh no!” Hermione burst out in dismay, causing the others to look at her strangely. This was not a normal reaction of a girl to hearing that her boyfriend was in love with her. “No, no, no!” She looked up to see four dumbfounded expressions. “What’s the thing Harry does better than anyone else?”

“I don’t know, there’s quite a few things he’s better at than anyone else,” Ron said blankly. “Quidditch, dueling ...”

“He feels guilty and blames himself when bad things happen,” Hermione interrupted. “What did Neville just tell us he said?” The confused looks of the others persisted, thinking that what Neville had just said was that Harry loved her. “He said it was all his fault,” she explained. “He’s probably avoiding me because he thinks it’s his fault that I almost died and he can’t bear to face me. That’s why he’s only here when I’m asleep. He’s desperate to know that I’m going to be all right, but he’s feeling so guilty that he leaves before I wake up.”

The rest of the students could find no flaws in that argument, and acknowledged that Hermione knew Harry better than they did, so they accepted her analysis. Hermione continued to fret and Susan moved closer and wrapped her arm around the distraught young witch.

“Don’t worry, Hermione, we’ll sort it all out. We’ll all keep looking for him and we’ll bring him up here eventually.” The others all nodded their agreement.

Hermione nodded, wiping tears from her eyes. “OK, let’s go on. What happened after that?”

*Neville took up the story again, and told us how he checked me for a pulse and finally got Harry to stop freaking out. Then the two of them carried me into the planetarium where Ron and Luna were hiding. Luna had a broken ankle and Ron was bleeding something furious. Luna had tried a healing spell but it didn't help, so she had ripped up her robes to tie around the wound. Harry wanted Neville to carry me out, but Neville convinced him that they'd be better hiding here. So Harry covered the three of us with the cloak as best as he could, then he went back out with Neville stubbornly tagging along. Unfortunately, his broken nose made it hard to enunciate spells correctly.*

*They ended up in the Death Chamber with about half of the Death Eaters, (Harry and I had taken out the rest) dodging behind the stone benches and firing back as well as they could. But they were trapped and it was only a matter of time before they were caught. Neville was hit (with Cruciatus!) and fell, breaking his wand and then Harry ran toward the veil holding the prophecy over his head. Neville thinks, and I agree, that he was attempting to draw their fire away from Neville. This did work, as they all turned their attention to him, but it seems to me that it put the prophecy more*

at risk.

He almost made it, managing to dodge their spells, but just before he dove behind the stone dias at the center of the room one of them caught Harry with an Impediment jinx and he fell, and the prophecy sphere smashed onto the floor. Just like with the others that were smashed, a white figure appeared and started to say something, but Malfoy was screaming at the Death Eater who had tripped up Harry so no one could tell what she was saying. Harry rolled away and was about to make a final stand when the Order finally showed up.

Ginny broke in at this point and said she'd managed to talk her mum into going to Grimmauld Place to see what was going on. It took a while, but she was finally able to convince them that Harry'd had another vision of an attack at the Ministry and that they should go check it out. Moody, Tonks, Shacklebolt, and Lupin all went, and somehow Sirius managed to talk them into letting him go as well.

While they split up and began dueling Harry crawled back up to Neville and they tried to help wherever they could, with Harry managing to stun Lucius Malfoy. Apparently Bellatrix Lestrange is an incredible duelist, though, because she knocked out both Tonks and Shacklebolt, who are Aurors. Then she started dueling Sirius, and they began taunting each other. As cousins who had a falling out over her support of Voldemort there was evidently a lot of bad blood between them. Remus shouted at Sirius to quit fooling around.

Then Dumbledore arrived and Neville said that Harry relaxed, assuming that he would take care of everything. After we saw him take out four opponents with one spell in his office last month, I can understand why. But while he quickly captured all the others, he didn't get Bellatrix before she hit Sirius with a killing curse!

When I heard that I couldn't stop crying. My poor Harry! Why did this have to happen to him? But even then Bellatrix managed to escape and run out of the room. Harry tore away from Remus and ran after her. Why didn't Dumbledore stop her? For that matter, why didn't he stop Harry? No one knows what happened next because none of us have seen Harry since. Neville says Dumbledore tied up the rest of the Death Eaters and then went after Harry.

Eventually Susan came back with her aunt and some Aurors and Neville took them to where the rest of us were hiding. Susan had made it out and found a floo connection in another wizarding building nearby. Madame Bones wanted to take me and Ron to St. Mungo's but Dumbledore showed up and insisted that we would be fine at Hogwarts. Evidently she wasn't at all happy about that. Susan says she wants to interview us later about what happened.

Right now I'm most worried about Harry. I'm sure he needs me – he's probably feeling so much guilt it must be almost unbearable. Ginny, Neville, and Susan are going to go look for him again. I need to get some more rest. My chest is still throbbing from my injury, but the heartache deeper down inside is almost as bad.

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione could see that her daughter was about to burst with questions, so she stopped and nodded to her to go ahead.

“So Ginny wasn’t even there?” Hermione smiled and shook her head. “Why did the book say she was then?” the young girl asked in an offended tone.

“You have to remember, she was trying to make Ginny’s role in the story seem larger than it really was, since she intended for her and Harry to be together at the end and she needed to make her somehow ‘worthy’ of him.” Rose scowled at the very notion that another girl could be more worthy than her mother, and Hermione laughed and gave her a hug.

“And you just said that Sirius was killed with a killing curse?” Rose asked next. “Then what was all of that about the veil?”

“Well, I think that was to keep her readers off balance,” Hermione answered. “By having him fall through the veil there was some doubt about whether he was really dead, and she prolonged the uncertainty. There was also some other misdirection there as well. Ron was injured by a nasty curse, not because he was attacked by brains. I mean honestly, how are brains going to attack anyone?” She shook her head in annoyance. “It’s even possible that she intended that to foreshadow a relationship between Ron and me, since I was the ‘brainy’ one. Some readers even thought that being attacked by brains was going to make Ron smarter, and therefore more compatible with me. And that locked room in the Department of Mysteries that supposedly contained a force more powerful than death was another red herring.”

Hermione leaned back and shrugged. “I have to admit that she certainly kept everyone’s attention. In the two years between the fifth and sixth book the interest in the series exploded. You wouldn’t believe how much discussion and debate went on about what would happen. Quite a bit of it about me, actually, and whether I would end up with Harry or Ron,” she admitted with a blush. Rose just grinned at her mother’s momentary discomfort.

“But there’s still the prophecy,” Rose pointed out. “You haven’t said anything about that yet.”

Hermione’s expression darkened. “Ah yes, the prophecy.” Her tone of voice was one that was used when speaking about something deeply despised. “Shall we see how that all ended up?”

Rose nodded eagerly and mother and daughter snuggled together to finish up the year five journal.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## Notebooks and Letters The Prophecy

### Chapter 11, The Prophecy

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 20 (continued)

*I awoke later to hear voices arguing outside the door to the infirmary.*

“I’m telling you Neville, she won’t want to see me,” Harry was shouting. “Don’t you understand, I almost got her killed!” Hermione’s heart broke at hearing this. She wanted to curse the Dursleys for his upbringing that had caused him to have so little self esteem. While waiting for what would happen next she reached over to her bedside table and picked up her wand.

“And I’m telling you you’re wrong,” Neville insisted. “Look, even if it is your fault that she’s in here, don’t you think you should at least apologize to her before you shut her out of your life?” When Harry hesitated for a moment to consider this, Neville shoved him through the doorway. Hermione wasted no time.

“*Petrificus Totalus! Locomotor Potter!*” Before he could register his surprise Harry went rigid, and then floated over to Hermione’s bed, where she carefully guided him in beside her. Then she put down her wand, threw her arms around him, and nodded to Susan. Fighting her laughter, Susan cast *Finite Incantatum* and Harry was released from his magical constraint, although he was still held tightly in Hermione’s embrace.

“Hermione I’m so ...” before he could get any further in his apology Hermione caught his lips in a searing kiss. Susan now laughed out loud while in the next bed Ron got a sour expression on his face and turned away.

Eventually they came up for air. “I forgive you,” Hermione announced breathlessly, but before her thunderstruck boyfriend could respond she pulled him back for another round.

“Mr. Potter!” came the shrill voice of the school nurse. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“Well Madame Pomfrey,” Ron broke in, now chuckling at Harry’s predicament. “I don’t think he actually had much choice in the matter.” The school nurse took in the situation more closely and her mouth twitched slightly. She addressed her next comments accordingly.

“Miss Granger,” she began again. “While I’m sure that this is making you feel better, it is not an approved treatment for your injury.” She ignored Hermione’s pout and stood there with her arms folded until her patient released Harry and he staggered in a daze into the chair that Susan vacated for him.

*After stopping him from apologizing twice more I finally got Harry talking. By this time Ginny and Luna had joined us and we listened in horror as he told us of confronting BellatrixLestrange in the Atrium, managing to hit her with a curse (he didn’t say which one, which worries me) and then hearing Voldemort’s voice.*

*At first he berated Bellatrix for not retrieving the prophecy, and bemoaned the fact that his yearlong plan had been ruined. (I don’t think he’s too happy with his Death Eaters right now – thwarted by six school children like that.) Then he turned on Harry, whose scar had been so blisteringly painful that he’d been nearly unable to move, and tried to kill him!*

*Thank God his killing curse was blocked! Dumbledore had finally appeared and animated the statues in the fountain. The wizard jumped in front of Harry, blocking the killing curse, and the witch grabbed Bellatrix, while the centaur charged at Voldemort. Voldemort managed to avoid it and then he and Dumbledore started dueling.*

*Harry described it as the most awesome duel he’d ever seen. He could feel the magic pouring off of them as they cast spells at each other. They also kept disappearing and reappearing, so that he had trouble keeping track of where they were. Dumbledore was at a disadvantage, though, since he was just trying to subdue Voldemort, while Voldemort was trying to kill him. Harry lost track of how many killing curses he cast, but by the end most of the statues were destroyed. Even Fawkes got into it, swallowing up a killing curse that Harry was certain was about to hit Dumbledore. Fortunately, since he’s a phoenix, he’ll recover.*

*Some of the things Dumbledore cast I’m going to have to look up, as I’ve never heard of them before. One was a flaming whip, and another covered Voldemort with a cocoon of water. And Harry said Voldemort used a shield that appeared to be more solid than the shield spells we’ve learned.*

*But then, just as it seemed that Dumbledore had been victorious and had driven him off, the most horrifying thing yet happened. Voldemort took possession of Harry.*

“Dumbledore got more scared than he had been the whole time,” Harry related, almost in a whisper now. “And then I found out why. My scar seemed to burst open and it hurt more than anything I’ve ever felt, even more than his *Cruciatus* curse. All I could think of was that I wanted to die. I could feel that he was inside me, but it was more than that. He was me and I was him.”

The room was completely silent for a moment, and then Ginny buried her face in her hands and began to whimper, remembering, no doubt, her own possession by the sixteen year old Tom Riddle. Neville and Susan’s jaws were hanging open in utter shock, and Ron barely managed a

whispered, “Bloody hell!”. Luna’s eyes bulged out even wider than normal, if that were possible. But Hermione remained completely focused on Harry. His voice had a dead, defeated quality to it that she had never heard before.

Without a word she raised her arms, tears streaming down her cheeks, silently pleading with him to come to her. Numbly he sat down on the edge of her bed and she moved up behind him to wrap him up as tightly, yet gently, as she could.

“Then I told Dumbledore to kill me, but it was *his* voice that came out of my mouth. But I was in so much pain that I agreed with him,” Harry continued in that hollow tone. “All I could think of was that death had to be better than this. Then it occurred to me that if I died I would finally meet my parents, and be able to see Sirius again.”

All of the listening students were crying by now, even Ron, and Hermione pulled Harry even tighter against her chest, ignoring the pain from her not fully healed injury. She buried her head in the back of his shoulder, soaking his robes with her tears. Finally he spoke again.

“Then, all of a sudden he was gone. He just gave up and released me. Dumbledore thinks it was my thoughts of my parents and Sirius that did it. He says Voldemort can’t stand thoughts of love.” The others all nodded numbly and began wiping their tears away, trying to regain their composure. Ron and Neville turned away to hide their embarrassment, but Susan moved over and hugged Ginny, who was still deathly pale. For her part, Hermione kept hold of Harry, giving him one more tight squeeze before relaxing her grip somewhat. He shifted slightly and leaned up against the headboard so that she was more beside him than behind him, and she buried her head in his chest while he put his arm around her shoulders.

“Everything’s a bit foggy in my mind about what happened after that,” Harry noted. “It seemed like all of a sudden Dumbledore was holding me and the room was full of people.”

“That’s when we showed up,” Susan broke in. “Auntie contacted some Ministry workers and they finally got the floos going again, and people started pouring in. She and at least half a dozen Aurors saw You-Know-Who before he grabbed Lestrage and disappeared. Fudge was there too, so he finally had to admit it. Everyone knows you were telling the truth now, Harry.” Harry just nodded as if it didn’t really matter anymore.

“Then the headmaster calmly told everyone that he had captured some Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries and we rushed down there,” Susan continued. “I spotted Neville and then we found the rest of you. When we got back upstairs Harry were gone and Dumbledore was explaining things to Fudge, who was visibly upset. I don’t think he’s going to be in office much longer,” she revealed with a very satisfied expression on her face. “Oh, by the way – Auntie is going to want to interview all of you. She wasn’t very happy about you leaving, but after all that happened Dumbledore pretty much has everything his way now.”

The others nodded and they all turned back to Harry. Hermione could sense that he was reluctant to reveal the rest of the story. His shoulders slumped slightly and he sighed but then resumed the tale.

“Dumbledore made a portkey that took me back to his office. I stayed there until he returned, after bringing you five back. He told me you would all be OK.” With this he shot a guilty look at Hermione, but she gave his arm a squeeze and nodded, to reaffirm that she understood and didn’t blame him.

“Then he explained some things to me.” At this point Harry’s face tightened and his voice took on a grim tone. “It turns out that Voldemort was sending me those dreams all year. He was planting that scene in my head in order to get me to go to the Ministry to look for that prophecy. He reckoned that I would be curious about it, but he didn’t realize just how much I’ve been kept in the dark, and that I didn’t even know there was a prophecy about me. When that didn’t work he sent me the vision of Sirius. In other words, it was all completely fake and I almost got all of you killed for nothing. And the worst part of it is,” he continued with his voice rising, “that Dumbledore knew it, since Snape had seen my dreams. He knew it all along and never told me what was going on. And now Sirius is dead because of it!” The other six students shuddered as a wave of magic seemed to pour off of Harry, and he punctuated his declaration by smashing his fist into the wall behind Hermione’s bed.

“What is going on in here!” Madame Pomfrey burst into the room, outraged at the loud disruption of her domain. “This is a Hospital Wing! If you students can’t control yourselves you’re going to have to leave.” She was brought up short by the sight of Hermione desperately clutching onto Harry and shaking her head pleadingly.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am, it won’t happen again,” Harry responded contritely, attempting to rise from where he was sitting by Hermione, only to find himself pinned in place as she refused to relinquish her hold on him.

“Very well,” the nurse relented. “But right now I need to examine my patients. Miss Granger?” Hermione reluctantly disengaged herself from Harry, then sat back and moved her hands to the buttons of her pajama top while the healer conjured up a privacy screen. After she had undone the first button she paused and shot a shy glance at her boyfriend, who turned bright red as he suddenly realized what she was doing and scurried to the other side of the screen.

Harry moved over to Ron’s bed as the other students took their leave, but his eyes remained glued to the partition as it just now occurred to him that Hermione wasn’t wearing a bra under her pajama top.

“You OK mate?” Ron’s voice interrupted his musing.

“Oh ... sure, I’m fine now,” Harry stammered, not about to reveal the fact that his mind had been conjuring up a vision of Hermione’s bare torso. “So, I never did hear – what exactly happened to the rest of you guys?”

“Well, Hermione and I got the worst of it,” Ron related. “Susan made it out with only a few bruises, and you already know that Neville broke his nose. Madame Pomfrey fixed that up right quick, as well as Luna’s broken foot.” He paused and cocked his head. “You know, that girl’s tougher than she looks. That bone shattering curse she was hit with had to hurt like blazes, but she

ignored it and tried to help me. Ripped up her robes to wrap around me to stop the bleeding.” He flushed slightly and muttered in a low voice, “pretty nice looking legs too.” Then he pulled his thoughts back to his injury and continued. “Not sure exactly what I was hit with. All I know is it started with S. Seck something. As best as Madame Pomfrey can figure it was some dark variant of a cutting curse.”

Ron paused again and looked around, then leaned forward. “Here’s the weird part. She couldn’t get the wound to close or stop bleeding. But then Snape showed up and said some complicated incantation while waving his wand back and forth over it and he managed to close it up.” He leaned back and shook his head in wonderment.

“Hermione’s injury was real bad, although she wasn’t bleeding like I was. Pomfrey will only say it damaged her insides. But she’s been taking about ten different potions every day and she sleeps a lot.” Ron now noticed Harry starting to slip into his guilt-ridden state again and punched him lightly on the arm. “But mostly she was worried about you when you weren’t here, mate. And none of us blame you for anything, so don’t start apologizing again.” Harry’s mouth snapped shut as he had been about to do exactly that, and he managed a sheepish grimace.

“I reckon the best thing you can do for her now is be here,” Ron commented. “She’ll get better faster if she doesn’t have to worry about you.” Harry nodded that he understood as Madam Pomfrey appeared and with a flick of her wand moved the privacy screen from Hermione’s bed to Ron’s. Harry winced at the long scar that was revealed on Ron’s shoulder and chest as he removed his own pajama top for her inspection.

“I believe that you will be able to leave after this final check-up Mr. Weasley,” the nurse announced. “Mr. Potter, Miss Granger has requested that you be allowed to remain. She will need to rest, however.” Harry nodded his agreement and walked back over to Hermione’s bed, where she was busily writing in her journal.

He sat watching her for a while and found his eyes drifting to her chest, thinking about her injury and Ron’s scar, as well as two other items that are frequently on the minds of young men. Hermione noticed him frown and shake his head, and shot him a questioning look. Hoping that she wouldn’t realize what he had been staring at, he forced a smile and took hold of her hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said simply. This time Hermione did not scold him, but simply smiled back.

“I know,” she replied, giving his hand an understanding squeeze. Ron emerged from the partition around his bed, dressed and ready to leave, and announced that he was going back to Gryffindor Tower. The increased pressure of Hermione’s hand in his informed Harry that she wanted him to stay longer, so they both bid their red-haired friend farewell.

Hermione placed her journal on her bedside table and leaned back onto her pillow as the potions she had just received gradually began to take effect. Harry remained by her side still holding her hand, willing to remain as long as she needed him.

After a few minutes to gather her courage Hermione opened her eyes and turned to Harry. “I love

you too,” she whispered. Harry’s head shot up and he gasped and turned pale, but their linked hands prevented him from drawing away.

“What? ... I mean, how? ...” he stammered, his mind racing to come up with an explanation for the way she had worded her declaration.

“Neville told me what happened after I was knocked out,” she explained softly. “How you told me you loved me and couldn’t live without me. I feel the same way.”

“I ... I ...” Harry’s mind was now unable to process any sort of coherent reply.

“Didn’t you mean it?” she asked, lines of worry beginning to creep onto her face. This look finally prompted a response from Harry.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” he admitted nervously.

“Well, so do I,” Hermione stated firmly, her eyes shining.

“But ...”

Hermione shook her head. “Not now. We’ll talk about the implications later. For now I want to go to sleep with this thought in my mind.” Her heart swelled as a bright smile of wonderment blossomed on Harry’s face. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he whispered back as her eyes fell shut again, with the smile on her face and another squeeze of his hand assuring him that she had heard him. “I love you so much.”

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 21

*Harry was still there holding my hand when I woke up this morning. I told him he shouldn’t have stayed all night, but he just smiled at me. Then I noticed that he’d changed his robes, and he revealed that he’d checked with Pomfrey to find out how long I’d sleep, then gone back to his room to sleep, shower, and change before coming back to be here when I awoke. I just shivered at the thought of how much he cares for me.*

*Over the course of the day he filled me in on more details. Kreacher had evidently hidden Sirius’s mirror, and then tricked Harry into thinking Sirius had gone out. Somehow Kreacher had left the house and gone to the Malfoy’s – possibly over Christmas holiday when the house was full and it wouldn’t be noticed that he was missing – and Narcissa had instructed him to do this.*

*Harry also told me with some embarrassment that he’d smashed his mirror in a rage after he left Dumbledore’s office. But even more shocking, he told me he’d been so angry at Dumbledore that he’d smashed up his office that night! I was aghast, although part of me thinks Dumbledore deserved it. When I told Harry this he gave me a strange look and said, “You don’t know the half of it.” I tried to get him to tell me what he meant but he changed the subject.*

*It turns out Snape did contact the Order, but didn't put much effort into it. Since Sirius was right there with them they eventually decided they'd sort it out the next time they saw Harry. By the time Mrs. Weasley got in touch with them it was too late.*

*Dumbledore fetched Umbridge back from the centaurs, and sent her packing back to the Ministry. I think she ought to be arrested and tried, but Susan says her aunt tells her the hag is very politically astute, and probably will get away with everything she did. Personally, I think if Dumbledore had a mind to, he could do something about her. After all, since she's Fudge's personal assistant, she won't have a position anymore if he gets sacked.*

*Speaking of Susan's aunt, she came today to get statements from all of us students. She assured us we wouldn't be charged with anything for entering restricted areas, or the damage we did. When she was finished Harry asked to speak with her privately, and she listened to him with a very serious expression on her face. Harry looked quite relieved when they came back, and promised to tell me later what it was about.*

*While she was pleasant enough with us, I could tell that she was furious about the incident. Certain people were 'persuaded' to leave their posts, and certain doors were left unlocked, as well as the floo being shut down temporarily. The thing she has to figure out now is if it was bribery or the Imperius curse in each case. But I think she'll get to the bottom of it – she seems a very capable witch. Not at all like some other Ministry people we've been exposed to. Before she left Harry told her he hoped she'd be the next Minister of Magic. That got the first smile from her we'd seen all day, and she told him she'd made too many enemies by not 'playing the political game'.*

*Later –*

*When we were alone tonight after everyone else turned in Harry told me what he'd needed to speak with Madame Bones about. When he confronted BellatrixLestrange in the Atrium he'd hit her with a Cruciatus curse! It hadn't worked, though, since he didn't have enough hatred in him – just righteous anger. She'd even taunted him about that. Madame Bones told him that in that situation she'd have been tempted to do the same, and she wouldn't charge him for it, but that he wouldn't get off so easy in the future. He assured her that he'd never even consider using an Unforgivable again. I understand more now about why they're called that. The hatred that is necessary to use them can destroy a person's own soul.*

*I've noticed that Harry is still carrying a lot of anguish in him, even more I think than would have been caused by Sirius's death. The reason I say this is that sometimes I notice him looking at me with such sadness, as though he's going to lose me too. At first I thought that it was because of what he just told me, and that he was worried about what would happen to him because of it. The idea of being expelled or even sent to Azkaban would certainly account for the misery I'm sensing. But it doesn't seem to have diminished since this afternoon.*

*Note added the next morning –*

*Right before I was ready go to sleep to I finally asked him about it. He responded by saying that he*

*had something important to talk to me about, but he wanted to wait until I was better and we had some time alone. Then he kissed me and held my hand again until I fell asleep.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 27*

*Oh No! No No No! Can't someone please make this madness stop! I can't bear this! Oh Harry, what are we going to do?!*

*Harry finally told me today what has been bothering him all week. Things had been so pleasant and peaceful, with classes over and with nice warm sunny weather, but I could see that he wasn't really enjoying it. I tried to be as supportive as I could, just being there as a source of comfort for him. I know it helped, but I still knew that something was terribly wrong.*

*After I was released from the infirmary I hoped that if it was because he was still worried about me it would set his mind at rest, but that didn't really help. It did enable us to spend more time alone together, doing different things, but he was always restless. We'd be in the common room and he'd start fretting and need to leave. We'd go visit Hagrid and only be there a few minutes before Harry jumped up and said it was time to go. We even went flying together once, and he was happy for a while, but it didn't last. Finally today we went for a long walk around the lake and he told me.*

*(There followed the fateful words, which Hermione had charmed so that they weren't visible unless she tapped them with her wand and gave the password.)*

**The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.**

*These are the words that have completely destroyed our happiness. Harry has to kill Voldemort or die. It's just not fair!*

*Later –*

*I had to stop writing and cry for a while. But now I have to pull myself together and act calmly. I need to be strong for Harry. Now he'll be tempted to pull away from me because he thinks I'll be in danger. He already tried – that's how he began the conversation, by saying it was too dangerous for us to be together. But I won't let him go. I told him that straight off and I'll keep telling him as long as I have to.*

*So many things now seem to fall into place. That's why Voldemort attacked him as a baby and why he continues to plot against him every year. Harry says the prophecy could have meant him or*



Neville but his scar is the mark that was mentioned. Since he got it when Voldemort failed to kill him it marked him as his equal.

This is also why he has to stay with his Aunt. Dumbledore created some blood magic that protects him from Voldemort while he considers that his home, because she's Lily's blood relative and she sacrificed herself for him. That seems awfully convoluted to me. Besides, Harry says Voldemort got around the blood protection when he used Harry's blood to restore his body. Granted, it helped Harry defeat Quirrell first year, but it's not effective against Voldemort now.

Dumbledore suggested that the 'power he knows not' is love. I used that interpretation to argue that we need to stay together. If his power is love and we love each other, it makes him stronger. I think I might have him convinced.

I'm so angry at Dumbledore, both for not telling Harry before now and for telling him when he did, when he was so emotionally fragile. Harry says he went through every year and how he considered telling him each time, but then didn't. Now it makes me wonder if some of the things that happened over the years were set up. I'm going to have to think about that.

After he told all of this to me we avoided everyone for the rest of the day and stayed in the Room of Requirement. We also skipped the Leaving Feast. We did run into Luna Lovegood (she was putting up signs trying to get her things back that her housemates had stolen from her as a prank) and she had some comforting things to say about death and seeing our loved ones again. Her mother died when she was nine. For the first time since I've known her she made complete sense. I think I've really underestimated her. It's also the first time I've heard anything that sounded like religion in the wizarding world.

It was Trelawny who made the prophecy, so we were right on target with our speculation about why she's here. It was made during her job interview. We still don't know any more about Snape, though.

I think I'm going to cry again before I can get to sleep tonight. Oh Harry, what's going to happen now?

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 28

I've calmed down somewhat now, and trying to look at this as a problem to be solved. A very large problem, to be sure, but there simply must be a solution.

We're on the Hogwarts Express on the way home, and there's a very subdued feeling. Most people are still pretty much in shock about what happened. The Daily Prophet has had stories all week, and surprisingly they're reasonably accurate. Harry's suddenly a hero again. Wonderful. (Does my sarcasm come through when I write that?)

I'm trying not to be bitter about this, but I can't help it. They're praising him for standing so firm

in his beliefs, despite being ridiculed and slandered. Give me a break! They were the worst offenders in the slander department. Do they really think everyone will forget that?

The only excitement of note was when Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle attacked Harry. I swear, hanging around those two brainless buffoons has turned Malfoy into a complete moron. He ambushed Harry while he was walking back from the loo. Since he's so down right now Harry wasn't really paying attention to what was happening around him, but he still dropped to the floor and managed to duck their first volley of curses. Even so he might have been in trouble except for the fact that the idiots attacked him right in front of the compartment where the Hufflepuff DA members were. Susan had been filling them in on some of the details of the battle at the Ministry.

Well, as soon as they saw the flashes of light from the spells, they were on their feet and out the door to come to Harry's aid. To top things off, Padma and Anthony were on prefect patrol and joined in. By the time all the hexes and jinxes had stopped flying those three clowns were a mess!

Harry's good mood from that incident didn't last too long, though, and we've been sitting quietly together most of the time. Every once in a while he'll have an idea and tell me, or I'll have a suggestion for him.

Ginny announced that she'd broken up with Michael Corner and was dating Dean Thomas now. Apparently Michael didn't take well to her beating him in the last quidditch match. As might be expected, Ron had a fit. I suspect that he'd object to any boy she wanted to date. Well, perhaps not Harry. I have a feeling he'd approve her dating him. Sorry, he's taken. It's a good thing that Ginny seems to have got over her crush on him. I do find it interesting that she's only gone out with guys that are at least a year older than her.

Speaking of that, Ron and Lavender also broke up. I actually heard that from Lavender this morning. When I asked Ron about it he just shrugged and said it wasn't working out. Lavender had quite a bit more to say on the subject.

I'd overheard her and Parvati talking about it when we were getting ready to leave the dorm room and asked her what happened. She said that she was tired of being ignored. Given the amount of time the two of them spent snogging, I didn't understand what she meant at first. Then she turned to me and said that she wasn't the most important girl in Ron's life – I was. When something important happened, it was me who he shared it with, not her.

She wasn't nasty about it or anything, and assured me that she wasn't at all suggesting that I was cheating on Harry, but it was just that I was Ron's best female friend and I was a higher priority for him. She reminded me that I was the first girl he hugged after the quidditch final, not her. That had never occurred to me. She thinks that as long as I'm around, Ron's going to have a hard time having a serious girlfriend. Unless this girl somehow becomes a part of our group and shares our 'adventures' with us. It made me feel a little guilty that Harry and I never really tried to include Lavender in our activities with Ron.

Well, that's something to think about at a later time, when Ron gets interested in another girl. Right now I've got other things to worry about. We'll be back at King's Cross station soon. For

*the time being Harry's going back to the Dursleys and I'm going home, but I hope we'll be able to get together soon.*

*Meanwhile, I'm going to study and plan and try to figure out what we'll do next year to train and get ready. Harry agrees that we're going to have work harder than we ever have, and he's as serious about it as I am. Whatever happens, though, I'm always going to be right by his side. I've never been more certain of anything in my life.*

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione closed the notebook and stared at it sadly. Beside her, Rose was curious at the sudden change in mood.

“Mummy? What’s wrong?”

Hermione reached out and put an arm around her daughter, hugging her to herself. “Oh, I was just thinking about how things turned out so differently than I thought they would at that time. Some things that seem so certain when you’re sixteen ... well, I would never have dreamed what was going to happen the next year, or how much my life was about to change.”

“But one thing hasn’t changed,” Rose declared firmly. Hermione looked down at the child’s upturned face and into those bright green eyes. “You’ve never stopped loving him.”

This simple assertion brought a smile to Hermione’s face. “No, I’ve never stopped loving him. That won’t ever change.”

“Can we go on to the next one now?” Rose asked hopefully.

“No, I think I want to wait a while. Would that be OK?”

“OK, Mummy.” And Hermione wrapped her daughter up in a big hug, and they sat together the rest of the evening talking about that fateful fifth year.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters Asking Questions

### Year 6 Chapter 1, Asking Questions

Rose's eyes went wide as Hermione brought out the next journal and bundle of letters. There were at least five times as many letters as had been in the previous year's batch. Hermione answered her question before she could even ask it.

"Yes, we wrote to each other quite a lot that year. You'll see why in a little bit. I don't think we'll be reading every one though. Many of them say pretty much the same thing."

"Mushy stuff like I love you and I miss you?" the young girl teased. Hermione smiled and nodded.

The mother and daughter settled down on the sofa together and opened the notebook entitled, 'The Journal of Hermione Granger – Book 6', and the first letter.

-oooOOOooo-

*Dear Hermione,*

*I knew you'd be worried about me so I thought I'd write as soon as we got back. The Dursleys have been OK – well, as OK as they can be, I guess. I was worried about what they'd do after the way things ended up last summer with the dementors and all. But the lecture Moody and the others gave them helped. I suspect they got another letter from Dumbledore too. Anyway, they're giving me the silent treatment, which is fine with me.*

*Being here by myself probably isn't a good thing, because now all I can do is think about what happened, and feel like it's all my fault. I mean, I know it isn't all my fault, and if you were here next to me you'd be explaining why it isn't, but that's a big part of the problem. You aren't here. I can't believe how much I miss you already, and it's only the first day. All I can do is write to you, and I know you'll write back too. I think Hedwig's going to be my lifeline this summer.*

*I wish I didn't have to stay here, but at least I know now why I do. I'm not sure how long it has to be though. Do you think you can visit like you did last year?*

*I miss you.*

*Love,*

Harry

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 1

*Harry wrote already, and his letter made me cry. I've been sitting here thinking about how similar this is to the beginning of last summer, and how different. Both started out with me worrying about Harry, and how he was coping with someone's death – Cedric last year and Sirius this year. But Sirius was much closer to Harry, so he's hurting even more this time. And of course our relationship is so much different now. Last year I was wondering if we might have something together, and now I know we do. That part's better, at least.*

*My parents were very interested in how things were going with Harry, and are happy that I have such a great boyfriend. That topic and how I thought I did on the OWLs took up most of the conversation on the drive home, which was a good thing. I need to figure out how to tell them about our trip to the Ministry and that Harry's godfather Sirius was killed. If they had any idea of how dangerous it was for us or that I nearly died, I'm not sure what they'd do. And I certainly can't tell them about Harry being possessed by Voldemort, or about the prophecy.*

*My mind is bubbling over with thoughts and questions, so I'm trying to organize some of them.*

### Harry and the Dursleys

*How does this protection work? What is the extent of it? Is he protected while he's living with them, no matter what he does, or is it only in the house itself, or in the neighborhood? He wasn't confined to the house last summer, even though Voldemort was back and thought to be after him. They did tell him it was a bad idea for us to go out shopping that day, but they hadn't given him such a restriction beforehand. Then they left him here at my house for 4 days, but then took him to Headquarters and didn't even let him out to go to Diagon Alley. It's maddeningly inconsistent.*

*How long does he have to stay there this year? And where will he go after? What happens to Headquarters now that Sirius is dead? If he's not going to go there, could he come here? My house would certainly be more difficult for Death Eaters to find than, say, the Burrow, but on the other hand the Burrow may be better protected. As far as that goes, though, if no one knew where he was that would seem to me to be the best protection. And does whatever 'protection' he gets from living at his Aunt's house last for the rest of the summer? It certainly doesn't work while he's at Hogwarts, what with all the things that have happened to him there. And it didn't stop the dementors last summer even while he was living there. Also, how does the blood protection work now that Voldemort used Harry's blood to restore his body? After all, Harry's touch killed Quirrell, but Voldemort could touch him after that ritual with no ill affects.*

### Harry and the Prophecy

*What do we do now? How can a school boy possibly defeat one of the most powerful wizards on earth? We have to train as hard as we can, but even if we do, how can he become strong enough to*

beat him when even Dumbledore could only battle him to a standstill? What is 'the power he knows not'? That must be the key. Is it some trick that will enable Harry to beat him, even if he's overwhelmingly more powerful otherwise? Maybe it's something muggle. Could Harry just use a gun and shoot him? But Voldemort was raised as a muggle, so he would know about guns. And if it were that easy I'd think someone would have tried it already.

Then there's Dumbledore's comment about love being the key. Yes, it enabled Harry to drive Voldemort out of his mind, but there's a big difference between that and actually destroying him. Could Harry somehow send intense thoughts of love into Voldemort's head and drive him insane? (OK, I just had an absurd notion here, that I'm not going to even write down in case someone reads this in the future, but it has to do with how I could help Harry generate intense feelings of love. If we did it while Voldemort was breaking into Harry's mind ... oh never mind.)

It was a good thing that no one was there to see her just now, Hermione thought, or they'd wonder why she was blushing so hard. She and Harry were much too young to think about doing *that*. Well, she amended, she supposed they weren't too young to *think* about it, but they were too young to actually *do* it. At least she felt that she was, and Harry was almost a year younger than her. Honestly, he wasn't even 16 yet. While she was getting off track there, she had to admit that these thoughts of Harry were certainly more pleasant than thinking about that awful prophecy.

Anyway, I'm going to have to research harder than ever, trying to find something Harry can do, some obscure spell or ritual or something. That means finding old books, probably ones that are considered dark magic. The library at Headquarters might have been a possibility. Now I wish I'd looked at it more when I had the chance at Christmas time.

I just remembered about Harry and Voldemort's wands locking up when they dueled each other last year. I wonder if that's the key. I'll have to read up on that too. Perhaps he can get their wands to lock up again and then pull out a gun and shoot him. Unfortunately, Voldemort's probably thought about the locking up problem too, and will have come up with some sort of counter.

### Dumbledore's Actions

I'm not sure I trust Dumbledore any longer. I mean, I trust him to do what he thinks is best, but I no longer trust that what he thinks is best is necessarily the best thing for Harry. His goal is to defeat Voldemort, and I'm afraid that if he thinks it's necessary to sacrifice Harry in order to accomplish that, he'll do it. Just thinking about that possibility makes my stomach hurt.

Why hasn't he done more to prepare Harry? Is he going to start giving Harry special training now? Will he let me join in?

I'm starting to become suspicious of all the things that have happened to Harry in the past. Did Dumbledore know about how horrible Harry's home life was with the Dursleys and just leave him there anyway? Was it to toughen him up or something? That's reprehensible if it's true.

Then what about all the unusual things while we've been at Hogwarts? Were some of those events manipulated by Dumbledore? Those traps we got by first year to get to the Stone make me wonder. Flying a broom to catch the keys was a cinch for Harry, and Ron was perfectly suited for the chess match, while I as a muggleborn had no problem with the logic puzzle. And it's also suspicious that Dumbledore found Harry looking at the mirror and explained how it worked before he moved it to the chamber with the Stone. On the other hand, those other traps were set up at the beginning of the year, before Harry, Ron, and I even became friends, so how would Dumbledore have known?

How much did he know about the basilisk second year? I can't imagine that he'd let Ginny be possessed, or risk the lives of all the students if he'd known what was happening, but it seems if I as a second year student could figure out that it was a basilisk someone like him certainly ought to have been able to. On the other hand, he didn't know Harry was a parselmouth and had heard snake voices did he? And he wasn't even in the castle when Ginny was taken down into the chamber and Harry went down after her.

Thinking about third year, surely he didn't know all along that Sirius was innocent and Pettigrew was the secret keeper, did he? It would have been monstrous to have let Sirius suffer in Azkaban all those years if he knew better. And why would he have done it? So that Harry had to keep living with the Dursleys?

My goodness, I'm becoming as paranoid as Moody! But thinking of Moody, how could Dumbledore not have figured out that Barty Crouch was impersonating him? For a whole year! And he made no effort at all to figure out a way to get Harry out of having to compete in that tournament. And he certainly could have put some sort of detection spell on the Goblet that would have alerted him that someone had tampered with it. So the question is, did Dumbledore want Harry to compete? Was that yet another test for him?

Speculation aside, it's certainly true that he botched things horribly this past year. It would have been so easy for him to alert Harry to his suspicion that Voldemort was sending him those visions intentionally. And the way he stood back and let Umbridge run roughshod over the entire school. I don't think it's a coincidence that Harry had to step up and become a leader as a result of her actions.

The bottom line is that I don't trust Dumbledore. From now on, whenever anything happens we have to be suspicious of his true motives.

-ooo-

Dear Harry,

Of course I'm worried about you! That's my job, right? But I'm glad that I can remove one item from the worry list since things are going OK with the Dursleys. I'm sure you'll agree that 'OK' is the most we can hope for there.

I feel so bad about you being there by yourself. I wish I could hug you through this letter. I know it's hard, and I can't conceive of how you're feeling, but try to remember how much Sirius cared

for you, and think about how he'd want you to react. Grieve for him but don't stop living. And he'd want you to become the best wizard you can be and fight back against Voldemort and the Death Eaters. They're responsible for his death, not you.

Speaking of Voldemort, how has your scar been? Now that I'm not with you every day you have to tell me anything that happens, all right? I won't nag you any more in these letters if you promise to keep me informed. I will nag you to do your homework, of course. (smile)

I've been thinking about things, and have come up with a long list of questions to research, which I'm copying from my journal and sending with this letter. Tell me what you think, particularly the ones about Dumbledore. I'm going to send some of the other ones at the top of the list about the Dursleys and Voldemort to him. I want to get you out of there as soon as possible.

With regard to visiting, I think we can manage a few. Mum's willing to drive me over for a day outing the weekend after next, like the one we had last year. And perhaps we can come over and take you out for your birthday. No Dursleys this time though. After what happened last year my parents don't want to have anything to do with them. Needless to say, your uncle didn't get accepted into my dad's club.

My parents are planning a trip to France later in the summer, and expect me to go along. It would be great if you could come too! I'm not certain how magical people go about getting passports and the like, but I know they travel a lot. Luna's going to Sweden this summer, for example. I suppose we could ask her, but ... well, she's Luna and I never know what kind of answer I'm going to get from her. The Weasleys should know, since they visited Bill in Egypt and Charlie lives in Romania. I hope it works out, and they don't try to keep you locked up this summer like they did last year.

Take care Harry. We just have to hope that things will turn out all right.

I miss you.

All my love,

Hermione

-000-

Dear Hermione,

It was so great to hear from you. To answer the questions that are probably most on your mind – I'm doing better in dealing with Sirius being gone, and my scar isn't bothering me at all. Not a twinge. Yes, I'll tell you right away if anything happens.

Those were great questions you came up with. I'm starting to wonder the same things about everything that's happened to me. I do know now that Dumbledore has had a plan for me all along – I just don't know what it is. I'm going to try to persuade him to share more information with me from now on. Now that I know what I have to do I think I deserve to have more say in what's going



on. I'm not going to just sit back and accept everything any more.

I think a good first step is to make my own decisions about this summer. I've accepted that I have to stay here for the first month, but that's all. The key is that I have to consider this place my home until I'm 17. OK, but that shouldn't prevent me from going on holiday with you in August, right? For security's sake, we should keep it as quiet as possible – no pictures in the Daily Prophet or anything like that. I wouldn't want to put your parents in danger, so aside from the Order and the rest of the Weasleys no one else needs to know where we go.

I have another question to add to your list. How does the Ministry track underage magic? I don't want to waste another summer not learning anything, and I need to be able to practice the spells. I've come up with three possibilities. 1) There's a tracking charm on our wands. 2) There's some sort of tracking charm on us personally. 3) They can detect when and where spells are cast, and check to see if an underage wizard is in the area.

From my experience, it would seem to be #3. When Dobby cast that hover charm on the bowl of pudding, I got an owl from the Ministry listing the time and location where the charm was used, and they assumed that it was me. And last year we got the owl saying basically the same thing about the patronus charm. But it only mentioned me, not you. I reckon that's because they didn't know you were there, so they assumed I was the only one who cast it.

If that's true, it might be best if I go to the Weasleys after I leave here. The Ministry wouldn't be able to tell if I cast spells there because they won't know it was me. You'll probably argue that Mrs. Weasley wouldn't let her kids do magic at her house, but don't you think they do anyway? How else did Ginny get so good at that bat bogey hex? And Ron's said they always stayed clear of the twins' room because they were experimenting with stuff.

That might also be an argument for going to France with you. The British Ministry wouldn't detect spells done in France, right? And if it's a tracking charm, the French wouldn't be tracking us. What do you think?

I'm really looking forward to spending the day with you next Saturday. To be on the safe side, pick me up at the park. I'll be under the cloak. We agreed that I get to pick the movie this time, right?

I've been working on my homework just like you told me. I've even been reviewing our charms and defense books from past years to make sure I have all those spells down solid. I plan to have everything done by my birthday. Aren't you proud of me? (Do I get an extra hug?)

Do you have any more books to recommend for recreational reading this summer? I really enjoyed the Lord of the Rings books you sent me last year.

Thank you again for everything you've done and are doing for me. I miss you.

Love,

Harry

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger –July 15

*What a wonderful day! I think it was just about perfect. We really needed a nice peaceful pleasant time together like this after what we'd been through last year.*

*We found the park without much trouble, and I opened the back door of the car and waited.*

Suddenly the back seat moved and Hermione felt Harry's hand give hers a squeeze, and she broke out in a big smile.

"Hi Hermione! Good morning Mrs. Granger," came Harry's voice. Then the car door shut and Hermione saw her mum give her a smile in the rear view mirror as she pulled out into the street. "Thanks for bringing Hermione over to visit me again."

"My pleasure, Harry," Emma replied. "Where do you want to go today?"

"The same place we went last year would be fine with me," Harry answered as he pulled off the invisibility cloak. He looked to Hermione for her input and she nodded her agreement. Then she wrapped him up in a big hug as her mother pretended not to watch them.

"Did everything go all right at your aunt and uncle's?" Hermione inquired.

"Yeah," Harry responded. "I told Aunt Petunia I'd be out all day and she just sniffed and turned away. I'm pretty sure I made out the words 'good riddance'. Then I put on the cloak and just walked down to the park." He shrugged it off but Hermione caught a flash of annoyance from her mother. "One odd thing though," Harry continued. "There don't seem to be any members of the Order watching me this summer." Hermione agreed that was curious and then explained to her mother about the guards that had been keeping an eye on Harry the previous year.

When they arrived at the mall, Harry admitted sheepishly that he'd outgrown many of the things he'd bought last summer, and Emma commented that she'd noticed he was quite a bit taller. Having been through the drill once, things went more smoothly, and Harry didn't object to the colored underwear this time. He still declined Hermione's teasing offer to help her pick out underwear for herself.

The truth of the matter was that Hermione had outgrown some of her clothing as well, although it wasn't because she was taller. She'd moved up a size in her tops, and had needed to replace all of her bras, which she'd done as soon as she returned home from Hogwarts. (She'd kept the red one she bought the previous summer though, for sentimental reasons.) Her hips had developed more as well. She wondered if Harry had noticed. She thought he had been checking her out when she was in the hospital wing after being injured at the Ministry, but she wasn't sure. They'd both had a lot on their minds at the time. Just for fun, she'd worn one of her old tops, which now fit very snugly, today to see if she could get a reaction from him. From the glances he kept shooting at her all day,

she decided the experiment was a success.

Apparently her mother was thinking along the same lines, because once Harry had finished his shopping, Emma turned to Hermione. “You need a new swimsuit if we’re going to France this year. I’m sure that the one you wore three years ago won’t fit you anymore.”

Emma chuckled at the grin that broke out on Harry’s face and the rosy blush that blossomed on Hermione’s. The swimwear that was worn on the beaches in France was considerably more revealing than the one piece suits she and Hermione wore at the neighborhood pool. During their last holiday her thirteen year old daughter had practically lived in a string bikini with a very small triangle top. If she tried on something similar today she’d be giving her boyfriend quite a show.

“I don’t know ... do you think we have the time?” Hermione demurred, trying to stall while she decided if she was ready to reveal that much of her body to Harry.

“Well, you don’t have to buy something today, but it wouldn’t hurt to look a little to get some ideas,” her mother replied, giving her an out. Hermione would be able to decide which suits she was comfortable trying on in front of Harry. “We still have some time before lunch.”

*At first I wanted to kill Mum for that suggestion, but at the end of the day I thanked her. I started out with some relatively conservative suits but gradually got bolder. I finished with a bikini that had a halter top with a low cut scooped neckline. I think Harry almost passed out. I hadn’t realized how curvy I’d gotten until I looked at myself in the mirror in those suits.*

*The movie Harry picked out was Mission Impossible, which just opened here in the UK last week. We both agreed that the title was ironically appropriate for what’s facing us. He put his arm around me during the scary parts, and held my hand during the rest. I told him he was like Tom Cruise – short, messy black hair, boyishly handsome. He was very embarrassed, of course. Even more so when Mum agreed with me.*

*We didn’t have much time to ourselves to talk about what’s going on in the wizarding world. We did discuss what we thought Rufus Scrimgeour, the new Minister of Magic, would be like. Harry didn’t think he could possibly be worse than Fudge. Since he used to be the head of the Aurors, I suggested that we write to Susan and ask her what her aunt thinks of him.*

*At the end of the day when Mum dropped him back at his relatives’ house we made use of his invisibility cloak to have a very passionate good-bye kiss. It was a great way to end the date, if I do say so myself.*

-000-

*Dear Hermione,*

*You won’t believe everything that’s happened since I saw you yesterday! Right now I’m at the Burrow! Dumbledore brought me here last night.*

I'll start from the beginning. When I got home there was a message waiting for me from Dumbledore that said he would come at 11:00 that night to pick me up. I hurried to pack up all my stuff and he showed up right on time. He stopped for a bit to 'visit' with my aunt and uncle, and took them to task for the way they've treated me all these years. That was good to see, but I wish he or someone else had done it long ago when it might have done me some good!

He also told me that Sirius had left me everything he owned, including Grimmauld Place. That answers one of your questions. Actually, Dumbledore wasn't sure if it was really true, or if some Black family enchantment would prevent it, but we confirmed it by having me call Kreacher. He came, being his usual nasty self, but he had to obey my commands, so that meant that I really do own Grimmauld Place now. I sent him off to Hogwarts to keep him out of trouble. What I really wanted to do was throttle him, but I didn't think Dumbledore would let me. (I also didn't think you'd appreciate that either.)

After telling the Dursleys I'd be back one more summer and then be out of their lives for good, we left. This next bit should interest you. We had to walk all the way to the end of Privet Drive before we could apparate. That's how far the wards extend from the house. He mentioned that most wizard dwellings have wards that prevent apparation directly into the house. Most people wouldn't do it anyway, as it's extremely rude to just pop in on someone, but that's also good to know in terms of being attacked.

We talked a bit as we walked down the street. I noticed that somehow he'd injured his wand hand, because it was all black, but he brushed it off and said he'd tell me later. He asked me about my scar, and I told him it hadn't bothered me a bit all summer. Surprisingly, he said that was what he expected. After what happened in the Ministry, he thinks Voldemort realized it was dangerous for me to have access to his thoughts, and was blocking me out. Then I asked him why he couldn't have told me that sooner, that it would have been useful for me to know that instead of just wondering about it. He stopped then and apologized. He'd told me in his office that night that he'd try to do better at keeping me informed about things that concerned me.

Next Dumbledore side-along apparated me to a muggle village to meet another wizard. Yes, you read that correctly. This wizard is named Horace Slughorn, and is a former professor at Hogwarts, and has this habit of 'borrowing' muggle houses while their owners are on holiday. Well, he wasn't exactly thrilled to see us. In fact, he hid for a while and tried to make it look like the place had been attacked by Death Eaters. Dumbledore found him right away, though.

Slughorn was an odd one. He's short and fat, and seems to really enjoy living the comfortable life. He was also going on and on about all the famous people he knew. In fact, I soon figured out that was why Dumbledore brought me with him on the visit. He wanted to persuade him to come out of retirement and teach again – DADA, I suppose – and I was the 'lure'. The man likes to 'collect' celebrities and who's a bigger celebrity in the wizarding world than me, right?

Well, it worked. After Slughorn refused outright, Dumbledore left me alone with him for a while and it was like Dudley being in a room with a piece of candy. He just couldn't resist me. It was almost disgusting, actually. He went on and on about how my mum was one of his favorites, and also mentioned Sirius and his brother Regulus. Said he'd had Regulus in his house and wished

*Sirius had been so that he could have had the set of them. Really, he actually used those words. As you've probably guessed by now he used to be Head of Slytherin house.*

*By the time Dumbledore returned he was almost begging him for a job. I wonder about that though. Somehow he doesn't seem the type to be a defense teacher. He claimed to Dumbledore that he was old and weak and couldn't move around very well. But by that time I had other things on my mind.*

Dumbledore chuckled as they exited the isolated muggle dwelling and walked down the garden path toward the main road. "Well done, Harry."

Temporarily keeping his annoyance at having been used without his consent in check, Harry asked rather abruptly, "So, now where are you taking me?"

His tone of voice brought Dumbledore up short. "Why, to the Burrow of course."

"Why 'of course'?" Harry countered. "You say that like it was obvious. I can think of several other places we might be going, or perhaps you might be dragging me off to visit some other old friend, for some other as yet unexplained purpose."

"I assumed that you would enjoy staying with the Weasleys for the rest of the summer," the headmaster answered calmly.

"Why would you need to assume anything?" Harry persisted. "Why not ask me? Maybe I have some ideas of my own about where I would like to go." Dumbledore gazed at him without responding, and Harry continued.

"You promised three weeks ago to keep me better informed, and yet I haven't heard a word from you until a few hours ago when I suddenly find out I'm leaving Privet Drive tonight. What if I had plans for tomorrow? Hermione just came over to visit me today. It could just as well have been scheduled for tomorrow. We'd also made plans for her and her parents to take me out for my birthday, which we're evidently going to have to change now."

"She wrote and asked you two weeks ago how long I'd have to stay with my aunt and uncle this year, but you never responded. You explained why I had to stay with them, and I agreed to do that, but I think I should have some say about where I spend the rest of the summer. Sure, I enjoy visiting the Weasleys, but I also enjoyed staying at the Grangers last summer, and would like to spend some time with them too."

"Harry, I apologize for being presumptuous," Dumbledore replied. "I thought this would be for the best. The Burrow is much safer than the Grangers' residence. It has been given the highest security possible."

"And you need your weapon protected, is that it?"

“Harry ...”

“You’ve been pushing me around like a pawn on a chessboard. Am I just a tool for a job that needs to be done? Or am I an active participant? I’m sure you have reasons for how you’re handling my life, but it’s my life. Explain your reasons and help me make an informed decision. If I don’t have a part in making the decisions then I feel like I’m just being used.”

Dumbledore removed his glasses and wiped them, a concerned look on his face. “Again, I apologize. I promised you that you would play a more active role, and I fully intend that to be the case. I realize that I still have some way to go in that regard, and need to break some habits. But I assure you that I do not consider you to be merely a tool.”

“What did we just do?” Harry challenged.

“What do you mean?” Dumbledore responded in puzzlement.

“You just used me to persuade Horace Slughorn to come to Hogwarts. You knew he would be unable to resist me. Did you ask me if I would be willing to help you recruit a professor, or was I an unwitting tool?”

Dumbledore’s expression changed from concerned to stricken. “You are of course correct. I can only say again that I am sorry for treating you that way, and promise to stop.” He paused a moment, then went on more tentatively. “As for our destination at this time, Molly is expecting you and would be quite distressed if you do not arrive soon. Will you consent to going to the Burrow with me?”

“Thank you,” Harry responded graciously. “Yes, I will. But would it be possible for me to at least visit Hermione sometime?”

Dumbledore paused to consider. “There is still the matter of safety to take into account, but I believe that could be arranged. May I suggest that two Order members accompany you whenever you leave the grounds of the Burrow?” Harry agreed to this stipulation, then pressed on.

“I’ve been invited to go to France with the Grangers in August.”

“I’m not sure that would be wise,” Dumbledore replied. Seeing the hard expression on Harry’s face he continued. “But if you can work something out with satisfactory security, we can consider it.”

*Once we came to that understanding, he apparated me to the Burrow. There we stepped into the Weasley’s broom shed for a bit while we discussed a few more things. He wanted to know how I was coping with Sirius’s death, and my new fame in the press. I think I’m going to come to hate the title Chosen One just as much as The Boy Who Lived. Scrimgeour, the new Minister, wants to meet with me but Dumbledore’s been putting him off. So far Voldemort’s been lying low. Dumbledore thinks I really shook him up when I threw him out of my head, and maybe even hurt him. His only*

major initiative has been to recruit the dementors, which Dumbledore's been warning about all year. They finally deserted Azkaban, and it's been a nightmare for the Ministry.

The most exciting part was that he's going to give me private lessons next year. Oh, and he also suggested I share the prophecy with you and Ron. He was surprised that I'd already told you.

He also emphasized once more the seriousness of the situation by telling me to keep my Invisibility Cloak with me at all times. I generally do that anyway, but I assured him that I always would in the future. Then he said something curious as he was leaving. He made me promise not to go running off no matter what happens. I have to have an Order guard. I wonder what that was all about?

Now on to the news from the Burrow. Of course, Mrs. Weasley was thrilled to see me, and started right in on feeding me. Tonks was there too, but left shortly after I arrived. She looks very depressed – I suppose it's because of Sirius. More about that later. Mr. Weasley came home shortly after we arrived, which was already after midnight. He's been promoted at the Ministry. I'm really happy for him – he deserved it. It keeps him busier though. They put me in Fred and George's old room (they now live in a flat above their joke shop) instead of with Ron. It's nice to have a real bed.

This morning I found out that Fleur is here also. She and Bill are getting married! Can you believe it? Apparently not everyone is happy about that. Ginny can't stand her, and says her mum can't either. There does seem to be some friction between the two of them. Ron, of course, goes into a daze whenever Fleur sweeps into the room. It's pretty funny. And I do mean 'sweeps'. It's just a sort of presence she has when she moves. Ginny did an imitation of it. She also has a nickname for her that's not too nice – she calls her Phlegm.

That bothers me a bit. Ron says it's because Ginny's used to being the center of attention as the only girl and now has Fleur competing with her. I think he may have a point. I'd not really noticed before, but Ginny has grown into a very attractive girl. And of course, Fleur is beautiful and well – she's Fleur. I can see that Ginny might resent her. And Fleur's attitude doesn't help any. She has a way of making everyone feel inferior. She can't seem to help making comments about things that come out sounding condescending.

Despite that, I actually like Fleur. I don't think she can help being like that. As she hangs around the Weasleys more I think she'll start to tone it down. And she's so enthusiastic – she was very excited about seeing me again. I noticed both Ginny and Mrs. Weasley gritting their teeth when she kissed me – you know, on the cheek the way the French do. (I hope this isn't worrying you. You know I'm completely yours and have no interest in any other girl. I'm not tempted by her or affected like Ron is.) I think we have sort of a bond from competing in the tournament together. I really respect her for that and I think she respects me as well.

Here's the weird thing though. Ginny says Mrs. Weasley's trying to break Bill and Fleur up, even though they're already engaged. She thinks her mum wants him to be with Tonks instead – that's supposedly why Tonks is hanging around here. I'm not sure that's right though – I mean the part about Tonks. Ron doesn't think Bill'd be interested in her either. It is true that Mrs. Weasley's not

*happy about him and Fleur getting married though. She claims he's too down to earth for her. But he is a curse breaker after all, and has been living in Egypt. I think that might be wishful thinking on her part.*

*Well, that brings you up to date, I reckon. I think this is the longest letter I've ever written to you. Are you impressed? Quite a bit of news though. We'll see what we can do about getting together for my birthday, and your trip to France.*

*I miss you.*

*Love,*

Harry

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## **Notebooks and Letters** **A Life-Altering Decision**

### **Year 6, Chapter 2, A Life-Altering Decision**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 16

*My life is over.*

Hermione Granger sat in her bedroom at her desk, staring out the window into her back yard. It was a lovely handcrafted oak desk, made for her by her father for her seventh birthday. In succeeding years he had added bookshelves, which now covered an entire wall. This was the place where she had always retreated in times of stress or sorrow, finding solace in her books. But there was no comfort for her this evening.

*How can things have gone so wrong so suddenly?*

She had long since run out of tears. Now she was trying to pull herself together enough to record the disaster in her journal. She sighed once more and picked up the quill again.

*Dad and Mum have withdrawn me from Hogwarts .*

Apparently there were still some tears remaining after all, for she buried her head in her hands and sobbed again at the sight of the stark words staring back up at her. It was as though writing them down was the final confirmation of their reality.

But eventually she was able to continue.

*This morning an owl arrived from Hogwarts. It sounded like a routine letter from Madame Pomfrey checking up on me after my injury, but it referred quite specifically to what had happened and how I'd almost died. When Dad saw it the roof fell in.*

*I can't really blame them for their actions. They're not doing it because they're mean or trying to*

ruin my life. They love me and are trying to protect me. At one point during our argument about it Mum asked what I would do in their place, if my daughter attended a school where she'd almost been killed several times. (I'd broken down and told them the truth about the other things that have happened to us as well.) I couldn't answer her.

When Hedwig showed up with Harry's letter I asked her to take a message to Dumbledore asking for his help. But when he arrived he just said that there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't force my parents to let me attend Hogwarts. Then I pointed out that I would be of age in a few months and wouldn't need their permission. They countered that I wouldn't be of age in the muggle world for another year. Dumbledore shot down the idea anyway by saying that even though I turned seventeen during the school year, I would not be able to start classes in the middle of the term.

After he left there was a lot of crying and hugging, and Dad compromised by saying since my birthday is in September, which is only a couple of weeks after the start of classes, they would allow me to make my own decision about the following year when I turn eighteen.

What am I going to do now? I promised Harry I'd be by his side. He needs me.

I need to be with him.

I need him.

The tears came once more, and Hermione buried her head on her beloved desk.

-000-

Dear Harry,

I have some awful news for you. My parents are not allowing me to return to Hogwarts next year ...

Hedwig had arrived during breakfast and Harry, recognizing it as a letter from Hermione, had eagerly opened it and begun reading. To everyone's surprise he immediately fell silent and turned pale, then buried his head in his hands. After a few moments, he looked up again, grabbed the letter and his eyes darted over it once more, as if trying to convince himself that he'd misread it the first time. Then he dropped the letter to the table as if it had burned his hands, stood up and choked out a few unintelligible words, and raced outside.

The others in the kitchen of the Burrow looked at each other in puzzlement. Ron picked up the letter and glanced at it, turned pale as well, and hurried out the door after Harry. Next Ginny picked it up and her eyes went wide, and Molly moved up to read it over her shoulder. After they finished Fleur took a glimpse at it in turn. Glancing up, she saw Molly shoot a triumphant look toward Ginny. The Weasley matron was about to say something to her daughter, but stopped when

she saw Fleur watching her. With a glare at them, Fleur swept out the door in the wake of the two boys.

Outside, Harry was standing by the edge of the woods, alternately clenching and unclenching his fists as Ron tried to think of something to say to console him.

“It’s my fault. It’s all my fault,” Harry moaned repeatedly. Suddenly he stopped as a wooden block appeared and hovered before him. He spun around to see that Fleur had walked up behind him, her wand out, and realized that she had conjured it for him.

“Go a’ead and blast eet,” she suggested. “When Veela are angry zey turn eento birds and shoot fireballs. Eet ’elps work off ze stress.”

Harry needed no further encouragement. “*Reducto!*” he called out with a slash of his wand, and a bright silver beam obliterated the object. With a quick wave of her wand Fleur conjured another.

“Harry!” Ron shouted in horror. “What are you doing? You’ll be expelled for underage magic.”

“So what?” Harry snapped back. “If Hermione’s not at Hogwarts why would I want to be there anyway?” He turned his attention to the new target. “*Reducto!*” Once again, Fleur smoothly replaced it.

“Harry ...” Ron began, trying to reason with his friend.

“Don’t worry, Ronald,” Fleur assured him in a calm, confident voice. “Your Ministry weell not concern zemselves weez simple spells being cast in a ’ouse full of wizards.” She paused to conjure another wooden victim for Harry’s blasting hex. “And eef zey investigate I weell just tell zem eet was me,” she concluded with an unconcerned shrug.

“*Reducto!*” Harry continued his assault on Fleur’s wooden creations. For ten minutes he blasted them apart as fast as she conjured them. Finally his shoulders slumped as the initial wave of anger subsided, and shock took over. At this point the French witch put a comforting arm across his back and guided him over to a grassy spot where she sat him down, then smoothed her robes as she gracefully settled down opposite him. To Ron’s amazement, and somewhat to Harry’s relief, no Ministry owls arrived.

“But ... but what about the Trace?” Ron objected as he plopped down beside Harry. At this Fleur lifted her head back and laughed lightly, a light melodic sound that made Ron’s eyes glaze over briefly.

“Oh, zat silly superstition,” she smirked with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Do you Eenglish still take zat seriously?” She noticed Harry’s curious expression and smiled at him and explained. “Wizarding parents tell zere children zat zere ees an enchantment on zem zat informs ze authorities whenever zey do magic. Eet ees to keep zem from experimenting outside of school. I do not zink zat eet ’as stopped your brozzers, n’est-ce pas?” she asked Ron with a twinkle in her eye.

Ron was unable to do more than make a few choking noises. Harry decided that Fleur had better stop smiling at him before he passed out. Then he remembered the source of his distress and his face fell again.

“What am I gonna do?” he sighed as his head dropped into his hands. “It’s all my fault.”

This comment managed to distract Ron from his fixation on Fleur. “C’mon mate, don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Ron, her parents are pulling her out of Hogwarts because I keep almost getting her killed,” Harry retorted bitterly.

“So, the troll was your fault?” Ron challenged.

“Well ...”

“Quirrel going after the Stone had nothing to do with you, and letting the troll in was part of his plan. As for Hermione being in the way, that was my fault if anyone’s,” Ron argued. “You were the one who went after her. She’d have been killed if you *weren’t* there.”

“I guess,” Harry admitted.

“And second year, when she got petrified by the basilisk it wasn’t your fault either,” Ron continued. “Ginny let it out of the Chamber. Shouldn’t you blame her instead?”

“No! I’d never say that,” Harry protested. “Riddle was responsible for that.”

“Right,” Ron agreed. “And You Know Who was responsible for what happened last month too.”

“As for what you are going to do about eet,” Fleur broke in before Harry could counter this assertion. “I zink zat ees a decision zat you and ’Ermione need to make togezzer.”

“How am I going to do that?” Harry complained. “Dumbledore specifically told me not to run off from the Burrow no matter ...” his voice faded out as he recalled the exact wording his headmaster had used. Almost as though he had expected something like this to happen. But before he could follow up on that thought, Fleur took him by surprise with her next comment.

“I zink I can do somezing about zat,” she announced with a broad smile.

-ooo-

*Dear Hermione,*

*I am so, so sorry. You must be feeling just awful. Please don’t lose hope. We have to have faith that things will work out. Like you said, it will be for a year at most, and then you can come back.*

*I think Dumbledore might have had an idea that this was going to happen from something he said*

to me as he left me here. I don't know why he couldn't do more about it. I'm going to ask him about it when I see him again.

Fleur is working on a way for me to come and visit you, and then she wants to talk to your parents. I'm not sure what she has in mind, but at least she's trying. The problem is, I promised Dumbledore I wouldn't leave here without two Order guards. Since Fleur is in the Order, that's one, and she's confident she can talk someone into joining her. She said if she can't get anyone else, she can certainly persuade Bill. I decided I didn't want to think about exactly how she would do that, but I have no doubt that she can.

Along those lines, I learned something about the restriction on underage magic. When I got your letter I was so angry I was about to explode, and Fleur suggested I blast some targets she conjured for me. She was right, it helped a lot. But I didn't get an owl from the Ministry. She said that they couldn't tell who was casting the spells, since there are a lot of adult wizards living here.

Then Ron said something about the Trace. Have you ever heard about that? Supposedly it's some kind of enchantment put on children such that the Ministry can detect when they do magic. I don't ever remember having something like that put on me, but it might have been when I was a baby. They wouldn't have done that to you though, since you and your parents didn't know you were a witch until you got your Hogwarts letter. Anyway, Fleur said it was a myth that wizard parents use to keep their kids in line. Apparently it didn't work on Fred and George!

Oh, and Fleur also thinks I should go to France with you. As you might have guessed, Mrs. Weasley hates that idea. She and Fleur weren't getting on very well to begin with, but now they're barely speaking to each other. Fleur says she'll take me there herself if she has to. I bet you'd love having a French witch to show us the magical parts of France, right?

I hope this has helped cheer you up a bit. Just remember that I love you, and I'll do anything I can to help you.

I really miss you.

Love,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

I love you! You have no idea how much better I felt after I got your letter. I'm ashamed to admit that I worried that you might forget about me if I was gone for a year. I know, I know, it was stupid of me. It's just my lack of self-confidence popping up again. It's the same thing that makes me worry that I failed my OWLs. Not that it matters (for me) now, but I wonder when we'll find out the results?

*I can't believe how helpful Fleur is being. I have to confess that I haven't always had the highest opinion of her. I'm glad that I was wrong! I hope I can start over with her on a new footing. And yes, it would be so exciting to learn about another magical culture!*

*With regard to underage magic, I did research it after you asked me about it a couple weeks ago, and I did find some references to the Trace. I had the same doubts that you did, because to my knowledge I never had any spell like that cast on me. What Fleur told you about the Ministry detection spells makes the most sense to me.*

*Oh, I do hope you and Fleur can work out a way for you to come visit. Even if you can't change my dad's mind, I want so much to see you and hold you again. And if you can come to France with us – well, I don't want to get my hopes up too much but that would be so wonderful.*

*I miss you.*

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-000-*

*Dear Hermione,*

*Good news! Tonks has agreed to come with Fleur to take me to your house. How does Saturday the 29th sound? You wanted to celebrate my birthday with me, and that's pretty close, I reckon. There's no way Mrs. Weasley would let me come on my birthday itself, as she has something planned here.*

*It seems kind of ironic in light of what Ginny was saying on my first day here about Tonks being a potential rival love interest for Bill, but she and Fleur get along pretty well. I often notice them talking to each other, and Fleur seems to be consoling her. Fleur really is nice once you get to know her and get past her somewhat aloof exterior. I actually identify with her in a way, since she has to deal with people's preconceived opinions of her, just like I do. I think we kind of understand each other. She's sort of turned into a big sister for me.*

*Besides Tonks when she's here, I'm the only one who really talks to Fleur (other than Bill of course). Ron still goes incoherent around her and Ginny constantly makes snide remarks about her. We sneak off to the woods and she helps me practice spells whenever we can get away from Mrs. Weasley.*

*Both Fleur and Tonks are working on figuring out a way to get me to France. I won't necessarily be able to go with you, but I might be able to meet you there. I understand that Dumbledore doesn't approve, but they both seem to be more willing to go against his wishes than most of the Order members. Mrs. Weasley is having a fit about it. Don't tell Ron I said this, but I think she's trying to get me together with Ginny. It seems like she's always setting up situations where we're paired up when she gives us chores to do, and Ginny ends up sitting next to me at every meal. But*

*you don't have to worry, I'm still all yours. Please don't ever doubt that. Ginny actually seems a little embarrassed about it.*

*So, how about it? Think you have room for three visitors next weekend?*

*I miss you.*

*Love,*

*Harry*

*-0x0x0-*

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 30

*It worked! Harry came to visit yesterday. I couldn't stop hugging him when he first arrived. I was so happy to see him. And on top of that, Fleur had a proposal for my parents. Things were a little awkward at first with them though.*

When Hermione finally released Harry from her enthusiastic welcoming hug, he turned to face her parents. “Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Granger,” he began politely. “Thank you for having me over today.” Unfortunately, her father had been somewhat reluctant for him to visit in the first place, and was further put out by the extended hug.

“I suppose you're here to try to change our minds about Hermione?” he challenged.

Harry made a supreme effort to keep his emotions under control. “Mr. Granger, I want more than anything for Hermione to come back to Hogwarts, but I acknowledge that you have the right to make the decision you did. And I also understand that you want what is best for Hermione. On that I completely agree with you.” Dan Granger relaxed a bit at these words and couldn't help being impressed all over again with this young man.

“Do you agree that it's dangerous for Hermione to be with you?” he asked next.

“It is,” Harry admitted. Beside him he heard Hermione's gasp, and felt without even looking at her the look of betrayal she sent his way. But he continued the statement Tonks and Fleur had assisted him with as he put together his thoughts for this confrontation. “The courage that she has shown in being willing to help me out of the trouble I find myself in, regardless of the danger involved, has been the most impressive thing about her ever since I first met her. Even more so than her intelligence, which is absolutely amazing. I'm sure that it is why she was sorted into Gryffindor rather than Ravenclaw.”

Dan Granger was not at all prepared for this honest response, and couldn't help the feeling of pride for his daughter it generated in him. Before he could come up with a reply, Fleur stepped forward and he temporarily took leave of his senses.

Fleur, with Tonks's help, had selected a halter style muggle sundress in a pastel green and white print. The snugly fit top revealed an impressive bust line with an attractive, but not overwhelming, amount of cleavage. She had also charmed her skin to a light tan, which perfectly complimented her silvery blonde hair. The overall effect was to take any male's breath away. Fortunately, Harry had had time to become accustomed to the outfit before they arrived at the Grangers.

Harry reached back to take Hermione's hand and was relieved when she gave him a squeeze of appreciation for his description of her. On her other side Tonks stepped up, dressed in a smart, professional looking blouse, jacket and skirt. Today, her hair was dark and shoulder length and neatly styled, as her look had been chosen be more in line with Mrs. Granger's preferences. Hermione introduced everyone and they all moved into the living room and sat down, with her father continuing to cast not so surreptitious glances at Fleur, much to her mother's amusement.

*After they spent some time getting to know my parents, Tonks and Fleur shifted to the topic of their decision about me. Tonks pointed out that if Voldemort's ideas prevailed, things would be dangerous for everyone, but particularly for muggleborn wizards and witches. But since I was already known to the Death Eaters, staying here at home wasn't necessarily the safest alternative. At the very least I needed to learn to defend myself if I were attacked.*

*Then Fleur made her pitch. She suggested that my parents enroll me in her alma mater, Beauxbatons. She claimed that France is relatively peaceful as Voldemort is concentrating his efforts here in Britain. And she assured them that I would receive a top notch education there, that she was on good terms with the headmistress, and that Madame Maxime was already aware of my superb talents as a witch. (She made me blush with that point.)*

*My dad just ate it up. Personally, I think she could have sold him anything, he was so taken with her. But Mum was nearly as impressed with Tonks, as well as with the thoroughness of their presentation. They sealed the deal by suggesting that we stop and visit Beauxbatons during our trip to France next month, and my parents agreed enthusiastically.*

*Once that was settled, everyone relaxed and enjoyed the rest of the day. All in all, it was a reasonable compromise. Of course it does mean that I'll be away from Harry for a year, which will be very difficult to take. Mum and Dad did agree that he could come visit over the Christmas holidays.*

*Dinner was wonderful. Mum talked Dad into making reservations at a very nice French restaurant, and our party made quite an impression. Tonks transfigured her business suit into a dazzling cocktail dress. I had bought a new spaghetti strap sundress for the occasion, and while I wasn't as stunning as Fleur, it did look pretty good on me. And even though every other man at the restaurant couldn't take their eyes off of her, Harry's attention was on me the whole time. Fleur charmed the waiter not only with her looks but by ordering in French, and I think she talked the wine steward into letting us have an expensive wine at a reduced price.*

*Tonks and Fleur even managed to distract Mum and Dad for a bit at the end so Harry and I could have some private time together. We sat out on the porch swing and snuggled up while watching*



the sun set. It's ironic that it was almost exactly a year ago that we did the same thing, the day the Order came and took him to Grimmauld Place. Things change and things stay the same. Last year we were two best friends who were wondering if we were becoming more, but were comforting each other as we faced an uncertain future, with Harry possibly about to be expelled from Hogwarts. This year the future is once again uncertain, but I'm the one who probably isn't coming back to Hogwarts. And we're much more than friends, although we're still that. And this time there was kissing along with the cuddling.

In between the kissing Harry gave me some more details on his reaction to my initial letter and what he'd been doing at the Weasleys since then. While I was sad to see him go at the end of the day, it was a very nice visit, and I'm hopeful that I'll see him again when we're on holiday.

Like we both told each other, we'll get through this somehow, and we'll be together again when it's over.

Later –

My OWL results arrived today. Pretty ironic timing, I suppose. I showed them to my parents, which set off another round of tears, although not too bad. I did very well and they told me how proud they were of me. They agreed that I should take them along to show Madame Maxime when we visit Beauxbatons. I got O's in everything except Astronomy and History of Magic, where I got E's. And there were extenuating circumstances for both of those. Hagrid and McGonagall were attacked during our Astronomy practical, and I couldn't concentrate on finishing the History exam after Harry had his vision and left the room.

Still Later –

Hedwig just arrived with a note from Harry about his and Ron's OWL results. Harry got an O in Defense Against the Dark Arts, as I was sure he would. There was a notation that he received better than 100 percent because of the extra credit point. That made it the highest DADA OWL score in more than 50 years. He also received E's in Charms, Transfiguration, Care of Magical Creatures, and Potions (take that Snape!) and A's in Herbology and Astronomy. He failed Divination (who cares about that anyway?) and History of Magic, of course.

Ron passed the same exams that Harry did, except with no O's, and not as many E's. All in all, it was a very good showing for both of them, but especially for Harry. I wrote back to Harry that between the two of us we had 10 O's and 6 E's and that he should try to figure out from that information what my scores were.

-000-

Dear Hermione,

We think we have it worked out. Fleur is going to take a portkey back home next Monday. Since international portkeys are strictly controlled, I can't just tag along. Apparently there are wards against cross-border apparation too. You have to apparate to designated receiving sites, sort of

like muggle Customs checkpoints. Tonks is going to apparate to one of them. Being an Auror she has a Ministry passport with unlimited access. As for me, I'm going to ride the Chunnel train under my invisibility cloak, and Tonks and Fleur will meet me in Paris.

In case you're wondering how Tonks is taking all this time off work, Director Bones has given her a special assignment – me! It seems that she has taken a special interest in me and my confrontations with Voldemort and considers me a high security target on a par with the Minister of Magic, so I warranted a personal bodyguard. Tonks will consequently be at Hogwarts next school year as well. Dumbledore approved the idea on the condition that Madame Bones would assign an Order member for the guard duty, and Tonks was the logical candidate since she knows me better than the other Auror Order members. Oh, by the way, Kingsley Shacklebolt's on special assignment for the Ministry – I'll tell you more about that when I see you.

After we spend some time seeing the sights of Paris, Fleur will take me to her home for a visit. Would you like to join us for that? Then we can go to Beauxbatons, and then we can spend two weeks with your parents in the south of France, before coming back here to get ready for the school year.

Does all this sound OK? If you have any suggested changes let us know.

I miss you.

Love,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

Your plan sounds wonderful! The only suggestion I have is that I join you in Paris. It's one of the most romantic cities in the world, you know. My parents say that as long as there are two chaperones, and we stay in separate rooms, it is all right with them. Can Fleur come down to our beach resort and pick me up before she goes to join you in Paris?

We're doing well so far, and my tan is developing nicely. I ended up getting two new bikinis, and I can't wait for you to see them. I'm not going to describe them for you so they'll be a surprise. I thought you might enjoy using your imagination. One thing that I will tell you is that I actually got noticed by a couple of boys here at the resort, and one of them asked me out! I couldn't believe it! Me? Don't worry, though, I'm not interested in any boy but you.

Oh, I wanted to mention that I brought along some books for you to read. Since you liked the ones I sent you last year I think you'll like these as well. They're not exactly about dragons and wizards, but they were written by a contemporary of Tolkien's – C. S. Lewis. I read these when I was younger and really enjoyed them. That's my favorite part of vacation – lying out on the beach in the lounge chair and reading and sunbathing all day. I can't wait for you to get here.

*I miss you.*

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-000-*

*Dear Hermione,*

*You are so evil! Do you have any idea what my imagination is capable of, after watching you try on swimsuits that day? And why wouldn't I believe that a guy would ask you out? He would be daft not to! And if you look anything like what I'm imagining, while you're lying out on that lounge chair, I wouldn't be surprised if every guy on the beach was after you! I think I'd better get there as soon as possible to protect you.*

*Fleur will be glad to pick you up. Send Hedwig to her with directions. Keep in mind that she's not at all familiar with the muggle parts of France, so you should pick a place for you to meet that's easy for a witch to find.*

*I'll see you on the 9th. I can't wait.*

*I miss you.*

*Love,*

*Harry*

*-oooOOOooo-*

Rose was wide-eyed throughout this episode, and spoke up as soon as Hermione finished. "So that's what you meant!"

Hermione raised an eyebrow in question.

"Back when we first started reading, and I asked you about how you acted so weird in the sixth book," the sharp young girl explained. "You said that wasn't really you. This is what you meant. You didn't even go to Hogwarts for your sixth year?"

Hermione smiled. "You'll just have to wait until we get to that part and see."

"Mum!"

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*

## Notebooks and Letters Holiday In France

### Year 6, Chapter 3 – Holiday in France

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 12

*What an amazing three days that was! We spent two days and one night in Paris, the next night at Fleur's estate in southern France, and then a day at Beauxbatons, which is near the Mediterranean coast. Now we're back here at the villa my parents have rented for the month of August, and Harry will be staying with us for two weeks !*

*Paris was wonderful. We didn't really have the time to visit any museums properly, so we stuck to the major tourist sights – the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe and the Champs-Élysées, the site of the Bastille, and Versailles. The evening we stayed there Harry and I took a walk along the banks of the Seine. It was every bit as romantic as I'd hoped it would be. We both promised each other that we'd come back some day when the war was over. I do have all those museums to show him after all. We also visited the Paris equivalent of Diagon Alley, Rue de Magique. Harry was under his invisibility cloak, since no one is supposed to know he is in France and we didn't want to take the chance of him being recognized. We didn't stay too long – just enough to get an idea of what it was like.*

*Accommodations turned out to not be a problem. Fleur brought along a magical tent that her family owns. It is very similar to the ones we stayed in at the Quidditch World cup, but more versatile. It has two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room, but the dimensions of each room are variable. Like all magical tents, it's bigger on the inside than on the outside, but within the expanded inner space the other four rooms can be resized as desired. For example, you can make the kitchen bigger and the living room smaller, if you want to eat your meals in the kitchen, or you can make the living area larger at the expense of the kitchen if you want a more formal dining space.*

*In our case, we made one bedroom small (for Harry) and the other one large enough to sleep 3 comfortably, and kept the kitchen and living room smaller. We didn't use the kitchen much at all, and just used the other space as a sitting room.*

*One of the results of that arrangement was that I got to know Tonks and Fleur better, as we talked a bit at night before we fell asleep. Tonks is a Black on her mother's side. Her mum, Andromeda, was Sirius's cousin, and her sisters are Bellatrix Lestrange and Narcissa Malfoy. I sympathized*

with her about having those two for aunts, but she pointed out that she'd never had any contact with them while growing up, since the Blacks had disowned her mother when she married her father, who was a muggleborn named Ted Tonks. She's perfectly fine with that, since she can't stand the Black family anyway and would rather forget that she's related to them. And having a muggleborn father enabled her to learn about the muggle world as well as the magical, which is useful to her as an Auror. That's why she is able to dress and act normally (as a muggle that is) when she needs to, which is difficult for pureblood witches and wizards.

I expressed my condolences to her on Sirius's death, which she accepted graciously. She's sad about it, as one would expect, but not as devastated as I'd been led to believe. There's something else that's upsetting her as well, which she's shared with Fleur but not me. She did mention being very glad that the Black estate, such as it was, went to Harry instead of to Bellatrix or Narcissa. Draco is certain to be quite angry about that, since he assumed that he would eventually inherit it. Harry will have to keep an eye on him this year in case he tries to retaliate. But then, when hasn't Draco had it in for Harry?

Fleur's family readily welcomed us to their home, which is a large manor house on an estate in the wine country, with lots of vineyards. It's nothing like the Burrow, or Grimmauld Place for that matter. I can see now why Fleur was bored at Bill's house before Harry arrived. Her mother is a strikingly beautiful woman, so it is obvious which side of the family Fleur gets her looks and her Veela heritage from. I'm not certain whether Mrs. Delacour is a full or half Veela.

The Delacours, of course, had heard all about Harry Potter, even before the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and became even more familiar with him as a result of that event. Young Gabrielle is completely smitten with him, considering him to be her personal hero for rescuing her from the lake in the Second Task, and collects every bit of news about him that she can find. It was quite embarrassing for him – he said that it was like an eleven year old Ginny all over again. It turns out that she just turned eleven and will be attending Beauxbatons in the fall. When I told her I was considering transferring there, she immediately promised to do everything she could to help me out. She's absolutely adorable, and the cutest little girl I've ever seen. She'll be a real heartbreaker when she's older, especially being a part Veela like Fleur.

The Delacour family has several house elves that tend their vineyards and produce the wine. It was a real struggle for me to be a polite guest and keep my mouth shut about the exploitation of these poor creatures. They treat them well, at least, and the elves seem to be genuinely happy with what they're doing. I still think it's no different than slave labor, which all civilized countries renounced more than a hundred years ago.

Beauxbatons is very different than Hogwarts, but no less impressive. It's absolutely breathtaking in how beautiful it is. It's not an old stone castle, but a more modern looking structure that strongly resembles the palace at Versailles. We later learned that this is not a coincidence – the people who built Versailles included some wizards, and it was actually modeled after Beauxbatons.

It was established as an alternative to Hogwarts about 200 years after Hogwarts was founded, as the population of Europe began to increase as it came out of the Dark Ages. It's structurally

smaller than Hogwarts, but its student population is larger, since it serves a larger geographic area. We learned that although Hogwarts draws its students exclusively from the British Isles, Beauxbatons students come from France and several surrounding countries, including Spain and Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Durmstrang, which is located on the Baltic coast of Germany, or rather Prussia, in what used to be Germany but is now part of Poland, serves Germany and Austria, the Scandinavian countries, The Balkan countries, and western Russia.

The building itself is much easier to navigate through than Hogwarts, with long straight corridors and lots of large windows. It is divided into an instructional section and a residential section. There are no houses; the students are divided by year, with a separate floor for each year. The upper years have the higher floors, which have the better views. The girls' wings are separated from the boys' wings by a large common room on each floor, and there are smaller common rooms scattered here and there. While it is possible for students to enter the corridors of the opposite sex during certain hours, they can't go into the bedrooms. That is, boys can't enter the girls' rooms and girls can't enter the boys' rooms, unlike Hogwarts, where only the girls' stairway is charmed to keep boys out.

Instruction is in French, and the robes they wear are considerably lighter in weight, made of fine silk, and are more form fitting than at Hogwarts. Fleur informs me that the Beauxbatons girls are pleased with this, and were generally horrified at how ugly the Hogwarts robes were. I have to agree that the unisex robes at Hogwarts did little for our figures. My parents were somewhat concerned about the expense of buying a whole new set of silk robes, while I was worried that my French wouldn't be good enough. I learned to speak French in primary school, but I haven't used it in ages, other than on our holiday here 3 years ago. Fleur came to the rescue on both of these counts. She said I could use some of her old robes if I wanted, and that she would help me with my French. Passing down school robes is apparently common, as the silk fabric is quite durable. Gabrielle will wear the same ones that Fleur did when she was a first year, and I'll return the ones I borrow when I'm finished with them so that she can wear them as well when she's older.

Madame Maxime was very enthusiastic to have me as a student. She told me she had a letter from Professor McGonagall that went on and on about what a fine student I was, claiming that I was the brightest witch they'd had at Hogwarts in the past 20 years. (I later figured out that she meant since Harry's mother, Lily.) Of course I was very embarrassed when she said this, but I could see how proud Harry was of me and that made me feel good inside.

Their system is different than ours, in that they take OWLs after their sixth year, not their fifth. At first I thought that meant that I would have to do them all over again, but when she saw my scores she said that meant that I would be put in seventh year instead of sixth year. That helped persuade my parents, since the idea of me being advanced a year appealed to their sense of pride. I liked the idea since it meant I'd graduate a year sooner and would definitely only be spending a year here before I could come back to Harry. It does mean that I will be the youngest in my class instead of the oldest, as I am now.

We had a long, serious discussion of the idea last night when we arrived back here in Cap d'Antibes. Harry brought up the idea of both of us transferring to Beauxbatons, but we discarded

it rather quickly. Having him there would make me less safe from my parents' point of view, and he needs the special training Dumbledore is going to give him. Finally everyone agreed that this was the way to go. So, I am now a Beauxbatons student.

Even though it's the best solution, I couldn't help crying a bit afterward. Harry hugged me as we sat out on the balcony. Neither of us could really think of anything to say, but that was OK. I just needed him to hold me.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 14

We've settled into something of a routine. We spend several hours a day studying – I study French with Fleur and Harry works out with Tonks. Tonks used her Auror connections to locate a place not too far from here for them to train. Part of his training is conditioning, and Tonks is making us run/walk on the beach in the morning. I join Harry for this part. I have discovered that I really need to get in shape. I also discovered that my new bikini tops don't support me well enough to jog on the beach. I'm sure Harry didn't mind the sight, but the bouncing made me really uncomfortable. I bought a sports bra after the first morning. Harry acted disappointed, but he still gets to see quite a bit of me.

We spend the rest of the day out on the beach. Harry is enjoying the series of books I brought for him – The Chronicles of Narnia. He can't sit back and read for hours like I can, though. He's too restless and needs to get up and do things. He does spend a fair bit of the time enjoying the scenery. That brings us to the issue of swimwear.

This is the French Riviera, of course, and the suits are very brief, both for men and for women. Mum and I discussed the whole topless thing before he arrived, and I warned him about it before we went to the beach the first day. He's adjusted to the concept rather well – a bit too well from my point of view. To be fair, he only stubbed his toe the one time, and only tripped over the lounge chair twice, and those were all on the first day. Of course, Mum and I both keep our tops on.

I'm not sure, but I think my mum would go topless if it were just her and my dad. I didn't ask and she didn't tell. There are some things you just don't want to know about what your parents do. Of course, I'm much too self-conscious about my body to do that – it took all of my Gryffindor courage to wear these bikinis. The more revealing one hardly covers me at all. I haven't worn that one yet, but I will after Harry gets used to me in this one. I have to admit that he does spend more time looking at me than at the other girls – even the topless ones. That gives me a pretty good feeling about myself. I think maybe in a few years, if Harry and I come back here, ( without my parents) I might be brave enough to give it a try.

Tonks and Fleur were pretty funny. Fleur started out in a one-piece suit that's more conservative than anything even my mother would wear. Mum says it's like what her mother wore when she was a girl. Tonks had on a normal one-piece like Mum and I wear back home. Fleur's suit didn't even make it out of the room. As soon as she saw what the rest of us were wearing she transfigured hers to look like Tonks's. By the end of the first morning they both decided to switch to two piece suits.

Now they look more like the other women on the beach, and Fleur is seriously considering something even smaller. I hope she doesn't decide to go topless. I don't think Harry would be able to take his eyes off her. My dad would like it, though, if my mum didn't kill him.

Fleur, of course, has a perfect figure. Her bust is considerably more impressive than mine, and her waist is smaller. Not fair! And Tonks can have any figure she wants. Oddly enough, though, she says she's using her normal body now because she's having trouble morphing lately. It has to do with her being so depressed. It turns out that it's because there's a guy she's interested in, but who's putting her off. When we figured out that it was a romantic thing, Harry and I first thought she might have fallen for Sirius. Sure, they were cousins, but apparently that's not uncommon with purebloods. But now we realize that's not it; there's another man involved. She talks to Fleur about it and Fleur offers her advice, which makes sense since she understands a lot more about that sort of thing.

So anyway, Harry and I are getting to see a lot of each other, so to speak. I'm enjoying looking at him almost as much as he's enjoying looking at me. I made him get one of those tight little suits the French and Italian guys wear. It's only fair that I get to ogle his nice firm bum too! And putting sunscreen on each other's backs is a real treat. I love rubbing my hands on his bare skin, and I get a tingle every time he does the same for me. The look on his face the first time I unhooked the back of my bikini so he could do my back was just priceless. I think he thought for a second that I was going to take it off completely. In your dreams, Potter!

Everyone is getting along OK. It's a bit cramped in the villa, but we worked it out. It's a two-bedroom, with my parents in one and me in the other. Harry sleeps on the sofa out in the living room. Fleur and Tonks put the tent up at night in the living room, and sleep in it. That also keeps them close to Harry, since they are his bodyguards after all.

I reminded Harry that gillyweed is native to the Mediterranean. We might try to find some and go skin diving using it. Mostly, though, we're just being together, trying to build up enough closeness to last us during the year we'll be apart. It won't be enough, but we'll do the best we can.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 20

This is absolutely the best vacation I've ever had! I think Harry and I are even closer now than we were before. I'm certain I've found the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. Unfortunately, it's going to be even harder being apart after he leaves next week.

The French is coming along nicely. I can read it just fine, but conversing is more of a challenge. Having Fleur talk with me in French every day is a godsend. Tonks is teaching Harry about spellcasting combinations in fighting. The way we did it in the DA, casting one spell at a time, is completely inadequate in a battle. She's also been telling us about what's happening in the fight against Voldemort.

Supposedly, Dumbledore has told her to keep Harry completely informed. I say 'supposedly',



because I don't think he even tells the Order everything. But at least Tonks is telling us what she knows. The current theory is that Voldemort took a major hit with the loss of almost his entire inner circle of Death Eaters, and needs some time to build up his forces. The dementor attacks are a diversion while he does this. The Ministry Aurors are spending nearly all their time responding to these attacks, and consequently he has free reign to make his other plans. The Aurors are making progress, but it will take some time before the dementors are completely eliminated as a threat. They're also concerned about giants.

No one is really sure what Dumbledore has been doing, but he's been away a lot. Harry recalled that he noticed when Dumbledore picked him up from the Dursley's that he had injured his wand hand. Tonks says it looks pretty serious, but no one knows what caused it or how to treat it. Harry vowed to find out more about this when he gets back to Hogwarts.

As far as the Ministry is concerned, Scrimgeour is really shaking things up. There's no question now that we're in a war. They've put out several communications to the wizarding public about what to do in case of attack, and general security precautions. Tonks says that Scrimgeour and Dumbledore are at odds, though. He wants more vocal support from him, but the Headmaster is taking a wait and see attitude. She confirmed that Scrimgeour is also anxious to meet with Harry.

Amelia Bones is on a tear, rooting out Voldemort supporters at the Ministry. It's an extension of her investigation about what happened at the Department of Mysteries. She's already got rid of several highly placed employees, including Marietta Edgecombe's mother. As we suspected, she was responsible for the floo network being shut down that night. According to Tonks, Madame Bones has been by far the most effective individual so far in the fight against Voldemort.

On a lighter note, we found a place to get gillyweed and the four of us are going diving today. Today will also be the first time I wear my more revealing bikini. I can't wait to see Harry's reaction. I may have to remind him to breathe. Along those lines, Fleur has progressed to some pretty brief bikinis of her own, but has assured me that she won't wear anything less than I do. So I don't have to worry about her going topless, or coming out in one of those thong bottoms that some of the other girls here wear. I can't imagine wearing something like that in public, although I'm sure that Harry would enjoy it if I did.

I asked Fleur about her choice of bathing costumes the first day, and she said she'd never been to a muggle beach before, so she consulted her old Muggle Studies book to find out what women wore. Apparently Beauxbatons' course is about 50 years out of date. I suppose that's at least better than Hogwarts' course which is even more antiquated. At any rate, she told me Veelas normally avoid going out in public in this little clothing because of the attention they get. I can understand that, based on the reaction of all the males here to her when she's at the beach. I think I could lay out starkers right next to her and no one would notice. Well, except for Harry, of course, the dear. Fleur also said that French witches usually wear two piece suits like most of the girls here, except they keep their tops on.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 27

*Today was Harry's last day here. I can't believe how I can feel so happy and so sad at the same time. Happy because we just spent the two most wonderful weeks of our lives together. Sad, of course, because now I won't see him for 4 months. I'm also still tingling from what we did before he left, and the gifts we exchanged.*

Harry looked over at Hermione for the sixth time in the last quarter hour. He had finished the last book of the Narnia series yesterday, and didn't have anything to do now but enjoy the scenery on the beach. And she was looking especially good today. She was wearing the smaller of her two bikinis, the one that had made his mouth go dry when he had first seen her in it the previous week. Her father had practically had a fit about it, but her mother had somehow calmed him down. He didn't think he wanted to know what she had whispered in his ear that made him choke like that, but he hadn't seen either of them on the beach the rest of the day.

This particular suit was a red string bikini with string tie sides. The bottom had a small triangle in the front that barely covered the essentials, and had what Hermione told him was a Rio cut back, meaning that about half of her bum was exposed. That seemed to be about the same fraction of her breasts that the tiny triangles of the top left visible. Even after a week his jaw still dropped when he saw her walking toward him wearing it. Right now, she was lying on her stomach reading a book in French, and her mouth was moving as she worked on her pronunciation. The strings of her top were untied in back and were dangling in the sand alongside the lounge chair on either side of her. They were driving him crazy. So was the barely covered flesh at the top of her legs.

"Is there something I can help you with or are you just enjoying the view?" Harry's gaze snapped away from where it was fixed on her behind and shifted to look at the smirk that had crept onto her face as she looked away from her book at him.

"Well, I'm certainly enjoying the view, but if you can tear yourself away from your reading for a while I wouldn't mind going for a walk," he suggested.

"OK. My head is about as full of French verb forms as it can get right now," she agreed. "Tie me up." Harry arched his eyebrows at her at the innuendo in her request, but she just cocked her head and grinned saucily at him. He reached over and stroked his hands up and down her back, taking his time with the strings, and managing to graze his fingertips over her partially covered shapely bottom once before he finished. She made no protest at his dalliance, indeed it was all she could do to keep from moaning in pleasure.

She felt his eyes lovingly caress her figure as she rolled to a sitting position, then stood to face him and smiled as he reached to take her hand helping her to her feet. Hand in hand they headed off down the shoreline one last time.

"Ready for a dip?" Harry asked about twenty minutes later. They had left the more crowded section of the beach behind and by now they were both sweltering in the hot Mediterranean sun. Hermione nodded and they turned into the water and waded out, picking their way carefully around the occasional rock. Soon they were covered up to their shoulders.

“I’m really going to miss you,” Hermione whispered as she moved closer to him, pressing her body to his and linking her arms around his neck. Harry’s acknowledgement was cut short by her lips and for the next few minutes they lost themselves in each other.

Once more Harry’s hands drifted down to her swimsuit bottom and again Hermione made no protest. Instead, she followed his example and dropped her own hands to the back of his suit. She gasped as his fingers crossed the fabric/skin boundary and began to stroke the bare part of her bum, and she elicited a moan from him as she squeezed his nicely toned gluteus muscles in turn.

If Harry thought he had died and gone to heaven, he was not prepared for what happened next. After a thorough massage he relaxed as Hermione’s hands released him and moved back to untangle his own hands from her bunched up suit bottom. To his shock she moved them up to place them over the two small triangles of the other half of her swimsuit, while she attacked his mouth again.

Curling his fingers gently over what she had offered him as if they were a rare treasure, he rubbed his thumbs timidly over the hard nubs that appeared in the thin fabric. This time Hermione did not try to suppress her moans, and both their hearts were pounding enough to make their chests ache. Harry was having difficulty controlling his breathing as Hermione returned her own hands to their previous location on his bum and pulled him against her hips, which also had the effect of letting her feel just how excited he was about the activity they were engaging in.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, they were rudely interrupted from their increasingly frenzied activity when a large wave crashed over them, breaking them apart and leaving them sputtering for breath. Since the water had been completely calm just seconds before, they were not surprised when they brushed their dripping hair out of their eyes and spotted a pair of witches giggling on the shore.

“Wotcher, you two!” called Tonks. “Your parents sent us to tell you it was time to come in and get ready for dinner. You about finished out there?”

Both teens blushed bright red as they turned to each other, then burst out laughing. Hermione quickly adjusted her suit to make sure everything was in place, and Harry pulled his own down in the back where it had ridden up as a result of Hermione’s exertions. Then he reached his arm around her and pulled her in close, and she leaned her head against his chest as they picked their way back to the beach and joined their smirking friends. Even though they managed to keep up a friendly conversation on the walk back, they continually exchanged knowing glances and neither of them lost the bright smiles that filled their faces, both very content with this new aspect of their relationship.

*Oh, how I’d wanted to do that so much. I’d been thinking about it all week. It will certainly give me more to dream about while we’re apart. Whenever I close my eyes I can remember the feel of him touching me.*

*Another thing that will help is the presents we exchanged later. He said he had an early birthday*

*present for me, and I told him I had a late birthday present for him. Neither of us knew the other was doing it, but it turns out Fleur knew and had helped us each pick out the other's present. She's such a romantic! It turned out that we both got the other a pendant that will remind us of each other. Mine is a golden snitch on a lovely gold chain. The one I got him was a miniature book on a leather cord (very masculine of course). The best part was that Fleur enchanted them – they respond to our thoughts. So when I think of how much I love Harry, the book will get warm and he'll be able to feel it, and the same for me with the snitch. We're going to try to take some time each night before we go to sleep to share our feelings with each other.*

*I tried not to cry when they left, but I couldn't stop a few tears. We stood there and hugged each other until Tonks said it was time to go. She's taking him back to the Burrow while Fleur is going with us to help me get my things to Beauxbatons next week. I made him promise that he'd write at least every week, and he grinned and said that Hedwig was going to get a real workout this year.*

*I miss him already. But the nice thing is that my snitch has been warm ever since he left.*

*I love you Harry.*

-oooOOOooo-

Rose, of course, had a question. “OK, I understand that she changed the story, but why in the sixth book did she make you act like, um ...”

“Like an empty-headed, boy-crazed, self-absorbed brat who turned her back on her best friend when he needed her most?” Hermione offered with an amused look on her face. Her daughter grinned back at her and nodded.

“Well, for one thing, she wasn't very happy with me at the time,” Hermione explained. “When she was writing that book it had only been a short while since we'd had that big dispute about her taking the story in a different direction and changing the ending so drastically. It may have been her way of getting back at me for the trouble I'd caused.”

“Not only that, but it was probably an overreaction to what was termed the ‘shipping wars’. As I told you before, there was a lot of speculation by readers about whether I'd end up with Harry or Ron. The ones who thought I should be with Harry tended to be the more mature readers who understood relationships better, and that annoyed her since she intended for Harry to end up with Ginny, and me to end up with Ron.” She paused to chuckle when her daughter made a face, wrinkling up her nose in disgust with that idea.

“So I think she went out of her way to make it look like Harry and I weren't as close as everyone thought we were. Since I wasn't even there that year, she could pretty much make my character do anything she wanted me to. I must say that I was furious when I saw the book, and she and I stopped communicating with each other entirely after that. At least she brought us back together for the last book, though. There were certain things that happened that she just couldn't leave out, and in those scenes you can see how close we had become.”

Rose settled back on the sofa in thought, and eventually nodded her understanding, so Hermione retrieved the next letter.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters Suspicious Behaviour

### Year 6 Chapter 4, Suspicious Behavior

*Dear Hermione,*

*Have you heard the news? Amelia Bones was killed last night. Tonks got an emergency call about it. The whole DMLE's in an uproar now. When she came back she was really down – says Madame Bones was the best administrator at the Ministry, and was really making a difference in the war. She thinks that's why she was targeted. By killing her Voldemort is sending a message to the Ministry of Magic showing them what will happen if they oppose him. The rumor is that he killed her himself, and that she put up quite a fight.*

*I feel so awful about it. Not only losing another powerful ally for our side, but she'd taken a personal interest in me, and was one of the bright spots in my life. And of course there's Susan, I feel bad for her too. I'm enclosing a sympathy note to her that I started. I couldn't think of much to say but I reckoned you could. When you're finished send it along to her with Hedwig from the both of us.*

*We went to Diagon Alley today to get our school supplies, and something interesting happened. Tell me what you think it means. We ran into Malfoy at Madame Malkins. He was being quite rude to her – that wasn't the unusual part, of course – when he suddenly went spare. She'd grabbed the left sleeve of his robe to make some adjustment and he yelled at her and pushed her away. Then he and his mother stormed out of the shop.*

*OK, by itself that wasn't too strange. But later, while we were in Fred and George's new shop, we saw him sneaking off toward Knockturn Alley. Well, Ron and I looked around and saw that no one was looking, so we took off after him. Except Ginny noticed us and followed along, catching up just as we got to the entrance. We tried to get her to go back, but she got stubborn and said she wasn't being left behind again. (Yeah, like the Department of Mysteries was some sort of adventure she'd missed out on.) Well, we stopped arguing with her and the three of us got under my cloak and followed him.*

*He went into Borgin and Burkes, who sell really dodgy stuff. Do you remember how I told you I saw Malfoy and his dad in there the summer before second year? Well, evidently he was there to buy something but they didn't have what he wanted because he was arguing with the guy behind*

the counter. Then he pushed up his left sleeve and showed it to the man, who suddenly got a real scared look on his face. By that time Ginny had the Extendable Ears out. (You remember them? We used them at headquarters to try to listen in on conversations and meetings.) We heard him demanding that the guy, who turned out to be Borgin himself, fix something for him. Whatever it is was too big to carry around.

After he left, Ginny got the idea to go into the store herself. Before we could stop her she slipped out from under the cloak and dashed inside. There she claimed to be Malfoy's girlfriend and wondered if he'd left anything behind. Except for the part where Ron almost lost his lunch thinking of her and Malfoy together (I had to agree with him on that one!) I was amazed that she almost pulled it off. That girl is scary. She can say anything with a straight face. She lied through her teeth to him without batting an eye. The only thing that tipped Borgin off was when he noticed her red hair and recognized her as a Weasley. I guess Mr. Weasley has raided Borgin and Burkes from time to time, so Weasleys aren't too popular in that shop. She had to run for it as soon as he figured out who she was, and we all hightailed it back to Diagon Alley.

So, tell me what you think was going on there. Ron and I have been having a bit of a row over it. It probably didn't help that I ribbed him about how convincing Ginny was as Malfoy's girlfriend.

Here's some other news. Several shops in the alley have either closed or been attacked, including Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor and Ollivander's Wand Shop. Fred and George are doing fine, though. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff they were selling. There was a section of Defense things – Shield Hats, Cloaks, Gloves, Instant Darkness Powder, and Decoy Detonators for example. They gave me some of the Decoy Detonators; I reckon they might come in handy sometime.

Ginny bought something called a Pygmy Puff, some kind of miniature puffskein. She named it Arnold, but it looked to me like something Crookshanks or Hedwig would call 'lunch'.

And they were also doing a bustling trade in 'romance' items, including love potions and daydream charms. Those put you into a 30-minute fantasy of your choice. You should have seen the girls swarming around that section of the store. Fred and George gave Ginny a hard time about it, saying they were absolutely not selling a love potion to their sister. I doubt they would have been too happy with the idea of her using one of those daydream charms either.

Of course, all my fantasies involve you, most of them including a beach and 'swimming' in the ocean. Every night I dream about those two weeks in France. I'm so glad we had that holiday together. It's going to make this year loads more bearable.

I miss you.

Love,

Harry

-000 -

*Dear Harry,*

*I only have time for a quick note because we're getting ready to leave. I'm back home now, getting my things together for Beauxbatons. I agree with you that losing Amelia Bones was a real tragedy. I finished the sympathy note to Susan, and Hedwig will take it along with this letter. It was very considerate of you to think of her like that.*

*About Malfoy, I assume you think the bit with his left arm was evidence that he might be a Death Eater. Actually, I'm having trouble figuring out which one of you doesn't think he's a Death Eater. From the way you worded your letter, I assume that you do. But I can't imagine Ron not jumping at the opportunity to think badly of Malfoy! I would just caution you about jumping to conclusions. Remember how much trouble that got us into last year. The deductions we made about your dreams were perfectly logical, but we were working with incomplete information. But you should definitely keep an eye on him this year. What you said certainly seems suspicious.*

*It sounds like Fred and George have some pretty amazing products. I'm happy that they've become successful, even if it is in such an unorthodox way. Do they give you a discount? (Yes, I figured out where their startup money must have come from. Do you really think you could keep that from someone who knows you like I do? Don't worry, I think it was very sweet of you.)*

*One thing you mentioned worries me though, and that's the love potions. I think you need to be very careful this year. Despite what you think, you are quite fanciable, and lots of girls are going to be after you. And I won't be there to protect my 'interests'. It might be a good idea to have Dobby check your food. I laughed, though at the twins' refusal to sell one to Ginny. If there's any girl who doesn't need a love potion it's her. There are plenty of boys who want to date her. And she's clever enough to figure out a way to get hold of one anyway, if she wanted to.*

*Hermione thought a moment, and then decided not to say any more about Ginny. Harry was certainly well aware of her long time crush on him, and there would be no point in bringing it up again. Besides, she trusted Ginny.*

*Got to go now. You really made me blush with that comment about your fantasies, but I've been having similar ones. Does your book pendant get warm at night? It should. I hold my snitch in my hand while I think of how much I love you.*

*I miss you.*

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-000-*

*Dear Hermione,*



*Well, the year started out with another adventure. Nothing too dangerous though, just the train ride with some interesting things happening. It started out normally enough, with our usual last-minute arrival at Kings Cross. We found a compartment and I hung out with Neville, Susan, and Luna while Ron went to the prefect meeting.*

Once Ron had left the compartment, Harry was about to sit down when Susan appeared at the door. Without thinking about it, he crossed over to her and wrapped her up in a hug. Her eyes went wide momentarily, as this was quite out of the ordinary for the normally reserved Harry Potter, but then she closed them and sighed, accepting his condolences and comfort. For his part, this was the only girl Harry had ever hugged besides Hermione, and he couldn't help but compare the experiences. Susan was ... bigger ... than Hermione, so that was different, but he decided he liked the way he and Hermione fit together better. And of course, not much could compare with the amount of enthusiasm Hermione put into her hugs, even when they had just been good friends.

"Susan, I'm so sorry," Harry murmured softly. "If there's anything I can do, let me know."

"Thanks, Harry," she acknowledged as they pulled apart, her eyes sparkling from the bit of moisture that had gathered and her warm feeling for him.

"I know it always sounds phony when people say it, but I think I can say that I know at least a bit how you're feeling," he continued. "If you ever want to talk about it, come see me."

This heartfelt offer released some of the tears Susan had been holding back. Having had both his parents killed by Voldemort, as well as losing his godfather just a few months ago, certainly qualified him to make that claim.

"Thank you," she repeated as she wiped her eyes. "And that was a lovely note you and Hermione sent." Then she forced a smile and changed the subject. "She also asked me to keep an eye on you, since she's not going to be here to keep you out of trouble."

This was news to Neville and Luna, who had wondered why Hermione hadn't come into the compartment with Harry and Ron. Susan sat down next to Harry, now offering him comfort in turn, as he filled their other two friends in on the details of Hermione's absence. Neville told about getting his new wand, and revealed that his Gran had been proud of his actions at the Ministry. Luna announced that her father had been happy to have his suspicions about the Death Chamber confirmed, and informed them that the Quibbler was selling better than ever.

All the while there was a constant stream of students passing by, peering in through the windows at them. While Harry was used to living in a fishbowl, this celebrity was a new and unwelcome development for the others. Susan also noted that she was receiving quite a few glares from the girls, who observed how closely she was sitting next to Harry.

Soon Ron arrived with some news – Malfoy was no longer a prefect. Initially they hoped that it was because of his abusing the position the previous year, with his role in the Inquisitorial Squad, but Ron quashed that speculation by pointing out that Pansy Parkinson was still a prefect. That led

to speculation about why Malfoy would voluntarily give up something so prestigious, and reminded Harry of their encounter with the blonde Slytherin in Diagon Alley. He wondered if the two items were related.

Just before lunch some scrolls were delivered by a blushing third year girl. Rolling his eyes at how annoying this adoration was getting already, and recalling Hermione's warning, Harry turned away from her and opened the sealed parchment.

"It's an invitation to lunch," Neville announced in surprise. Harry looked up to see that Neville and Susan had also received one, but not Ron or Luna. "From someone called Professor Slughorn."

Harry explained about meeting the portly wizard, and revealed his penchant for 'collecting' famous or potentially famous students.

"No surprises about why I'm not invited then," snarked Ron with a sour expression. "Harry's obvious, of course, and Susan because of her aunt (Harry winced a bit at the insensitivity of that remark, and moved his hand to give Susan's arm a squeeze, which she acknowledged with a grateful glance) but ..."

"... but I'm not famous!" Neville exclaimed, completing Ron's analysis. Harry briefly wondered if Slughorn could possibly have known that Neville had 'almost' been the Boy Who Lived, but dismissed that thought.

"Is your gran important in wizarding society?" Harry suggested.

"I suppose," Neville answered doubtfully. "I've never paid much attention to those sorts of things." Susan then confirmed that this was in fact the case; as a girl, and being from a prominent family herself, she was more attuned to these sorts of things.

"Don't worry Ronald, I'll keep you company," Luna asserted. Harry smiled as Ron's face cycled through several emotions. His best mate was confused about what to make of Luna's attentions. At the end of the past year he had begun to appreciate some of her qualities, but she was still ... weird. He finally responded with an incomprehensible grunt of acknowledgment.

Once the trio reached Slughorn's compartment, they found that the situation was exactly as Harry had speculated. The new professor spent the entire time sucking up to a group of students, none of whom Harry recognized except for Cormac McClaggen, a large seventh year Gryffindor, and Blaise Zabini, a good-looking, dark skinned sixth year Slytherin.

Harry personally was not impressed by any of them. What did it matter that Blaise's mother was a famous beauty, or that someone's uncle had invented something, or someone else's grandfather was a personal friend of the Minister of Magic? As far as he was concerned, Neville and Susan (and Ron and Luna too, for that matter) were important on their own merits, and were deservedly famous for their role at the Department of Mysteries, not because of her aunt or his gran. After all, the six of them had contributed to the capture of a dozen Death Eaters. *That* was worth being

impressed about. He did find it interesting, however, that Malfoy apparently was not among the invitees.

Eventually Slughorn ran out of hot air and dismissed them to return to their carriages. As Harry spotted Zabini returning to the Slytherin compartment, he had an idea.

“Neville,” he whispered as he disappeared under his invisibility cloak. “I’m going to try to find out what’s going on with Malfoy. Come by his compartment and make a scene if I’m not back in half an hour.”

“Sure,” Neville replied, feeling a bit foolish at talking to an empty corridor.

“Does this sort of thing happen a lot?” Susan queried as they resumed the trek to their own compartment.

“More often than you might think,” Neville responded. “I learned my lesson to just go along with it, or at least not interfere, all the way back in first year.” He then related the tale of being petrified by Hermione when he tried to stop the trio from going after the Philosopher’s Stone. By the time he finished Susan was in stitches. She had wondered what he had done to earn the points that had won Gryffindor the House Cup that year.

As they neared their compartment, they passed one in which Ginny and Dean were wrapped in a passionate embrace, unconcerned with the rest of the world while they thoroughly explored each other’s mouths. Susan noted how Neville stiffened at the sight, and heard him mutter, “Good thing Ron didn’t see that.”

Realizing that there was more to her friend’s distress than concern about the pretty red-haired girl being found out by her brother, Susan asked quietly, “You have a crush on her, don’t you?” Neville did not answer, but his red face responded for him. “You can bide your time and wait if you want to,” she suggested. “She does go through boyfriends rather quickly. And the one she really wants is already taken, you know.” This time Neville responded with a shrug. He knew that everything Susan was saying was true.

“There’s another alternative, though,” she continued. This finally got him to look up at her questioningly. “There are other girls available. And some of them might be interested in you.” The questioning look on Neville’s face turned to surprise, and then to shock as she took his hand and laced her fingers into his. Then they both turned away from each other, looking straight ahead as they resumed their walk, somehow moving more slowly than they had been before. Their hands stayed together. And even though they weren’t looking at each other, each was aware of the shy smile on the other’s face.

‘Hmm,’ Susan thought to herself. ‘I’m going to have something else interesting to tell Hermione about in my next letter.’

Precisely thirty minutes later, Ron and Neville appeared outside the Slytherin compartment.

“What do you two losers want?” Malfoy sneered as the door opened.

“We missed your annual visit, Malfoy, and the words of wisdom you always have for us,” Ron declared with a smirk. Malfoy stood, and wands appeared in the hands of his six Slytherin classmates who shared the compartment with him.

“In case you haven’t noticed, Weasel, *you* are outnumbered this time,” Malfoy taunted. “You don’t even have famous Potter to save you. What’s he doing, crying over his lost Mudblood?” Hermione’s absence had evidently been noted and the infamous Hogwarts gossip network had spread this information throughout the train by now.

Malfoy’s sneer disappeared as ten DA members filled the corridor, led by Susan Bones. After the two sides glared at each other for a while, the two Gryffindors backed out of the hostile compartment, and the group eventually dispersed. In the confusion, there was no chance that anyone would have noticed the black-haired youth under the invisibility cloak slip out with them.

*Now, I know you’re probably worried about what might have happened, but I think I had it all under control. You probably thought I’d get caught and have the snot kicked out of me, right? Anyway, from what Malfoy was saying, he’s definitely up to something. He didn’t come right out and tell them, but he implied that he was on a special mission from Voldemort. Of course, that could have just been him bragging, but don’t you agree that it’s significant that he gave up his prefect position?*

*Anyway, after that excitement the opening feast and the sorting were pretty normal. The only big news is that Snape’s the new DADA professor and Slughorn’s teaching potions. I had a feeling he wasn’t going to be the Defense teacher, but I can’t believe Dumbledore gave it to Snape. And that used to be my favorite class. Well not last year, obviously, but before that it was. Several people have already asked me if we’re going to do the DA again, but I don’t know. I’m not sure I can lead it well enough without you to help me figure out what to cover. What do you think?*

*Hagrid told us that Grawp’s living in a cave up in the mountains now, instead of in the forest. He says he’s much happier there. I bet the centaurs are even happier! But that reminded me that with all that happened this summer I haven’t really given much thought to what classes I’m taking this year. Last spring I signed up for Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology, and Potions, but I knew I probably wouldn’t get the O I needed to get into NEWT Potions, and I didn’t. So maybe I should take Care of Magical Creatures instead? Hagrid would be devastated if neither Ron or I took it.*

*Oh, I almost forgot. I’m the Gryffindor quidditch captain this year! Katie and I have been on the team the longest, and I figured McGonagall would give it to Katie since I was banned last year, but Katie didn’t want it. I almost think it should go to Ron, though, since he knows a lot more quidditch strategy than I do. But I’m going to give it a go. He’s already pretty busy with being prefect. Of course, as you might expect, I also got my Firebolt back. I’m going to have to take it out tomorrow and make sure it’s still up to snuff.*

*Mentioning quidditch reminded me of the snitch I gave you. I bet it will be warm tonight, because I'll be thinking of you a lot. And yes, I've noticed when my book pendant gets warm. It helps me remember how much I love you.*

*I miss you.*

*Love,*

*Harry*

*-000-*

*Dear Harry,*

*Whatever am I going to do with you? You have no idea how much I worry about you, being there without me to watch you and keep you out of trouble. That's been my job practically since the day I met you, you know. I feel so helpless here! Please promise me you'll be careful.*

*I am glad that you took a bit of time to plan your little foray into the serpents' den instead of just rushing right in without thinking. I cringe when I think what could have happened if they'd caught you. I doubt if they would have killed you, but I wouldn't have put it past them to hex you severely or beat you unconscious.*

*I'm becoming more convinced that you are right that Malfoy is up to something. I can't think of any other explanation for his actions. The bragging is not that unusual, but giving up his prefect position is hard to believe. It's possible that he's doing something sinister for his father, instead of for Voldemort, but really that's practically the same thing. Is Ron convinced yet?*

*I heard from Susan too, and she included some things you just glossed over in your letter. That was very sweet of you, offering to be there for her like that. And you are far too modest about your accomplishments. I agree with you that honors should be based on the student's own accomplishments. But you deserved to be in that luncheon, more than anyone in the compartment, based on what you've done since you came to Hogwarts, never mind what happened when you were one.*

*Somehow, from what you told me about Professor Slughorn, I'm not surprised that he's teaching Potions and Snape's teaching Defense. I have mixed feelings about that. Snape is certainly knowledgeable about Defense against the Dark Arts, perhaps more than anyone besides Dumbledore. But whether he will actually teach you anything, instead of just tormenting and insulting you every period, remains to be seen. I'm hoping for the best.*

*As far as the DA is concerned, I think you should continue it, at least in some form. Would it still have to be secret? If you call it a study group Snape can hardly complain about it. And don't sell yourself short. You were great at teaching! If you like, we can still discuss what to cover through these letters. Another benefit of the group was the camaraderie that developed among the members. The inter-house cooperation was wonderful.*

*I understand what you're saying about possibly taking Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid. I don't know what to suggest; I mostly feel that you should select courses for academic reasons. Perhaps you're right, though.*

*Congratulations on being quidditch captain! I only saved this till now because I'm going through your letter point by point. I'm so proud of you! You're such a good teacher and leader, I just know Gryffindor will win the Cup again this year. I'm only sorry I won't be there to cheer you on. I never missed a single one of your games, you know, and I was always there just to root for you (and to help keep you alive, remember).*

*OK, let me tell you a bit about how things are going here. I'm taking the same courses I would have back at Hogwarts, or their equivalents – Charms, Transfiguration, Defense, Potions, Herbology, Ancient Runes, and Arithmency. I think the language problem will be manageable. Arithmency should be little problem, since we're dealing mostly with numbers, and Ancient Runes are the same in any language. All spells are in Latin anyway, so incantations won't be an issue. Potions will be the most difficult, since I have to learn new words for all the ingredients.*

*We had our first day of classes today, and everything's official – I'm considered to be in seventh year and am going for my NEWTs at the end of the year. At Hogwarts we have that year after OWLs to relax a bit, but here they just continue straight on to NEWTs. (You don't have to say it – I know even if I were there I'd be starting to study for NEWTs already this year. I just can't help myself.) Hopefully it will be a good way to counter my loneliness; I can lose myself in my studying.*

*Not that I'm not fitting in here or anything like that. In fact, I ran into someone I knew! Remember Sally-Anne Perks? She was sorted right before you were first year, into Hufflepuff. She's a muggleborn, and left Hogwarts after our second year, because of those attacks. Some officials from the Ministry came to her house and told her family she needed to be trained in her magic, or they'd have to Oblivate her. Her only other choice was to transfer to another wizarding school, so here she is. It's nice to have a fellow countryman here. She helps me with my French, too, since she can always figure out what I'm trying to say in English and translate it for me. And Gabrielle is sort of my unofficial mascot. With no house tables, students can eat anywhere they want, although they tend to stay with their own years. But Gabrielle has sat beside me at every meal so far. She's taking very seriously her vow to help me out however she could. She's so cute!*

*The other girls are OK as well. It's a bit overwhelming at first. There are at least twice as many students here as at Hogwarts, which means something like 40 to 50 witches just in my year. We all live together in a long corridor on the top floor, 2 to a room. Since the bathrooms are communal, that means that there are constantly witches running around in their underwear in the mornings. That's something else I discovered right away. French witches are nowhere near as modest as English witches! And their lingerie is something else. Think about the tiniest bikinis you saw on the beach in the Riviera, only lacier, and you'll have a good picture of what I'm talking about. Not that I want you dwelling on that picture, mind you!*

*As you might expect, all of them have heard of you, and many have also heard of me. The ones that have know I'm your friend, but few of them know I'm your girlfriend. I think I should keep that to myself as much as possible. I might need to create a boyfriend, though, to fend off any attention*

from guys (if that even happens), and to explain all the letters I'll be getting (right?). I'm thinking of calling him Henry, since that's pretty close to Harry in case I slip up. You can choose your last name.

It also occurs to me that perhaps we ought to charm these letters so no one else can read them, in case Hedwig gets intercepted. Can you get Remus or Tonks to teach you the spell that Sirius used to charm your letter last Christmas?

Even though I'm fitting in as well as can be expected, it's nothing like being with you. I'm thinking of counting down the days. 1 down, 302 to go.

I miss you.

All my love,

Hermione

-000-

Dear Hermione,

Guess what? I'm in Potions! It turns out that requiring an O to continue was Snape's rule, not Slughorn's. McGonagall told me that on the first day of classes, and the next thing I knew I was back down in the dungeons. And I'm pretty good at it. I actually won a prize for best potion!

OK, before you wonder which Ravenclaw is forging this letter to you, I'll explain. When we first entered the room, there were NEWT level potions in cauldrons scattered about, and Slughorn asked us to identify them. The first one was Polyjuice, which I knew (thanks to you!) and the second was Veritaserum. I didn't get it right away, but after he told us what it was I recognized it. Then came Amortentia, for which the odor was supposed to be the clue. (No one figured it out, but I bet you would have.) He passed a sample around for us to smell – it's supposed to be different for everyone, according to what attracts us. I smelled my quidditch broom, treacle tart, and something that reminded me of the beach in France. I think it might have been something in the sunscreen. I found myself wondering what things you would smell. I'm pretty sure books would have been one of them.

Since neither Ron or I had a Potions book, because we didn't think we'd be in the class, Slughorn loaned us some from the storeroom. Well, mine had writing all over it – notes and corrections to the procedures. When it came time to make the day's potion, Draught of Living Death, I used some of the altered instructions. One of them was a different way to cut up some of the ingredients, and the other was a change in stirring. (I don't think I'll ever understand Potions. What in Merlin's name does it matter which direction you stir it?)

Anyway, it came out perfect. I think the book must have belonged to some Potions prodigy, who figured out how to improve the procedure. What do you think?

The result was that Slughorn now thinks I'm a star Potions student. I wish! He said I must take after my mum, who apparently was a wiz at Potions. (Did I tell you that he told me this summer that my mum was one of his favorite students? He made a comment about her being a muggleborn, and I told her that my best friend was also a muggleborn, and was the best student in our year.) He was disappointed that you aren't here this year. He probably was thinking of adding you to his 'collection'. He's already started inviting me to these parties he hosts every couple of weeks, but I put him off because of quidditch practice.

Oh, I almost forgot. The prize I won was a vial of Felix Felicis, also called liquid luck. I'm thinking of saving it for when I have to battle Voldemort. Maybe it could be 'the power he knows not'?

Thinking of that, I haven't told the prophecy to anyone but you yet. Do you think I should tell Ron? Anyone else?

Because I'm in Potions, I have a decision to make about Care of Magical Creatures. I'm now taking 5 classes, and that would make 6. I know 6 would be no problem for you, but I've got quidditch and possibly some sort of revised DA to consider too. On the other hand, Hagrid's class isn't exactly very difficult.

Responding to what you wrote, I don't remember anything about Sally-Anne. I didn't even know which year she left. I'm glad that Gabrielle's 'taking care' of you.

You are so evil, teasing me like that about your dormmates' underwear! I certainly do remember some of the bikinis on the beach last month, but the one I remember the best is that sexy little one you wore. Remember that last day? I sure do!

Oh yeah, you definitely need to claim to have a boyfriend! Wouldn't want those French or Italian guys to sweep you off your feet! Henry's fine. I thought about using something clever like Evans or Porter for the last name, but decided they were too obvious. Let's go with something simple like Smith or Jones.

With regard to Malfoy, Ron's coming around, but he says the real proof will be if Malfoy gives up quidditch. I think he was kidding, but I'm not sure.

I'll talk to Tonks about how to charm the letters the next time I see her. Even though Madame Bones isn't around any more, she's still assigned to Hogsmeade. I sent her a note this afternoon. I'm not sure where Remus is, but maybe she'll be able to get in touch with him.

Well, that's quite a bit for the first day of classes! I'm off to bed as soon as I give this to Hedwig. It shouldn't be too hard for you to figure out what I'll be dreaming about tonight.

I miss you.

Love,



‘Henry’

-000-

Dear Harry,

*I don't think I need to use your pretend name in my letters, since no one here will see them. But Henry Jones is fine. Just to make it more interesting, Henry Jones, Jr.*

*That Potions book of yours makes me nervous. I don't need to remind you what happened to Ginny. You don't really know what sort of charms or enchantments might be on it. Here's something I'd like you to try. Tap your wand on the cover and say 'Specialis Revelio'. That should reveal hidden charms. And please be careful about using unknown instructions. I know it worked out that time, but I don't want you getting hurt if a potion explodes on you. At least be ready with a Protego spell when you try something.*

*It's not to say that I'm not proud of you for winning the prize, or that the Felix Felicis might not come in handy, but well, it wasn't really your own ability, right? You know, if you get an undeserved reputation for potions brilliance Slughorn will be even more interested in you.*

*OK, I guess I've expressed my reservations well enough. Please promise me you'll be careful?*

*With regard to the potions identification, you're right, I would have guessed the Amortentia. Besides the fragrance, there should also have been a mother of pearl sheen to the surface. As far as what you smelled in it, the ingredient you're thinking of in sunscreen is cocoa butter. Every time I smell that it reminds me of the beach too.*

*I think that might also be one of my three things. Especially because it reminds me of you making me feel all tingly by rubbing it into my back. And legs. And ... (See, my memory of that last day is just as good as yours!) You are right that the smell of books would probably be one of my things, but I'm not sure what the other would be. My broomstick has some pretty happy thoughts associated with it too, all of them involving flying with you.*

*I've had all of my classes at least once now, except for Defense. I was starting to get really nervous about how I'm going to manage all the work, but today a few of us formed a study group. It was a bit strange the way it came about. I'm still getting used to how things work socially around here, as well as the way the girls dress.*

Hermione followed her roommate Michelle into her room and watched as the girl pulled her robes off over her head and flopped into a chair. She was still having trouble getting used to the casual attitude toward clothing here. In September in southern France it was quite warm; to her relief the robes they wore were seasonal, and the summer style actually had short sleeves. She mused to herself that someone like Malfoy would certainly have difficulty disguising his dark mark at Beauxbatons. Many of the girls, however, wasted no time in removing even this lightweight garment once in the privacy of their rooms. And nearly all of them wore only undergarments

beneath, so her roommate was currently lounging in a lacy bra and knicker set. Hermione herself was still too shy for that, and wore either a light camisole or a tank top, paired with tap pants or running shorts, under her borrowed silk robes.

Something outside caught Michelle's attention. Jumping up, she dashed over to the window and leaned out. "Jean-Claude!" she called out. "Who's your friend?"

"Giovanni," he returned, as both boys stopped to look up at the partially clad witch hanging out of the seventh floor window. From her point of view, Hermione was getting a clear and unobstructed look at her roommate's barely covered bum. It didn't seem that it could be very comfortable, with that thin strip of lace that disappeared between her legs, and Hermione wondered if it was an acquired taste.

"Come up here, I want to introduce you to my new roommate," the outgoing young witch insisted. To Hermione's relief, Michelle then threw on some conservative shorts and a sleeveless blouse, which she tied at the bottom around her midriff, just below her breasts. She also left the buttons undone, which revealed the lacy edge of her bra, not to mention a healthy bit of cleavage.

When the boys arrived, they were met in the hallway and introductions exchanged. Each male in turn took Hermione's hand and bent to kiss it, lingering long enough to give her figure a thorough inspection, even though her tank top wasn't nearly as revealing as Michelle's blouse. She belatedly realized that her running shorts exposed a lot more leg than her roommate's mid thigh-length shorts did. Then the foursome made their way down to one of the lounges, picking up the pair of girls in the next room as well, Brigitte and Thérèse.

Remarkably, by the time they reached the lounge, Jean-Claude and Giovanni had managed to ascertain the dating status of each of the four girls. Michelle – available, Brigitte – dating a guy, but not serious, Thérèse – just broke up and taking some time off dating (which would later turn out to be two weeks) and Hermione – seriously dating a boy named Henry back home, to the obvious disappointment of the French and Italian wizards.

"Henri?" asked Brigitte, who was one of the girls who knew of Hermione's background. "Not Harry Potter?"

"Harry and I are good friends," Hermione clarified.

This led to several minutes of inquiries, for the most part polite and not overly invasive, as they could see Hermione's reluctance to dominate the conversation. Eventually the talk turned to their classes, and the six discovered that they all had Charms and Transfiguration, and there were at least four of them in each of the other classes. After some discussion of days and times, they finally all agreed on a time to study together on a regular basis.

Relieved, Hermione then joined them for a stroll on the grounds so that they could help her get familiar with the place. They ended up on a quidditch practice field, and Jean-Claude and Brigitte brought up Harry again. Apparently his performance in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, particularly the first task, had acquired legendary status at Beauxbatons. More relaxed now, Hermione regaled

them with some of the things that Harry had done over the years on the quidditch pitch that had driven her mad with worry. By the end of her tales, noting the glow on her face and the warmth in her eyes as she talked about her best friend, the three other girls knew very well who Henri really was, but were content to keep the confidence of their new friend.

*So, things are looking up here in terms of classes, and I've made some friends. Nothing like you and Ron, though. Speaking of Ron, I do think you should tell him the prophecy. Probably Neville too. I'm not sure of Ginny, since she's younger and not quite as mature. She'd probably be all right, I suppose, but you decide. Only if you're completely comfortable with it. Another possibility is Susan. She hasn't really been part of our group that long, but she's certainly loyal. Luna – well, again, I don't know what to think about Luna. The way she seems to say whatever pops into her head would argue against it, but I have a suspicion that the things she says aren't as random as they appear to be.*

*Let me know how Defense goes, and what you decide about Care. I've got two essays to write tonight and then I'll turn in. I'll be dreaming about you tonight too.*

*I miss you.*

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*

## Notebooks and Letters Settling In - Classes and Quidditch

### Year 6, Chapter 5, Settling In – Classes and Quidditch

*Dear Hermione,*

*Well, we had our first Defense class today. It was nearly worthless. After his usual introductory rant about how mysterious and challenging the subject was (Dark Arts this time, instead of Potions) and how unlikely it was that students as worthless as us would be able to succeed in his class, Snape promptly assigned us to cast jinxes and shields nonverbally. Of course, no one could do it, so we spent the entire rest of the period waving our wands at each other like idiots.*

*It gets worse. After taunting us for a while he decided to demonstrate a nonverbal jinx on, who else, me. I wasn't going to stand there and just let him jinx me, so I automatically cast a Shield Charm. And as you might expect, since I didn't do it nonverbally I got a detention.*

*So, if that's any indication of how his class is going to be, we will definitely continue the DA. Katie came up to me after class and we talked about it. She's in her NEWT year, of course, and she's going to come up with a list of what she thinks they'll need to know, and we'll use that as a basis.*

*She also said something about quidditch tryouts – she thinks everyone should have to earn their spot again, even her. Ron's not too keen about that idea, but he won the keeper spot in tryouts last year, so he should be able to do it again.*

*I decided to take Care of Magical Creatures, and then discovered there wasn't anyone else in the NEWT class. I'm the only one. None of the other Gryffindors signed up for it, the Ravenclaws think it's worthless, and the Slytherins won't touch it. Susan says some Hufflepuffs would take it but are turned off by Hagrid's dangerous creatures. She told me Sprout complained to Dumbledore about that, but he didn't do anything. Hagrid was pretty shook up about the situation, but said he'd just give me private lessons.*

*I told Ron, Neville, and Susan about the Prophecy. Ron just sat there with his mouth open, Neville turned pale, and Susan cried and gave me a hug. Then I explained to the other two about how it could have been Neville. That got him a hug from Susan too, but I noticed that his hug was a little tighter and lasted longer than my hug. Do you know if there's something going on between those two? They all promised to help me in any way they could. Neville was almost scary, with the*

determined look he got. It's a personal fight for him, now more than ever. It is for the others too, of course, because of Susan's aunt and the way the Weasleys are so involved. I think even Ron is going to start taking his studies more seriously.

The reason the four of us were together in the first place, in fact, is that we've been studying together. Ron and I really miss you (not only for that, of course) in that area. We only now realize just how much we depended on you to make us get our homework done (and, I have to admit, do it for us sometimes). Neville's the expert on Herbology, of course, and Susan's good at keeping us on task. Ron says she nags us almost as much as you did. I'd never say that, of course. You encouraged us.

Just writing about this is making me even lonelier. I knew it was going to be hard here without you this year, but there are so many things that remind me of you. I'll be going along and then something will happen or I'll think of something to say to you and I'll turn to my side and you aren't there. Then it hits me all over again and I get this empty aching feeling inside.

I better stop now before I start to cry.

I really miss you.

Love,

#### Henry

-ooo-

Dear Harry,

Oh, the end of your letter just made me want to cry, too. I know exactly how you feel. It doesn't happen so often for me here, since it's so new, but there will still be times when I want to say something to you or show you something and I can't. We just need to hold on until this year is over and I'll be back where I belong – by your side.

I talked to our Defense instructor, M. Béliveau, about non-verbal spells. He says that they are rare – only a few wizards master them, and that they are usually weaker than spoken spells, which is why they are seldom used. I've only ever seen Dumbledore and Moody (and of course Dolohov) perform one, and now Snape makes four. Of course, it's very lucky for me that they are weaker than normal spells. I don't know what to tell you to do. Snape is correct in that it would be a useful skill, but it's unreasonable to expect students to master them.

Here's something else I discovered. At Beauxbatons some of the spells we learn are different. For example for a blasting hex at Hogwarts we learned Reducto, but here they teach Confringo. I will keep track of all of these and teach the alternatives to you when I see you again. I think they may come in useful, because it would be more difficult for an enemy to block a hex he isn't familiar with.

*It sounds like Katie has some good ideas, both with the defense study group and the quidditch tryouts. Let me know how that goes this weekend.*

*Yes, there is something going on between Neville and Susan. She's been writing me too. They're both pretty shy, of course, so don't expect to see them snogging in public any time soon. I think they're at about the same place in their relationship that we were a year ago. How about Ron? Has any girl caught his eye this year? I got the impression at the end of last year that he was starting to warm up to Luna, but things were pretty hectic and I might have been reading more into it than was there.*

*It's nothing for you to concern yourself with, but guys here are still asking me out on occasion. I'm pretty sure it's a combination of the 'new girl' and 'foreign girl' allure. They see me as a challenge. I always decline and say I have a boyfriend back home, and Michelle, Brigitte, Thérèse, or Sally-Anne backs me up. If they persist Gabrielle kicks them in the shins.*

*I hope you got a laugh out of that last line. It's really funny to see her step in to 'protect' me. Of course no one can protect me like you can.*

*Other than that, things are going OK here. Somehow things just aren't as exciting here as they have been at Hogwarts. I think you might be a big reason for that.*

*I miss you.*

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-000-*

*Dear Hermione,*

*I have some news for you today. First, quidditch tryouts were this morning. As Katie suggested, I announced that all positions were open. It was crazy – it seemed like there were a hundred people there to try out. Then I found out that more than half of them weren't even from Gryffindor! After I sorted that out and I sent all the spectators to the stands, things were more manageable. There were a lot of Gryffindors there just to watch, like Neville, Lavender, and Parvati, and some friends from other houses, like Susan and Luna, but there were also a bunch of 'Potter fans'. (That's what Susan called them.) It was really annoying.*

*Anyway, Katie easily made the team again as Chaser, as did Ginny. Both of them were really good, and worked well together. The third Chaser is a girl I hadn't known before, but who could fly really well – Demelza Robins. She wasn't as good as Katie or Ginny at passing, but they both thought they could work with her. Dean and Seamus both tried out too, and were a bit miffed that they didn't make the team, but neither of them claimed that they were better than any of the three girls. So, for at least one more year Gryffindor will have an all-female Chaser line.*

We have two new Beaters this year – third years named Jimmy Peakes and Ritchie Coote. They're not Fred and George, but they're at least better than Sloper and Kirke were last year. Both of them tried out as well, but they admitted that these new guys were better, so things turned out OK there too.

That brings us to Keeper. Cormac McLaggen, who I mentioned was part of Slughorn's 'group', was among those trying out. It turned out he was pretty good, partly because he's so big he could block one hoop without even moving. This of course made Ron really nervous. He managed to control it, though, and it soon came down to the two of them.

Well, McLaggen saved five shots from Katie, and Ron saved five shots from Ginny. Then McLaggen complained that Ginny was going easy on Ron because he was her brother. That was definitely the wrong thing to say, and besides, anyone who knows them knows how competitive they are. She'd never go easy on him. So I had them switch and Katie shot at Ron while Ginny shot at McLaggen. I don't think Katie went easy on Ron, although by that time it was clear who everyone wanted to be on the team, since McLaggen was being so obnoxious, but he saved all five of her shots. And to top it off McLaggen complained loudly the whole time.

By this time Ginny was so angry at McLaggen that he didn't have a chance. He saved her first two shots, but he barely got a hand on the third one, as she flew at top speed one way then switched hands and flipped the quaffle back the opposite way at the far ring. For the fourth one she pulled off a move I've never seen before. I'm still not sure how she did it, but she somehow stalled her broom, dropped about ten feet, then shot up to the right, flipped upside down and reversed direction. McLaggen ended up wrapping himself around the center goal as she pulled to a stop in front of the left hoop and dropped the quaffle through while she gave him a sarcastic wink.

The crowd in the stands went crazy while he swore and started after her, threatening to break her in half. Of course, there's no way he could catch Ginny, but I flew in front of him with my wand out and shouted that I'd blast the broom out from under him if he moved another inch. Neville later told me the look on my face was the scariest thing he'd ever seen. (I'm sure he was having me on – I mean, he faced Bellatrix at the Department of Mysteries, right?) In any case, McLaggen backed off and flew down to the ground, cursing the whole time. I told Ginny she'd better watch her back, but she just flipped her hair back and said she wasn't worried. Then Dean piped up that he'd be watching her back, and she smirked and wiggled her bum a bit. That, of course, set Ron off, but everyone was in too good of a mood for there to be any trouble. We had a party in the common room afterward, and as you might expect McLaggen didn't show.

The other piece of news is that last night I had my first private lesson with Dumbledore. I suppose you'd consider this to be the more important item, and are wondering why I didn't mention it first, but the truth is that it was something of a let down.

I thought I'd get some training in advanced spells or something, or at least more Occlumency lessons, but instead all we did was watch pensieve memories for two hours. That's it – nothing more. They were memories of Voldemort's parents and the circumstances leading up to his birth. His mother's last name was Gaunt, and they were descendents of Slytherin. And that's all they had, they were a poor family with nothing else to their name but some Slytherin heirlooms. One

was a ring and the other a locket. Voldemort's grandfather seemed to think that his being a pureblood descendent of Slytherin was all that mattered.

Now that I think about it, he said the locket was from Slytherin, but I'm not sure about the ring.

At any rate, his son, Voldemort's uncle, was rather dimwitted, and his daughter, Voldemort's mother, had a crush on a rich local muggle who'd ride past their house every day. In the memory we watched, the head of the DMLE came and arrested the grandfather and his son for jinxing a local muggle. Evidently, after they were both out of the house, the daughter used a love potion on the rich muggle and eventually had his baby. Dumbledore thinks he got free of the potion and left her, and she died either in childbirth or shortly after. She named her son Tom Marvolo Riddle, after his father (Tom Riddle) and his grandfather (Marvolo Gaunt), and he grew up in an orphanage.

Here's the weird part. Dumbledore now has the ring. And I think it has something to do with why his hand is injured. Remember how it was all black and dead looking? It hasn't healed at all since we saw him this summer. He said in that indirect way he has that he acquired the ring at the same time he injured his hand. Then I asked him exactly how he injured his hand but he said we were out of time. So he's back to his old habit of keeping information from me.

This is where I'd normally sit down with you and Ron and we'd talk about it and you'd help me figure things out. Sigh. So writing this down for you is the best I can do. I hope I haven't left out anything important.

As far as everything else is concerned, classes are going OK, with the exception of Defense, where we continue to waste time on nonverbal spells. Studying without you is still a struggle. Potions continues to go well, though. I used that spell you suggested on the book, and nothing happened. It's basically a regular book with some of the instructions crossed out and new ones written in the margin. I've been very careful just like you asked. Oh, and here's a clue as to who may have written all these things. Inside the back cover it says 'This Book is the Property of the Half Blood Prince'. Sounds like the guy had a real ego, doesn't it? I assume it means he must have been a half blood instead of a pureblood or a muggleborn.

We made a decision about the DA. We're going to get together at least once a week and review stuff for NEWTs. I also came up with a plan on nonverbal spells. I asked Flitwick about them, and he said you have to be really proficient at a spell in order to cast it silently. So I had each member decide which was their best spell, then focus on it. The idea is to get so that they can cast it without even having to think about it. Then we'll work on saying it softly, then whispered, and finally silently, just thinking the incantation. We spend about a third of our time each meeting on that, and the rest on learning NEWT material (or OWL material in some cases – Ginny, Colin, and Luna).

As far as who's involved, we have all the Gryffindors in our year again, plus Katie from seventh year and Ginny and Colin from fifth year. We have four Hufflepuffs – Susan, Hannah, Ernie, and Justin. Luna and Cho are the only two Ravenclaws. The Ravenclaw guys were mostly there last year because Michael was dating Ginny. Parvati says Padma might start coming too, especially if



Snape continues to not teach us anything. We're meeting in an empty classroom about halfway between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff common rooms. That's also where Susan, Neville, Ron, and I meet to study. Hannah joins us sometimes too now, since she's Susan's best friend. Although from the looks I've noticed her and Ron shooting at each other, there may be another reason she wants to study with us.

Of course, what I really need is my best friend, but she's not here. So I do the next best thing and think about her every night when I go to bed while I hold my book pendant. The nice part is that the pendant is always warm. It really helps knowing that you're thinking of me too.

I miss you.

Love,

Henry

-000-

Dear Harry,

Well, that certainly was some interesting news. I must confess that I'm as puzzled as you are about your training with Dumbledore. Perhaps he's just laying some groundwork, so you can understand Voldemort better. Know your enemy and all that. Make sure you follow up about that ring. I agree that it's significant that Dumbledore has it in his office now.

It sounds like you have a good plan for the DA. Making it a mix of studying and perfecting spells, and throwing in some practice on nonverbal spellcasting is an excellent plan. I am surprised to hear that Cho joined the group again after last year's unpleasantness. Are you still using the charmed Galleons? It doesn't seem like you need them any more.

I'm so glad to hear that everything turned out so well in your quidditch tryouts. You're going to be a great captain. Now, guess who else is on a quidditch team? Me! Quidditch is a lot different at Beauxbatons than at Hogwarts. There are lots more teams here; since there are no houses students get together on their own. There are two leagues, one competitive and one recreational. Some of my study group decided to form a team – Brigitte and Jean-Claude are the real quidditch enthusiasts – and asked if I wanted to join. I just hope they aren't expecting me to be as good as you. Brigitte is the Seeker and Jean-Claude is the Keeper. I'm playing Chaser and the other two are Antoine and Sylvie. Our Beaters are Lucia and Isabelle. Thankfully, we're in the recreational league. So far I just fly up and down the pitch and try to stay out of the way. Sometimes the opponents forget about me and I can intercept a pass, and then I get rid of the quaffle to Antoine or Sylvie as soon as I can. I'm having fun though, even if I doubt I'll ever score a goal.

I'm also taking a cooking class. Don't laugh! I know my cooking skills haven't been one of my strengths, but the French and Italians take their cooking very seriously, and they offer extracurricular instruction in it. So I thought, why not? After all, it won't be long before I'm out of school and will have to cook for myself. Actually, I'm hoping it won't be just for myself – there's a

certain other someone that might be sharing my meals with me. And hopefully the kitchen duties as well.

We are learning both regular cooking techniques and magical shortcuts. The French think that the English overcook everything! For them it's more of an art form. Presentation is nearly as important as the food itself. I hope you're ready for a high-class culinary experience, because I'm planning to practice on you.

Got to go study my sauces now.

I miss you.

All my love,

Hermione

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 19

I'm now an adult in the wizarding world. I don't really feel any different than I did yesterday, but today I am officially of age. The most significant change is that I can do magic outside of school. But then, Harry's figured out that wasn't as forbidden as we thought it was.

I wonder what I will do next year? Perhaps rent a room in Hogsmeade so I can be near Harry? I'm sure he would offer to pay for it. Then I guess I'd be a 'kept woman'. I can just imagine the look on his face when I tease him with that one.

Harry got me an amazing birthday present. It's one of Fred and George's Daydream Charms, but he had them customize it so that the daydream has him in it. He picked out a beach scene. I'm going to wait until I have some privacy before I activate it. If it's anything like the daydreams I already have about him and me on the beach it will be quite a sensual experience. He mentioned that the twins are pushing him to allow them to mass market it. No way! Under no circumstances do I want anything to help other girls daydreaming about Harry.

My dormmates got together on a birthday present also – fancy lingerie. Much smaller knickers than I usually wear, including some thong bottoms. Also skimpier bras – some demicup ones that barely cover anything and one padded push-up one. All of them very frilly and lacy. The whole lot of them came into my room and made me try them on. I was blushing so much! I have no idea how I should tell Harry about them, or even more so if/when I should show them to him!

Harry had a bit more news. The Ravenclaws in DADA evidently complained to Flitwick about Snape spending all his time on casting nonverbally, so he and McGonagall went to Dumbledore and got him to force Snape to move on to something else.

Here's something that worries me a little. Harry's still studying with Ron, Neville, and Susan, but Cho has joined them. He says she's been a godsend since she's a seventh year and had all the

material they're learning now last year. I wanted to write him back and ask why he didn't study with Katie instead, but that would just be betraying my insecurities. Susan wrote to me too, and reassured me that Cho isn't being flirty or anything, just really nice and helpful. That worries me anyway, since Harry's not likely to have his defenses up. Susan says that Marietta is now a pariah since her mum's conviction this summer, so Cho isn't hanging out with her any more. Harry probably felt sorry for Cho since she's lonely.

On the bright side, Susan says it is helping keep other girls away from Harry. With Cho in their group she has effectively staked her claim on him among the Ravenclaws, and none of them dare cross her. Susan's presence keeps the Hufflepuffs at bay, and with one or two exceptions the Gryffindor girls are leaving him be out of respect for me. I guess I should be happy about that at least.

Later –

Oh my! I tried out the Daydream Charm this evening. It's a good thing I did it in private and used a silencing charm. That was intense! We absolutely can not let the twins sell that to anyone else. In my daydream Harry and I both ended up without any clothes on and I ... well ... we were touching each other everywhere . It was a real cardiovascular workout! I woke up with my hand inside my knickers and my heart was still pounding.

It's going to be very difficult to resist viewing that every day.

-000-

Dear Hermione,

We had our first Hogsmeade weekend today. Ron, Neville, Susan, and I went together. There's not much to tell you about though. We did see Dung and he was certainly up to no good . I swear , I wanted to kill him. He was fencing stolen merchandise from an old abandoned house that some bird club used to use.

Remus and Tonks say hi. We met them in town and had lunch with them. They seemed rather cozy together. Tonks has been a bit down whenever I've encountered her lately, but she perked right up when Remus joined us. You don't suppose she fancies him, do you?

I guess that's all for now.

Love,

Henry

It took Hermione no time at all to pull out her wand and tap the parchment while reciting, 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good', and the rest of the letter appeared.

OK, this is serious. Ginny almost died today! Here's what happened.

On the way back to the castle, Ginny started acting odd. She had left the table she was at for a few minutes, and when she returned she just walked out to the carriages without saying anything to Dean or anyone else. By the time we got back to Hogwarts Dean was still unable to get any response out of her, and out of frustration he grabbed her arms to try to shake her. When Ron saw this he went spare, and lunged at Dean, but then Ginny pulled out a dagger !

She screamed out some strange sounding curse. From the look in her eyes it seemed like she was possessed or something. She looked around, then started toward me. I hit her with Expelliarmus to knock the dagger away – I wasn't sure who she was going to attack with it but didn't want to take any chances – then she passed out. Ron picked her up and ran all the way to the Infirmary. I don't think I've ever seen him so shook up.

It turns out the dagger was cursed. I levitated it into the air and Susan wrapped a scarf around it, then we took it to McGonagall (Dumbledore's not here right now). She sent for Snape and he examined it too. It was an assassin's blade, which takes control of a person and forces them to kill someone. Then they die too. Since Ginny was wearing gloves and didn't have it in her bare hand they say she'll probably survive, but they took her to St. Mungo's. Ron never left her side.

Neville, Susan, and I huddled together afterward and tried to figure out what had happened.

We came up with a lot of questions, but not many answers. Susan wrote them down so we could send them to you.

Who was the target? Ginny walked toward me but that could be just a coincidence. She could have come after me while we were still in the Three Broomsticks. Was it someone in the castle? Hard to see how she could have got to them, since everyone is checked for dark objects by Filch as we enter.

Was Ginny selected randomly or on purpose? I may be paranoid but it seems too much of a coincidence to me to think it was random. We think she was put under Imperius because of the strange way she was acting even before she pulled the dagger out of whatever she was carrying it in, but that could have been the dagger affecting her even then.

Did Malfoy have something to do with it? If so, Ginny could have been targeted in retaliation for her snooping around at Borgin and Burkes. But Malfoy didn't go to Hogsmeade today – he has an ironclad alibi. But of course, if he was involved he'd be sure to have one as well.

How would he have gotten to Hogsmeade in order to set it up in advance? Does he know about the tunnels? We should ask Fred and George just how many students know about them. Come to think of it, Pettigrew certainly would have, so we can assume any Death Eater who needed to know about them would be told.

Another possibility – Cho mentioned that she had seen Malfoy in the Three Broomsticks before school started, flirting with Madame Rosmerta. (She joined us at our table while we were there,

after Tonks and Remus left. We were telling her about his suspicious behavior and she agreed that he'd seemed different to her too.)

Even if it wasn't Malfoy, someone was trying to kill someone at Hogwarts. Or make it look like they were? What would be the purpose of that?

That's all we've come up with so far. I think the professors are even more stumped than we are.

As you can see, Remus taught me the charm to disguise this letter. I'll show it to you at Christmas time.

That's all the news for now. We're pretty shook up about Ginny.

I miss you.

Love,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

Oh my goodness, that was just awful news! Have you heard any more about Ginny? I do hope she's going to be all right.

As far as who the target was, the most obvious ones are you and Dumbledore. But you said Dumbledore wasn't even in the castle, and you already pointed out why it probably wasn't you. I think it's quite possible that there wasn't a specific target, but rather that the Death Eaters are just trying to terrorize people in general. Any death of a student at Hogwarts is certain to shake people up. For that matter, even an unsuccessful attempt will have nearly the same effect.

I'm not willing to rule out Malfoy's involvement either. Even if he didn't do it directly, he could have been involved in the planning. That's actually more like him, to get someone else to do the dirty work and then stand back acting all innocent.

That's a good point about Death Eaters knowing about the secret passageways in and out of Hogwarts. Have you mentioned that to Dumbledore? With all the other security precautions you've described, I hope they haven't overlooked those. He can probably ward them in some way.

But the most important thing is that you be as careful as possible and stay safe. I'm so worried about you. I think I'd die if anything happened to you. Please take care of yourself!

Not much to report on about Beauxbatons. Things are pretty much the same. No trolls in girls' bathrooms or basilisks crawling around in the pipes. The biggest excitement recently is that we've switched from our summer robes to our autumn ones. I wish you were here to liven things up. 53 days down, 250 to go.

*I miss you.*

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-000-*

*Dear Hermione,*

*We had our first quidditch match today, against Slytherin, and we won. It was almost embarrassing, though. Everyone did their jobs except me! Ron was great in goal (ask him sometime about how 'lucky' he was – it's a pretty good story), the Chasers did fine even without Ginny, and the Beaters managed to keep the bludgers pretty much under control. But I was paying so much attention to everything that was going on that I forgot about looking for the snitch. The Slytherin Seeker spotted it first but fortunately I managed to beat him to it. I managed to distract him at a critical moment. (I haven't been playing quidditch all these years without learning a few tricks!) I think perhaps having the Seeker be the captain isn't that great of an idea.*

*Did you notice anything unusual about what I just told you? It was the part where I mentioned the Slytherin Seeker. It was a new kid I'd never seen before. In other words – not Malfoy. He's given up quidditch this year. Pretty suspicious, don't you think? Ron's finally convinced now.*

*Here are some other things I've noticed. I've been trying to keep an eye on Malfoy with the Marauder's Map, and he keeps disappearing. Do you think it's possible that he's sneaking off the school grounds? I can't figure out where he might be going, though.*

*I almost never see Dumbledore, so I mentioned the tunnel problem to Tonks the last time I saw her and she said it's being taken care of. I assume that means he's not leaving the castle that way, although it's possible he did at the beginning of the term.*

*Another possibility is that he's discovered how to use the Room of Requirement. You remember he was there last year when Umbridge caught us (and you put on such a convincing show!). I've never seen him near it so far this year, but I'm going to start watching it more closely.*

*Ginny's going to be OK, but she's still really weak and it's going to take a while to get the poison out of her system. So they're going to keep her at St. Mungo's until the end of the month and then she'll recover the rest of the way at home. They figure she'll be able to come back to Hogwarts next term.*

*I had another 'lesson' with Dumbledore last night. The term's half over and we've had a grand total of two. And we spent the whole time looking at pensieve memories again. No training at all. This is getting frustrating. I mean, one of the reasons I stayed at Hogwarts instead of going to Beauxbatons with you was so I could take these lessons from Dumbledore. I asked him if we could meet more often and he just said there were lots of things going on and that we were making good progress. So I asked him what sorts of things those were and what progress was being made but he*

just peered at me over his glasses and said 'All in good time'. I almost got up and walked out right then, but realized that wouldn't help anything.

So, here's what I learned. Voldemort was a real jerk as a boy. Big surprise there, eh? Let's see, first we saw that his mum pawned the Slytherin locket at Borgin and Burkes, then that she died shortly after he was born, so he was raised at an orphanage. Dumbledore visited him there with his Hogwarts letter, and found that he was a bully. Also suspicious and cocky. Oh, and he didn't like the name Tom. (Maybe I should start calling him that. I noticed that Dumbledore called him Tom when they fought each other at the Ministry, and it ticked him off.) Then Dumbledore told him he was a wizard, and he got excited. He'd already been doing magic and used it to control animals and hurt people who annoyed him. Those were his exact words.

With that attitude I wonder why Dumbledore accepted him, or at least why he didn't keep better control of him while he was at Hogwarts? Of course, I do remember the Tom in the diary complaining that Dumbledore was always suspicious of him, so I guess he did what he could. But it seems obvious that he was a right evil git all along.

I'm trying to figure out why Dumbledore showed me this. So Tom Riddle was an orphan, and brought up alone and without any friends, and he didn't learn about magic until he got his Hogwarts letter. In other words, just like me. Is Dumbledore trying to show me how similar we are? Is that supposed to reinforce this connection we have? Except we were different too. He was way more powerful than me, and could control his magic, even before he started Hogwarts.

And Dumbledore made the point that Tom Riddle never had any friends, even after he came here, and never wanted any, and is still that way. That's a lot different than me. I always wanted friends, even when I didn't have any, and now I have great ones, especially you.

One other point he made that I didn't understand why it was so important. Tom Riddle liked to collect things. For some reason that reminded me of the ring again, and I asked Dumbledore about it. He said its importance would be revealed at our next meeting.

I have a couple other things I wanted to mention before I close this letter. I discovered some spells written in my Potions book, and some of them are specifically designed to be nonverbal. (Yes, I'm being very careful when I try them out. So far they're harmless.) I'll show them to you at Christmas.

Speaking of potions, Slughorn's finally roped me into going to one of his parties. He practically scheduled it around me. It's a Christmas party, and I need a date. Neville and Susan are going together, so I'm going to take Cho. She has been so unbelievably helpful to me this term, so I reckon it's a way of repaying her. I made it clear to her that it's just on a friendly basis. By deciding early, I also managed to avoid being swarmed by other girls who found out I needed a date to the party and were eager to volunteer. There's a girl in Gryffindor named Romilda Vane who's being especially aggressive about it.

Of course, I really wish I were going with you. I know I'd enjoy the party loads more if you were there with me. And I wouldn't have to avoid any mistletoe they might have up. But I'll make it up

to you when I see you at Christmas.

I miss you.

Love,

Henry

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – November 4

*I feel so helpless. I need to be at Hogwarts – Harry needs me. There are so many things I should be doing for him, helping him with. And that's not even including our personal feelings, which are also driving me mad. I miss him so much! I just feel like I'm trapped here at Beauxbatons. I mean, it's not a bad place. It's just that I'm not with Harry. Truth be told, if I'd been given the choice between Hogwarts and Beauxbatons and known what each of them were like in advance, I'd probably have chosen Beauxbatons. I mean, a lot of the things that have happened to me at Hogwarts haven't exactly been pleasant. Except for the friends. Harry, Ron, and the others have made it all worthwhile.*

*It makes me wonder how things would have turned out differently, if I'd never gone to Hogwarts and met Harry and Ron. I'm sure he'd say he would have died or flunked out by now. But how would he have made it to the Stone in first year without me? Or figured out about the basilisk second year? Would Ginny have died and Tom Riddle lived? It's frightening to think about. And what would have happened with Sirius and the Dementors third year without my time turner? And I think I was pretty instrumental in getting him through the tournament in fourth year.*

*Enough of that. It's just impossible for me to imagine my life without Harry Potter in it. Back to what's going on now.*

*I should be helping Harry prepare to face Voldemort, and discussing his lessons with Dumbledore with him, trying to figure out what they mean.*

*I should be helping him figure out what's going on with Malfoy, and what happened to Ginny.*

*I should be going over his Potions book and checking it out, and helping him figure out who wrote it.*

*I should be helping him lead the DA, mastering spells, learning nonverbal spellcasting.*

*I should be helping him study instead of Cho.*

*I should be going with him to Slughorn's party, not her!*

*I still don't trust her. Harry is just too trusting of people sometimes and too ready to forgive, especially those he considers his friends. He's certainly not at all like Voldemort in that sense. Or*



*any other sense, really. I honestly don't know see how Dumbledore could have been trying to make that point.*

*Susan has reassured me that there's nothing going on between the two of them. I'm certain that's the case from Harry's point of view, but I'm not at all sure about Cho. I have a bad feeling about this.*

*I miss him so much. I can't wait for Christmas to get here.*

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*

## **Notebooks and Letters** **Betrayal and Heartbreak**

### **Year 6, Chapter 6, Betrayal and Heartbreak**

Hermione looked up as she flipped through some pages in the journal, stopping when she got to a page that was somewhat wrinkled, as though it had gotten wet and dried again. The first half of the page was crossed out and the writing started over with a new heading at that point.

“Nothing much happened for the rest of the term,” she explained to her daughter. “Now, this next part is pretty intense, and contains some, um, adult discussion, but I think you’re old enough to hear it.”

Rose rolled her eyes and gave her mum the sort of all-knowing, long-suffering, woman-of-the-world look that only a preteen girl can give, and replied. “Yes, mother.”

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 21

*Oh God, I never thought anything could hurt so much! Even though it’s settled now and I’m over it, I can still feel how painful it was when I think back on it. But I should start from the beginning.*

Almost as soon as Harry entered Slughorn’s party he found himself wishing it were over and he could leave. Cho, on the other hand, was thrilled to be there so he resolved to stick it out for her sake. She kept close to him with a hand lightly holding his arm, not enough to make him uncomfortable or to suggest any inappropriate level of intimacy, but enough to let every female present know that she was there with him.

Slughorn insisted on showing him off, introducing him to a bewildering array of evidently famous personalities in the wizarding world, but none of whom Harry recognized. Except, of course, for Gwenog Jones, the captain of the Holyhead Harpies. He did spend some time talking to her, much to Cho’s delight, as Gwenog was a role model for nearly every female quidditch player, and she was no exception. When the famous beater pointed out some mistletoe overhead, Harry sighed and gave Cho a friendly peck on the cheek, to which she smiled appreciatively.

When he had finally had enough of all the celebrity posturing, Harry looked for Susan and Neville

to let them know he was leaving. But when he spotted them under some mistletoe, and saw that they were taking full advantage of it, he turned away with a grin on his face and resolved to leave them to their own devices. Although she would have liked to stay longer, Cho did not protest as Harry guided her to the door.

Once outside in the corridor, Cho was about to say something when they heard a familiar pair of voices coming from an isolated side passageway. With Cho following closely behind, Harry crept down the passageway until he identified the location of the conversants in a darkened classroom. He shared a look with his Ravenclaw friend as they strained to listen to the student and professor both despised, as well as suspected of being up to some nefarious scheme.

Repeatedly, the Head of Slytherin house demanded that Draco Malfoy inform him of what he was planning, and each time the demand was refused. Malfoy alternated between denying that he was doing anything, and insisting that his plan was none of Snape's business. Finally he declared that the mission was given to him alone, and whatever vow Snape had taken to assist him was unnecessary and unwanted.

When it appeared that the argument was winding down, Harry nudged Cho and the two of them stole back down the passageway and out into the main corridor in silence. At first Harry was too deep in thought to pay attention to where they were headed, but at length he realized that they were not going in the direction of Ravenclaw Tower.

"Cho ...?" Harry began, but the dark haired girl was ready with an explanation as soon as he noticed.

"Harry, can I talk to you for a bit before we call it a night?" she asked. "I have something I want to tell you."

"Er ... OK, I guess," he replied. His mind was still pondering the conversation they had overheard, or he might have been somewhat suspicious, especially when she led him to the seventh floor by the painting of Barnabus the Barmy. Or possibly not, since for all his life-threatening experiences he was still basically a clueless sixteen year old boy when it came to girls.

It took no time at all for Cho to glide past the entrance three times to summon the Room of Requirement, and she immediately took Harry's hand and pulled him inside. The room she had summoned was a comfortable sitting room, ideal for a private conversation, and not at all like the 'make-out' room Hermione had created the year before.

"Harry, I want to thank you for letting me back in to your circle of friends this year," she began in a soft voice.

"Oh, well, I appreciate all the help you've given me as well, in addition to your support," he responded somewhat nervously, only now realizing just how alone the two of them were.

"I want to do something for you to show my appreciation," she continued as she turned her back to him briefly.

“No, that’s not necessary ...” he began before his voice died in his throat. Somehow Cho had slipped off her robes and they pooled on the floor around her feet as she turned back around and stepped forward. She was now clad only in a black lacy bra and matching knickers.

“I like you, Harry,” she continued in that soft voice. “I like you a lot.”

“Cho, no, you ... you shouldn’t ... I ...” Harry tried to avoid looking at her slender, yet shapely figure. He fought to replace the sight before him in his mind with an image of Hermione walking toward him in her tiny string bikini. But Hermione wasn’t here, and Cho was.

Then Cho made the bra and knickers disappear. Fighting to keep his breathing steady, Harry could find no counter image of Hermione this time. And Cho distracted him by continuing to explain what she was doing, although Harry only half heard her. No, he shouldn’t be looking at her like this. He shouldn’t be letting her do this. He was with Hermione.

But Hermione wasn’t here. And Cho was.

His back hit the wall of the room and he was startled, not having realized that he had been backing up. Now the view of Cho’s lovely nude form disappeared as she moved closer to him, and only her pretty face with its look of blatant invitation was visible. Before he could protest again she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her naked body against him.

Hermione wasn’t here. Cho was.

Some time later back in Gryffindor Tower, a messy black-haired figure sat before the dying fire of the common room, his head buried in his hands in despair. What had he done? How was he going to tell Hermione? Beside him her latest letter, delivered just that afternoon, taunted him, accused him, rebuked him. She was so excited about coming home for the holiday and was so anxious to see him. The last line was clearly visible.

*I’ve missed you so much! I can’t wait to be with you again!*

-000-

The reunion of the two long separated lovers was as painful as Harry had feared it would be.

“Harry, how could you!” Tears flooded Hermione’s eyes as she backed away in horror.

“Hermione, I ...” Harry moved forward, reaching out in a pleading gesture.

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed, and flung herself onto her bed, sobbing into her pillow.

“Hermione, please ...”

“Go Away!”

-000-

Emma Granger was shocked to find Harry alone in her living room, weeping inconsolably, curled up in a ball on her sofa.

“Harry? What’s wrong? Where’s Hermione?”

“She’s in her room,” came the reply in a completely dead, defeated tone. “She doesn’t want to see me.”

“What?! That’s not possible! She’s been looking forward to ...”

Harry’s miserable voice cut her off. “I cheated on her.”

Stunned, Emma tried to gather her thoughts as she processed the situation. Whatever he had done in Hermione’s absence, the despondent youth before her clearly regretted it. If the two of them couldn’t settle this problem, the Granger family was in for a dismal holiday.

“I think I’d better leave,” Harry offered. “I’ll get in touch with the Weasleys. I’m sure they ...”

“No, don’t move!” Emma insisted. If he left, Hermione would be impossible to live with. She was not about to let that happen if there were any way at all to salvage this state of affairs. “Stay right here while I go talk to Hermione.”

-000-

It took a while, some shouting through a locked door, a threat or two, and a large amount of patience, but Emma eventually got the two of them sitting in the same room, although not on the same sofa. She began the negotiation by addressing Harry.

“Do you still love her?”

“More than anything,” he declared fervently. From where she was curled up on the sofa, facing away from him, Hermione let out a small sniff.

“Do you still love him?” Hermione made no immediate response, but she could not stop herself from nodding forlornly, still unwilling to raise her eyes to his.

“Do you want to try to get past this and still make it work?” Harry straightened up immediately and nodded, but Hermione shrugged her shoulders miserably, which caused Harry to slump back down in his chair.

“OK,” Emma went on briskly. “Now, before we start, Harry, are there going to be any other, uh, consequences?” Harry gave her a blank look. “What I’m trying to ask is if you took precautions,” she clarified delicately.

Harry frowned in confusion; then when he realized what she was asking he turned pale. “Oh no!”

he gasped. “It was nothing like ... I mean ... we didn’t ... I didn’t ... oh my God, Hermione you don’t think ... Mrs. Granger, I ...” Emma raised her hand to stop his incoherent rant.

“Harry, perhaps you should tell us exactly what happened,” she suggested, now puzzled at what precisely he was guilty of. Hermione winced and turned her head away in anguish, not wanting to hear it.

“Um, she took off her clothes and then she kissed me,” Harry replied in a small voice, his hands twisting anxiously in his lap.

“What else?” Emma prompted.

“Well, I didn’t stop her,” he added.

“Yes, yes, and then?” Emma began to think that this would be amusing if it weren’t so painful for her daughter.

“I pushed her away and ran,” Harry explained.

“What?”

“I ran out of the room and back to the dorm.”

Emma shot a sharp look at her daughter, whose head had snapped back to stare at Harry with her eyes wide. “And nothing else happened?” she persisted. “You didn’t ...”

“Didn’t what? No! I’d never do something like that!” Harry protested.

“Well, what exactly did you mean by saying you cheated on Hermione?” Emma demanded in exasperation.

“Like I said, Cho kissed me and I let her.” Harry’s voice still had a miserable quality to it. As far as he was concerned, he had betrayed her trust and he deserved whatever painful consequences came his way. He only wished he could take Hermione’s pain on himself as well.

Emma shook her head. Of course. This sounded more like the young man she’d thought she knew. This was going to turn out all right after all, and it would become a valuable, albeit painful, learning experience for the young couple.

“I think you two need to talk,” she announced. “And Hermione dear, you have occasionally had a bad habit of jumping to conclusions before you have all the information you need. Maybe this will show you that you still need to work on that.” She got up and left the room, still shaking her head.

“Hermione?” Harry asked in a plaintive tone. Hermione finally met Harry’s eyes, her own eyes still glistening and her face streaked from the many tears she had shed. “Hermione, I’m so sorry. Can you possibly forgive me?”

“Yes.” Hermione wiped her face with the back of her hand as she nodded. “On one condition.”

“Anything,” Harry agreed eagerly, getting up from his chair and kneeling in front of her. He took her hand in his and squeezed it, hopeful for the first time.

“That you kiss me, and make it better than the one you had with Cho.” She dropped her head uncertainly, but a small tentative smile had crept onto her face.

“Hermione, every kiss I’ve ever had with you has been better than the one I got from Cho,” Harry protested, as though perplexed that she could ever think otherwise.

“Oh Harry!”

-ooo-

Some time later Dan Granger made his way into the kitchen in shock and agitation.

“Emma, did you know that Harry and Hermione were making out on the living room sofa?” he inquired somewhat testily.

“Yes,” she replied calmly as she picked up a spoon and stirred some vegetables.

This was clearly not the answer he had expected. “And you’re letting them?”

“I thought it would be better having them do it in the living room than in her bedroom.” Now she opened the oven door and checked on the roast.

“What?”

Emma quickly explained the situation to her husband, whose jaw dropped as she got to the unexpected conclusion.

“So, you’re saying that he had a naked girl kissing him and he just pushed her away and ran?” he asked in disbelief.

“That’s pretty much it, yes.” Emma smiled to herself as she reflected on the character of her potential son-in-law.

“Wow.” Dan paused to consider for a moment. “Was she good looking?”

Emma scowled, but Dan missed it. Leave it to a man to come up with that explanation. “Very. She’s the girl Hermione said was after him all last year,” she informed him, shooting down that argument.

Dan just shook his head in amazement, now feeling much better about trusting his daughter’s heart to this messy haired boy.

“Why are you so surprised?” Emma asked with a mock glare. “You’d do the same thing, wouldn’t you?”

Dan suddenly caught on, and tried to figure out how *he* had managed to get into trouble from this conversation. “Uh, yes, sure ... of course I would.”

“That’s what I thought,” his wife responded in the tone that wives use when they have just scored another minor victory in the battle between the sexes. “Now set the table while I go call the kids for dinner.”

“Yes dear,” Dan replied with the universal husband admission of surrender.

*I just couldn’t let go of Harry after that. My greatest fear – that I had lost him – seemed to have been realized, but then I was given a reprieve. It was almost like a stay of execution. I climbed onto his lap and wrapped my arms around his neck and held on as tightly as I could, alternately kissing him and crying. I never want to have to go through that feeling again. Yes, I understand that with the prophecy I might be faced with losing him again, but I don’t want to think about that right now.*

*Of course, Harry couldn’t stop apologizing and this time I let him get it out of his system. Now that I’ve calmed down I really don’t blame him too much. Sure, he could have been more aware of what was happening and stopped it sooner, but the important thing is that he resisted when he did. How many other boys do I know who would turn down a naked girl as beautiful as Cho Chang? And after he settled down I explained that I had let my insecurities get the best of me and overreacted by jumping to the wrong conclusion without waiting to hear him out. Hopefully we both can learn from this.*

*It eventually came out that there were some other extenuating circumstances, and that led to a bit of discomfort for me.*

Dinner that evening turned out to be far more pleasant than it had looked to be just a few hours earlier. Harry and Hermione couldn’t keep their eyes off each other, although they managed to participate to some extent in the conversation. It also just so happened that his left hand and her right hand seldom made an appearance during the entire meal. Finally Dan decided that it was time to shake things up just a bit to keep them from being too wrapped up in each other.

“So Harry,” he began in a friendly tone, “while I’m happy things turned out the way they did, I’m just a little bit curious about what that Chinese girl said to you that got you so confused.” He managed to avoid the glare that Hermione sent his way, which had been known to make certain Gryffindor males quake in their boots, as well as a similar one from his wife.

“Well,” Harry began, turning red at the prospect of another embarrassing revelation. “She started explaining about her NEWT Runes class.” Out of the corner of her eye Emma noticed Hermione suddenly stiffen and decided this line of inquiry was worth pursuing after all. “She claimed that



next term they are going to study some nude rituals and she needed my help getting used to being naked in front of boys. Then she said that besides that, she wanted the first guy to see her naked to be someone she cared for. Then she started on how much she liked me and, well, you know the rest.” By the time he had finished this explanation he was so red that Dan and Emma thought they could feel the heat coming off his face.

Before Dan could ask a follow-up question Emma broke in. “Hermione, isn’t that a course you’re taking?”

Hermione fidgeted a bit, then made a scoffing noise. “Oh honestly, that’s one of those myths that get circulated around the school. All the upper class girls tease the younger ones about it when they first start taking Runes in third year. You should have seen the way Angelina and Alicia got Ginny going when they were sixth years and she was a third year. I wasn’t fooled a bit though, when they tried it on me my third year. I’d read the course syllabi for all of the years, of course, and knew there was nothing of the sort. Really, Hogwarts is far too conservative for something like that.”

While her daughter’s explanation *sounded* reassuring to Emma, something in her body language said otherwise. “I see,” she replied. “But the school you’re going to now is quite a bit more liberal, didn’t you say?”

“Well ... it is, but ...” Hermione hedged. Now Dan began frowning at his daughter, and Harry sent a questioning look her way. “OK, it’s optional,” she blurted out. “It’s covered at the end of seventh year.”

“And what are you going to do about this option?” Emma pressed on.

“I ... I suppose ...” Hermione was clearly torn between the desire to learn everything there was to know about a subject and the propriety of the situation. “But it might be something that would be important to know!” she protested.

“Hermione, don’t you think this is something you should discuss with us before you make the decision – or with Harry?” Emma demanded. Dan was nodding his head firmly in agreement until his wife mentioned Harry, when he was suddenly caught up short. For his part Harry continued to give Hermione the questioning look that was making her feel more guilty by the second.

“I was,” she protested. “I was planning to talk to Harry about it during this break in fact.” Her eyes now locked with his, pleading for him to believe her. In response he gave her a little smile, and squeezed her hand where he was still holding it under the table to let her know he did.

*After that I said I thought there might be a possibility of doing it in same sex groups, so there would be only girls present. Mum allowed that she thought that was a reasonable compromise. Dad still wasn’t sure. Then Harry joked that a class like that sounded like the perfect opportunity for a guy with an invisibility cloak and that really broke up the tension. I gave his hand an extra strong squeeze for that. Dad immediately wanted to know about invisibility cloaks, and Harry*

*promised to demonstrate his after dinner.*

*So, Harry has wowed my parents with the cloak and now we're relaxing on the sofa near the fire. Harry has had his arm around me all evening and I'm trying to hold him to myself as tightly as possible without giving Dad a fit. What an exhausting day! I'm pretty calmed down now but I'm still shaking a bit inside. It feels so good being in his arms again. I wish I never had to let go.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 22*

*We fell asleep on the sofa last night. Eventually Harry carried me up to my bedroom and put me to bed. I woke up enough to wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down for a goodnight kiss. When he finally left my room I felt so cold and empty. I wish there were a way for him to sleep with me. I mean sleep – just holding each other. There will be plenty of time for more than that eventually. Perhaps next year when I've graduated and have my own place in Hogsmeade. Or maybe I can get a job at Hogwarts as someone's assistant. I could work in the Infirmary learning healing from Madame Pomfrey, or in the library with Madame Pince.*

*But enough dreaming about the future for now. This morning at breakfast we talked about what we wanted to do this week. I announced that I'm going to cook dinner a few times and show off my newly acquired culinary skills. Harry and I are going to show each other the new spells we've learned and he's going to show me that Potions book. And of course there's Christmas shopping. And plenty of time for affection.*

*I have him here for a whole week and I want to make the most of it. We're lucky we even have this much time together. Mrs. Weasley expected him to go to the Burrow for the holiday, as did Dumbledore, but Harry insisted that he was going to visit me. Eventually I think Dumbledore realized that he'd have to stun Harry and keep him tied up at Hogwarts for the entire break to stop him from coming to see me.*

*So, as far as anyone else knows Harry is at the Burrow. He used his invisibility cloak to get away, with Remus and Tonks escorting him. Fleur offered to as well, but they said they'd take care of it. I'm not certain what they're doing now, but I think they're taking turns keeping an eye on our house. Since I'm not even at Hogwarts this year no one's really paying attention to me now, so it's relatively safe as long as no one knows he's here.*

*"I just don't know, Harry," Hermione said with apprehension. "Something about this book just seems off to me. I agree that it doesn't seem to be cursed or enchanted or anything." She had just spent ten minutes running every detection and revealing charm she knew on the infamous Potions manual.*

*"Really, Hermione, most of it is just alternative directions for making potions," Harry insisted. "It's like that sauce you're making for the Boeuf Bourguignon. You found three different versions of it in your cookbooks. Not to mention how many different varieties of Chocolate Mousse there*

are.”

“Yes, and you decided that we needed to try every one of them before the holiday is over,” she teased. “But I’m not sure it’s the same with magical potions. I think they’re pretty standardized. Some of these potions haven’t changed for hundreds of years.”

“And you think that’s a good thing?” Harry challenged. “How many advances in muggle medicine have there been in that time? Look at these alternate instructions for Polyjuice. It says to steep the boomslang skin with the powdered bicorn horn while the lacewing wings are stewing, stirring twice a day, then add them together. It cuts the time to prepare it in half!”

“But if it works so well why wouldn’t this be the standard procedure now?” Hermione protested. “This book is ancient – it’s been nearly twenty years since Slughorn last taught at Hogwarts.”

“I think whoever this Half Blood Prince character is he must have wanted to keep his discoveries to himself,” Harry reasoned.

“It could be a *her*,” Hermione added.

“It could be,” Harry agreed. “Slughorn says my mum was a genius at potions. But I can’t see her, or any other witch for that matter, calling herself a prince.” Hermione gave a noncommittal shrug, which Harry knew from experience was her admission that she had run out of arguments.

“But, potions aren’t the only thing in here,” he continued. “And here’s where you might have a point. There are also spells in here I’ve never heard of before. Take this one for example.” He turned to a new page and Hermione leaned closer to look at the small writing.

*Levicorpus (nvbl)*

“What’s it do?” she asked. “And does nvbl mean nonverbal?” Harry just grinned at her and pointed his wand and gave an upward flick, concentrating on the incantation in his mind. Before she knew it Hermione was dangling upside down in the air.

“Harry!” she screamed. “Put me down!” Harry moved toward her and cast the counter-jinx ( *Liberacorpus !* ) and caught her in his arms as she dropped.

Hermione straightened out her jumper, which had ridden up to expose some bare skin at her waist, and then hit him on the arm in indignation when he couldn’t stop chuckling. “That’s not funny Potter!” she insisted, although she couldn’t help the small smile that crept onto her face at his amusement.

“Yeah, it would have been a lot more entertaining if you had been wearing a skirt,” he suggested with a cheeky grin. Hermione huffed at this and folded her arms across her chest, then got a sly look on her face.

“So, you think this is a way you’re going to get to see those French knickers I got for my birthday, I suppose?” Now the tables were turned and Harry was flustered, and Hermione laughed and gave

him a hug. “We’ll just have to see about that, but only if you behave yourself,” she whispered in his ear.

It took some time and a few more whispered endearments, as well as several kisses, before they got back to the subject of the Potions book and its spells.

*I complimented him on learning a nonverbal spell, and he said it was much easier than doing a regular spell nonverbally. I picked it up fairly quickly too, and he let me practice it on him a few times. Then he showed me a few more of the ones in the book. I had to admit that most of them were fairly innocuous, more useful for pranks than anything else. One that did have some promise was Muffliato, which creates some background noise around you so that it’s more difficult for people nearby to overhear your conversation. As long as it isn’t overused, so that others get suspicious every time they hear the background buzz, it could be useful for short periods.*

*Then he returned to the Levicorpus spell and asked me if I remembered where we’d seen that spell used before. I thought of the Quidditch World Cup, where the Death Eaters had used it on the muggle family. He had forgotten that, but reminded me that his father had used it on Snape in the pensieve memory he’d seen last year. He confessed that at first it made him wonder if the Half Blood Prince was his dad. But James Potter was a pureblood, not a halfblood, and it was his mum who was the potions prodigy, not his dad, so he quickly discarded that thought. But the point is, the spell wasn’t just used by this Half Blood Prince person, but was more widespread. Then he told me he had asked Remus about it, and he’d recalled that it was a popular pranking spell when he was a student. Apparently these things come and go like fads.*

*Later we talked about what Malfoy and Snape were up to.*

“Harry?” The two of them were in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on Hermione’s creation for that evening’s dinner, and she looked up at him with a frown on her face.

“Hmm?” he responded absently. The fragrance of the wine flavored beef dish was driving him crazy, and Hermione had already smacked his hand twice for attempting to sneak a taste.

“What do you think’s going on with Malfoy?”

“I think what I overheard the other day pretty much confirms that he’s working on some project, and I still think it’s for Voldemort. He specifically said to Snape that the job was given to him alone, and he didn’t need Snape’s help. He’s using Crabbe and Goyle, and some other Slytherins too. That must have been what he was lining up already on the Hogwarts Express. It’s apparently taking up a lot of his time because he gave up his prefect position and quidditch, and Snape was complaining that his grades are slipping too.”

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. “It must be quite a long-term project, though,” she mused. “You said he told Snape it was taking longer than he thought it would?” Harry nodded. “What I’m uncertain about is whether Snape is offering to help him to find out what he’s doing in order to

assist him or thwart him,” she wondered.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Well, he could be trying to keep tabs on him for Dumbledore,” Hermione explained. “And that vow he mentioned – that complicates things as well. I wish we knew exactly what the wording of the vow was, and who he made it to.”

“I sure wish we knew for sure whose side Snape’s really on,” Harry complained.

“Me too,” Hermione agreed. “For that matter I wish I could figure out what Dumbledore’s up to. I just don’t understand what he’s trying to accomplish with your lessons. Do you get the impression that he’s stalling you? I mean, honestly, only meeting two times all term?”

“Definitely,” Harry grumbled. “I feel like I’m still being kept in the dark. Almost like I’m being set up for something. It’s like last year all over again, only now it’s Dumbledore stringing me along instead of Voldemort.”

“Harry, that’s a pretty serious charge!” Hermione exclaimed. “Do you really think so?”

Harry shrugged. “Sometimes. I mean, first he tells me that I’ve got to defeat him, but I’ve no clue how I’m supposed to do it, and he hasn’t said a thing about the prophecy since that night. Is there some big secret weakness that we’re going to uncover by studying his life? If so, why can’t he just tell me what it is so I can spend the time training on how to use it against him?”

Hermione moved up behind Harry, who had started pacing back and forth in the kitchen and wrapped her arms around him. “We’ll figure something out, Harry. I promise you.”

Two days later Harry found Hermione sitting in the living room curled up in a chair with the Potions book open on her lap, and a very concerned look on her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as he came up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder.

“I’ve just finished going through this book,” she answered, “and there’s a spell in here that really worries me.” She gestured to the page and he leaned forward to peer at the writing in the margin.

*Sectumsempra*  
For Enemies

“What do you suppose it does?” Harry asked in a low voice.

“I don’t know, it sounds familiar though,” Hermione answered, her brow furrowed as she tried to remember where she had read about this curse before.

“Should we try it out?” he wondered.

“It sounds dangerous,” she pointed out. “If it’s to be used on an enemy, it must be intended to be harmful.”

“Why don’t we go out back and try it on that snowman we built yesterday?” he suggested.

They were shocked at the deep incision that tore a good size chunk off the snowman, even more so when the spell proved difficult to reverse. Then they both realized where they’d heard of the curse before – it had been the one that a Death Eater had used on Ron in the Department of Mysteries the previous year. It was obviously a dark spell.

“And Snape knew how to counter it, remember?” Harry recalled.

“Well, it stands to reason he would know it, he was a Death Eater after all,” Hermione contended. “So it seems that this Potions book might have once belonged to a Death Eater. “I suppose there must be half blood Death Eaters – they’re probably not all purebloods.”

“Riddle was a half blood,” Harry reminded her. The two of them gasped in unison and their eyes bulged out as they turned to look at each other. Could it be possible?

“Slughorn did teach at Hogwarts while Riddle was a student,” Hermione informed him. “I checked in my copy of *Hogwarts, a History* . This Potions book *has* been around that long, but it isn’t the book that Snape would have assigned.” To Harry’s questioning look she shrugged and admitted with a small smile, “I looked ahead at the end of last year. Slughorn probably switched to it because it was the one he taught from.”

“He must have taught here for a long time if he taught Tom Riddle, since he was still here when my mum and dad were students,” Harry pointed out. “There are a lot of possible Death Eaters it could have been in that time period, so we can’t necessarily assume it was Riddle. And he hated the fact that his father was a muggle so I can’t see him bragging about being a half blood.”

“I think you’re right,” Hermione conceded. “It would be just too much of a coincidence that a book that Slughorn picked up randomly and gave you just happened to belong to your sworn enemy.” She turned to face him again, her worry evident in her eyes. “Harry, I don’t think you should use this book any more.”

“But don’t you think it might be good to learn any spells we might be facing?” Harry countered. “I promise not to use any of them without carefully checking them out first.” Hermione reluctantly accepted that suggestion and Harry put his arm around her as the two of them headed back into the house.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 28

*I can’t believe this week went by so quickly. Despite the rocky beginning, this was just what we needed. Harry and I reconnected and that closeness we used to have picked right up where it left*

off. It's good to know that our love for each other could withstand the separation, as well as survive a crisis. I learned to trust Harry more, and we both learned not to let the other push us away. When we have problems we can work them out.

We've spent the last several days sharing spells. Harry told me about the success the DA's been having with nonverbal spells. The idea to focus on your best spell worked. Each member now has at least one spell they can cast silently, although not all can do it at full strength. Harry's 'signature' spell is *Expelliarmus*. He can cast it silently at full power. He thinks that will be an advantage since with his invisibility cloak he is likely to be in a position to catch an opponent by surprise. Most of the others are focusing on *Protego* or *Stupefy*. Next term he's going to start on combat situations and the use of spell combinations that Tonks worked on with him last summer.

I taught him some of the new spells I've learned at Beauxbatons – *Confringo*, *Deprimo*, and *Expulso*. All of them are blasting hexes of one sort or another, and it's good to vary them in combat so that your opponent doesn't know what to expect. If you use *Stupefy* or *Incarcerous* all the time they're easier to block. And if *Reducto* is the only blasting hex in your arsenal, it can easily be countered.

I got up the nerve to ask him if Cho would be welcome back in the DA. His first inclination was to say no, but the more we thought about it the less cut and dried it seemed. She didn't do anything wrong in an illegal sense; she just tried to move in on another girl's boyfriend. Pretty much the same thing she was doing last year, only much sneakier this time. We didn't kick her out for it last year. Harry's going to get the opinions of the other leaders of the group like Ron, Susan, and Neville, who can be more objective. This will probably end their study sessions together though.

We talked about the nude rituals in Runes, and I admitted that I didn't think I'd be able to bring myself to be nude in front of other guys even if I wasn't going out with him. And since we were together, I wouldn't even consider it unless he was in the class too. I told him I wasn't even sure I could do it in an all-girl class, but if the option were available I'd try. He said he was OK with that, and told me to tell him when it was scheduled and he'd see if he could visit with his invisibility cloak. I smacked him on the arm and we both laughed.

Along those lines, tonight will be our last night together for a long time and I have some plans to make it a very memorable one. I'm really nervous about it though. I just have to gather up my Gryffindor courage and go for it.

-oooOOOooo-

Rose looked up at her mother as she began to close the notebook, a faraway smile on her face. "Wait, what happened next?" she demanded. She reached in and pushed the journal back open to the page they had been on, but there was nothing more written. And the next entry was on an unrelated topic.

"That's pretty personal, don't you think?" Hermione responded as she turned to her daughter in amusement.

“Mum! You can’t stop there!” she complained.

“What we did that night is between your father and me,” Hermione answered firmly.

“But ...” Rose tried a pout but had no success as her mother gave her a ‘that’s final’ look.

“It’s time you were getting to bed anyway,” Hermione pointed out. “You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow.”

As the young girl grudgingly dragged herself off to her bedroom, Hermione settled back and the contented smile returned to her face as she recalled that wonderful evening. She didn’t need a journal to remember what happened next.

-oooOOOooo-

Harry had just finished putting his pajamas on and was climbing into bed when his bedroom door opened and Hermione walked in wearing her dressing gown.

“Hermione?” he asked, rising to his feet. “What is it?”

“Mum and Dad won’t be back for at least half an hour,” she announced as she closed the door. She then fingered the sash of her dressing gown nervously before she managed to continue, “and I have something I want to show you.” Before she could lose her nerve she pulled the knot loose and let the gown fall open. Harry’s jaw dropped as it revealed that all she was wearing beneath was a light blue bra and knicker set, one of the ones her dorm mates had given her for her birthday. With a shrug of her shoulders the gown fell away to give him a full view. The demicup bra’s lacy edge only partly covered her breasts and there was almost nothing to the knickers.

“Hermione!” Harry found his voice at last. “You don’t have to do this just because ...” his voice died away as she turned around and looked back at him shyly over her shoulder, disclosing the fact that these were thong knickers. Then she unhooked the bra.

“It’s not because of Cho,” she explained as she turned back to him and let it drop to the floor. “I’ve been planning to do this for some time now.” Harry swallowed hard. “What do you think, did my friends make a good choice for my birthday present?”

“Brilliant!” he gasped, unable to take his eyes off her. It was even better than his fantasies had been. “I definitely have to thank them if I ever meet them.”

Growing bolder with his positive response, Hermione pressed forward and unbuttoned his pajama top. She encountered no resistance at all as she divested him of the shirt and moved back, taking his hands in hers.

“I want you to touch me,” she whispered, raising his hands to her chest. Then she closed her eyes and leaned her head back, losing herself in the sensation as he gently ran his fingers over the soft curves and hard peaks.



Eventually she opened her eyes again and locked them with his, sinking into his passionate gaze. Closing the distance between them she pressed herself tightly to his chest as his arms enfolded her, and she raised her lips to his.

Harry couldn't keep the grin off his face as they parted after a very satisfying kiss. But she wasn't finished surprising him yet. As her hand dropped to the waistband of his pajamas and tugged on it she murmured in a low, sultry voice, "I want to see you too, and touch you."

It was a memorable thirty minutes indeed, as the two of them carefully and lovingly explored this newly uncovered territory.

Just like the daydream charm, Hermione later decided, only without the sand. Better yet, it was no dream. And the memories of this evening would keep them both warm during the upcoming term apart. She also decided that nude hugs were a very good thing.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters** **New Year, New Information**

### **Year 6 Chapter 7, New Year, New Information**

*Dear Hermione,*

*Happy New Year! We had quite the celebration last night here at the Burrow. Unfortunately I didn't have anyone to kiss at midnight. Well, that's not quite true. I did get a peck on the cheek from Ginny. Don't worry, it was the same as the one she gave each of her other brothers, no more and no less. In fact, I think she sees me as another brother now. More about that later.*

*I also got a kiss from Fleur. Two actually, one on each cheek, like she usually does. First she gave Bill a kiss that left him temporarily unable to remember his own name. You should have seen the look they got from Mrs. Weasley. Then she came over to me and Ron and gave each of us a kiss on both cheeks. I'm sure you can imagine the effect that had on Ron! While he was temporarily dazed she teased me about who I really wanted to be kissing. And she was right. Even though Ginny is really pretty, and Fleur is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, while each of them were kissing me all I could think about was how much I wanted it to be you.*

*Oh, and you should have seen Tonks go at it with Remus! There's definitely no question about them now. I don't think anyone else but me noticed, because she grabbed him while Fleur was attempting to remove Bill's tonsils with her tongue. I wonder if Tonks and Fleur planned it that way, to have Fleur create a distraction. I wouldn't put it past them. Anyway, aside from that, I have a lot to tell you about, even though it's only been a few days.*

*I told Ron about overhearing Malfoy and Snape, and we speculated about what they were up to. He pointed out that the incident with Ginny and the dagger didn't fit well with it being a long term project, and I agreed. Perhaps that was a diversion? We both thought that Snape's role was curious – him being out of the loop and demanding to be let in on the plan. He, of course, is more ready to believe that Snape's evil and wants to help Malfoy cause whatever trouble he's up to, where you tend more to think that he's still following Dumbledore's orders.*

*We've tried to make subtle suggestions to some of the others here about Snape, such as Remus and Tonks and Mr. Weasley. But they all firmly believe that Dumbledore knows what he's doing and that if he trusts Snape, then Snape must be trustworthy. The only one who deviates from the party line is Fleur, probably because she didn't grow up here and wasn't taught all her life that Dumbledore is some infallible god.*

I also told Ron about what happened with Cho (but not what you and I did the night before I left!). That got him back to thinking that I'm the luckiest bloke in the world. (He asked some questions about her that I'm not going to repeat, and I finally had to threaten to hex him to get him to stop.) He then declared that he certainly wouldn't have run away from an offer like that! So I asked him 'what about Hermione?' I could see he hadn't thought that far. After a bit he decided I shouldn't have told you – you'd have been happier not knowing and we wouldn't have had a big fight about it. I didn't agree with him though. I guess because of how upset I get when people have kept things away from me 'for my own good'. Does that make sense?

Thinking about it some more, I think it's more than that. I've always trusted you, probably more than anyone else in the world, and I want you to be able to trust me that way. I don't think it's good for a relationship to hide things like that from each other. Yes, it was very painful, but I think it helped us become closer in a way.

Sorry, I got off the track there. I've had other interesting conversations and observations as well. The most surprising one was with Ginny. She's fine now and eager to get back to school, by the way. Anyway, she pulled me aside and asked me to go out for a walk with her yesterday. When I pointed out that it was cold outside she just glared at me and said, 'Warming charm, you prat!' I guess she also has discovered we can do magic here.

Anyway, when we were alone outside she told me she wanted to ask me for advice about her and Dean. Can you believe that – someone asking me for advice about dating? When I pointed that out to her she said I'm different now that I have you for a girlfriend. Said you've educated me. Plus, since I've been in a relationship with one girl for more than a year that qualifies me as an expert. Anyway, she wanted to know how far we've gone in our relationship. When I answered that that was private and I wouldn't betray your confidence like that, she said she understood and admired me for saying that, and would try to ask the question a different way so that I could answer.

She then suggested that it seemed to her that we weren't too physical with each other at the beginning, and that she assumed that it was at least six months before we got as far as touching each other 'intimately'. I said that was a good assumption. Then she said she and Dean got into heavy snogging right off the bat this year, and that after the first couple of weeks he started trying to put his hands under her top while they were making out. She giggled a bit at the look on my face at that revelation. When I realized that it must have been quite a murderous glare, I jokingly asked her if she wanted me to go beat him up. But she replied that she already had plenty of brothers to do that – she was looking more for a male friend that could give her advice.

I told her that for me, I respected you too much to try doing things like that unless I was pretty sure you would want me to. Then she sighed and said that's what she thought I'd say. She told me I was a great boyfriend and that to please let her know if you and I ever decide to call it quits. That startled me for a second, but then I joked that she'd have to get in line behind Cho.

She scowled at that comment and told me she'd heard about what happened. She said she didn't blame Cho for trying but that she thought she'd gone too far. There's apparently some sort of unwritten rule about how hard a girl is allowed to try to steal another girl's boyfriend. I guess flirting is OK, but taking your clothes off in front of him isn't. Hopefully I won't have to learn

*these rules because I won't ever need to find another girlfriend.*

*After we chuckled about that a bit she turned serious again. She thanked me for the advice and said she was going to give it another try with Dean when she got back to school, but she was going to be more assertive about setting some limits. Then she gave me a hug and said she was glad she had a friend like me. I can certainly see how she wouldn't be able to talk to Ron about this! (By the way, she said it was all right for me to tell you about this conversation.)*

*It occurred to me as we were walking back how much Ginny has grown up. I'd always thought of her as Ron's little sister, but she's turned into a mature young woman without me noticing it. That prompted me to say something to her about Fleur. I told her I didn't appreciate the name-calling and nasty comments, that I considered Fleur a good friend, and that I thought Ginny was a better person than that. That startled her, and she was real quiet for a time. Then all of a sudden she had tears in her eyes and she hugged me again, thanking me for saying that. She said she'd try harder to live up to my opinion of her. I was really surprised at that reaction. I guess despite your best efforts, I still don't understand girls very well.*

*Since then, she hasn't said the word 'Phlegm' once, and has tried to be nice to Fleur. I've noticed Fleur with a surprised look on her face a couple of times. That brings me to the next subject. Fleur and Mrs. Weasley are definitely NOT getting along. They hardly talk to each other, and sometimes it even seems like they deliberately antagonize each other. Mrs. Weasley will make comments that hint that the wedding still isn't a sure thing, and Fleur can't resist retaliating with comments about Mrs. Weasley's preferences in things like music, food, decorating, fashion, etc. The other night we were listening to Celestina Warbeck, who is Mrs. Weasley's favorite singer, and Fleur kept complaining about the noise. Mrs. Weasley responded by turning up the volume every time until all our ears were hurting.*

*The problem with all of this is that they're supposed to be planning a wedding. And they can't even agree on where to have it. According to tradition, it should be at the Delacour's in France. And frankly, having been to both houses, that would seem to me to be a better location. But Mrs. Weasley has her heart set on having the wedding at the Burrow. Her argument is that they have so many friends and relatives in Britain that would come, and it would be inconvenient for them to have to travel to France. Personally, I think Bill should step up and support his fiancée, and tell his mum it's going to be in France. (Of course that may be because I've become good friends with Fleur.) But you know how much trouble the Weasley children have always had standing up to their mother.*

*Oh yeah, that reminds me – Mrs. Weasley is still trying to get Ginny and me together. The look on her face when we came back into the house together after our talk was like Christmas had come again. I guess she was watching out the window and saw the hug Ginny gave me. Ginny has apologized to me a couple of times for the hints and suggestions she's been dropping, and said to just ignore them – that's what she's doing. I think she's had words with her mum about it more than once.*

*Speaking of Weasley children acting independently, the last bit of news happened today. While we were in the middle of a big New Year's dinner, two people apparated onto the road in front of the*

Burrow and started walking up to the house. It was Percy and Minister Scrimgeour. At first, Mrs. Weasley was all excited that Percy had finally come home, and she even started crying a bit, especially when Ron, Fred and George had some rather uncomplimentary things to say about him. Unfortunately, it turned out that their comments were all justified. The reason they were there was that the Minister wanted to talk to me, and Percy had brought him. He hadn't wanted to see his family at all! He just stood there and ignored them while the Minister took me outside. He even refused the sweater his mum made for him, the big git!

My talk with the Minister was just like I'd expected from what Dumbledore and Tonks told me last summer. He wants my support. Don't you think it's pretty ridiculous when the head of a government goes to that much effort to get the support of a boy who's still in school? I told him I had no intention of giving a press conference or making any kind of statement at all, and that I wasn't really aware of anything he'd done that I wanted to support. According to Remus and Mr. Weasley, they've only arrested a handful of people on suspicion of being Death Eaters, and those few probably aren't even guilty. One of them is Stan Shunpike, the guy from the Knight Bus! That's ridiculous!

As a result of that comment he got mad and accused me of being Dumbledore's man. I told him that yes, I was, and he stalked off. While I might not agree with everything Dumbledore's doing, or the way he's going about my training, he's doing loads more than anyone else. So I'm not about to let Scrimgeour or anyone else try to split us apart or play one of us against the other. He'd also tried to get me to tell him what Dumbledore has been up to, but I refused. I didn't tell him that I didn't know myself. When we have our next lesson I'm going to insist on getting some more answers.

That's about as much as I can think of for now. I wish you were here. It's only been 3 days but it seems like forever.

I miss you.

Love,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

I am so proud of you! The way you handled all of those situations was wonderful. You really are becoming more sensitive. As much as I'd like to take the credit for it, as Ginny suggested, I'm certain that it is also due to your increasing maturity.

I don't know how so many interesting things could have happened to you in just 3 days! Nothing has happened here since you left. I've spent the time reviewing my books and getting ready to go back to France.

*I very much appreciate your response to Ron about Cho. That does sound like the sort of reaction he'd have, just do what looks enticing and think about it later. But what you said about how important trust is in a relationship is spot on. I do trust you, despite how badly I reacted, and you've proven that I'm right in doing so. It's important to me that you trust me too, though I hope no situations like that arise for me that would make you doubt me.*

*It was good to hear what you did for Ginny too, and that she looks up to you as someone she can confide in about those things. I think you handled her questions about us very well. I don't particularly want to have her (or Ron, or anyone else for that matter) know about how far we've gone. I'm certainly still enjoying the memory of that last night, but I want to keep that for just the two of us.*

*I don't know what can be done about the problems between Fleur and Mrs. Weasley. I hope they can work something out – it's not a good situation to be at odds with your mother-in-law. I'm certainly glad that my mum and dad both get along with all of my grandparents. And you are right that Bill and Fleur ought to have the biggest say in it, although often it's the mothers who do most of the planning for weddings. Like you, I consider Fleur to be a good friend, so I'm inclined to take her side, even though I like Mrs. Weasley.*

*That is, I did until she started trying to break us up and get you together with Ginny. Honestly, why can't she just accept that her dream matchup of her daughter with the Boy Who Lived isn't going to happen? It's certainly good to hear that Ginny's not encouraging her. And I'm also glad that she's trying to change her attitude toward Fleur. I agree with you that it sounds like she's matured this year. And I wouldn't worry too much about what she said about letting her know if we break up. For one thing, that's never going to happen. And she does like you, so it would only be natural for her to want to date you if you were single. Like I keep telling you – you're very fanciable. I bet if you asked any of your female friends there at Hogwarts if they'd like to go out with you, nearly all of them would say yes. Susan would probably only say no because she's with Neville now.*

*Speaking of relationships – that's really something about Remus and Tonks. That must be what all the talks between Tonks and Fleur last summer were about. I never would have guessed it was Remus Lupin! He must be at least 10 years older than her. It will be very interesting to see if they can make a go of it.*

*I guess the only other thing to comment on is your meeting with the Minister. Once again, I'm proud of you for how you handled yourself. And it was a good idea to keep your disagreements with the Headmaster to yourself. Scrimgeour doesn't need to know about that. Don't reveal any more to people like him than necessary. Sounds quite Slytherin of us, doesn't it?*

*I'll be heading back to Beauxbatons tomorrow. But I certainly wish I were going to Hogwarts with you. It won't be forever, but you're right, it will certainly seem like it. I need to stop thinking about that before I start crying. Good luck with Dumbledore.*

*I miss you.*

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-000-*

*Dear Hermione,*

*Well, the new term is underway. I had another lesson with Dumbledore yesterday. It's starting to make more sense now. I'll tell you about that later.*

*Our study group has changed. Cho's not meeting with us any more. I understand that Susan had some 'words' with her. As you know, loyalty is a big thing with Hufflepuffs. We'll just have to get along without her. Ginny has joined us, though. She missed more than 2 months and she's really behind, so we're all pitching in to help her out. Since she's in her OWL year, it's pretty important. What we really need is another Ravenclaw to join our group.*

*Hannah is back, too. I don't remember if I told you, but her mother was killed in November and she left school for the last month of the term. Ron was pleased to see her. I think some teasing is in order there.*

*They're going to offer apparation lessons this term, with an exam for everyone who's of age scheduled for the last week of April. We all signed up, even though Neville and I won't be able to take the exam until July. When do you learn to apparate?*

*I guess that's all for now.*

*Love,*

*Henry*

*Hermione wasted no time tapping the parchment and reciting the incantation to reveal the hidden message.*

*Finally! I had a session with Dumbledore last night and we're actually getting somewhere! It's all starting to make sense. Now it's clearer what he's been leading up to with all these memories of Tom Riddle. It was necessary background to understand what Riddle did to turn himself into Voldemort. It turns out that there is an extremely dark ritual that he performed that split his soul. It's called making a Horcrux, and it basically made him immortal. Yes, you read that right. As long as these Horcruxes exist he can't be killed. So, if I'm to be the one to destroy him, the first thing that has to happen is to find and destroy these Horcruxes. But the thing is, we don't know how many of them there are! More about that later.*

*The first memory we watched tonight showed the teenaged Riddle confronting his uncle Morfin, who told him some things about his mother and grandfather. According to Dumbledore, he then killed his father and the rest of the Riddle family and framed his uncle Morfin for it, even memory*

charming him into confessing. He was really that evil, even as a teenager! He also took the Gaunt family ring, which is important.

The next memory was of Riddle in a group of students meeting with Professor Slughorn. After the meeting broke up, Riddle stayed after and asked Slughorn what he knew about Horcruxes. Dumbledore thinks that Slughorn gave him some information about them, but we're not sure because the memory had been tampered with. Once he saw how Riddle turned out – becoming an evil dark lord – Slughorn must have been ashamed to have helped him, so he somehow modified the memory.

After he told me that, Dumbledore said it was my job to get the real memory from Slughorn. He said there was no way he could force it out of Slughorn, but that he had to be persuaded to give it freely. Do you see what's going on here? This entire thing with Slughorn has been a set up from the beginning. He knew he needed that information last summer, and he's manipulated Slughorn into a position where he thinks I can get it from him. Can you believe how much planning and calculation Dumbledore has put into this, not to mention outright deviousness?

At that point Dumbledore dismissed me, but I refused to leave. I think that took him aback quite a bit. I said there was a lot more information that he hadn't told me yet, and that he had to stop holding back. This was a life or death situation – my life or death – and I wasn't willing to play guessing games any more. I needed to know exactly what he already knew about these Horcruxes so that I'd have a better idea of exactly what information I needed from Slughorn. He tried to stall some more, but I asked him if I was back to being an unwitting tool again.

That comment finally shook him up enough to get him to tell me more. Here's the gist of it. Once he figured out that Voldemort wasn't really dead, he worked on trying to figure out how he managed it. He finally decided that it was through the use of Horcruxes after our second year. I bet you've already figured out what I'm going to say next. The diary was one. That's how it had the essence of Tom Riddle in it. When I destroyed it, I actually killed a fragment of his soul.

The ring I've mentioned several times was also one. Dumbledore found it at the Gaunt house and destroyed it at the beginning of July. There are two more he's pretty sure about, and he's going to show me memories relating to them next time. But the most important thing I need to find out from Slughorn is how many Voldemort made.

Hopefully, now that I know that it will be easier. So, do you have any suggestions on how I can 'persuade' Slughorn to give me information that he refused to give to Dumbledore? Or what other items Voldemort used, or where else he might have hid them? As you can see, I need you more than ever.

I miss you.

Love,

Harry



Dear Harry,

Your news about Voldemort was amazing. Even though I see where Dumbledore was going with the pensieve memories, it still seems like he could have got to this part a lot sooner. Why not give you this information in the first place? Why put you off and stall so long? And then the way he still tried to keep some of the critical parts from you even now? Sometimes that man is so infuriating!

I'll search the library here for anything I can find on Horcruxes. I've also been thinking about the unknown items and locations. I'm pretty sure that one of the ones Dumbledore's going to tell you more about next time is Slytherin's locket. That must be why he made a big deal about it earlier. I also suspect that his emphasis on Tom Riddle liking to 'collect things' is significant. As far as where they might be, I'm guessing they're in significant locations, not just scattered randomly about the country. That's probably another reason why you learned so much about his background. So, for Tom Riddle one significant location was his pureblood grandfather's house, so he hid the family ring there. Perhaps another would be the orphanage he grew up in? And mightn't Hogwarts be a possibility? And don't forget that Lucius Malfoy had one. That's all I can come up with so far.

So, Ron and Hannah Abbott, hmm? It sounds like he might have a thing for blondes, given who he's dated so far, as well as his infatuation with Fleur. For teasing purposes I'd suggest you ask him if blondes have more fun, but I doubt he'd get the muggle reference.

I must confess I'm not at all disappointed that you're not studying with Cho any more. You remember how much I wanted to hex her for going after you last year, so you can imagine what I want to do now. I did hear from Susan about her 'talk' with Cho. Let's just say the results of that confrontation are going to stay between us girls. But I did find her description of it quite satisfying. (Picture your Hermione sitting here with an evil smirk on her face.)

As far as needing another Ravenclaw to study with, you might consider Padma Patil. I'm not sure how you'd ask her without also including Parvati, though, and then you'd also have to have Lavender. Then that raises the question about how well she and Ron are getting along, or her reaction to Hannah. So many complications! Believe it or not, that's the sort of stress that 'normal' teenagers generally have to deal with. Not at all like us!

Things are going pretty well here at Beauxbatons. Some of the things we're scheduled to cover this term look very interesting, especially in Charms and Transfiguration. I'll be sure to let you know what happens with regard to the nude rituals in Runes. As far as learning to apparate, the others in my class learned last year, of course, so I'm joining the other sixth years for that. Ironically, it's my first class with Sally-Anne. We've decided to be partners. I've been telling her some of the things happening back home, especially news from Susan about her former classmates in Hufflepuff. It's good in some ways but unfortunate in others. It's nice having someone to talk to about Hogwarts, but it reminds me even more that I'm not there with you.

I miss you.

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-000 -*

*Dear Hermione,*

*Before I get to the serious stuff, I have to tell you what happened in Potions today. I really wish you could have been here, because it was a problem that you'd be really good at. Slughorn gave us a vial of a mixture of poisons and told us to identify them, then brew an antidote for as many of them as possible. As you can probably guess, I didn't have a clue what to do. Somehow the Half Blood Prince never got around to writing a procedure on how to separate poisons. I would have to actually know something about potions to do this one.*

*So anyway, I figured my reputation as a Potions genius was really going to take a hit. That would be fine with me, if it meant that Slughorn would stop obsessing over me, but I doubt that would happen in any case. I peeked at what Ernie and some of the Ravenclaw students were doing, and Specialis Revelio identified the poisons well enough, but I didn't have much idea of what to do next to separate them. Then, while I was looking up antidotes to poisons in the book, I found another tip in the margin.*

*Just shove a bezoar down their throats*

*Remember the very first day of Potions in first year, when Snape was trying to embarrass me by asking questions I wouldn't know the answer to? (Perhaps you also remember a little bushy-haired girl raising her hand trying to answer all of those questions.) That incident is pretty well burned in my memory. One of the questions was about a bezoar, and I now remembered that it's supposed to be an antidote for most poisons.*

*Now, you're probably going to scold me for 'cheating' on this assignment, but I walked over to the supply cupboard and found one. Then, when Slughorn was going around the room checking our results, I just handed him the bezoar.*

*Well, he ate it up. Told me I had nerve, just like my mum. (I get the impression that he really liked her. I wonder if I can use that somehow.) Then he chuckled and agreed that a bezoar would certainly act as an antidote to all those poisons. Unfortunately, the students who had actually done the assignment were pretty ticked off. I tried to tell him that they should get house points instead of me but he wouldn't hear of it. On the bright side, I reckoned this would be a good time to ask him about the memory.*

*It didn't do any good. As soon as I said the word 'Horcruxes' he froze right up. He knew right off that Dumbledore had shown me his altered memory and insisted that was all he knew. He yelled the last bit as he was shoving me out the door of the dungeon and slamming it behind me.*

*Here's something I forgot to tell you about last letter. At the beginning of my meeting with*

Dumbledore, I mentioned what I heard Snape and Malfoy doing. He assured me that he was well aware of the situation, and that Snape was acting on his orders and keeping tabs on Malfoy. So I guess it's like you suggested. But a few other things still don't add up. What about Snape's vow? And it sounded like he wasn't really having much success at finding out what Malfoy's up to. I tried to ask Dumbledore about that also, but he said it wasn't my concern. Then I pointed out that Ginny had almost died, and that there was a good possibility that I had been the target, so it bloody well did concern me. Then he apologized for brushing me off and said that he understood my concerns, but that he was certain there was no danger to me, and that with Malfoy aware that Snape was watching him it was unlikely that there would be any more attacks on students. I agreed to drop the subject for then, but let him know that I was keeping my eye on Malfoy as well.

So, I've been watching for Malfoy on the Map whenever I get a chance. I still haven't seen him near the Room of Requirement, but we have run into young Slytherin girls in that corridor a couple of times lately. And I mean that literally. Ron knocked one over once and she dropped a set of scales, which made an awful racket. It's not been the same girl each time, though, so I don't know what to make of that. I still think he might be using it as part of whatever he's planning.

We started spell combinations in the DA this week. It's coming along nicely. We're all caught up with what we should have learned by now for NEWTs and we're also improving our fighting capability. Tonks stopped by and helped me show them some of the stuff she taught me this summer.

Susan doesn't think Padma would be a good person to add to our study group, but not for any of the reasons you mentioned. She says she's still sore at Ron because of the Yule Ball. I guess it wasn't enough to keep her out of the DA, but she doesn't want to study with him. So apparently she doesn't mind me helping her out (in the DA) as long as she doesn't have to help us (in our study group).

I think I'll try to have a talk with Parvati sometime and see if she's still upset with me about the ball, and apologize for the way I acted toward her. On the other hand, Susan says she could get just about any other Ravenclaw girl to join our group if we really wanted, because all of them have a crush on me. I think she was kidding.

In your next letter to Susan ask her how her apparating is coming along. We've been giving her a hard time because she was the first one to splinch herself yesterday. She left half of her leg behind. It sounds really gruesome, but Pomfrey was right there waiting for something like that to happen and fixed her up immediately. It's slow going for the rest of us. I can feel a tingle and a bit of a tug when I try it, but no success so far.

Those were some good ideas you had about the Horcruxes. I'm very glad to have you working on it with me. You've always been the one who makes the key discovery to bail me out on my adventures and it sure would be great if you could do it again.

I miss you.

Love,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

Oh, what am I going to do with you? That stunt you pulled in Potions – well, it was rather amusing to read about, but I'm sure that if I was there I would have scolded you for getting points when you hadn't even done the assignment. Honestly, the nerve of you, just handing Professor Slughorn a bezoar! It seems to me that you could spend a little more time trying to learn something about potions from that book instead of just looking for tips and shortcuts. Oh well.

I have some things to tell you about on several subjects. I'm doing well with apparation. I was the first in my class to manage a short one without splinching. No matter what they say about how it's reversible and not that serious, it still seems horrible to me. I feel so sorry for Susan. You boys are so mean, teasing her like that! Now I, of course, would never do anything of the sort. I may have just happened to ask her if she was planning to practice her hopping skills though. (Yes, your bookworm girlfriend can be just as mischievous as you, she's just more subtle about it.)

We learned a spell in Transfiguration this week that I think you should teach the DA. It turns common objects instantly to stone. Do you see the application? You could use it to block an Unforgiveable! The incantation is Duro and I've included a sketch of the wand movement.

The next thing is that we're learning about enchantments in Charms. The examples given in class reminded me of the mirror Sirius gave you. I think I might be able to duplicate it. Can you get one for me? Perhaps you could get Kreacher to bring you the one Sirius used. Didn't you say he hid it? As much as I disapprove of using house elves, he does have to obey you if you order him to give it to you right? Barring that, could you send me a piece of the one you broke? It would be like the Protean charm I used on the DA Galleons, only much more complicated.

I haven't found anything in our library yet about Horcruxes. I need to ask permission to look in the 'dark' section, but I'd have to give a good reason for that. I'll keep working on it. I'm going to find some useful things for you, I promise. Like you said, I've always solved problems for you in the past and I'm not going to stop now, just because we're apart.

I'm back to holding my snitch pendant at night while I think about you. Five more months to go.

I miss you.

All my love,

Hermione

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters** **Valentine's Day And Shocking Discoveries**

### **Year 6 Chapter 8, Valentine's Day And Shocking Discoveries**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger - February 15

*The most extraordinary thing has happened – Harry is here! At Beauxbatons! His story is so incredible I can scarcely believe it. It started yesterday morning on Valentine's Day.*

“What's that you've got there?” Ron asked as he climbed out of bed, rubbing his eyes.

“Valentine's cards, and a few gifts,” Harry replied as he sorted through the pile, looking for one in particular. Finding the parcel from Hermione, he settled back onto his bed and opened it, ignoring the other tokens from hopeful females.

“Hey, chocolate cauldrons,” Ron observed with interest. “I love those.”

“Help yourself,” Harry offered without much thought. He had just finished reading a very passionate card and was now gazing at a picture that Hermione had enclosed of herself. While she was fully clothed in the photo, her Beauxbatons robes showed her figure off very nicely and she had quite an inviting smile, and he quickly decided that it would occupy a prominent place on his bedside table. Then something occurred to him.

“You'd better check those chocolates before you eat any,” he cautioned belatedly, without looking up. “I wouldn't put it past Romilda Vane to dose some with a love potion.”

“Don't say that!” Ron objected angrily. “You can't talk that way about the woman I love!” Harry's head jerked up in surprise at this absurd statement, and he was shocked to see Ron standing before him clenching his fist. Realizing he was about to get punched, Harry quickly drew his wand while diving out of the way.

“Ron, what are you doing?” Harry cried, as Ron's fist cleaved the air where Harry's head had been a moment earlier.

“You take that back!” shouted Ron. “Romilda would never do something like that. I love her!” He

made another lunge toward Harry, but with years of experience at dodging Dudley, Harry managed to evade him again. It was now all too obvious what had happened. Romilda had indeed sent him a treat laced with a love potion – a rather powerful one by the looks of it. He had to figure out a way to get Ron an antidote, without letting him make a fool of himself with Romilda, and more importantly, without letting Ron beat him senseless.

“*Stupefy!*” Just as Ron was about to launch himself at Harry in an attempt to pin him down, Harry stunned him. “*Locomotor Weasley.*” Now Ron’s gangly body levitated and began floating across the room, his long limbs flopping every which way. Harry directed him out the door and down the stairs, headed for the Potions classroom where he hoped he could find an antidote. As he passed through the common room he explained to the few students who were up that Ron had had a bad reaction to a prank Valentine treat from the twins. Fortunately, Romilda wasn’t present at the time.

Harry’s luck held as Slughorn was awake, but had not yet gone up to breakfast, and the portly professor opened his office door dressed in a nightcap and a ghastly looking lime green dressing gown. Harry found himself wondering briefly if he and Dumbledore shopped at the same place, and if fashion sense was something that was non-existent in elderly wizards.

“Harry?” he asked in surprise. “Not that I’m not always happy to see you but ...”

“Ron’s been dosed with a love potion,” Harry interrupted as he maneuvered his best mate through the doorway, “and I was hoping you might have an antidote.”

It took a bit of convincing, as Slughorn first suggested that Harry should have no difficulty whipping up a counter potion himself, which Harry deflected by pointing out that it would take time and he didn’t want them to be late for class, before the professor agreed that he might have some in the storeroom. While he was fetching the potion, Harry settled Ron in a chair and put him in a body bind, then re-energized him.

Ron’s eyes communicated his distress at finding himself petrified, and in an unfamiliar office, not to mention his lingering ire from Harry’s insulting of his true love Romilda, but Harry said nothing as Slughorn returned to the room. For a moment the Potions professor appeared to be debating with himself whether to suggest that he be compensated for the potion, but apparently decided against it, as it was a student preparation in the first place, made from ingredients purchased with school funds.

Without giving Ron a chance to figure out what he was doing, Harry took the potion, tilted his friend’s head back, and poured it down his throat. He then released the body bind and stood back warily while Ron dropped to his knees, coughing and choking.

“Bloody hell, mate, what do you think ...” Ron’s demand for an explanation came to an abrupt halt as the potion took effect, and he felt the infatuation for the dark-haired beauty named Romilda Vane fade away. “What ... what just happened to me?”

Harry proceeded to explain to Ron and Slughorn the sequence of events that had led them to this

situation, and Ron slumped back into an overstuffed chair, going pale at the thought of what might have happened if Harry had not intervened so decisively. For his part, Slughorn was both amused at the tale and impressed with Harry's quick thinking, and decided that drinks were in order, both to celebrate Ron's escape and to help ease his distress. The boys both agreed and he sorted through his collection of alcoholic beverages.

"Hmm, firewhiskey ... no, you're still underage ... butterbeer ... too early in the day ... wine perhaps ... ah, here's just the thing." He returned with a bottle of finely aged mead and poured each of them a glass. "Had this sent over special from The Three Broomsticks, meant to give it to Dumbledore for Christmas but never got around to it – oh well." As Harry reached for his glass Slughorn's comment stirred something in the back of his mind.

"Wait!" he shouted. "Don't drink that!" Too late. Ron, still a bit shaken, had already downed his whole glass. To Harry's dismay, he began to jerk uncontrollably and foam at the mouth.

He leapt to his feet as Slughorn sat there dumfounded and dashed to the supply cabinet, trying to find something that looked like a poison antidote. Then he spotted the bezoar he had bluffed his way through the potions assignment with, grabbed it, and stuffed it into Ron's mouth. Within seconds Ron's body stopped convulsing and his color began to return to normal, as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

"My word!" Slughorn exclaimed. "What just happened?"

A half hour later Harry made his way back down toward the dungeons from the Hospital Wing, grabbing a quick bite to eat along the way. Madame Pomfrey had shooed him out with assurances that Ron would make a full recovery and he decided to go let Slughorn know that everything had turned out all right. When he re-entered the office he discovered that the man was still quite shaken over the event, and had apparently been drinking ever since Harry had left to levitate Ron to the infirmary.

"I didn't know ... I didn't know ..." he protested as he spotted Harry.

"Don't worry about it," Harry reassured him. "Ron will be OK. Just take your time and settle down. There's still some time before classes start."

"Yes ... of course ..." Slughorn agreed. Then Harry surprised him by asking if he could stay and talk for a while. After everything that had just happened, the professor could hardly refuse, although he was immediately suspicious about what Harry would want to discuss. But Harry had decided on a more subtle approach, and realized that this was an opportune time, given Slughorn's mixed feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and gratitude, combined with his increasing level of inebriation. Harry refilled his wine glass and poured a bit for himself.

"While we're here, could you tell me a bit about my mum?"

It didn't take Slughorn long to fall into his familiar mode of bragging about the accomplishments of one of his prize pupils, and Harry listened aptly. Not only was this a part of his plan to loosen the Potions professor up, he really did want to learn more about his mother. As Slughorn extolled her virtues, he made a comment about how she had friends in all four houses.

"Yeah, I remember hearing somewhere that she was friends with Snape," Harry interjected.

"Oh yes," Slughorn confirmed, "the two of them were practically inseparable for four years. Unfortunately Severus made some poor choices and fell in with the wrong crowd, and they drifted apart. Your mother wanted nothing to do with that sort, of course, and they would hardly tolerate her either, being a muggleborn. I sometimes wonder if I couldn't have done more to guide young Severus away from that line of thinking. Unfortunately, it was quite attractive for some students back then, before ..." He drifted off, uncomfortable with the direction his thoughts were heading.

"It seems surprising to me that a muggleborn would so quickly have become close friends with a pureblood," Harry commented. "Remus told me it was practically from the first day of school."

"Oh, that wasn't the case," Slughorn corrected him. "Severus Snape is not a pureblood, he's a halfblood. His father was a muggle and his mother's name ... let me see if I can recall ... oh yes, his mother's maiden name was Prince. Eileen Prince. A pretty fair student in her own right – I believe that's where he got his potions talent from." At this point he stopped his reminiscing, as Harry had gone pale. "What's wrong, my boy?"

"Oh ... oh nothing," Harry stammered, trying to shake off the shock of this revelation. Forcing his thoughts away from the newly discovered identity of his secret Potions mentor he turned the discussion back to his own mother.

"I really appreciate your sharing your memories of my mother with me professor," he continued, leaning forward and softening his tone. "I have so few of my own, you know. I was just thinking, do you know how she died?"

"Well," Slughorn twisted uncomfortably in his chair and downed another long swallow from his wine glass, which Harry had determinedly been keeping filled. "I have heard the story, of course."

"It's my only memory of her," Harry responded in a low, haunted voice. "Her screams as Voldemort came after me. She kept saying 'No, not Harry. Not Harry. Take me. Kill me instead.' See, he didn't intend to kill her. Only me."

Slughorn was shaking his head and choking up, but Harry pressed on. "She wouldn't get out of the way, though. She sacrificed herself to save me. The last thing I can hear in my mind is her saying 'Have mercy!' and then there's a green flash, then nothing."

The room was silent for a moment, save for the sniffing of the large man sitting before Harry. Then he continued. "Do you know why Voldemort wanted to kill me, Professor? Do you know why he didn't die that night?" Slughorn whimpered and shook his head, a horrified expression on his face. "There was a prophecy about him and me, you know. It said I have to be the one to kill



him. So he tried to kill me first. But he failed, didn't he?"

"No ... no, I can't," Slughorn choked out, tears running down his face.

"He's still after me, though. And it's up to me to finish him off. But I can't do it without your help." Slughorn buried his head in his hands. "Without your help Lily Evans will have died for nothing and he'll win."

Without looking up, Slughorn shook his head. "I only need a number, sir," Harry murmured, leaning in close.

In a voice that Harry could barely hear, the broken down man whispered.

"Seven."

Harry slowly rose to his feet and reached forward, clasping the quivering mass of a wizard lightly on the shoulder. "Thank you sir. I'll let your first class know that lessons are canceled for today, all right?" With that he turned and exited the office into the Potions classroom.

Harry's first thought was to run straight to Dumbledore's office to tell him about his success, but he hesitated. The headmaster still had more Horcrux related memories to share with him at their next meeting – they weren't going to be able to do anything about them until after that. And besides, it would give Dumbledore a taste of his own medicine to have to wait for some information. He was also still pondering the likelihood of Snape being the Half Blood Prince and what to do with this information. In the meantime, he decided to use the free time available from his Potions class being canceled to go visit Ron.

Back up in the infirmary, Ron was still unconscious but breathing normally. Ginny was there, though, and Harry told her the story of what had happened. On hearing this Ginny scowled, then an expression of determination filled her face and Harry realized that Romilda Vane was in for an unpleasant experience. He wisely decided not to inquire into the fiery redhead's plans for reprisal, and instead the pair of friends talked about what this would mean for their upcoming quidditch match. Both agreed that they sincerely hoped that Ron would be able to play, as neither was thrilled about having Cormac McClaggen fill in as keeper.

To their surprise, Fred and George entered the room during their quidditch discussion. The twins had been in Hogsmeade negotiating to buy out Zonko's, the former joke shop that had recently closed, in order to open a Hogsmeade branch of WWW. Harry offered the opinion that it was a brilliant idea. When the discussion turned to Ron's condition, Harry repeated his tale of the love potion laced chocolate cauldron and the poisoned mead. There was a brief uncomfortable moment as the twins acknowledged that it was one of their own products that had felled their brother, but Harry quickly pointed out that the love potion had only been an embarrassment, not deadly.

At this the mood lightened somewhat, and the Weasley brothers turned their minds to the subject

of payback. After sharing a look with their sister they nodded their agreement that she was more than able to uphold the family's honor in this incident and merely asked if there was anything she needed from them. But as the three of them huddled together to discuss potential pranks Madame Pomfrey entered the room.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, it's good to see you," she greeted them, along with a nod to the twins. I'm glad to see that you've completely recovered from your own unfortunate incident, my dear," she continued to Ginny. "And I must say that it's unusual to see you on this side of the bed Mr. Potter. It's been all too often that you've been the patient here and this lot, along with Miss Granger, have been the visitors." Harry responded with a grin – this *had* been a rather uneventful year for him in terms of hospital visits. He couldn't recall any other year so far that he had avoided being a patient himself.

When the healer turned to the Weasley siblings and informed them that their parents had already been notified and were on their way, Harry remembered something he had wanted to ask her about.

"Are parents always notified about students' injuries?"

"Certainly," the prim and proper witch responded. "Or I should say, wizarding parents are."

"But parents of muggleborns aren't?" Harry wondered. "And I suppose that would include my aunt and uncle as well?"

"That's correct," Pomfrey answered. "It has been our experience that muggles don't really understand the severity of magical ailments and injuries, and how readily they are treated. In ordinary cases we can fix students up without much difficulty, as you yourself are aware. It's only cases like this," she motioned to Ron, "where parents need concern themselves with a trip here. Unfortunately, muggles aren't able to make this distinction and would be unnecessarily alarmed by common incidents."

"So, for example, a student like Hermione, you wouldn't have told her parents about her hospital stays, even when she was petrified second year?" Harry persisted, steering the explanation subtly toward his real question.

Now the nurse shifted uncomfortably. "It wouldn't be proper for me to discuss the details of another student's cases ..." she stopped short at the skeptical look she was getting from Harry, knowing full well that he was thoroughly familiar with each of Hermione's hospitalizations, since he had been by her side for every one of them, and how ridiculous her protestation sounded. She also had deeply regretted her part in causing Miss Granger's withdrawal from Hogwarts, but she had no choice but to follow Dumbledore's orders. "You'll have to talk to the Headmaster about this. Whenever the normal policy is not followed, it is only on his specific instructions."

Suddenly things began to click into place for Harry. *Hermione's parents had withdrawn her from Hogwarts after learning of her hospitalization. They would not have received this information without the direct intervention of Dumbledore. The owl to the Grangers had been sent the day*

*after he had objected to Dumbledore's plans for his summer, and revealed his desire to spend part of it with Hermione.*

*That bastard!*

"Harry, what's wrong?" Ginny asked in alarm. Both she and her brothers shrank back at the fury on Harry's face as he looked up at them. Without a word he turned and stormed out of the infirmary.

It took little time to make his way to the Headmaster's office and give the password to the gargoyle, and he soon found himself standing in front of Dumbledore's desk, barely able to control his rage.

"You're the one responsible for Hermione being withdrawn from Hogwarts," he accused through clenched teeth. "Why?"

The customary twinkle was absent from Dumbledore's eyes, and he looked older than Harry had ever seen him appear before. With regret in his voice he answered. "Yes. It was a most painful decision, but one I believed needed to be made. It was for your own good." Harry gaped at the audacity of this claim, but couldn't find the words to express his outrage just yet. "I felt that you needed to become more self-reliant and Miss Granger seemed to be making all the decisions for you."

"That's ... that's ridiculous!" Harry screamed. "You couldn't be more wrong! We've always been partners – we work together. Sure she comes up with lots of ideas, but she's always pushed me to become better and stronger, not made me weaker. There's not a single thing that I've accomplished since I've been here that I would have been able to do without her help. She, more than any other person here, has made me a better wizard."

"But that's the point, Harry. You need to learn to accomplish things on your own, and I felt that without her presence stifling your initiative ..."

"Would you rather have had me die trying at something by myself than succeed with her helping me?" Harry demanded. "She wasn't with me during the tasks of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. I won that on my own abilities. But I needed her help to develop those abilities. I'd have died during the First Task without her helping me learn the Summoning Charm. And last year, it was her idea to do the DA, but I taught it. She helped me pick out spells, but it was my decision on which ones to teach and how to teach them. We worked together! She made the discovery about the Basilisk, but I killed it. She had the Time Turner, but it was both of us together that figured out what we needed to do to save Sirius and Buckbeak."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I did what I thought was best," Dumbledore sighed, knowing that there was a good possibility he'd permanently damaged their relationship.

Harry slammed his fist on the desk before him. "That wasn't your decision to make! It's my life, not yours. You yourself said love was my greatest strength. If I can't be with the woman I love

why should I bother fighting?”

Harry turned abruptly and strode to the door. Whirling one more time he faced the headmaster once again. “You can just find yourself another weapon. I quit!”

The furious young man strode down the corridors toward the Entrance Hall, feeling like the walls were closing in on him. He had to get out of this place. Deciding that flying might help him blow off some steam, he headed outside. But Dumbledore had evidently anticipated that he might flee the castle, because as he approached the main doors they swung shut and barred themselves. But this did not dissuade him; it only made him more determined to leave. Retracing his steps, he quickly climbed the Astronomy Tower, summoning his Firebolt along the way. Without another thought he hurled himself over the turreted walls and into the air.

Once aloft, Harry had no direction in mind as he soared higher and higher, only that he needed to get away from the manipulative old man who was determined to control his life. Before he realized it he found himself over the Forbidden Forest, heading south. He knew that more than anything, he needed to talk to Hermione, and decided that his subconscious was directing him toward her. When no other ideas presented themselves, he resigned himself to a long flight.

As his mind calmed down and he began to think more rationally, it occurred to him that he didn’t exactly know how to get to Beauxbatons from Hogwarts. But as this concern began to grow he realized that he had company. Hedwig, as always, knew when he needed her and his faithful familiar, who had made this trip many times, flew up to him to guide him to his destination.

“Hey girl, it’s sure good to see you,” he greeted the owl as she alighted on his shoulder. “Can you take me to Hermione?” With a bob of her head and a nip at his ear, Hedwig assured him that she was up to the task.

With that problem solved, the issues of warmth and concealment needed to be dealt with. As night fell, the February temperatures would drop below freezing, and it would not be well to be spotted from the ground on this unauthorized excursion. A warming charm and a disillusionment charm took care of those pressing issues, and he settled down on his journey.

Hermione was sitting in one of the Beauxbatons lounges with her study group when a familiar snowy owl flew in and alighted on her shoulder. Her friends smiled at the sight, as it was a frequent occurrence at the school – Hedwig never waited for the normal owl delivery period, but sought out Hermione wherever she happened to be. Hermione, on the other hand, was somewhat surprised to see her favorite owl, since she had just sent her off with Harry’s Valentine’s present two days before. Harry had thoughtfully sent her present – a red rose charmed with an everlasting preservative spell and a box of Honeyduke’s finest chocolates – early so that Hedwig could take Hermione’s gift to him on the return flight. Nevertheless, Hermione reached for the parchment the owl carried, surprised that it was just a short note. In fact, there were just three words.

*Open the window.*

Frowning in puzzlement, Hermione walked over to the nearest window and swung it open. To her amazement, the outline of a disillusioned figure flew into the lounge on a broom and dismounted right in front of her. Her stunned mind worked out the identity of her visitor just as he dropped the disillusionment charm.

“Harry!” she screamed as she hurled herself into his arms. “What are you doing here?” This was followed immediately by another exclamation. “You’re freezing!”

“Yeah,” he shivered. “C-could really use one of your w-warming charms right now. Mine s-s-seem to be wearing out.” It was another few moments, though, before either could bring themselves to release the other, but eventually Hermione leaned away and pulled out her wand. Her mind was a blur as excitement, desire, curiosity, and worry competed for her attention, and her hand shook slightly as she tried to mouth the incantation.

She was startled as another hand took hers to help steady her wand, and she turned to see that her roommate Michelle had come over to help her out. With a grateful smile she managed to settle her nerves and cast the charm, which was followed by several more as her other friends added their own warming charms, rising to their feet and moving to join her.

“Oh,” she blurted out as she realized that some introductions were in order. “This is, um, Har... no, Hen... er ...” The French girls exchanged broad smiles before Michelle put an end to her dilemma.

“Don’t worry, ’Ermione,” she laughed. “We’ve known all along who Henri really was.” She turned to the newcomer, who had not moved away from Hermione since he had arrived, and now had an arm wrapped firmly around her waist, and switched to English. “’Ello, ’Arry Potter. Eet ees an honor to finally meet you.”

The rest of the girls joined in the laughter as a sheepish grin appeared on Harry’s face, in contrast to the startled look of dismay on Hermione’s. For their part, the boys were initially puzzled, but eventually worked out their classmate’s subterfuge and understood what was going on. Michelle put her hands on Harry’s shoulders and gave him a kiss on both cheeks, followed by Brigitte and Thérèse. Jean-Claude and Giovanni then came forward and shook his hand, both somewhat in awe of the living legend. The five of them quickly agreed to continue to keep the couple’s dating secret from the rest of the school. Their story would be that Harry Potter had just come to visit his good friend Hermione Granger.

Finally, Hermione repeated her question. “What are you doing here?”

Harry shot a glance at the others in the room then turned back to her. “It’s a long story, actually, with some parts that you’re really not going to like.” Upon hearing that the others got up and took their leave, after Brigitte and Jean-Claude extracted a promise from Harry to talk with them about quidditch, and Giovanni offered to share his room if Harry needed a place to stay overnight.

Hermione thanked them and promised to tell them later as much as she could about what was going on.

As soon as the door closed, Hermione threw her arms around Harry's neck and kissed him thoroughly, then drew back and led him over to a sofa near the fireplace. Harry looked around briefly, then cast a locking charm on the door and several privacy charms on the door and windows. When she saw this, Hermione added a wide-area privacy charm of her own that she had recently learned. Harry then settled down wearily on the sofa and pulled Hermione onto his lap, where she leaned her head against his chest while he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly to himself.

Finally he began the tale of his adventures of the previous day, beginning with the trip to see Slughorn, Ron's poisoning, and the information he'd retrieved from the Potions professor, including the likely identity of the Half Blood Prince. Up to this point Hermione, though intrigued with what she was hearing, was still puzzled about what had warranted his extraordinary broomstick flight across Scotland, England, and France. Then he told her about Pomfrey's revelation, and his confrontation with Dumbledore. At that point it was all he could do to keep hold of her, as she was now ready to storm off to Scotland and confront the headmaster herself.

*I must admit that I was fit to be tied! Over and over I kept saying, 'I can't believe it!' as Harry tried to calm me down and keep me from blowing something up. It's ironic, because generally those roles have been reversed in the past, and I've been the voice of reason trying to get him to keep himself under control. But on his long flight here he had a lot of time to settle down and think about what was going to happen next.*

*We agreed that Dumbledore wasn't going to just let him go like that, and that we should be prepared for him to track Harry down and come after him. We also decided that it wouldn't be long before Madame Maxime learned of Harry's presence here, and would want to know what was going on. As she is a member of the Order, we could assume that she would contact Dumbledore. As I have developed a pretty good relationship with her, we decided to take her into our confidence and see if we could get her on our side.*

*As we had hoped, when we met with her she was sympathetic, and immediately offered to accept Harry into Beauxbatons if that's what he wanted to do (so much for the rule about transferring in the middle of a year – Dumbledore probably made it up on the spot) but we doubt that Dumbledore will let him go. She also agreed that he could bunk with Jean-Claude and Giovanni for the night. She shot a wink at me as she added that she expected that the two of us would eventually find our way into our own beds, which made both of us blush furiously.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger - February 16

*We had our confrontation with Dumbledore today, and I think we held our own. The important thing is that we came to an agreement that I think we can all live with. Neither Harry nor I will*

*ever trust the man again, but we still have to work with him if Harry is going to be able to defeat Voldemort.*

*It helped that he was off balance from the beginning. He wanted to meet with Harry alone, but we informed him that not only would I be involved in the conversation, but that we wanted Madame Maxime present as well, since we didn't trust that he wouldn't try to erase our memories and take Harry back by force. Madame Maxime bristled when he tried to claim that secret information was at stake, since she is in the Order after all. His habit of keeping things from his allies certainly tripped him up there. She is a rather imposing presence, and having her sitting there glaring at him during the entire conversation definitely evened up the odds.*

"First of all, Miss Granger, I must apologize for my actions concerning you this summer," Dumbledore began. "At the time I thought that what I was doing was for the best, and that Harry would benefit from your absence. He has rather forcefully indicated to me that this was not the case." He sent a nod toward Harry, who refused to react to the attempt at humor, and maintained a stony expression. "I assure you that my intentions are only to prepare Harry as well as I can for what he has to face."

"I don't think so." This response caught not only Dumbledore, but also Maxime by surprise, and even Harry turned an inquiring eye in Hermione's direction. "I think that you're setting Harry up to die."

"Miss Granger!" came Maxime's shocked voice, duplicated by a similar sentiment from Dumbledore.

"Miss Granger, you can't think ..."

"You tell me, then," Hermione's voice overrode their protests. "If it came down to a choice between Harry's life and defeating Voldemort, which would you choose?" The ensuing silence was as abrupt as the outburst had been, as all eyes were now on Dumbledore. "Well?" Hermione challenged. But the great leader of the light side was unable to answer her, a desperate pained expression his only response.

"I think you've been planning it all along," Hermione continued, her voice rising even more. "You put him in a situation with his relatives where he was certain to come out with no sense of self worth. You want to make sure he is willing to sacrifice himself. Then you decided to get rid of me, not for the reasons you stated, but because I was giving him something to live for."

Dumbledore could only shake his head. "No, you don't understand," he protested.

"Everything you've put him through, all his life, was leading up to this." Hermione was shouting now, moving toward her former headmaster with her fists clenched at her sides. "Oh, it would be all right if he was attracted to someone like Cho Chang, just a pretty face. Or a girl who was in awe of The Boy Who Lived, rather than someone who actually understood him and cared for him. A shallow meaningless relationship would be just fine. Not someone who would stand and fight

alongside him, and try to keep him alive. You needed him with a girl who would be willing to sit back and let him run off to be the hero. Who did you have planned for him next, Ginny Weasley?"

Dumbledore hesitated, and that was all the confirmation Hermione needed. "You bastard!"

Olympe Maxime had seen many things in her life, but none of them surprised her as much as the sight of seventeen year old Hermione Granger stepping up to the most respected wizard of her time and slapping him in the face. As she watched the two students stalk from her office in a fury, she reached out to restrain Dumbledore from following them. They needed to cool off, but from her previous discussion with them she knew they would be back.

"Albus Dumbly-dore, are any of zose zings Miss Granger just said true?" she demanded.

Dumbledore looked every bit of his one hundred plus years of age as he slumped back into a chair. "It is true that Harry is destined to do battle with the man who calls himself Lord Voldemort. How could it be otherwise – he has been trying to kill the boy since he was a baby. And although I might wish it were not so, one possible outcome – one might even say the most likely outcome – is that he may die."

Maxime paused to ponder this revelation, then turned a suspicious eye on the Hogwarts Headmaster. "You know more about ziszan you 'ave said. As do Mr. Potter and Miss Granger."

"Believe me, my dear Madame, this knowledge is by far a burden, a curse even, that you would not wish to share," he replied wearily. "I would not wish it on those children either, but Harry has borne it better than I could have ever hoped. And now Miss Granger seems determined to share it with him, despite what I might wish."

The Beauxbatons Headmistress shook her head. "Albus, you are one of ze most brilliant men I know, but you are woefully ignorant of *les affaires du coeur*."

Dumbledore sighed. "You may be right. I loved someone once, but it was long ago."

Hermione circled on her broom, watching Harry as he seemed to be trying to kill himself with some death-defying stunts on his Firebolt. Even though she knew he was just working off his anger at what Dumbledore had just admitted, and she knew how skilled he was with a broom, it still made her nervous enough that she had her wand out, ready to cast a cushioning charm on the ground beneath him if he fell.

For herself, slapping Dumbledore had been enough of a release that she was now able to assess the situation calmly. She shook her head wryly at the thought of how a younger Hermione Granger would have reacted to the idea of striking her headmaster. She probably would have gone catatonic. Looking around, she decided that she would need to end Harry's airborne therapy session soon, since a crowd was beginning to gather. He really was putting on quite a show, and she could hear some of their amazed comments on his flying ability. *Yet another chapter in the*



*legend of Harry Potter* , she sighed to herself.

Eventually, she leaned forward on her broom and flew up so that she was in his field of vision, and gestured to him to follow her. She led him off to a private spot in the woods to discuss their options.

“Even though Madame Maxime offered, I don’t think you can stay here,” she began. Harry nodded his agreement. He still needed to work with Dumbledore to defeat Voldemort, and besides, his being here would put the Beauxbatons students in danger once his enemies found out where he was.

“If you want to run away together, you know I’d be willing to go anywhere with you,” Hermione continued. “But I’m not sure that’s the solution either.”

“No, I don’t think it is either,” Harry replied. “As attractive as it sounds, we could only hide for so long before Voldemort would eventually hunt us down. And I don’t want to live like that.”

“Neither do I,” Hermione agreed. “And we’d both feel guilty about deserting everyone, especially you.”

“What about you coming back to Hogwarts?” Harry suggested. “We probably have enough leverage now with Dumbledore to force him to let you.”

Hermione worried her lower lip with her teeth. “I want to so badly, but I promised my parents I’d come here for a year. I don’t know if I can break my agreement. And besides ...”

“You’re on track to take your NEWTs and you’d have to give that up,” Harry finished. “I know,” he added as he saw her start to explain. “You’d be willing to do it, that’s just an additional reason.” She nodded glumly and he reached his arm out and pulled her into his side, and she rested her head on his shoulder. “We can hold out for another four months,” he reassured her.

“I do agree with you that we have leverage now, and should use it,” she pointed out. “I think we are going to have to negotiate a deal with Dumbledore.”

*When we finally returned to Madame Maxime’s office, Harry presented Dumbledore with a list of demands we had drawn up, leading off with asking for an Unbreakable Vow from him. He initially balked at that, pointing out that the broad language we suggested (like sharing all the information he had, or answering any question we might ask) would almost certainly lead to his death, since he would be unable to fully comply. We agreed that we were prepared to negotiate on the wording.*

*He vowed not to retaliate in any way against us, or try to modify our memories, or magically coerce Harry or me to do anything we didn’t want to do. He also vowed not to try to break us up again, or to keep Harry from seeing me. Harry did agree to go back and live at Privet Drive for at least 2 weeks this summer. Madame Maxime acted as the Bonder. Once that was out of the way, we agreed to talk with him without her being present. She let us use a secure conference room for the*

*rest of our meeting. By the time we finished, there were 3 additional terms to his vow:*

- 1. He vowed to answer any question Harry had about the Horcruxes, to the best of his knowledge.*
- 2. He vowed to share all the information he had about the prophecy, and anything else to do with Harry and Voldemort.*

*For both of these he added that he could not reveal any specific information that he had sworn to keep secret, but that this would not hinder Harry's task.*

- 3. He vowed to train Harry in whatever magical skills he would need to be able to fight Voldemort, after he comes of age in July, and advise him on the best way to go about defeating him.*

*He pointed out that Harry would have to receive some sort of punishment for leaving the castle without permission, and suggested that McGonagall be the one to determine it. That seemed fair to both of us. Afterwards we all shook hands and agreed that we needed to work together. He apologized again and we agreed that we would try to move on and put this issue behind us.*

“One of the first things we shall need to discuss is the remaining Horcruxes,” Dumbledore stated, once the negotiations had concluded. “And that, you will recall, is dependent on a task that you have been assigned.” Harry nodded, not allowing his face to reveal anything, and Hermione moved closer to him, wanting to be sure to see Dumbledore's reaction to Harry's news. The headmaster noted Harry's lack of response and decided to redirect the conversation. “Although I am also interested in hearing the details of just how Mr. Weasley came to be occupying a bed in our infirmary,” he suggested, peering over his glasses at Harry.

“Well, it turns out that those two items are more related than you might think,” Harry revealed, as he and Hermione exchanged triumphant smiles. “You see, Ron and I paid a visit to Professor Slughorn the other day.”

“Indeed?” Dumbledore replied, his heightened interest very evident.

“Seven,” Harry announced simply.

For the first time all day, the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes returned. “Well done, Harry! Well done.”

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione closed the notebook and glanced up to see her daughter looking at her in admiration.

“You really slapped Dumbledore? Way to go, Mum!”

Hermione smiled. “Yes, I was quite the feisty little witch back then.” Then she added, shaking her head, “the things I did for that boy.”

“Because you loved him, Mum,” Rose pointed out confidently.

“Absolutely right,” her mother agreed. Then she sighed. “Dumbledore still managed to put one over on us, though. We didn’t realize until later that he had no intention of training Harry. But he knew he’d be dead by the summer, so it didn’t cost him anything to take the Vow.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters** **Horcrux Info And A Loony Quidditch Match**

### **Year 6, Chapter 9 – Horcrux Info and a Loony Quidditch Match**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger - February 15 (continued)

*Professor Dumbledore and Harry stayed until just before suppertime, which gave us some more time together, and also allowed me to participate in their conversation. Dumbledore created quite a stir with his presence at lunch, and everyone was asking me what was going on. Of course, the fact that the boy sitting next to me was Harry Potter soon made the rounds as well. Gabrielle sat herself down on his other side and scowled at any other girl who came close. Harry gave her a hug and thanked her for being such a good friend to me, and she was on cloud nine for the rest of the day. Between Gabrielle and the rest of my study group we managed to deflect everyone's questions. The story we gave out was that Dumbledore was here to meet with Maxime and brought Harry along so he could visit me. Harry even took some time to go flying with Brigitte and Jean-Claude after lunch while Dumbledore was meeting privately with Madame Maxime. After that we joined him again.*

Dumbledore listened thoughtfully to Harry's retelling of the events of Valentine's Day, ending with his visit to Ron in the Hospital Wing. Before the headmaster could change the subject or ask another question, Harry had one of his own.

"What are you going to do about Malfoy?"

"That situation is under control," Dumbledore reassured him.

"With all due respect sir, no it's not," Harry retorted. "Professor Snape doesn't have him under control at all. Remember, I heard them talking just before Christmas."

"Nevertheless, this is not your problem," Dumbledore insisted.

"That's the same thing you said last time," Harry argued. "And now another student has almost died because of this plot of his. And they were two of my best friends! So it certainly is my problem. What will it take before you do something about it? Are you waiting for a student to die?"

“What would you have me do, Harry?” was the testy response. “Expel Mr. Malfoy because you *suspect* that he was involved? I still have hope that he may be dissuaded from the path he is on. But if he were to leave the school, he would have no choice but to follow his father’s footsteps.”

“Headmaster, why does it seem that you are more concerned with protecting the guilty than keeping the innocent safe?” Hermione broke in. “If Ron or Ginny had died in these attacks, would you be able to explain to Mrs. Weasley that her son or daughter had to die because you *hoped* that Draco Malfoy might be redeemed?”

Dumbledore sighed heavily and closed his eyes for a moment, clearly pained by the accusation. “I understand your point of view, believe me. But I do not believe that there is any more danger to students. I am Mr. Malfoy’s target. I have been aware of this since last summer. Now that Professor Snape is taking a more active interest in his activities, I do not think there will be any more of these diversionary attacks. The means by which they were accomplished has been identified and eliminated.”

“It had something to do with Madame Rosmerta and the Three Broomsticks, didn’t it?” Harry guessed. “That’s where Ginny was given the dagger, and that’s where the poisoned mead came from.”

“Your reasoning is sound, Harry,” Dumbledore acknowledged. “Another advantage of associating with Miss Granger all these years, I suppose. But I will not share the details with you. Suffice to say that it has been taken care of. With regard to his longer term plan against me, I am confident that it will be thwarted as well. I have confidence in Professor Snape and our other precautions.”

“That leads me to my next question, then,” Harry continued. “Why do you trust Snape? I know he was a Death Eater, and he’s spying for you. But doesn’t Voldemort also think he’s spying for him? How can you be sure?”

“This is one of those areas in which I cannot break another’s confidence, and so I cannot answer you,” Dumbledore replied.

“But if it concerns me or the prophecy, it’s something I have to know,” Harry argued. “Even if you can’t tell me the details, you must be able to give me some general idea. Does it have something to do with my mother? I know she was good friends with him at school.” A look of surprise flickered over the normally serene face of the aged headmaster, and both Harry and Hermione saw that he was on the right track.

“That’s why he came over to our side, isn’t it?” Hermione suggested. “He was devastated about her death ... perhaps he even felt guilty because he had a hand in it.” A flash of inspiration hit her. “He was the spy wasn’t he? He was the one who told Voldemort about the prophecy, not knowing it would lead him to kill her!”

“Again, Miss Granger, your powers of deduction are unsurpassed,” Dumbledore complimented her. “But I repeat, I cannot confirm your speculation.”

“But even if that was his motivation, you would insist on something more tangible in order to trust him that much,” Hermione reasoned aloud. “You are certainly not foolish. What Harry said before about him spying for both sides is right. You must have had some ironclad guarantee – something like the magical oath we used before. You can tell us that much.”

Dumbledore paused, then nodded. “You are correct that I would not risk this much on just someone’s word or good intentions. There are magical oaths in effect between Professor Snape and myself.”

“Does he know the prophecy?” Harry asked.

“He does know that part that Voldemort knows,” Dumbledore acknowledged.

“Does the rest of the Order know that part?” Harry continued.

“Most of them do not,” Dumbledore admitted. “They only know of the existence of the prophecy and its importance. Your parents were aware of it, of course.”

“Does he know about the Horcruxes?” was Harry’s next question.

Dumbledore looked back and forth between the two determined students before answering. “I agree that my vow compels me to share this information with you. And this should help you accept how much I trust him. He is aware that they exist, and has aided me. He was indispensable in treating me for the effects of the destruction of the ring.”

“I think it’s important that I know how you did destroy the ring,” Harry declared. “Can we move on to that subject next?”

“I will tell you, but that is a much longer story and we have not the time right now,” Dumbledore replied as he pulled out his pocket watch and examined it. “I will share that memory with you at one of our upcoming meetings. You are correct in that it is something that you should know how to do.”

He sat back and regarded the pair of students. “It is my sincere hope that we have begun to move past this difficulty and rebuild our relationship.” Harry and Hermione shared a look, then nodded at the wizened old wizard. “It will soon be time for us to return to Hogwarts, Harry. I suggest you spend the remainder of your time here saying goodbye.” The twinkle had returned to his eyes and he smiled at them. Harry and Hermione returned a grateful smile to him, then got up and left the room in search of a more private location.

-000-

*Dear Hermione,*

*I have quite a bit to tell you since I got back. Ron is still in the Hospital Wing, but is awake now. He’s really weak, just like Ginny was, but since I got the bezoar to him so fast enough he’ll recover much quicker than she did. Madame Pomfrey figures a week in bed, then a couple of weeks*

of taking it easy until he's back to full strength. Unfortunately, that means he'll miss our quidditch match against Hufflepuff, which for Ron is the worst possible news.

I've been spending as much time with him as I can, and our study group comes up to see him every day and go over the lessons he's missing. Hannah always stays behind to spend more time with him. She's not at all mad at him about the incident with Romilda, as she knows anything he said under the influence of the love potion wasn't real. But she and Susan are going to make life miserable for Miss Vane. That is, if there's anything left of her after Ginny gets through with her. She seems to have developed a serious complexion problem in the past few days, and I understand from what I overheard that I can expect to see her hair start falling out soon.

Interestingly, Ron's most frequent visitor is Luna. She's with him almost every time I stop by, and often she has him laughing about something or other. He really gets a kick out of the outrageous things she says. And even though she seems to be completely serious about her claims, sometimes I can see a bit of a twinkle in her eye. She's also smiling a lot more these days.

Here's some bad news. The punishment I got from McGonagall was a one game suspension from quidditch. It was tougher than I expected, but she felt she needed to do something more than detention, to emphasize what a serious infraction leaving the castle without permission is, and to make sure no one could accuse her of favoritism. So, McClaggen will play Keeper and Dean will be a substitute Chaser again, while Ginny switches to Seeker. I'm pretty confident that Ginny can catch the snitch, and McClaggen is competent enough, as long as he keeps his ego under control.

Speaking of Ginny and Dean, they broke up on Valentine's Day. It seems they had different ideas of how to celebrate – Ginny wanted something romantic, and Dean decided it was time to take their relationship to the next level. You remember that she already had problems getting him to keep his hands to himself, so this did not go over well at all. So, I'm not exactly sure what level they were at, or what level he was interested in, but it was definitely more than she was willing to do. (Actually, I'm not even sure what the levels are, or even how many there are. I do know that I'm pretty happy with the level you and I are on, whichever one it is.)

That's it for now. I miss you.

Love,

Harry

(Doesn't seem to be much point in using Henry any more.)

Without missing a beat, Hermione tapped her wand to the parchment to continue reading the more confidential portion of the letter.

I met with Dumbledore last night – so far he's keeping his promise. We looked at some more memories, and talked about strategy. Now we're seeing post-Hogwarts Voldemort. It turns out he worked at Borgin and Burkes for a time, but that was only a cover to let him search for certain

magical objects. While he was there he found out what happened to Slytherin's locket – Burke had bought it from his mother and sold it to an old witch named Hepzibah Smith. So he smooth talked his way into her confidence in order to get it from her. Dumbledore can't prove it, but it looks pretty certain that he killed her and stole it, along with another artifact.

Dumbledore got this information from her house elf, who was convicted of accidentally poisoning her. Seeing the memory from the house elf made me think about your efforts with SPEW – it really was horrible how the authorities treated her. After this whole thing with Voldemort is over we're going to have to try to do something about issues like that. Not just house elves, but the way wizards treat other magical beings in general.

The other artifact Voldemort stole from her was a cup that belonged to Helga Hufflepuff. Apparently she was an heir of Hufflepuff, so it had been passed down through her family. I wonder if she's any relation to Zacharias Smith?

After that he disappeared for a while, but turned up ten years later when he came to see Dumbledore at Hogwarts. Dumbledore showed me the memory of their meeting. By then he had already started recruiting Death Eaters, and Dumbledore surprised him by naming several of them. His appearance was quite a bit different than Tom Riddle's had been, which might have been why no one recognized who he was. Splitting his soul several times had taken a toll on his body, particularly his face and eyes. The reason for their meeting, amazingly enough, was that he was applying to be the DADA professor. He claimed to know more about the Dark Arts than anyone alive, (which was probably true!). Dumbledore was suspicious, though, of what his real motives were, since he sure wasn't the type who would want to teach children. Maybe he wanted a way to spread his evil ideas and recruit more followers. Do you have any other thoughts?

Back to the Horcruxes. Dumbledore thinks Voldemort was trying to collect artifacts from the four founders of Hogwarts to use for his Horcruxes. Everything had to have some sort of significance, and Hogwarts was very significant in his life – probably the only place he considered home. (Yet another way in which he was like me. But I also consider the Burrow to be like a home to me, and I'm starting to feel that way about your house too, whereas Voldemort didn't have anything else.)

So far we have something from Slytherin (the locket) and Hufflepuff (the cup) but Dumbledore's still trying to figure out what he might have used from Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. Since we now know that there are seven total, including the soul fragment still in Voldemort, and we already have the diary and the ring, that leaves two more to figure out. Dumbledore suspects that his snake Nagini is also one, which would mean either one from Gryffindor or one from Ravenclaw.

He also thinks that Voldemort wanted to make the final one by killing me (what a cheery thought!) but failed. It seems to me that means that whatever artifact he was going to use would have ended up on the floor of my bedroom at Godric's Hollow, but Dumbledore says nothing was found in the wreckage. Still, I think it's worth a visit sometime. The crucial point, though, is that he might have still been one short at that point. If so, he would have made his final Horcrux after he came back, and it would stand to reason that Nagini would have been that one.

So, we have two that we know what they are but not where they are, and at least one that we don't



even know what it is, much less where it's hidden. For now, Dumbledore's working on finding out where the locket and the cup are. That's why he's been gone from the castle so much this year. He has some leads on the locket, and hopes to have it located by the end of this term. I asked him if I would be involved in finding it or destroying it, and he said that was his intention.

We didn't have time to talk about how he destroyed the ring, but he assured me that we will at our next meeting. He did say that he used Gryffindor's sword – the one I used to kill the basilisk with.

One other thing that might be of interest. I was talking to Hagrid during one of our weekly meetings for Care of Magical Creatures and he let slip that he'd overheard Dumbledore and Snape arguing. Snape was trying to get out of doing something, and Dumbledore insisted that he had to do it. I'm not sure what to make of that. Do you suppose Snape wants to stop spying on Voldemort because it's too dangerous but Dumbledore won't let him? Or maybe Dumbledore told him to crack down harder on Malfoy.

So, that's about it. So far Dumbledore and I are getting along pretty well. Let me know anything you can come up with on this information. Oh, I forgot to mention this when I was visiting you. Kreacher claimed that Sirius's mirror wasn't there in Grimmauld Place anymore. Assuming he's telling the truth (and I think I worded it so that he couldn't lie) I have no idea who might have taken it. So I dug out a piece from the one I broke and am enclosing it. I hope it's enough. It would be great to be able to talk you!

I miss you.

Love,

Harry

-000-

Dear Harry,

I'm so glad that Ron is OK, and is getting better. It sounds like things are getting back to normal there, although I feel awful about your quidditch suspension. You'll still be able to attend the game, right? Will you be able to act as captain? And will Ron be allowed to watch? The way he gets so worked up at quidditch matches, I'm not sure if that would qualify as 'taking it easy' for him.

I guess McGonagall didn't think she had much choice but to give you such a severe punishment – while I agree with what you did, it was a serious violation of the rules. Was she aware of the specific reason you came here? I suspect that learning that Dumbledore was responsible for my leaving would have infuriated her, and might have seriously damaged their relationship, so it probably wasn't worth opening that can of worms. If you think it's important to tell her, though, I'll support you.

We're still dealing with the fallout from your visit. The whole castle is buzzing with Harry Potter

stories. I think half of the seventh year girls here now have a crush on you, and I'm hearing the most outrageous plans of how they're going to get you to notice them if you ever come back for another visit. That's from the ones who don't know that we're together. The other three girls in my study group, who actually know that we are together, are a whole different problem. They are all teasing each other and me about which of them gets first crack at you if we ever break up. Brigitte says it should be her, since you spent more time with her than the others, and you have a natural connection with her since you're both Seekers. By the way, she asked me to express her gratitude for flying with her, even with all the other things that were on your mind, and for the tips you gave her. (Like those kisses she gave you when you left weren't already enough. Must you always be so charming?) She's already planning how to put your suggestions to use in our next match.

To make matters worse, when they're not teasing me about how they're going to steal you away from me, they're giving me tips on how to hang onto you – specifically, certain things I should do to make you happy. One of them was pretty much what I did that last night you were at my house, although I didn't tell them that. The others go even farther! I'm not going to repeat any of those, because I'm too embarrassed to even write some of them down. You'll just have to use your imagination. (And yes, I know I'm teasing you. That was actually one of their tips.)

Speaking of romance, it's too bad about Ginny and Dean, although I suspected that was coming after what you wrote at New Year's. I hope she eventually finds a guy who's good for her. (Maybe not the best guy, I suppose, but the second best guy, since I've already got the best one.)

I'm not sure what you were saying about Ron – is it Hannah or Luna that he's most interested in? Remember my comment about him liking blondes? It seems to still be holding true, doesn't it? Please continue keeping me up to date on him. He's my second best friend, you know, and he never writes letters. Don't be too surprised if you see his face turn red when he reads his next letter from me, as I plan to tease him unmercifully.

Now for the more serious stuff. Dumbledore requested that Madame Maxime permit me to have access to the Dark section of our library here, and she's granted it. No luck so far, but I'll keep looking. That's given me another idea. Since Durmstrang is reputed to spend more time studying the Dark Arts than Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, I think a visit to their library might be helpful. I'm writing to Viktor to see if he might be able to get me in. I'm thinking of going over Easter break. Our break isn't the same time as yours – ours is the week before Easter and yours is the week after Easter. So I thought I'd go to Durmstrang first, then come to visit you on the weekend we have in common. Perhaps you can come home with me for Easter day itself.

I've been thinking about Horcrux identities and locations, but haven't come up with anything yet. I've been through my copy of Hogwarts, a History several times looking for possible Gryffindor and Ravenclaw artifacts without success. There should be more detailed books on each of the founders in the Hogwarts library, but I would assume Dumbledore's been through them. On second thought, we shouldn't assume anything – ask him where he's looked so far. I don't have any more ideas on locations than I've already mentioned. I did have another thought on Voldemort's reason for meeting with Dumbledore about the Defense position. Maybe he wanted access to something or somewhere in the castle, like the Chamber of Secrets?

*Have you made a successful apparation yet? I passed my exam this weekend, so I'm licensed now. That's one of the reasons I thought my plan to visit you might work. I can just apparate to Hogsmeade and then side-along with you to and from my house. I'm also working hard on charming the mirrors. The piece you sent did help, as a revealing spell gave me an idea of which charms Sirius and your Dad used. I'm hoping to have them done by the holiday, so I can give you yours then. Then we'll be able to talk to each other whenever we want, and see each other as well!*

*As you can see, even though I just saw you a week ago, I miss you.*

*All my love,*

*Hermione*

*-000-*

*Dear Hermione,*

*What a disaster! You wouldn't believe how much one player can bollix up a quidditch match! I guarantee you that CormacMcClaggen will never play for Gryffindor again as long as I'm captain. Arrrgh!*

*They did allow Ron and me to attend, although now we both wish we hadn't. I made out the lineup and joined him in the stands. It started out all right, as Katie scored the first goal, but then it all fell apart. McClaggen started paying attention to everyone's job but his own. First he started yelling tips to Ginny about how to find the snitch, which let Hufflepuff score uncontested. Then he went off on our Chasers every time they lost the quaffle, but not even bothering to try to defend the hoops against their Chasers after it happened!*

*I called time out and yelled at him to play his own position and let everyone else play theirs, but it didn't help. It finally got completely beyond belief when he flew up to Peakes and grabbed the Beater bat out of his hands and started demonstrating swings, while the game was still going on! Needless, to say, Hufflepuff scored that time also.*

*The only good thing about the match was that Ginny caught the snitch when Hufflepuff wasn't too far ahead, so that we only lost by 20. So our match against Ravenclaw in May will be for the title. With Ron and me playing, and Ginny back at Chaser, we should have a good chance to win the cup.*

*There was one other unusual thing about the match, that actually helped make it somewhat bearable. Luna was the announcer! I have no idea what McGonagall was thinking, and I'm sure she's wondering the same thing right now. Luna had something to say about everything, except for, you know, relatively unimportant details like the score? And she said it all in that calm matter of fact voice of hers. McGonagall was ready to tear her hair out, even more than she ever was with Lee Jordan.*

*The weird thing was that since the game itself was so bizarre (or at least McClaggen's play was)*

that it almost seemed appropriate. After a while Ron suggested that we close our eyes and just listen to her commentary, and it would be less painful that way. He was right.

What made it even stranger was that Luna always seemed to know where the snitch was! She'd be going on about some blithering humdinger or whatnot and just happen to mention that the snitch was visiting the Ravenclaw stands, or sniffing the frostberry blossoms (do those even exist?) underneath the Gryffindor hoops. At first I thought she was making it up, but I looked and she wasn't!

Ginny finally caught on and started listening to her. She followed one of her tips to track down the snitch, and caught it to end the whole crazy match. Then Luna came running up to Ron and me afterwards and asked "How did I do?" Ron actually grabbed her and swung her around, telling her that it was the funniest quidditch match he'd ever heard. What a nutty day!

The situation with Malfoy is more frustrating than ever. I'm certain that he was working on his 'project' during the quidditch match – I almost considered skipping it to spy on him (but Ron would have gone spare if I'd done that). After having to watch McClaggen though, I wish I had.

Sometimes we see him on the Map, but I can't be looking at it all the time. I'm almost certain he's using the Room of Requirement. We've noticed once or twice on the Map that Crabbe or Goyle are in that corridor. He must also have other students besides them working with him, because we continue to find Slytherin girls hanging around outside the Room whenever we walk by.

In order to keep tabs on Malfoy better I decided to order Kreacher to do it. It was a little tricky to word the instructions so that he couldn't find a way out of it – like I had to specifically state the hours when I wanted him tailed, and that he had to avoid letting Malfoy know he was doing it, and that he had to report back to me, and so forth. It got a bit easier when Dobby popped up and wanted to do it too, and he helped me with the wording. So now I have the both of them doing it, and Dobby's making sure Kreacher doesn't worm his way out of the job.

Congratulations on passing your Apparation exam. I've managed to apparate successfully in class, but I won't be taking my exam with the others next month because I won't be of age yet. Ron's pretty nervous about it. That sounds like a pretty good plan you came up with. I don't know how Dumbledore will react to me leaving Hogwarts again to spend Easter with you, but since we're on break I'm technically allowed to. I wonder if the vow he took not to keep us apart will make him let me go. I'll be sure to find out and let you know. It will be great to be able to see you again, even if it's only for a day or two.

I miss you.

Love,

Harry

While the contents of the visible letter were somewhat interesting, the critical information was

revealed after Hermione removed the masking charm.

*I finally got Dumbledore to show me how he destroyed the ring Horcrux. He resisted, but I think the Vow forced him to do it. I think he didn't want to tell me until later, I guess because he wants to destroy them himself and is worried that I'll want to do it. After seeing what happened to him, I can see his point. I wish you had been able to view the memory with us, but I'll try to describe it as completely as I can.*

Following their standard procedure, Dumbledore directed the memory into the pensieve, although Harry noted his reluctance. Then the two of them leaned over the shimmery contents of the stone basin and plunged in.

They found themselves in the same office they had just left, and Harry deduced that it was the previous summer, probably shortly before Dumbledore came to get him from the Dursleys. The headmaster was seated at his desk with the ring in his hands, examining it carefully. For the first time Harry took careful note of it.

It was a simple gold ring with a black stone. The stone had a design on it, which Harry was surprised to see bore no resemblance to a snake, or could even remotely be construed as an S, leading him to suspect that he had erred in assuming that it was a Slytherin heirloom. Rather, the design was a simple geometric one, with a vertical line bisecting a circle, which was itself inside a triangle.

The Dumbledore in the memory appeared conflicted, undecided as to his next course of action. Setting the ring down on his desk, he crossed the room and removed the Sword of Gryffindor from its case and raised it as though to strike the stone, but then lowered it again and placed it also on the large desk. Then he sat once more in the throne-like chair and took up the ring again, concentrated briefly, and put it on.

A bright flash of light erupted from the ring, accompanied a split second later by a scream from the headmaster. Harry involuntarily ducked back and brought his hand up to shield his face; beside him he felt the real Dumbledore wince and grab his own hand in remembered pain.

The headmaster in the memory remarkably managed to keep his composure, even though his right hand was burning before his eyes. Resisting the urge to grab the cursed ring with his other hand, he instead took his wand and flicked at the ring, sliding it off his finger and onto the table, then dropped the wand and took up the sword again, whirling it in an arc that ended with it cleaving the black stone of the still glowing ring.

A loud scream erupted from the ring, and then suddenly the room was still, the ring ceased glowing, and the headmaster slumped into the chair again. He stared at his blackened hand, his face a mixture of guilt and horror. Then he pulled himself together enough to once more raise his wand, and a bright silvery phoenix burst from the tip and flew from the room.

The scene blurred slightly and Harry realized that the headmaster was flickering in and out of

consciousness. Suddenly pounding footsteps could be heard on the circular stair outside the office and Snape rushed into the room right past the point where Harry and Dumbledore stood watching.

“Headmaster!” he cried out. “What have you done?” In the ornate chair Dumbledore stirred and motioned with his left hand to his injured one, and then to the shattered ring lying on the desk before him. Immediately Snape withdrew his own wand and muttered a diagnostic incantation, then hurried to remove two vials and a goblet from the bag he was carrying. Mixing the contents of the vials produced a thick golden potion which he carried around the desk, while simultaneously he cast a charm on the blackened hand laid out before him.

“Why?” the potions master pleaded. “Why did you put on that ring? You knew it was cursed.”

Harry watched as Snape poured the potion down the headmaster’s throat before turning his attention fully to the injured hand, casting several more incantations. Then he jumped slightly as the real Dumbledore touched his shoulder.

“That is enough, I believe,” he said simply, and the scene dissolved as they returned to the present. Once he had regained his equilibrium, Harry turned to the elderly wizard with the same question Snape had asked on his lips.

But Dumbledore anticipated him, and before he could make his inquiry, shook his head sadly. “Alas, as you have seen even the wisest of us sometimes make mistakes,” he intoned. “As for the explanation, it is unfortunately a common one. Power corrupts.”

That’s all he would say. I guess there was some compulsion in the ring to make him put it on, just like Ginny was compelled to write in the diary. But now we know how to destroy the rest of them when we find them. And it’s definitely destroyed, because he could put the ring on afterward without any effect. I remember seeing him wearing it last summer.

I’m adding a drawing of the symbol on the ring to the bottom of this letter, so you can try to figure out what it means, or what it might stand for. Maybe it’s some kind of rune?

I’m really looking forward to seeing you in a few weeks.

I miss you.

Love,

Harry

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 15

*It’s been a month now since Harry was here, and two weeks until I see him again. Since I hope to give him his mirror then and perform the final charm to activate it, it’s likely that our letter writing is drawing to a close. We probably won’t write much once we can talk to each other*

whenever we like. I'm eagerly looking forward to that, but I'll also regret it just a bit. Letters have a permanence to them that oral communication doesn't have. I've saved every letter he's written, and he's saved mine as well. I wonder if we'll get them out occasionally when we're older and reminisce about these days. Perhaps along with these journals. Or maybe we'll look at them with our children.

I expect that with the mirrors I'll be able to help Harry more directly with his 'projects'. The time delay with the letters sometimes makes my suggestions irrelevant. I have been able to make some contributions these past few weeks, though. It was my idea that the interchangeability of Crabbe and Goyle with the Slytherin 'girls' outside the Room of Requirement was the result of Polyjuice Potion. Harry and Ron were quite amused at the thought of those big hulking brutes having to act like little girls. Harry says that when Ron suggested that they might peek inside their own robes to 'check themselves out' it sent them both into a choking fit for several minutes. It would certainly be weird to polyjuice into a member of the opposite sex. We didn't even consider that when we brewed it during second year. I have to admit that I'd probably take a peek myself, if I ever did it.

I also had a suggestion that improved the house elf surveillance on Malfoy, once I managed to set aside my annoyance at the very idea of ordering house elves to do anything. Since Dobby didn't trust Kreacher to do it right, and so wouldn't let him out of his sight, I pointed out that Harry didn't really need to use Kreacher. Since then it's only been Dobby, and Harry hasn't needed to worry about Kreacher's reliability. It's presumably been less stressful for Dobby as well. I also reminded Harry to tell Dobby that he didn't need to watch Malfoy when he was sleeping, which at least enabled Dobby to rest sometimes. So, I was able to ease the burden on both Dobby and Kreacher, which helped soothe my conscience and allow me to uphold the ideals of SPEW at least somewhat. After all, I did 'promote elvish welfare' a bit.

I had no ideas, however, on what the symbol on the ring meant. I did tell him that it wasn't a rune. I'm also at a loss to explain Dumbledore's comment that 'Power corrupts. I do recall that the phrase is often followed by, 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely.' How could a Horcrux confer power on someone other than its creator? There must be something I'm missing here.

I'm sometimes amazed at the difference in atmosphere between Beauxbatons and Hogwarts. Here, the students are primarily concerned with the normal academic, social, and personal issues of students everywhere. How did I do on that last exam, will that cute guy in Arithmancy ever notice me, what should I wear today, etc. At Hogwarts Susan says that the primary question every morning when the owl post arrives is 'Who died yesterday?'

We are essentially untouched by this war here in France, whereas Britain is intimately involved in it. Voldemort is largely perceived as a British problem. Were it not for the fact that his resurrection occurred during the Tri Wizard Tournament, there might be even less interest. I understand that something similar happened with Grindelwald, who primarily operated in continental Europe and was initially not as much of a concern to the British Ministry, although it was Dumbledore who eventually defeated him. I wonder what it's going to take before the other European magical communities take Voldemort more seriously.

I'm preparing to leave for Durmstrang next weekend, and also for my subsequent trip back home

*later in the week. Since I won't be returning here in between the packing is tricky. I'll be wearing my Beauxbatons robes while I'm at Durmstrang, but my regular clothing at home.*

*There might be a potential problem with Viktor. He's let me know that in order for him to be able to get me into the part of the Durmstrang library that I need to see, it has to appear to everyone that we are 'together'. I'm not exactly certain what that entails, but I made it very clear to him that I'm with Harry now, and that's not going to change. It occurs to me that even though I spent some time with him two years ago, and have been corresponding with him since then, I don't really know him all that well. I don't think he would be the type to take advantage of a situation like this.*

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*



## Notebooks and Letters Some Misunderstandings And Resolutions

### Year 6, Chapter 10 – Some Misunderstandings and Resolutions

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 27

*I certainly have mixed feelings about this trip to Durmstrang. From the point of view of my research, it's been a success. From a personal point of view, it's been a disaster. That part's pretty difficult for me to write about, but I'm going to try to be as complete as I can, beginning with my arrival.*

*Durmstrang itself is a little scary. Everyone is so serious here! I don't mean serious like I'm serious about my studies, but serious as in humorless. Possibly it just seems that way because they're so suspicious of outsiders. I mean, they must have some fun, or do things like sit around telling jokes in the privacy of their rooms. Perhaps they're gathering around a fire right now, laughing at the clueless English girl. More likely they're making lewd comments about me and Viktor.*

Viktor had met Hermione at the Polish International Apparation Receiving Site (sort of like picking her up at the airport, she decided) and greeted her warmly with a hug. Then he put his arm around her and side-along apparated them to the entrance to Durmstrang. Hermione became increasingly uncomfortable as his arm remained around her while they approached the gates of the castle. But before she could object they were met by the Durmstrang headmaster, Herr Friedrich Karl Von Hoffmann, who had succeeded Igor Karkaroff after the latter fled at the conclusion of the Tri Wizard Tournament two years previously. Later, Viktor would explain that the headmastership of the institute rotated among the three primary ethnic groups involved – Germanic, Scandinavian, and Slavic.

Hermione soon noticed the number of curious looks, glances, and occasional outright glares she received as the headmaster escorted her and Viktor into the castle, and her Bulgarian friend evidently did as well. In response he once more wrapped his arm around her waist in a possessive fashion and returned a glare of his own. Trying to force her mind off of this behavior for the time being, she focused her attention on her surroundings.

Viktor had told her at the Yule Ball about the lakes and mountains that surrounded the castle, but her imagination hadn't done them justice, as the setting was quite beautiful. It was also

considerably colder than Beauxbatons, and she pulled her cloak more tightly around herself. Unfortunately, her shivering gave Viktor the excuse to wrap his arm around her even more snugly.

The castle itself was similar in style to Hogwarts, although smaller in size. But just like Beauxbatons, this smaller size did not translate to fewer students, as Durmstrang served the largest geographical area of the three schools. The student population was diminished somewhat, however, by their policy of not admitting muggleborns. Hermione wondered if that might be part of the reason for the stares she had received, and whether she was the first muggleborn witch or wizard to set foot inside these gates.

Finally, Headmaster Von Hoffmann reached the guest quarters and showed them inside. To Hermione's dismay, it was immediately evident that they were expected to share a room, and as soon as she and Viktor were alone she expressed her feelings on the matter.

"Viktor, just what is going on here? You know very well I'm with Harry now! This is completely improper!"

Krum did not react immediately, giving her a solemn look in response, then gestured to her to sit down while he walked around the perimeter of the room, casting an occasional detection spell before returning to face her again.

"I informed you that we must appear to be together," he stated slowly, in an obvious effort at correct English pronunciation. "They would not have let you come here otherwise. Even so, there was difficulty, but I am, how would you say, important name here."

Hermione nodded her understanding of the situation, but needed more clarification. "I appreciate your willingness to do that for me, Viktor, I really do. But what exactly does 'together' mean?"

"It means that I am courting you, and either have already or soon will ask for your hand in marriage," he revealed, now moving forward and gently taking her hands in his.

Hermione gaped momentarily, and backed away, removing her hands from his grasp, but he followed her and took hold of them again. "Is that such a disturbing idea?" He kissed the back of her hand, and Hermione's face flushed as she remembered a similar situation back at Hogwarts during her fourth year, where the kiss on the hand had escalated into something more. Sure enough, he followed up by moving his head closer to hers, but she dodged away again, moving to the other side of the chair.

"Viktor! I told you, I am with Harry!" she snapped.

"And has Potter asked you to marry him?" he asked.

"Well, no not yet, but ..." she stammered, thrown off balance by the question. She expected that she and Harry would get to that stage eventually, but he wasn't even of age yet. She was, of course, at least in the wizarding world, and Viktor was three years older still.

“Then there is still a chance for me,” he replied evenly. “Perhaps, with this time for us together, you will change your mind.”

“No!” Hermione nearly shouted. “No, Viktor, I told you the last time you asked me and that hasn’t changed. We are just friends, and that’s all.” She lowered her voice and continued. “I’m sorry that you got the wrong impression. It was very important that I get into the library here, and I thought that you’d be willing to help me – as a friend.”

Viktor stood up straight and squared his shoulders. “Very vell. I vill help you with your search – as a friend. However, ve must still keep up ... appearances.” Hermione shakily nodded her understanding. “Outside of this room, ve must appear to be ... lovers.” Hermione swallowed hard and nodded again. Why had she not foreseen this potential complication? The irony of this situation in comparison with how Cho had pursued Harry just a few months ago was not lost on her. At least Viktor had not removed his clothing ... yet.

“Where are we going to sleep?” she demanded. Viktor looked toward the large bed and then swung his gaze back to her. “No,” she said firmly. Then he continued to turn his head until he spotted the sofa at the other end of the room.

“You vill use the bed. I vill sleep over there.”

*It was a nightmare. For three days everywhere we went we had to act like we couldn’t keep our hands off each other, and he would sneak kisses whenever we had a semi-private moment. I never kissed back, and certainly never opened my mouth, but it was still extremely uncomfortable. Of course, everyone ‘knew’ what was going on, and the lecherous looks we got made me want to scream. Even so, I drew the line at him touching me in certain places. The first time he did it, I pulled out my wand and asked him if he remembered Fleur Delacour. Then I hissed at him that she had taught me a hex that Veela used against men who made unwanted advances. It causes extreme pain in a certain localized area, and eventually leads to loss of functionality. His hands never went near my breasts or my bum after that.*

*When it came time for bed, I changed in the bathroom. I hadn’t given much thought to sleepwear – at Beauxbatons and at home I sleep in knickers and a tank top this time of year – but fortunately I had packed some old quidditch robes of Harry’s that I like to keep with me to remind me of him, sort of like a security blanket. I decided to transfigure them into a long nightgown that covered me quite thoroughly, and made a statement as well. I could see Viktor’s face fall when I emerged from the bathroom wearing a red and gold nightgown with ‘Potter’ stamped across the back. (I had to resist an urge to add ‘Property of’ to spell it out even more.) Even though I’m sure I could trust him not to try anything, I still put up an imperturbable ward around the bed.*

*As far as the research went, I learned even more than I expected. I did find several references to Horcruxes, and they confirmed what we already knew and provided more information as well. One book even went into the theory behind the spell. I now have a pretty good understanding of the ritual, as disgusting as it is. While none of the references went into any detail about how to destroy them, it does appear that there are two components involved, physical and physiological.*

Thinking back on the two that have already been destroyed, I believe that the basilisk venom or something similarly toxic was necessary, in addition to the physical damage that Harry did when he punched a hole in the diary with the fang, or Dumbledore did when he cracked the stone of the ring with the sword. As a magical object the sword must have imbued the toxic properties of the basilisk venom when Harry thrust it into the creature's mouth.

The other discovery I made was when I spotted a familiar symbol carved into a wall in one of the corridors. It was the circle/triangle combination from the ring! I immediately stopped and asked Viktor about it, and he got a disgusted look on his face. At first he refused to say anything, but I persisted and he finally revealed that it was Grindelwald's mark. And it's all over the place – he must have carved it at least a dozen times. Now, I'm certain that the ring was much older than Grindelwald, so the question is, why did Grindelwald adopt this symbol as his mark, and for that matter, how did he come to know about it? I can't believe that he would have ever paid a visit to the Gaunt shack in Little Hangleton in England, or that they would have showed it to him if he had. So there must be some significance to that symbol, more than just being a Gaunt family coat of arms. I'll have to add that to my to-do list, after I finish with this Horcrux business.

As far as Grindelwald is concerned, I've asked around a bit and everyone is extremely reluctant to say anything about him. Sort of like the German people are about Hitler, I suspect. All I've learned is that he was definitely a student here, sometime in the last century. He launched an anti-muggle movement and wanted to take over the wizarding world and eventually have wizards rule over the rest of the world. He was defeated by Dumbledore in 1945, but not killed. As near as I can tell, he's still in prison.

The library search for the Horcrux information wouldn't have taken four days, except that we couldn't make it look like I was only here to see the library. So Viktor had to show me the entire castle, as well as the grounds. Of course we had to spend a good deal of time at the quidditch pitch, where we watched one of the Durmstrang teams practice. I had a strong urge to dress up in Harry's Gryffindor quidditch robes that day, but I resisted, since it would have really blown our cover.

To top off the whole awkward experience, this evening they had a feast in honor of Viktor, and there was a photographer. There's sure to be a picture of us kissing in every Eastern European magical newspaper tomorrow. Fortunately, with the way the Daily Prophet virtually ignores any news outside of Britain, it will probably take a few days before anyone back home sees it. I desperately hope I get a chance to tell Harry about it myself before he sees it in the paper, and explain what happened. Please, please, please!

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 29

Oooh! Sometimes I don't know whether I want to kill that boy or kiss him. And sometimes I want to do both at the same time.

“Hermione, how could you!” Trembling, Hermione took a step back from Harry, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

“Please, Harry, I can explain!” But before she could say anything more, Harry grabbed her arms and pulled her close again. Just then she noticed the edges of his mouth begin to twitch upward.

“Only after you kiss me, and make it better than when you kissed Krum,” he intoned, still trying to keep a straight face.

“What?” Hermione was taken aback, having been about to launch into her explanation. “Harry, I ... you ... oh you!” She began to pound on his chest with her fist, before he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly to himself. “Harry, I was so nervous,” she moaned, after she caught her breath. “I’ve been agonizing over how I was going to explain this for two days.”

“And I bet you’ve written a speech in your head, and changed it at least twenty times, and it’s probably more than a half hour long,” he teased.

“Yes, but ... you prat! This is serious!” she protested.

“I know,” he said softly. “But I trust you. You’re here, right? So there must not be anything to it. After what happened at Christmas time I’d be a daft git to jump to the wrong conclusion. So I’ll sit down and listen to the whole thing, and even scowl a few times when you get to the parts I don’t want to hear. But you’re here right now and I’ve really missed you. Can I have my kiss now?”

*I changed my mind. After hearing him say something like that, I don’t want to do anything other than kiss him. I love him so much.*

*So, I met him in Hogsmeade, outside of the Shrieking Shack, and side-along apparated him home (after that initial discussion and welcoming kiss, but before I told him the whole story – that waited until we were snuggled up together on the sofa in our living room). He agreed that it was a successful trip, and worth doing, and that I’d done the best I could with Viktor. That didn’t stop him from wanting to kill Viktor, though. Unfortunately, he lost a lot of respect for Viktor from this incident. I did too, to some extent, but I realize that he did what he thought he had to do to get me into Durmstrang. Harry did ask me if I was joking about the spell I learned from Fleur, but I demurely responded that that information was just between us witches.*

*With respect to more serious matters, we agreed that we have as good a handle on Horcruxes as we need. What we need now is specific information on Voldemort’s Horcruxes – what and where. We also decided that he’d ask Dumbledore about Grindelwald’s symbol and its connection to the design on the ring. We don’t really know the extent of Dumbledore’s interaction with Grindelwald, other than that he defeated him.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 30

*Today is Easter, and we went to church this morning with my parents. Easter services are always so festive, and the atmosphere did us good. There's such an emphasis on victory over evil and beginning a new life – it made us think about our future and how it will be once Harry defeats Voldemort. I don't want to push the analogy too far, though, since I don't want to dwell on the possibility that Harry might die in the process. I don't expect to find any magical resurrection spell for him.*

*There was one hymn we sang that seemed particularly appropriate. The first verse goes like this:*

*The strife is o'er, the battle done;  
Now is the victor's triumph won!  
Now be the song of praise begun.  
Alleluia!*

*That sounds like exactly what happened the last time he was defeated when he attacked Harry as a baby. I certainly hope history repeats itself.*

*This afternoon I got out the mirrors and cast the final spell to activate them. They're keyed to Harry and me specifically, unlike the one he got from Sirius, which could be used by anyone. We talked about that and decided it was the best way to go, so no one else can use them if something happens to one of us and our mirror would get taken away. We tested them out by taking them into different rooms and calling each other on them.*

*I teased him about giving Hedwig a rest now that he probably wouldn't be writing to me anymore, but he said Susan (and Ron? I think he's written me 2 letters all year) would still be able to use her. We set a time right before bed when we'd talk to each other every night, but we'll keep them with us during the day too in case either of us need to get in touch with the other in an emergency. This is going to be so much better!*

*Before we left to take him back to Hogwarts we talked about Snape. It's so ironic that he's the Half Blood Prince. Harry's done better in Potions using his old book than he ever did while Snape was teaching the class. I think that says something about his teaching competence! And that last memory Dumbledore showed him certainly seems to indicate that Snape is trustworthy – at least as far as Dumbledore is concerned. By that I mean that he may be loyal to Dumbledore, but we're not convinced that he fully supports Harry or his role in the battle against Voldemort. After all, Snape does bear some responsibility for the death of Harry's parents, regardless of the fact that he owed James a life debt, or was friends with Lily at one time.*

*This has been a great two days. I'm so glad it worked out that we could spend this time together. Only three more months to go.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – April 12

Harry finally got a chance to ask Dumbledore about the symbol and Grindelwald. Dumbledore says that he's certain that Voldemort had nothing to do with Grindelwald. He pointed out that Grindelwald was defeated while Tom Riddle was still at Hogwarts, and Tom wouldn't have had any opportunity to meet him. So he was out of the picture when Riddle started transforming himself into Lord Voldemort. And Grindelwald would have known nothing about the ring Horcrux, or any of them for that matter. Clearly, that symbol has an older history than just being on the Gaunt family ring. Dumbledore did say that he would research the symbol and put some background material on it together for us, but the Horcruxes were his first priority so it might take a while.

Dobby's surveillance of Malfoy is beginning to pay off. He's confirmed that Malfoy is indeed using the Room of Requirement, but the amazing thing is how often he's in there. He must really be neglecting his studies. Of course that doesn't help too much, since no one can get into the room while he's in it. Just like Umbridge wouldn't have been able to get in last year, since we requested 'a room where we can practice in secret', Malfoy would have requested something similar. Harry tried anyway, going through all the variations of 'I want to find out what Malfoy's hiding' that he could think of.

He did come up with a plan to thwart him a bit, and at least slow him down. Whenever Dobby reports that Malfoy's heading that way, Harry and Ron will intercept him. Gryffindor Tower is closer than the Slytherin dungeons, so they can get there first – as long as they're in the corridor, Malfoy won't dare to summon the Room.

I suggested an improvement in the scheme, so that Harry uses the other DA members as well. Since he can't be available all the time, they worked out shifts where there are always 2 or 3 of them 'on call'. He uses his charmed Galleon from last year to signal whoever's turn it is to hurry up to that corridor to get there before Malfoy does. It also looks less suspicious when it's always someone different who just happens to be hanging around in that hallway.

So far it's worked most of the time, and Malfoy is getting very frustrated. They haven't come to blows yet, but it might be only a matter of time before he goes off.

On a lighter note, while I was talking to Harry on the mirror last night, Michelle came up and looked over my shoulder to join in the conversation. (We had finished the confidential part so I didn't mind.) However, because of the way Michelle dresses when we're in the room, in only a bra and knickers, she ended up giving Harry quite a show. She was wearing a particularly low-cut bra today. It was quite amusing to see his eyes keep darting to look over my shoulder at her cleavage, then he'd force them back to me. Finally she just sort of casually slipped the straps off her shoulders and pretended to be taking it off and his eyes really bugged out. At that point she and I both burst into laughter and let the poor boy off the hook.

But Michelle didn't let it go at that. She started making all sorts of suggestions about what we could do with the mirrors besides just talking. One that really got Harry's attention was that I should take the mirror into the shower with me. That escalated into the possibility of a group shower with several of the girls in the dorm. Poor Harry was ready to pass out by that time. It did raise an interesting question about how far you could see with the mirrors, though. We

*experimented, and discovered that the focal length is about 2 feet, and anything farther than 4 or 5 feet is too blurry to see clearly. So no ‘naked witches in the shower’ show for Harry.*

*That did leave open quite a few other possibilities, however. But I’m not going to write any of those in this journal. I’ll just say that we’re going to enjoy these mirrors even more than I had expected.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – April 27

*It finally happened, as we expected it might. Harry and Malfoy got into a fight yesterday. Harry was by himself this time, as Ron and most of the others were off in Hogsmeade taking their Apparation Exams. Malfoy had Crabbe and Goyle with him, though, as themselves this time, so I suppose he was emboldened by the odds. Not that it mattered. Harry’s been practicing dueling all year while Malfoy’s been spending all his time in the Room of Requirement working on his ‘project’ so it was no contest.*

*Harry followed Tonks’s instructions perfectly, attacking the primary target first, then engaging the backups, and finally finishing off the main threat. I’d like to see a pensieve memory of it sometime, but he described it for me pretty thoroughly.*

“So, Potter,” Malfoy sneered as he approached the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy, flanked by a smirking Crabbe and Goyle. “No *friends* today? You’ve been quite an irritant lately, you know? I think it’s time you got out of my way. A nice long hospital stay seems just the thing. And Pomfrey probably misses you besides.”

“I don’t think so, Malfoy,” Harry retorted, willing himself to remain calm and focused. He allowed his wand to slide into his hand as he held his arms slightly away from his body and bent his knees a little, bringing his weight forward. “You’ve never got the best of me yet, and I don’t see that happening with just the three of you. You forget that I’ve fought real Death Eaters, not just a bunch of kids pretending. You and your two goons are hardly enough to worry me.”

As Harry had planned, the insult infuriated Malfoy, who hated nothing more than being dismissed as unworthy of notice. “You’ll pay for that, Scarhead,” he snarled, raising his wand. “*Cruc ...*”

But Harry was faster. “*Reducto !*” The spell was out of his wand before Malfoy could even finish the incantation of the Unforgiveable he’d been about to cast, and the surprised Slytherin hastily slashed his wand down to deflect the blasting hex, which tore a chunk out of the wall behind him. This left him wide open for Harry’s followup nonverbal *Expelliarmus* , which he’d perfected through hours of practice. Malfoy’s eyes went wide as his wand was torn from his grasp and sent flying through the air.

Crabbe and Goyle were much slower to draw their own wands, and were only now casting hexes of their own. Harry smoothly dropped below their curses and returned his own. “*Stupefy !*” he called



out twice in rapid succession, incapacitating the hulking pair before turning his attention back to Malfoy.

*Levicorpus* ! The nonverbal spell caught Malfoy just as he reached for his wand and an invisible force hoisted him into the air, dangling him by his ankle as his robes fell over his head.

“Potter!” After a quick glance confirmed that all three of his opponents were out of action, Harry turned to see his least favorite professor storming down the corridor, his robes billowing out behind him.

“Release him!” Harry nodded an acknowledgement and turned back to the three Slytherins, flicking his wand again while thinking the counter jinx, *Liberacorpus* . But the unexpected drop caught Malfoy by surprise and he landed on his head with an audible crack, suggesting that Draco Malfoy, rather than Harry Potter, would be the one experiencing a long hospital stay. While the arrogant blonde Slytherin lapsed into unconsciousness, Snape revived Crabbe and Goyle.

“Follow me.” With a glare at Harry, Snape levitated Malfoy and gestured to Crabbe and Goyle, and without breaking stride, continued down the corridor to an empty classroom. “Wait here,” he hissed at Harry. I shall return in ten minutes and we will discuss the terms of your detention for fighting in the corridors.”

Harry managed to keep his cool and prepare for the confrontation, sending off some messenger spells while racing up to his room and back to fetch his school bag. He even had a minute or two to spare to compose himself before Snape returned.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Potter?” the angry black-eyed professor all but shouted when he returned to the dimly lit classroom.

“I was minding my own business in that corridor, when Malfoy demanded that I leave. When I refused, the three of them attacked me,” Harry retorted, working hard to stay calm.

“You’re lying, Potter!” Snape hissed. “Do you expect me to believe that you were attacked by three students but still managed to incapacitate all three of them while remaining untouched? You obviously attacked them first. That will be a detention for fighting, and another for lying.”

“If you’re going to accuse me of lying, I’ll demand to be allowed to submit a pensieve memory of the attack,” Harry shot back. “The Headmaster can decide who’s at fault then.”

“The Headmaster is far too busy to bother with your petty squabbles with Draco Malfoy, Potter,” the erstwhile Potions professor snapped, irritated at being out-maneuvered. “But the detention for fighting still stands. Now, tell me where you learned that spell.”

“The levitation spell?” Harry asked innocently. “Oh, I must have learned it from my father. He was quite good at it, as you’ll no doubt recall.” Ignoring the furious look on Snape’s face, Harry continued. “Oh, no, I guess I couldn’t have learned it from him could I? I never knew my father since he was killed when I was one. I never learned anything from him, did I? No, instead I had to

grow up in a house full of people who hated me and abused me every chance they got. But you wouldn't know about that, would you Professor?"

Snape moved forward and grabbed Harry by the front of his robes. "Tell me where you learned that spell, Potter!"

"I read about it in a book!" Harry shouted, pushing himself away. "It was a very useful book, too. I learned more from it than I ever learned from you!"

"Give it to me," Snape growled in a cold voice.

Harry stepped over to where he'd dropped his bag, and retrieved his old copy of the notorious Potions book and handed it to the scowling professor. "Here. I think this belongs to you. Don't worry, I've already learned all the spells in it."

Snape snatched the book out of his hand without looking at it, as he'd already figured out Harry's secret. He continued to stare loathingly at Harry for a full minute, then announced in a cold voice, "You will have detention with me every Saturday for the rest of the term. It's a shame that you've let down your quidditch team yet again. Gryffindor should have picked a more worthy captain." He turned in triumph to leave the classroom, but Harry wasn't finished yet.

"Would you hate me so much if I looked like my mum instead of my dad?" Snape whirled back to face him in surprise. "I know you had a thing for her. Is that why you arranged for my dad to be killed?" Ignoring the look of fury in Snape's black eyes, Harry pressed on. "Tell me, did you think she would go to you once my dad and I were dead?"

Seething with rage, Snape whipped out his wand. "*Obliviate* !" he shouted, pointing it directly at Harry's forehead.

"*Protego* !" Harry was just as quick, and had anticipated the attack.

"*Expelliarmus* !" This spell came from another direction, and in a different voice. Both of the combatants turned in this direction, one in surprise and one in expectation. The small figure of Professor Flitwick emerged from behind one of the desks and walked up to Snape, handing him his wand back. The taller man faced him down for a moment, but wisely decided not to challenge the former dueling champion, and turned to leave the room.

"Mr. Potter's detention will be served with me, as a neutral party, as will those of Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Crabbe, and Mr. Goyle. And they will be at a time of my choosing," Flitwick announced before Snape had exited the door. Then he turned to Harry with a wry smile. "Despite the fact that you will be playing against my House, I will enjoy watching you in the upcoming quidditch match. Please do try to avoid any further mishaps before then." With that he reached up to shake Harry's hand before following his fellow Head of House out of the room.

"Thank you, sir," Harry called out to the diminutive professor as he disappeared down the corridor.

Now another witness to the drama appeared, as a tabby cat moved out of the shadows and transformed into the Gryffindor Head of House, who regarded Harry with a stern expression.

“This is a dangerous game you’re playing, Mr. Potter,” she warned.

“I’ve been playing a dangerous game ever since I arrived at Hogwarts, Professor,” Harry responded darkly. “But I’m just now discovering the rules.”

*I was incredibly nervous while he was relating that last part, even though I knew it must have turned out all right since he was there telling me about it. It was a very good idea for him to have Flitwick present, even more so than McGonagall. Oh, but I worry so about him. At least he probably won’t have to be concerned about being challenged by Malfoy again after the humiliation he dished out. On the downside, Snape told Harry that he was forbidden to be in that corridor for the rest of the year, and that if he found him loitering there again he would be serving that detention.*

*As far as the Apparation exams went, Ron didn’t pass – he missed the target by several feet – but he shrugged it off by saying his brother Charlie didn’t pass on his first try either, and at least he hadn’t splinched himself. Susan passed, and Neville, like Harry, isn’t of age yet since their birthdays are both at the end of July so he didn’t take it either.*

*Two more months to go.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – May 10*

*Harry won – I mean Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup! Harry activated the mirror before the match and handed it to Susan, so I was able to hear a running commentary while it was going on. They finally got to play with their entire team intact, for the only time this year, and they were sensational. Harry toyed with Cho for the whole match, and Susan said she just seemed to give up, realizing how outclassed she was. Katie and Ginny were both awesome as Chasers, and the third one, Demelza, held her own. But Katie and Ginny just pelted the Ravenclaw Keeper unmercifully.*

*Ron played well, too, and only let in 5 goals all match. Susan said she could see Luna in the Ravenclaw stands cheering for Ron whenever he made a save, which annoyed her housemates. But when has something like that ever bothered Luna?*

*Interestingly, Hannah, who was sitting right next to Susan during the match, was a bit put out. She said Luna keeps popping up around Ron, and that he always smiles when she’s around. I asked Harry about it when he talked to me after the match and he just shrugged and said Ron finds her amusing. He didn’t think there was anything else going on there. He thought Ron thinks more of Luna as a fun person to have around, rather than as a girl. I’m almost reminded of how the two of them regarded me as the brains of the trio and not as a girl, until they saw me in my Yule Ball dress. Perhaps Luna will have to do something similar to get Ron’s attention, if she’s interested in*

*him that way.*

*Harry didn't talk long, since he wanted to get down to the celebration in the common room, and I told him he should go ahead. It's so good to see him in such a great mood.*

*Later –*

*Harry just called me back. That boy! He just can't seem to stay out of trouble!*

As Harry came down the stairs to the common room a cheer went up from the crowd. "We won! We won! We won!" Ron began to move in his direction with a bottle of butterbeer, but someone else got there first. With a running leap Ginny jumped into Harry's arms, laughing the whole time. Then with a blazing, determined look on her face she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly on the lips.

After what seemed like several long moments – several uncomfortably long moments for Harry, although it *was* quite a good kiss – but in reality were only a couple of seconds, Ginny pulled back and smirked at him.

"I figured this would be the best chance I'd ever get!" Then she laughed again at the startled look on his face. "Don't worry, it won't happen again."

Harry understood, as he too was caught up in the mood. "You know though," he grinned, "there are probably a lot of people staring at us right now."

Ginny giggled. "Perhaps we could act like it's no big deal."

Harry's grin turned mischievous as he had an idea. "Hang on." With that he grabbed her tightly around the waist and spun her around and around in a circle, as she shrieked with delight. He released her and she staggered slightly, laughing so hard she could barely stand, as he looked around. Spotting his next quarry he moved quickly across the room.

Katie just had time to put her glass down before she found Harry's arms wrapped around her in a massive hug. Then he moved his head to give her a congratulatory kiss as well. To his surprise, she returned it with one as vigorous as Ginny's kiss had been. Her eyes sparkled with amusement at his questioning look.

"I've wanted to do that for years," she teased.

Harry groaned. "Where were you when I needed a date for the Yule Ball?"

Katie laughed. "Alicia and Angelina tried to talk me into asking you, but I chickened out."

Harry just shook his head with a wry grin, before he grabbed her waist and spun her around in a circle as well. As her delighted shriek dissolved into laughter he released her and looked around again. As he moved toward the third member of his Chaser line, her fellow classmates giggled and

moved away from Demelza Robins, whose eyes grew wide as saucers. The rest of the room roared their encouragement, and it was obvious that only one thought dominated her consciousness. *I'm about to get kissed by Harry Potter!!*

After a comparatively chaste kiss, but one that the young Gryffindor would be telling her grandchildren about, Harry gave her a spin as well. After releasing her so that she could run over and hide her furious blush in a huddle of her giggling girlfriends, he paused to take stock of the common room, which quieted in anticipation. Another grin spread over his face as he spotted the two Beaters, Peakes and Coote.

“Sorry guys, that’s where I draw the line.”

The common room exploded with laughter as Ron and Ginny came over to join him, and Ron finally handed him his butterbeer and slapped him on the back.

“Good one mate. For a minute there I thought something funny was going on with you two,” he joked, as he gestured at his sister. Ginny wrapped an arm around Harry for a quick hug, cocked her head and gave him a nod of approval for his display of enthusiasm along with a grin, then gave him a wink when Ron wasn’t looking.

After taking a long pull from the butterbeer bottle, Harry sighed to himself, and decided he’d better call Hermione again before the gossip spread too far. But first, he was going to enjoy the rest of the party.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters** **The Room, The Cave, The Tower**

### **Year 6, Chapter 11 - The Room, The Cave, The Tower**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 9

*I knew from the beginning that today wasn't going to be a normal day because of my special Ancient Runes lesson, but I had no idea just how different it would turn out. As usual, Harry was the catalyst.*

“Hermione Granger!” Harry waited several seconds for her to answer the mirror call, then repeated it. “Hermione Granger!”

“Harry Potter,” came Hermione’s reply, although her voice was in a whisper. “What is it?” As Hermione’s face came into view, Harry got a brief glimpse of her bare shoulders before she moved the mirror closer to her face.

“I discovered something,” he began eagerly. “And I wanted you to ...”

“Harry, I’m in class,” Hermione interrupted. “Can’t it wait?”

Harry frowned in puzzlement, recalling what he had seen when she first answered. “In class? But it didn’t look like you were wearing anything.”

“This is my first nude runes and rituals lesson, Harry,” Hermione explained hurriedly. “I’m getting undressed.”

“Oh.” Harry pushed his thoughts away from the idea of a naked Hermione. “Can you skip it? This is really important.”

“Are you sure?” Hermione hissed back. “Important enough for me to skip out on a special class session that I’ve been stressing about for months? Can’t it wait for an hour?”

Harry quickly considered the alternatives. If he waited an hour, he’d have to miss his Transfiguration class, and McGonagall would not be pleased. Weighing the alternative of an irritated Hermione vs. an annoyed McGonagall he immediately came to a decision.

“Call me back as soon as you can,” he replied. “I’ll wait right here.”

Hermione immediately closed the connection, and presumably finished removing her clothing. Again, Harry forced himself to focus on the matter at hand.

He had been under his invisibility cloak staking out the Room of Requirement, when he had finally spotted Draco Malfoy coming out of the hidden door. Unlike the recent times he had encountered the arrogant Slytherin however, Malfoy was in a good mood. Ecstatic, even.

“I’ve finally got it!” he shouted to Goyle, who was once again polyjuiced as a young Slytherin girl. “It’s ready to go. Now we only have to wait until ...”

He was interrupted by the appearance of Professor Trelawny, and Harry, who had been moving forward to try to intercept Malfoy before he could get away, pulled back a bit, groaning to himself in annoyance.

The Divination professor was wobbling somewhat, but drew herself up and wrapped her shawls around herself when she spotted the two Slytherins. “What are you doing here?” she asked indignantly. Harry cursed silently as the doorway to the room disappeared behind Malfoy, hiding whatever dark scheme he’d just completed.

“Nothing, you demented old bat,” Malfoy sneered at her, prompting the girlish form of Goyle to giggle.

“Well! I never ...” Trelawny adjusted her oversize glasses to try to discern more clearly who had just insulted her, but Malfoy turned away and took Goyle’s hand, pulling him out of sight. After another indignant huff, Trelawny turned and looked at the blank wall, and Harry only now noted that she was carrying several empty sherry bottles. Then, to his astonishment, she paced back and forth three times, summoning the Room once more.

Harry gathered his wits enough to slip in after her, before the door shut again, and found himself in what appeared to be an enormous, completely disorganized storeroom. He watched silently as Trelawny moved to a stack of boxes overflowing with bottles similar to the ones she was carrying, and added hers to the collection. He stayed behind as she turned and quickly left the room, drawing her shawls up around her once more.

*What was the purpose of this room?* he pondered. Trelawny must have intended to dispose of those empty sherry bottles, but had chosen this unusual way to accomplish the task. Likely she didn’t get rid of them in the normal manner because she didn’t want anyone else to know she had been drinking. Harry had noted the whiff of sherry emanating from her, and the overflowing boxes of bottles before him indicated that she’d been consuming large quantities of the alcoholic beverage for quite some time.

*Were all of the items in this room things that people wanted to discretely discard?* Harry had then decided to call Hermione on his mirror and get her opinion.

After their brief conversation he was in a bit of a quandary. He dared not leave the room, because he wasn't sure if he would be able to summon it again, since he didn't know what thought Trelawny had used to call it into being in the first place. Whatever it was must be quite a common desire, since she was clearly not the first person to utilize this particular incarnation of the magical room.

Deciding that he might as well have a look around while he was waiting for Hermione to call him back, he wandered through the piles and piles of discarded items, arranged in long rows and columns that appeared to date back hundreds of years. Broken classroom furnishings abounded, along with banned items of every sort. And wherever he looked there were books, thousands of them, of every description. Down one side alleyway a remarkable collection of photos was displayed, of witches in lewd and alluring poses, clothed in decidedly non-regulation attire, if they were wearing anything at all. After a brief pause to admire the flexibility of some of them, Harry moved on, deciding it would not be healthy for him to be standing in this area when Hermione reopened the magical mirror connection.

Harry wondered why anyone would want to throw away perfectly good-looking jewelry, as a rather attractive tiara caught his eye. But for the most part the spurned material was junk, left here and forgotten for obvious reasons.

Finally, an hour and a half after he'd first entered the room, Hermione's voice sounded again. "Harry Potter!" Harry immediately pulled out his mirror and responded, and seconds later a flushed and excited looking Hermione appeared. "I'm back," she announced briskly. "What is it?"

"Hermione, calm down," Harry grinned at her, recognizing the symptoms of hyper Hermione. The last time he had seen her so worked up after a class had been when she'd gotten one hundred and seventeen percent on an Arithmency exam. "How was your class?"

"Oh Harry, it was great! Amazing, incredible, nerve-wracking, scary, and just plain insane!" she gushed. "All of that rolled into one. It was the most bizarre class I've ever been in. I mean, can you imagine a room full of naked witches and a professor casting charms and drawing runes on each other's bodies for a whole hour?" Harry's eyes glazed over momentarily as he began to visualize that scene. As the image unfolded in his mind there was one jarring discontinuity.

"Um, Hermione, the professor? Was he, or she ... I mean, was it a he or a she?" he asked uneasily.

"Oh Harry, of course it was a witch," Hermione answered with a touch of exasperation. "Honestly, you know I wouldn't take my clothes off in front of another man, even if he was a professor."

"Right, of course," Harry replied, trying to hide a sigh of relief. "So tell me about it."

"Oh, like I said, it was just so ... so different, so weird," Hermione began again in a rush. "I mean, we touched each other just everywhere! And I have runes on me in so many different places. Temporary, of course. The first ones we did were on our breasts, and I swear mine are twice their normal size now." Harry's breath caught in his throat on hearing this, and he found himself tilting the mirror forward as though it would enable him to peek down Hermione's top to check out this



enhancement.

“Um, why ...?” he finally managed.

Hermione noticed his startled look and laughed lightly. “A lactation ritual, Harry. It’s so a witch can nurse another witch’s baby if necessary. But that was just the beginning,” she continued, pouring out her experience in a torrent of thoughts. “I have another set of runes running down my back all the way to the bottom of my bum, I have several on each of my inner thighs, my pubic hair is completely shaved away, and I even have a rune on ... well, just imagine what it feels like to have another witch stick her wand in your vagina.”

Whether he wanted to or not, there was no way Harry could have prevented the image that now formed in his head, as it was a pretty standard fantasy for young wizards. “Um, right,” he choked out. “I mean, no ... ah ...”

Hermione finally caught herself, and thought back a moment before realizing what she had said, and noticed the glazed look in his eyes and the way his breath had shortened. “Oh Harry, get your mind out of the gutter! It wasn’t that far in, just touching it with the tip. Honestly, there wasn’t anything erotic about it at all!”

“Easy for you to say,” Harry muttered. Clearing his throat, he tried to keep his voice level and asked, “So, what was the purpose of all this, ah, intimate contact then?”

“Oh, it was mostly fertility rituals and contraception rituals today,” Hermione answered quickly, still eager to share the experience with him. “I’m sure now I’ll never have to worry about getting pregnant until I want to, and at that point I can almost guarantee conception. I can’t believe there are so many conception alternatives. I think I could even make you pregnant if I wanted to.”

This, of course, set off an enormous choking and coughing fit in Harry. “Really?” he finally managed to gasp out.

He looked up into the mirror, which was difficult to keep steady as his hand was shaking so much, to see Hermione smirking at him. “No, not really,” she admitted. “I was just having you on.” Her smirk turned to a full laugh when she saw the look on his face, and he joined in her laughter.

“Harry, it was just so incredible it’s hard to describe,” she went on. “I’m just now finally starting to settle down. I mean, I was so worked up about it before hand, and it was such an intense experience. I’m probably boring you to death by running on and on about this, aren’t I?”

Now it was Harry’s turn to be amused. “Hermione, think about what you’ve just been telling me,” he chuckled. “Can you imagine any male being bored by that?”

“Oh. I suppose you’re right. Some of that was pretty suggestive, I guess,” Hermione admitted sheepishly. “I wasn’t really paying attention to what I was saying.” She paused to think some more. “I bet you’re just a bit interested in the results of that lactation ritual, aren’t you?” Harry nodded, trying to keep the grin off his face. “OK, here, have a look.” Hermione pulled the mirror

out to arm's length and angled it so that Harry had a view of her torso.

"Wow!" was the first response that came to Harry. Hermione's breasts had increased by at least a cup size, probably two, and were straining to break free of her tank top. "Um ... how long will they stay like that?"

"Don't get your hopes up, it'll wear off by tomorrow morning," Hermione responded with a laugh. "You won't get to see them like this until I have a baby. Then you'll be able to ogle them all you like." She returned the mirror to its normal conversational position. "They're really uncomfortable. I tried to transfigure my bra, but I couldn't get the cups to be comfortable, so I just took it off and put on the loosest tank top I own. It's funny, I've heard that everyone at Beauxbatons knows what day this class is held, because so many seventh year girls come to dinner that day engorged like this. Some of the smaller girls actually look forward to it, but these are just too big for me. I don't know how Susan puts up with hers."

All this talk of oversize mammaries was too much for Harry's teenaged male brain to handle. "Sounds like quite a class," he finally offered.

"Yes, I almost wish you could have been there," Hermione teased. "I think you would have enjoyed it."

"What I'd give for a pensieve right now," Harry retorted with a sly raising of his eyebrows.

"Harry Potter, don't you even think of suggesting that I would show you a memory of that class!" Hermione protested, trying but failing to keep the amusement from her face. "That would be an invasion of privacy for the other girls."

"Ah, well, a guy can dream, can't he," Harry signed dramatically. Then a thought struck him and he turned serious. "That's it! A pensieve! Hermione you wouldn't believe where I am right now."

Harry proceeded to tell me about the manifestation of the Room of Requirement that Trelawny had created, and what he'd guessed about its purpose. I agreed that it sounded like a place to hide things, which would certainly be a common desire of students (and staff) of any time in history. The fact that it was so large and full, and that even Trelawny was using it, tells us that a large number of people must have known about its existence over the years. It surprises me that the Weasley twins never figured it out, although I do recall them mentioning that they'd stumbled on it once when they needed a hiding place from Filch.

As far as how to go about summoning it again, I suggested he ask Dobby, since he was the one who told us about the Room in the first place, and some of the stuff sounded like it had been left there by house elves. But Dobby couldn't tell him, not that he didn't want to, but couldn't because the house elves were sworn to secrecy. But I told him not to worry about it, since it wasn't likely we'd ever need that particular room, and if we did Trelawny certainly knew how to summon it. I told him his idea of using a pensieve memory to review the contents, in order to see if there was anything there that might be interesting or useful, was good thinking.

*Then he related the circumstances of how he'd found the room, and what Malfoy had apparently accomplished, and we turned our attention to that issue. We agreed that this was quite troublesome, and that he'd really have to keep in eye on him now, and that he'd have to talk to Dumbledore again. We hoped that this would finally prod the headmaster to take action.*

*It wasn't long, though, before another item of significance surfaced. This one sounds ominous, especially in conjunction with the news about Malfoy.*

By the time Harry returned to the Gryffindor Common room it was nearly dinner time, and several students were lounging on the comfortable sofas, relaxing for a bit before going down to the Great Hall. Spotting Neville and Ron at their customary place in the corner, Harry immediately headed over to them.

"Harry, mate, where have you been all afternoon?" Ron asked. "McGonagall wasn't too happy when you didn't show for Transfiguration."

"Never mind that, I've got something important to tell you," Harry returned in a low voice. After casting a *Mufflato* charm, he quickly informed the pair of Gryffindors about Malfoy's success with his project. "I reckon he's just waiting for the right moment to spring it."

"Harry?" The three boys looked up to see Ginny approaching, and Harry dispelled the sound masking charm. "Dumbledore wants you to come see him. It sounded urgent."

Feeling that things were rapidly coming to a head, Harry told Ron and Neville to fill Ginny in on what he'd just told them, and to wait for him to return.

*Harry's summons to the Headmaster's office turned out to be just what we've been waiting for. Dumbledore had finally discovered the location of a Horcrux! He told Harry to prepare to go with him to retrieve it, and that they would leave immediately after supper. Things turned a bit tense after that however. When Harry reported what he'd learned about Malfoy, Dumbledore put him off again, saying that Snape had it under control. Harry expressed his concern that Malfoy might try something this evening, while he and Dumbledore were away, but Dumbledore assured him that he'd arranged for extra protections. We assume that means that there will be some Order members in the castle, possibly along with some teachers patrolling.*

*One thing that really worries me – Dumbledore made a big issue of demanding that Harry swear to obey his every command, even if it meant leaving the headmaster and escaping to save himself. The way Harry told it, it sounds almost as if he expects to die!*

*After he left the Headmaster's office, Harry called me on the mirror again and filled me in, then went to find Ron, Neville, and Ginny. After talking it over we decided that the DA should be put on alert as well. Right now I'm getting this journal up to date while the four of them go to supper and plan what they're going to do. I suppose I should get something to eat as well, but I'm so nervous I*

*don't know if I'll be able to.*

Harry leaned forward after casting another *Muffliato* charm on the end of the Gryffindor house table, where Ron sat by his side and Neville and Ginny were across from him. "I've got a bad feeling about this," he told them in a low voice. "I want you to contact the DA and arrange to keep an eye on things tonight."

"What exactly are we watching for?" Ginny asked. "And where are you going?"

Harry shared a look with Neville and Ron, both of whom gave a short nod. "It's a long story, and these two can fill you in later," he began. "But Dumbledore and I have been working on a ... project, let's call it, all year. We're going to go out and try to find something tonight, something that will help defeat Voldemort." Ginny shuddered briefly, but kept quiet, eager to learn whatever she could about what was going on with her friends. "The thing is, Malfoy's also been working on a project, on Voldemort's orders."

"I told her about how we're pretty sure he was behind the dagger, and the poisoned mead," Ron broke in as Ginny nodded, her eyes blazing furiously. "I don't think I'd want to be him when she gets hold of him." Beside Ginny, Neville nodded his agreement – it had taken both of the boys to restrain the smaller girl from hunting down and cursing their hated nemesis. Harry allowed a bit of a smile to cross his face at the thought of Ginny getting revenge on the Slytherin for putting her in the hospital.

"So, whatever it is he's been working on – and Dumbledore thinks it's actually himself that Malfoy's after – it's ready to go. I'm going to leave you the Map, so you can keep an eye on everything that's going on, and my charmed master Galleon." He paused to consider the situation, then hardened his face in resolve. "I'm also going to leave you the *Felix Felicis*."

"What!" Ron objected. "No, you can't! You're saving that for when you fight You-Know-Who."

"He's what?!" Ginny gasped in horror. "When is Harry going to ..."

"Never mind that," Harry cut them both off. "Look, I've thought about this and you lot are going to need every break you can get to pull through this. If anything happened to you I'd never forgive myself."

"But Harry ..." Neville began.

"No, this is the way it's going to be. We can worry about that other part ..." he shot a sharp look at the two boys to shut them up, "...later." From the look on her face, Ginny was barely able to control herself, but she yielded to Harry's fierce determination and refrained from asking any more questions – for now. "Now," Harry continued. "There's enough here for twenty four hours of luck. I reckon you can split it up into twelve doses of two hours each. If you take it when Malfoy starts to make his move, that should get you through whatever happens."

“We’ll take care of things here, Harry,” Neville broke in, as Ron still wasn’t convinced. “You just be sure to take care of yourself and come back in one piece.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be with Dumbledore,” Harry reassured them. “And I’ll have a bit of backup besides,” he added, patting the mirror in his pocket. Now, let’s finish up here and get back to the common room.”

Although they were all too keyed up now to eat much, they managed a few bites before it was time for Harry to go. On the way out of the Great Hall Neville stopped by the Hufflepuff table to let Susan know something was up, and Ginny wandered over to the Ravenclaw table for a quick word with Luna.

A few minutes later Harry had retrieved the necessary items from his room, shaken Ron and Neville’s hands, received a desperate hug from Ginny, and then he was off, heading back down to the Entrance Hall.

“Hermione Granger,” he spoke quickly into the mirror once he was alone in the corridor.

“Harry Potter,” came the prompt reply. “What’s up?”

“I’m on my way to meet Dumbledore now,” Harry explained, then brought her up to date on what had transpired since their last conversation. “Do you think we can keep this connection open from here on?” he concluded. “I’d really like to have you tag along.”

“I don’t see any reason why it shouldn’t work,” Hermione replied, both thrilled and relieved that she would be able to be with him from afar, and possibly be able to assist. “I’m going to find a private place to set up, and I’ll have my journal out to take notes.”

---

*By this point it was evident that this was going to be one of the longest and most momentous days of my life. And through it all I was a bystander, a spectator who saw and heard the events that will change the wizarding world. But not a spectator in the way I was during the third task of the Tri Wizard Tournament, where I sat there helplessly while Harry was involved in a ritual that brought Voldemort back to life. Rather I was more like the football coach, who never steps on the playing field but calls out suggestions or instructions to the participants.*

*As I come back and insert this preface from the perspective of a day later, it is clear that what happened is a turning point in the battle. When we look back on this day a year from now, or five or ten, however things turn out, it seems likely that we will say that this was the beginning of the end.*

---

*Harry met Dumbledore and they headed off towards Hogsmeade, making small talk about where they were going and how they were going to get there. Dumbledore’s done this quite a few times this year, and his cover is that he’s going out for a drink at the Three Broomsticks or the Hog’s*

*Head. Then he told Harry to put on his invisibility cloak, but before he did, Harry revealed my presence.*

“I have this mirror that allows me to communicate with Hermione, and I’ve asked her to stay in contact. I thought she might be able to help.”

Dumbledore peered into the mirror in surprise. “Miss Granger?”

Hermione returned an awkward smile. “Hello, Professor. Yes, it’s me.”

“My word!” Dumbledore exclaimed. “This is quite impressive magic! Your doing I presume, Miss Granger?”

“Yes sir,” Hermione admitted with a blush. “But I got the idea from Harry’s dad and Sirius.”

“Ah yes,” Dumbledore responded. “I had heard about those mirrors. So you’ve been able to duplicate them?”

“You knew about Sirius’s mirror?” Harry broke in. “How?”

“I learned of them from Kreacher when I spoke with him during the unfortunate incident at the Ministry last June,” Dumbledore replied as delicately as possible. “He had hid the one that Sirius kept, as you will recall.”

“But then ...” Harry began.

“That is a tale for another time,” Dumbledore interrupted. “We have our own task before us. Miss Granger, I would be delighted to have you join us. Another set of eyes and ears is always welcome. But I am concerned about who may overhear you, as this is extremely sensitive business.”

“That shouldn’t be any problem, Professor,” Hermione reassured him promptly. “Madame Maxime has allowed me into the secure room that we used when you were here, and I’ve put up several silencing and privacy wards.”

Dumbledore frowned briefly, then nodded. “That should be sufficient, I suppose. I am aware that you tend to be quite thorough in your work, so I believe that your location will be secure. Now Harry, if you will put on your cloak, let us be off.”

*When they got to Hogsmeade he side-along apparated Harry to somewhere along the seashore. It was a rocky area, with a high cliff rising straight out of the water. They were looking for a cave, where young Tom Riddle supposedly terrorized some of his classmates. Trust a sick person like him to consider an experience like that to be one of the high points of his life! They looked around for a bit and finally spotted a cave further along the coast. They had to pick their way among the boulders to reach it, and for the last bit they had to wade through the water. Fortunately, it wasn’t*

too cold. It's a good thing they're making this trip in June and not January. It's also a good thing it's low tide tonight, or the entrance of the cave would have been flooded.

Once they reached the cave, a quick drying charm sorted them out, and Dumbledore announced that he could tell they were in the right place because he could detect a magical signature. I couldn't sense anything through the mirror, of course – I'll have to ask Harry later if he could. Dumbledore cast several detection charms, which I recognized. I think I'll write them, along with all the other spells used tonight, on another page and discuss them with Harry later. I stopped him once and had Harry hold up the mirror so I could see exactly what he was doing.

Once Dumbledore located the hidden entrance, he studied it for a while and then asked me what I knew about blood based wards. I answered that there were two types, specific and general – if it were specific it would require the blood of a certain person to activate, if general anyone's blood would do. He agreed and informed us that fortunately this one was of the more crude variety – any blood would do. Evidently the purpose was merely to weaken an intruder. Harry immediately offered his blood, but Dumbledore insisted on using his own. So he cut his already injured hand and smeared blood on the doorway and it opened.

Inside there was a large cavern filled with water – an underground lake – with an island in the middle. There was a pale glow coming from the island, which Dumbledore thought indicated that this was where the Horcrux was hidden. Obviously, there would be traps of some sort between the shore and the island. We discussed possible ways to get to the island. Harry suggested apparating there, which didn't work as the entire cavern must have been warded against apparation. I suggested levitating someone across the water to the island, but Dumbledore feared that something in the water might intercept them along the way. Harry then tried a summoning charm, but all that accomplished was to confirm that there was indeed something in the water, as it rose up and blocked his spell, then fell back down with a splash before we could identify what it was.

Finally, as they walked around the lake, Dumbledore found an invisible rope, which turned out to be tied to a boat that was hidden below the surface. Harry was amazed that he could find it, but Dumbledore once again remarked that he could sense Tom Riddle's magical signature on it. I think that will be very important for us in the future, and this time I asked Harry what he could sense. They paused a bit while Harry tried to decide if he could feel anything. His scar tingled, but that might have been from the presence of the Horcrux. Dumbledore said it was something that required a lot of practice and experience.

I thought the boat would be charmed to recognize if the person it was carrying were Voldemort – that's certainly what I would have done if I were setting this up, but Dumbledore seemed to think he and Harry could get in safely. I'm not sure what made him think that, but he turned out to be correct. Harry wondered if the boat would hold two people, but Dumbledore answered that it was a magical boat.

Once they got in, the boat moved by itself out to the island. Along the way Harry noticed what appeared to be human figures in the water. He held out the mirror so I could see them too, while Dumbledore informed us that they were Inferi – dead bodies that had been enchanted to serve a dark wizard. He suspected that they would attack us as soon as it became apparent that the two of

them were enemies of Voldemort, but so far they hadn't realized it. He then made a comment about them being creatures of the dark, who feared warmth and light, which we would use against them if they attacked.

The island was very small, about the size of a classroom. The only thing on it was a stone basin on top of a pedestal, which contained some liquid. This is where the greenish light was coming from. They decided that the Horcrux was inside of the basin, at the bottom of the liquid, although they couldn't see it through the greenish glow. Harry held up the mirror so I could have a look, then propped the mirror up against a rock so I could watch while he helped Dumbledore.

This is where the whole task turned truly horrifying. While I watched helplessly, Dumbledore decided that someone had to drink the glowing green liquid to get the Horcrux. They tried several other things, but nothing worked. Neither of them could touch the liquid with their hands, only when they were holding a cup. As soon as the cup touched the liquid, it immediately filled and the level in the basin went down. But if they tried to pour it on the ground, it instead flew back into the basin. No matter what they tried, they couldn't stop it. If they Vanished it, it just reappeared in the basin.

Finally, Dumbledore took a drink. He didn't say anything, but it looked like it must be painful. He filled the cup again and Harry confirmed that the level of liquid in the basin went down again. With each cupful Dumbledore appeared to be in more and more agony. It didn't seem to be physical pain, though, more emotional pain. Harry commented aloud that he looked like he was in the middle of a nightmare. (Harry would know how that felt, if anyone would.) Dumbledore merely nodded and kept drinking. I now realized what this was – a Nightmare Potion. It forced the drinker to experience his worst fears. It mixes in horrible things that have happened in one's life with things they dread happening, so that it's not possible to distinguish what was real and what was imaginary.

Suddenly he sank to his knees and shouted out, 'No! no!' But he took a moment to gather himself and then took another cupful. Harry checked in the basin and announced that there were only 2 or 3 more cups to go.

After the next one, Dumbledore looked even more frantic.

"I didn't mean to! It was a mistake!" the weakened headmaster cried out, bending down and covering his face with his hands.

"Professor?" Harry asked tentatively. "Can you keep going or should I ...?"

Dumbledore shook his head and reached up, beckoning Harry to hand him another cupful. Harry complied, and the weakened wizard put it to his lips once more. Harry helped him tip the cup, forcing the remainder of the potion down his throat.

This time Dumbledore collapsed completely. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he cried out. "It was all my fault! Can you ever forgive me?"



“Yes, yes, I forgive you!” Harry shouted back, having no idea what he was forgiving, but not caring either. “There’s only one more to go.”

Dumbledore shook his head and curled up in a ball. A look of resolve came over Harry’s face and he dipped the cup into the basin, watching the final bit of potion fill it one last time. Now he could see the Horcrux clearly sitting on the bottom – it appeared to be a locket of some sort. He reached out to pick it up but it remained stuck fast, and he knew that it would not be released until the final cupful was consumed.

“Harry no!” Hermione shouted from her vantage point as she realized that he was going to drink the final portion himself. But he only gave her a look, a look she had seen before, the one that meant, ‘I have to do this’, and he tipped his head back and swallowed it down.

The effect was almost instantaneous. A look of horror flashed onto his face and he shouted, “Hermione no! No, don’t leave me!”

“I’m right here, Harry!” Hermione responded immediately from the mirror. “I’ll never leave you! I love you!”

Wide-eyed, Harry shot a look at where Hermione’s anxious face looked out from the mirror, and his shoulders dropped in relief. “Oh Merlin, that was awful! I thought you were dying!” he gasped. “And it burns so much.”

“Water ... water,” came a plaintive cry from the headmaster who was struggling to rise to his hands and knees.

Harry seized the cup and quickly pointed his wand at it. “*Aguamenti !*” But to his dismay, the water inside vanished as soon as he finished the spell. He tried once more with similar results, as Dumbledore continued to beg for relief.

“Harry, conjure another cup!” Hermione called out from the mirror. “That one’s probably cursed from being in the basin.”

With a wave of his wand and an incantation Harry conjured a duplicate, and as Hermione had surmised, this time the water did not vanish. He took a quick swallow to quench the burning in his own throat before offering the remainder to his headmaster. He and Hermione both breathed a sigh of relief as Dumbledore began to regain his senses. Harry filled the cup for him once more and then returned to the basin. As he expected, this time the locket came into his hand without resistance.

“Harry, look out!” Hermione’s scream alerted him and he spun around to see dozens of white shapes emerge from the lake, their summoning triggered, no doubt, by his removing the locket from the basin. Hermione had a scene from Indiana Jones flash through her mind but shook it off, focusing on how she could help Harry defeat these creatures.

“*Reducto !*” he called out, almost before his wand hit his hand. The nearest Inferius was blasted

back into the water, but the rest kept coming.

“Harry, remember, light and heat!” Hermione called out. “Try a flame hex!”

“*Incendio !*” This proved far more successful, as one of the creatures burst into flames, and the others around it shied back

Suddenly an entire ring of fire surrounded the basin and the two wizards and began to expand, forcing the Inferi back off the island and into the water. Harry turned to see Dumbledore, now on his feet again, but looking a bit unsteady. Together they rushed back into the boat and pushed off the accursed island.

“Harry, don’t forget me!” Hermione called out in a panic.

“Accio mirror!” Hermione shut her eyes tight to avoid the dizzying sensation from her field of view as the enchanted mirror flew toward the boat. Harry expertly snatched it out of the air and quickly returned his attention to the threat of the Inferi.

*To our relief, the Inferi didn’t attack the boat – evidently Voldemort had put some protection on it – but we weren’t looking forward to what would happen when they landed on the main shore. Fortunately, Dumbledore was partially recovered by then, at least enough to create his ring of fire again. Unfortunately, it drained him so much that by the time they got to the entrance of the cave again he was leaning heavily on Harry.*

*Somewhere along the way, Harry had skinned his elbow, so he pressed the bleeding part against the doorway to open it, and they staggered out into the open once again. They both rested for a while, leaning against the cliff, and Harry joked that he’d never realized how much he liked the feel of fresh salty air on his face. Then his face turned grim again as he realized that Dumbledore might be too weak to apparate them back.*

*Before he even said anything I could tell from the look on his face that he was considering attempting to do it himself. I managed to overcome my rule-abiding, cautious nature and project an air of confidence as I said, ‘Go ahead, Harry. You can do it. I believe in you.’*

*To my surprise Dumbledore repeated my words. ‘I believe in you too, Harry.’ I can’t help but wonder if it was true, if the Headmaster was finally trusting Harry’s judgment and accepting his ability to make his own decisions. I suppose only time will tell.*

*A few seconds later we were back in Hogsmeade, but it turned out the night wasn’t over yet. As soon as the two of them had regained their balance, Dumbledore told Harry that it was essential that he get to Snape as soon as possible, since he’d drunk a potentially lethal quantity of the potion. Harry was feeling pretty weak himself at that point, but agreed, even though he thought Madame Pomfrey would be a better choice.*

*At that point both of them noticed that there was a Dark Mark over Hogwarts! Since they were*

*right outside the Hog's Head, Harry summoned a couple of brooms from their storage shed, and as I write this they're flying to the castle. What else has happened tonight? Please, don't let it be one of our friends!*

"Hermione, I'm going to put the mirror inside my pocket now, OK? You should still be able to hear us," Harry told her as the towers of the castle came into sight. "It looks like the Dark Mark is hovering over the Astronomy Tower so we're heading there."

"Oh, Harry, please be careful," Hermione responded tearfully. "I can't stand being stuck here unable to do anything."

"You've been a big help already. We're about to land now. I love you."

"I love you too. Stay safe."

"Look Professor, who's that?" As the two wizards shakily dismounted from their broomsticks, still feeling the effects of the Nightmare Potion, Harry spotted a dark, hooded figure slumped against the inner wall of the tower. Upon closer inspection, he discovered that it was a Death Eater who had been stunned and magically bound.

"Do you suppose he was the one who set off the Dark Mark?" Harry wondered.

"I believe that is most likely the case," Dumbledore replied faintly, leaning heavily against the outer wall where he had landed. "But he is certainly no longer a threat to us. Now, listen to me carefully. We don't know what else we're up against. Put on your invisibility cloak. Fetch Professor Snape immediately and do not stop, do not speak to anyone else, and do not remove your cloak. It is vital that you do this as quickly as possible. I don't have much time left."

But no sooner had Harry reached the door leading to the staircase than they heard someone on the other side. Harry stepped away from the door and drew his wand but suddenly felt himself go rigid, the victim of a petrification jinx! *How was that possible? His opponent hadn't even come through the door yet. Could it have been Dumbledore?*

He felt himself being levitated to a leaning position against the wall, where he could see everything that was going on, but was unable to move or speak.

"*Expelliarmus !*" From the edge of his field of vision he spotted Draco Malfoy emerge from the doorway with look of triumph on his face. "Hah, got you Old Man!" the arrogant Slytherin gloated. Out of the other corner of his eye Harry saw Dumbledore's wand fly over the edge of the ramparts as the headmaster sank into a sitting position, still leaning against the wall next to the brooms.

Harry (and Hermione) listened helplessly as his hated rival boasted about the plan he'd successfully implemented, from the diversionary attacks with the Assassin's dagger and poisoned mead, to his efforts in the Room of Requirement. There, it turned out, he'd succeeded in repairing

a broken Vanishing cabinet, which was paired to one he'd found at Borgin and Burkes, and which now resided at Malfoy Manor. From there the raid was launched, and more than a dozen Death Eaters had slipped into the castle tonight.

Harry's immediate concern, on hearing this, was what had happened to the DA and Order members who'd been patrolling. But as Malfoy continued his tale, he noticed that the Slytherin appeared much more nervous than someone whose plan had been a spectacular success. Perhaps his friends were making a good showing in the battle, and were still alive, he hoped desperately.

Dumbledore pointed this out, and attempted to undercut Malfoy's triumph by informing him that he'd known all along what was going on, and that Snape had been watching him on his instructions.

"Oh yeah? Well he didn't stop me, did he?" Malfoy sneered. "Maybe he's not as much on your side as you thought. And besides, who's holding the wand right now, huh?"

"You are holding it, of course, Draco, but you have not used it since you burst through the door. Surely if you were going to kill me you'd have done it by now? Perhaps your heart isn't really in this."

"My heart's just fine!" Malfoy insisted. "And kill you is exactly what I'm going to do!"

"It's not too late, you know," the headmaster replied, as coolly as if they were having a pleasant conversation about the weather, rather than discussing whether he was about to die. Harry couldn't believe how the man could be so calm at a time like this. He listened in astonishment as Dumbledore actually tried to make a deal with Malfoy, if only he'd renounce his actions and come over to the right side.

"Why would I ever want to be on the side of a mudblood loving old fool like you?" Malfoy shot back. "In case you haven't noticed, your side is losing!"

"Step back, Draco." Malfoy jumped in surprise and shot a look behind him. With all the yelling, no one had noticed Snape slip through the door onto the tower. *Was that Dumbledore's game – to stall until Snape arrived?* Harry wondered. But instead of disarming Malfoy, the dark eyed professor directed his wand at the helpless headmaster, who was now barely able to hold himself up, gasping for breath.

"Severus, you're just in time," Dumbledore whispered. "Help me, please."

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Harry watched in horror as the green light that haunted his dreams streaked from Snape's wand, and snuffed out the life of the greatest wizard in the world. From inside his pocket he heard a muffled gasp, and knew that Hermione had deduced what had happened as well. *How could Dumbledore have been so wrong?*

"Draco, get out of here, now!" Snape shouted. Terrified by what had just happened, Malfoy bolted through the door and down the steps of the tower.

“Potter! I know you’re here somewhere,” Shape hissed out urgently. “Listen to me carefully, there is not much time. First, you must tell everyone that it was I who killed Dumbledore, not Draco. This is essential. Second, and you must tell absolutely no one else of this, the Headmaster was dying. I was only able to slow down the curse from the ring, not stop it. He would have been dead within a month, but he wished to go in a manner of his own choosing. Finally, and this is the most important, you *must* complete the task you have been given by the Headmaster. It is the only way the Dark Lord can be defeated.”

Suddenly Malfoy burst back onto the tower. “Potter and his cursed group of friends are down there, and all of our people are defeated,” he announced in desperation. “We’re trapped here!”

“Are you certain it was Potter?” demanded Snape.

“Well, I didn’t see him, but who else could it have been?” Malfoy moaned. “What are we going to do?”

“Here,” Snape instructed, striding over to the two broomsticks lying next to Dumbledore’s body. “We can fly out of the castle. Go now!” Greatly relieved, Malfoy hurried over to take one of the brooms, deliberately avoiding looking at the dead wizard, and launched himself from the tower. But Snape hesitated a few seconds longer.

“Remember everything I have told you, Potter. This is only the beginning of the Dark Lord’s plans. I will aid you when I can.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters The Rest Of The Story

### Year 6, Chapter 12 - The Rest of the Story

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 9 (continued)

*OH NO! What a catastrophe! Dumbledore dead! And Snape killed him! But – what Snape said – it sounded like he's still on our side. And that he and Dumbledore planned that something like this would happen. Why? If Dumbledore was dying anyway, was it so that Snape would get in Voldemort's good graces? But Snape said Harry wasn't to tell anyone.*

*Oh, I do hope Harry is going to be all right. He's still petrified, so I can't talk to him. Surely someone will come up here and find him soon. But he's still under his invisibility cloak, I think, so they might not see him. I'm going to have to listen and then shout as loudly as I can. Oh, this is so hard!*

*Wait, I think I hear someone coming now.*

#### Three hours earlier

“OK, that's everyone,” Susan announced as Luna and Cho arrived in the classroom where the DA held their training sessions. “What's going on?”

Neville and Ginny both looked to Ron to be the spokesman, and the lanky redhead cleared his throat nervously and walked to the front of the room as the others formed a semicircle around him.

“You all know that we've suspected that Malfoy's been up to something all year,” he began. Most of the students nodded; a few shrugged – even for the ones who hadn't been in on the surveillance, this wasn't news. “Well, earlier today Harry discovered that he's finished whatever it is, and he thinks he's going to spring it tonight. He wants us to keep an eye on him.”

“Where's Harry? Why tonight?” were some of the questions that emerged from the general murmuring that immediately ensued.

“Harry and Dumbledore are off on ... on a secret mission that has to do with You Know Who,” Neville spoke up. “That’s why Harry thinks Malfoy will move tonight, while Dumbledore’s out of the castle.”

“Anyone who’s willing to help, stay here,” Ron added. “The rest of you can leave now.” Not one of the members of the DA moved from where they were standing, but instead quieted down, as the seriousness of the situation became more apparent.

If Harry was asking them to do this, it must be important – and probably dangerous, given the things he had been involved with in the past. In the beginning it had been just Ron and Hermione who’d been with him in these situations. Last year three more of their members had joined the trio. Now it was their opportunity to put their lives on the line for the light side. Harry had made it clear from the beginning of this year that they were training to fight back, and now the time was here.

“OK, here’s what we’ve planned,” Ron began again. “Malfoy’s been using the Room of Requirement, as you know, so that’s where most of us will be stationed. But we should also have someone watching the Slytherin common room, in case more of them are involved. And someone should also keep an eye on Snape’s office.” Despite the fact that Hermione had Harry mostly convinced that Snape was on their side, Ron still didn’t trust him. “And Katie, I was thinking one of us should patrol the outside of the castle, on a broom. Can you handle that?” Katie Bell, easily the best flyer in the group besides Ginny, nodded her agreement.

“We should probably also have one of us in each of the other three common rooms, in order to keep the other students out of the way if something does happen,” Susan suggested. “It sure would be useful if we could communicate between all of these groups.”

“I think I have something that can help with that.” To the surprise of the leaders of the group – Ron, Neville, Susan, and Ginny – Cho Chang stepped forward. Although she had been largely ostracized by the rest of the members all term, she had still kept coming to the meetings and practicing with them, as hard or harder than she ever had.

“I wanted to do something to make up for what I ...” she began hesitatingly, avoiding Susan’s glare. “I mean, I needed to prove myself, I wanted to be useful. So I, that is, Luna and I, have been working on our coins.” She held out one of the charmed Galleons that Hermione had created. “We figured out a way for the master Galleon to send messages to the rest, other than just the date and time. And for the rest of us to respond. You’ll just have to think of a short message and touch your wand to the coin.”

Susan was reluctant to accept any help from the backstabbing girl, and Neville was reluctant to disagree with his girlfriend. Ron wasn’t sure what to make of the offer. Ginny, however, noticed the look on Luna’s face, and realized that the two Ravenclaws had for the most part stayed together at their meetings. Luna would certainly know what it was like to be an outsider, and had evidently befriended her seventh year housemate. Now, both girls were biting their lips, hoping that their intellectual contribution would be accepted.

“I think it sounds brilliant, don’t you Ron?” Ginny announced decisively. “What do you need to do to activate it?”

“We just need to cast the charm on the master Galleon, and another one on all of the other ones,” Cho said eagerly, while Luna nodded, her eyes as wide as ever.

Ginny made a show of taking out her Galleon and Ron shrugged and followed suit, pulling out both his own and Harry’s. Soon all the rest of them were digging through their pockets and bags, and in a few minutes sixteen coins were on the desk at the front of the room.

“Probably the master coin should be with someone who’s not doing anything else, so they aren’t distracted,” Ron reasoned aloud.

“I’ll do it,” Lavender spoke up. “I’m probably the best one to stay in the Gryffindor common room, since I’m a prefect and I’m also not that good of a fighter.” Everyone agreed with that, and Hannah was the obvious choice for Hufflepuff, for similar reasons. Cho shared a look with Luna.

“I should be the liaison with Ravenclaw, I think,” she suggested somewhat apologetically. “Luna doesn’t exactly have a lot of credibility.” The potentially awkward moment was broken when Luna shrugged and smiled in a *‘what can I say? that’s the way I am’* manner, and several of the members chuckled in response.

“I have one more thing for you,” Ron added. “Harry left us with a little extra protection. Here are twelve doses of *Felix Felicis*, each good for two hours.” The other DA members gaped in surprise as Susan and Ginny levitated two trays forward, each holding half a dozen stoppered vials of pumpkin juice to which a portion of the lucky potion had been added. “I know there are fifteen of us here ...”

“But the three of us staying back in the common rooms don’t need it,” Hannah finished for him.

They decided not to actually drink the potion until the alarm had been sounded, so as not to waste any of the effects. Justin and Ernie were given the Slytherin stakeout, as the Hufflepuff common room was closer to the dungeons, and having non-Gryffindors on this assignment would avoid as much friction as possible. Luna was tasked with the surveillance of Snape. The rest (Ron, Neville, Susan, Ginny, Dean, Seamus, Colin, and Parvati) would patrol the corridors, with at least two of them in sight of the Room of Requirement at all times. Once everyone had their assignments, they broke up and headed off to their positions.

An hour later messages began to flash on the charmed Galleons.

*Malfoy on the move.* Ernie sent this to Lavender, who immediately relayed it to the others.

*Anyone else?* Ron queried

*No.*

*Stay in position.* Malfoy was apparently operating alone this time, but they still needed to watch



in case any other Slytherins joined in later.

*Take the potions.* This was it. They were now committed. Ron, Susan, and Neville had consulted and determined that something would happen within the next two hours.

*Go Katie.* Katie nodded to Lavender and exited the common room with her broom to begin patrolling outside.

*Malfoy at the ROR.*

Malfoy was allowed to enter the Room of Requirement unheeded. After some discussion, it had been decided that if they stopped him, he would just do it again some other night, when they weren't mobilized and ready for him. Whatever was going to happen, it would be best for it to be now when he wasn't aware that they were on to him.

Ron moved most of the members watching the corridors, the best fighters in the group, to the seventh floor hallway and waited. Only Colin and Parvati remained on general patrol. But he had the Marauder's Map as well, and kept an eye on it constantly. Besides the members of the DA, there were quite a few Order members patrolling, including Bill, Fleur, Remus and Tonks. But most of them were in the area around Dumbledore's office and the classrooms. This puzzled Ron, as he had been certain that Dumbledore knew that Malfoy was working in the Room of Requirement.

The waiting seemed interminable. After an hour Ron began to regret what appeared to be the premature taking of the *Felix Felicis*. But then it happened. The door to the Room opened, and the DA members assembled outside barely had time to bring themselves to full alertness when the entire corridor went pitch black!

*"Stupefy ! Stupefy !"* These spells were aimed blindly in the direction of the door on the chance that someone was there.

*"Avada Kedavra !"* The return fire was decidedly more lethal, and even in the dark, the students ducked to the floor, remembering their training.

*"Reducto ! Stupefy ! Protego ! Avada Kedavra !"* The frustrated students dodged and shielded spells they could hear but not see, all the while being aware of bodies scurrying by them in the hallway, pausing occasionally to launch curses back at them. Much later, during the post mortem analysis, it would be concluded that Malfoy had used Instant Darkness powder but had some magical artifact that allowed him to see through the darkness. Hermione would liken it to night vision goggles, but only Harry, Justin, Dean, and Colin would know what she was talking about.

*"Let's get out of here!"* Ron called out, not even knowing how many of his force were still standing. A few minutes later, he found himself leaning against a wall outside the field of darkness, which still completely cut off any evidence of what lay beyond.

*"Is everyone all right?"* A quick head count turned up Neville, Susan, and Ginny, with Dean and

Seamus still missing. Ron glanced again at the Map, noting their unmoving figures still in the area near the Room of Requirement. He also spotted a dozen figures moving away from them at the other end of the corridor, along with three more unmoving ones near Seamus and Dean.

“*Accio* Dean!” he called out, attempting to get his dormmate clear of the carnage.

“Ron, you know that spell doesn’t work on people,” Ginny chided. “*Locomotor* Dean Thomas!”

“*Locomotor* Seamus Finnegan!” Susan added from beside her. In a few moments the unconscious forms of the two Gryffindors emerged from the darkness. The anxiety of the foursome dissipated when the pair was successfully revived.

“Wow, that was lucky!” Seamus exclaimed when the situation was explained to him. All those spells and no one was hurt!”

“I think we’re going to be saying that a lot during the next hour,” Neville noted wryly.

“Never mind that, let’s see if we can head them off,” Ron declared, studying the map.

“We need to call this in to Lavender too,” Susan added, taking her charmed Galleon and tapping it with her wand.

*Death Eaters in the castle!*

*Where?*

*ROR, moving west.*

Circling high above the grounds near the Forbidden Forest, Katie moved closer to the castle when she received this message, keeping an eye on the entrance, but also on the main gates. Now that Death Eaters were inside the castle, they might be planning to meet up with others on the outside to let them in.

For his part, Ron noted that two Death Eaters remained near the Room of Requirement, no doubt to ambush anyone who came out of the darkness on their side. Accordingly, he split up his force, leaving Dean and Seamus to guard this end of the hallway and instructing Colin and Parvati to sneak up on this pair from the rear. He then took the other three to intercept the rest of the enemy force. Meanwhile, Susan kept relaying messages to Lavender and the other watchers.

“*Stupefy! Stupefy!*” The pair of Death Eaters guarding the approach to the Room of Requirement never knew what hit them, as Colin and Parvati crept up silently from behind and launched their nonverbal spells. While Parvati bound them and took their wands, Colin called out to Dean and Seamus to join them. The two Gryffindors stopped along the way through the darkness to locate the bodies of the three Death Eaters who had been downed in the initial flurry of curses. One of them was dead, likely by a stray killing curse from his own side. The other two were bound and

their wands collected as well. Then the four of them awaited further instructions from Ron.

Unfortunately, the battle wasn't going that smoothly in other parts of the castle. Before Ron and his group could catch up and ambush them, three Death Eaters encountered a group of Order members. Ron could only watch the Map in frustration.

*"Stupefy ! Stupefy ! Avada Kedavra !"* Once more, the forces of the light side were seriously outgunned, and Sturgis Podmore fell lifeless to the floor, while Tonks and Remus barely managed to evade and escape around a corner.

"Here they come," Ron whispered to his three companions as they huddled in the shadows. "Remember the stone spell."

*"Reducto ! Stupefy! Stupefy! Protego !"* The DA led off with four nonverbal spells and the battle was joined. *"Avada Kedavra ! Duro ! Expelliarmus! Stupefy! Protego!"* These and similar spells flew fast and furious for several seconds. When the dust had settled, Ron's plan had succeeded brilliantly. His initial blasting spell had thrown the Death Eaters off balance, and two had been stunned immediately by Neville and Susan. The third had been more difficult to subdue, but had eventually been vanquished, although not before turning a tapestry to rubble. Ginny had alertly ducked behind the wall hanging and turned it to stone, blocking the killing curse that had been targeted on her. So far, their luck was still holding out.

Meanwhile Susan sent another two messages to Lavender.

*8 Death Eaters down.*

*More near Astronomy Tower.*

Ron had deduced that the target appeared not to be Dumbledore's office, but the Astronomy Tower, and accordingly redeployed his forces. It occurred to him that with the Marauders' Map this was like playing chess against a blindfolded opponent. He could see where they were but they had no idea where his pieces were. He smiled grimly at the thought, but didn't dwell on it very long. For on the Map, he could see that Bill and Fleur were in the Death Eaters' path, and he had no way to warn them.

Katie changed her search pattern when she received the message about the Astronomy Tower, and flew cautiously over to check it out. Just as she was within sight, a bright green spell soared into the air and exploded into the Dark Mark. Furious that such a loathsome symbol would be loosed at Hogwarts, she accelerated to top speed and dove down on the figure in dark robes who had turned back toward the doorway.

*"Stupefy! "* Once again, the hours of target practice with her nonverbal specialty paid off as she nailed him before he made it through the door. Quickly she dismounted and dragged him up against an inner wall of the tower and took his wand. *"Incarcerous !"* Leaving him there, she carefully peeked through the doorway and down the winding stairway, then slowly crept down the steps. To her surprise, she was stopped at the bottom by an invisible barrier, but she could hear

shouts coming from the other side. Hurrying back up to the top, she mounted her broom once more and contacted Lavender.

*Dark Mark over Astronomy Tower.*

*Stairway blocked.*

It was a very long minute before she had her reply.

*Return to castle.*

With one last glance at the Death Eater she had captured, she soared off toward Gryffindor Tower. Soaring through one of the windows, and frightening two second years half to death, she braked right next to Lavender, who had commandeered a table near the entrance portal.

“They have the rest of them trapped, and Ron wants you to join them for the final attack,” the normally frivolous but for now deadly serious blonde instructed. “Good luck.”

Katie checked her watch. “Yeah, for another twenty minutes anyway.”

Down in the dungeons Ernie and Justin had been growing increasingly restless with their lack of activity while following the messages from their comrades who were engaged in the battle. For although they had been responsible for sounding the alarm, absolutely nothing had happened outside the Slytherin common room since.

After indulging for the better part of an hour in some creative ideas of ways to utilize their temporary abundance of good luck (they were currently speculating on which girls they might ‘get lucky’ with), they were finally prompted to action when the stone door to the Slytherin common room opened. From their hidden positions on either side of the corridor, the pair of Hufflepuffs watched quietly while Nott, Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle, and Bulstrode slipped out of the doorway and started down the passageway, presumably to join in Malfoy’s triumph several floors above.

It was over almost before it started. Ernie and Justin’s first two nonverbal stunning spells had Nott and Parkinson down before they even realized they were under attack. Bulstrode managed to get off a hex which missed Ernie by several feet, and Justin stunned her from the side before she could get off a second shot. Goyle somehow managed to drop his wand and Crabbe looked frantically back and forth across the hallway unable to decide which of his opponents to attack first. Two more stunners eliminated for him the necessity of making that decision.

Justin shot Ernie a thumbs-up and triggered his Galleon while his friend kept an eye on the doorway to ensure that no other Slytherins emerged to investigate. Fortunately, no one inside the common room had heard them.

*5 more Slytherins just came out.*

*All stunned and out of action.*

Lavender sent a clarification before passing on the message.

*2 on 5 and you got them all?*

Justin permitted himself a bit of smugness.

*Just lucky I guess.*

Back upstairs everyone else was converging on the entrance to the Astronomy Tower. Ron had maneuvered so that four DA members were coming from one direction and three more plus Remus and Tonks from the other, and they now had the remaining Death Eaters trapped and outnumbered. This time the battle was more drawn out, since the enemy was now aware that their opponents were more numerous than they had anticipated, and they had taken cover in a defensive position. Bill was already down and bleeding, but Fleur had pulled him behind a suit of armor. She was now defending their hiding spot, fighting with a fury that Ron would never have believed possible from such a beautiful woman.

One final surprise remained. Mere minutes after Draco Malfoy had abandoned his companions to race up the stairway to the top of the tower, Snape appeared in the hallway and followed him. It all happened so quickly that he made it through the crisscrossing spells unscathed, in large part due to the fact that both sets of combatants thought he was on their side.

Berating themselves for not realizing that the stairway was only blocked in one direction, Neville and Ron redirected their fire, casting a series of blasting hexes at the opening to make sure that none of their other enemies could escape in that direction.

Seconds later Luna joined the other DA members, shocking the rest of them by cursing angrily and scowling. No one had ever before seen her like this, no matter what misfortune had been visited upon her by her fellow students.

“I tried to stop him, but he got by me,” she lamented to Ginny and Susan, who were closest to her. “Professor Flitwick came down to see him and must have told him about the attack. Then he flew out of his office with a horrible look on his face. Like he had the most loathsome task imaginable to complete, and he was forcing himself to do it. I don’t think he even noticed that I was there, and he was gone before I thought to stun him.” She took a deep breath and calmed herself, and the slightly detached look returned. “This is where I’d normally make a comment about how he was being inhabited by some bizarre creature, but I’m too shook up right now, so just pretend I did.” Susan and Ginny exchanged a look of disbelief, then just smiled and shook their heads before returning their attention to the battle.

Just as the last of the Felix Felicis potion was about to wear off, the final Death Eater was hit by eight simultaneous stunning hexes, four of which seemed certain to miss but inexplicably connected anyway. Slowly, cautiously, the remaining defenders rose from their positions and approached the entrance to the tower, wands still held aloft and ready. There was one last brief moment of excitement, as Malfoy appeared on the other side of the pile of rubble that Ron and Neville had created, but a flurry of spells quickly chased him back up the stairs.

Ron consulted the Map once more and quickly pinpointed the top of the tower, as the other DA members looked over his shoulder.

“There’s Harry and Dumbledore! They must be back!” Ginny exclaimed.

“But Malfoy and Snape are getting away!” Ron added in disgust. “Come on, Katie, we need to see what’s going on up there.” Katie still had her broom with her, since she had literally flown down the corridors from Gryffindor Tower in order to get to the site of the battle as quickly as possible, and Ron now climbed on behind her.

For their part, the other DA members pitched in where they could. Seamus, Dean, and Neville began to clear away the rubble, while Susan and Luna helped McGonagall, Fleur, and Remus carry Bill and the other injured Order members to the Hospital Wing. Tonks joined Parvati and Colin back at the Room of Requirement to ward the doorway against any further incursions into the castle, and then to round up the other Death Eaters who had been captured. Ginny raced back to Gryffindor Tower to get her and Ron’s brooms so that she could follow along up to the Astronomy Tower.

Back at Beauxbatons, Hermione waited as patiently as she could, knowing that someone would eventually come up to check out the scene at the top of the Astronomy Tower. Fortunately for her sanity, it wasn’t long.

“Look, here’s Dumbledore!” Ron shouted as he and Katie landed. “But where’s Harry?”

“Oh Merlin! He’s dead!” Katie shrieked. “Dumbledore’s dead! Ron, what are we going to do?” She collapsed by the fallen wizard crying hysterically. But Ron, though staggered by the sight, was still anxious to know what had happened to Harry. He had been on the Map just minutes before. Then he heard a faint voice.

“Over here!” Hermione shouted into the mirror as loudly as she could.

“Hermione?”

*Eventually, everything got sorted out. Ron followed the sound of my voice and found Harry under the Cloak. He managed to undo Dumbledore’s petrification jinx and by then Ginny had arrived with two more brooms. She had a bit of a breakdown as well once she saw Dumbledore, and Ron and Harry were pretty shook up too, but eventually they got everyone off the Astronomy Tower. Flitwick was called up to undo the charm at the bottom of the tower, that somehow only let people with a Dark Mark pass through, and then he and some house elves secured the Room of Requirement. Once Harry told everyone about the Vanishing cabinet, Dobby was able to get in and bring it out, and it was quickly disabled.*

*Harry was taken to the Hospital Wing as well, since he needed to be treated for the potion he’d*

ingested, but Madame Pomfrey said he'd recover. As one can imagine, everyone is quite shook up about Dumbledore's death, and the fact that Snape killed him. But there are other things to deal with as well – an Order member was killed in the battle, and most of the rest were injured, especially Bill who was severely mauled by the werewolf, Fenrir Greyback. That evil creature won't ever injure or turn anyone else, though, because Fleur killed him. From what Ron said, she can be vicious when defending someone she loves. I can understand that, actually, because I think I'd do the same thing if it were Harry.

The good news is that all the Death Eaters were killed or captured except for Malfoy (and Snape), and none of the DA was hurt. I think it's a credit to Harry's training of them that they performed so well. Luck can only do so much for you, after all.

They gave Harry a sleeping potion and Ron told me to get some rest too, so I deactivated the mirror. He's right, it's past midnight here and I'm exhausted. I don't know if I can sleep though. What are we going to do now!

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 10

Things continue to be in a state of uproar at Hogwarts, and it has now spread throughout Britain, and to a lesser extent to the rest of the wizarding world. I'll cut out and save a few newspaper articles to illustrate that, and focus my notes here on what's going on with Harry and Hogwarts.

I got a chance to talk to him on the mirror this morning before everyone else came to see him in the Hospital Wing, and we decided to keep what Snape told him secret for now. We'll wait and see what happens before we let anyone else know. He made sure to tell McGonagall and Tonks that it was Snape who actually killed Dumbledore, whereas Malfoy had set it all up. I'm sure he'll have to repeat the story several more times, but even if they give him Veritaserum, it is the truth, as far as it goes. Plus they have plenty of witnesses who saw Snape and Malfoy go up to the tower, and Katie and Ron who found the body while Harry was still petrified.

The rest of the staff is in a state of shock, both that Dumbledore is dead and that one of their colleagues killed him. Most of the students don't have nearly as much trouble believing the latter – Snape was so hated by everyone except the Slytherins. Susan told us when she came to visit Harry that there are some mixed feelings about Malfoy – everyone is disgusted by what he did, but to some extent they're impressed that he pulled it off.

There's more bad news. After all he and Dumbledore went through to get the Horcrux, it was a fake! Someone else had got there first, and left another locket with a note inside. It wasn't until this morning that Harry found time to take a good look at the locket he took from the basin, and it was only then that he discovered the subterfuge. The note basically taunted Voldemort and said that RAB (whoever that is) had stolen the real Horcrux and destroyed it. Well, if it's true that part is good news, but how will we ever know?

Bill is really messed up. Greyback scratched him up badly, and may even have bit him, but Remus

says that as long as he wasn't transformed at the time, Bill won't become a werewolf. The wounds are cursed, however, and will take a long time to heal, and he'll always have scars.

If there's anything good that came out of last night, it's that Mrs. Weasley has completely changed her mind about Fleur. When she heard how fiercely Fleur had defended Bill, and even killed his attacker, she was very impressed. I think it's probably because she's always so protective of her family herself, and now sees that trait in Fleur as well. Now, finally, everyone will realize what Harry and I have known for a while now (and Bill too, of course). Fleur is much more than just a pretty face – she's a very capable witch.

As the battle is discussed more and more, it's becoming obvious that the DA outperformed the Order hands down. Every Order member except Remus and Tonks and, interestingly, Fleur, was injured to some extent, even McGonagall, but not a single student was. And not only that, but nearly every Death Eater was taken out by a student. Among the Order only Fleur, who got Greyback, and Tonks, who would be expected to be more capable since she's an Auror, actually defeated a Death Eater. Tonks got two in the final showdown. There's some inclination among the adults to pass it off as the effects of the Felix Felicis. But how do they explain the DA's skill with nonverbal spells, or how much better organized the students were?

I personally think Harry should get some credit for how well trained they were, and Ron for maneuvering everyone about the castle! Not to mention the others who kept the rest of the students out of harm's way. I still can't believe how good a job Lavender did at relaying all those messages. And to think that Cho, of all people, modified MY charm on the Galleons!

Later –

I just talked to Harry again this afternoon. Now that the shock of his death is finally wearing off, I find myself angry with Dumbledore. I asked Harry, and he's starting to feel the same way. If Snape is to be believed, he knew he was dying for the past year. So why didn't he do more to train Harry? Why did he waste all that time? How on earth is Harry going to be able to find and destroy the rest of the Horcruxes, much less defeat Voldemort, without Dumbledore's help? The more I think about it, I'm not just angry, I'm furious! What sort of game was he playing at?!!

Harry and I really have our work cut out for us now. And I'm sure Ron will be joining us. It will be good to have the three of us together again. Somehow, we'll have to go through Dumbledore's records to learn all we can. It might be tricky to get someone to let us into his office. I suppose McGonagall is the Acting Headmistress now. I think she's quite fond of Harry and me, so we ought to be able to persuade her.

Still Later (evening) –

Madame Maxime came to see me and asked if I wanted to accompany the Beauxbatons delegation to Dumbledore's funeral. I thanked her and said of course I would. I need to be with Harry for this, and he needs me as well. There's no way I'm going to be able to keep my mind on my studies for the next few days anyway.



Madame Maxime doesn't know it, but there was quite a debate about the funeral arrangements, and Harry was a part of it. Dumbledore is going to be buried at Hogwarts, which is a departure from precedent, but it makes sense, since he devoted so many years of his life to the school. They were going to end the term early and send the students home, but Harry argued that the students ought to be allowed to stay for the funeral. So I'll get to see Ron and everyone else when I get there tomorrow. It's hard to believe how long it's been.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 13 (Friday the 13th)

*I arrived back here at Hogwarts right after dinner yesterday evening with the others from Beauxbatons. It was an interesting experience riding in the coach with the flying horses, but I had quite a few other things on my mind. Harry was waiting for me, of course, and I was in his arms almost as soon as I left the carriage.*

*We headed up to the Room of Requirement with Ron, Ginny, Susan, and Neville and spent hours talking about everything that had happened. Susan gave me detailed notes on what the DA had done during the battle, which I'll copy into my journal in the space I saved for it. We didn't really get into the more secret stuff, since most of them haven't been told everything. As far as I know, only Ron knows about the Horcruxes. Mostly I just wanted Harry to hold me, and I sat curled up next to him wrapped up nice and snug. Hannah and Luna joined us later, which cheered Ron up a bit.*

*Finally the others left to give Harry and me a little private time together. I really considered asking the room to give us a bed, but I knew I was expected back at the carriage for the night. Things got pretty hot and heavy for a while, but then we settled down and just lay on the sofa holding each other. We ended up lying on our sides with him spooning up behind me with his arms wrapped around me (which allowed him to touch me in a way that both of us enjoyed very much). We talked some more about what we're going to do next.*

*McGonagall already asked Harry what he and Dumbledore were doing that night, and it was awkward for him to not be able to tell her. I think we should tell her, especially since we want to go through his records. Harry pointed out that Dumbledore was quite specific when he said he should only tell Ron and me, (although he also told Neville and Susan the Prophecy).*

*On reflection, that seems strange to me. This was at the same time that Dumbledore decided I was too involved in Harry's life, and was holding him back. And as good a friend as Ron is, he sometimes lets his emotions get the better of him. Why would the two of us be the only ones that could be trusted with the knowledge of the prophecy and the Horcruxes?*

*On the other hand, we have mounting evidence that Dumbledore has been trying to hold Harry back. What if the real reason for not allowing Harry to talk to anyone else was to hinder his progress? Or make him completely reliant on Dumbledore? If either of these is true they're infuriating. But regardless, if it's the former, we can't afford to be hindered any longer now that the Headmaster's gone. If it's the latter, the same argument applies.*

*It will soon be time to get ready for the funeral, so I'll have to talk to Harry about this later.*

Although it was the first wizarding funeral either Harry or Hermione had ever been to, it was difficult to imagine a more impressive one. Everyone who was of any importance in the wizarding world, whether in fact or merely in their own minds, was in attendance. Hundreds of chairs were set out in front of the castle facing the lake and a temporary stage, which included a simple marble table on which the Headmaster's remains were laid out. His body was attired in one of his favorite purple robes adorned with stars, and his hands were crossed over his wand, resting on his chest.

The group from the British Ministry of Magic had the most prominent seats, and included some of the couple's least favorite people – Cornelius Fudge, Dolores Umbridge, and Rufus Scrimgeour. Delegations from other countries were seated immediately behind them. Hogwarts students and faculty were seated on the right side, while 'ordinary' witches and wizards were on the left. The members of the Order of the Phoenix took unassuming positions with this group. Hermione fumed as she noted the representatives of other magical beings were shunted as far to the outskirts of the ceremonial area as possible.

The trio sat together for the funeral, with Hermione and Ron flanking Harry. Neville and Susan were on Ron's other side, while Ginny sat next to Hermione, and the rest of the DA gathered around them. They suffered through interminable speeches by politicians who only *thought* they knew Dumbledore.

But when those finally ended, they were pleased by the tributes of some of the other magical species, who though disregarded by the wizarding world, were cherished by the Headmaster. The mermaids sang their strange sounding songs, the centaurs loosed a volley of arrows, and the house elves of Hogwarts popped into view and then quickly out again, leaving the marble table holding Dumbledore's body overflowing with brightly colored flowers.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash, and when everyone's vision cleared a marble tomb had appeared, Dumbledore's final resting place on the shore of the lake. It was positioned perfectly to be visible from the castle entrance, from the road leading from the school gates, from the quidditch stadium, and from the lake traversed by first year students on their initial introduction to Hogwarts.

"Harry, can I talk to you for a bit?" Ginny asked as people began to get to their feet at the conclusion of the ceremony. Harry glanced at Hermione, who gave his hand a squeeze before releasing it. She moved next to Ron as Ginny and Harry walked away, and gave him a hug.

"Hey," he greeted her as they pulled apart. "First time I've had a chance to talk to you alone since you got here."

"Yeah, I'm sorry for ignoring you, but ..."

“Don’t worry about it, I understand. You and Harry needed the time together. So, how have you been?”

Hermione looked around. The crowd was breaking up and students were beginning to drift back toward the castle. Susan and Neville were talking to Hannah. She took out her wand and cast a discreet privacy charm.

“I’m just barely holding it together. I’m trying to be strong for Harry, but I don’t know how much more I can take,” she admitted shakily. “Oh Ron, I’m so scared! Dumbledore left Harry with this impossible task, and I don’t know how we’re going to do it!”

“We’ll make it through, Hermione, we always do,” Ron said hopefully. “Harry can do this, and you and I will be right there with him.” He wrapped one arm awkwardly around her, and she leaned into his side as the two friends continued to comfort and encourage each other.

Meanwhile, Ginny stopped when she and Harry were far enough away from everyone to avoid being overheard.

“You’re going after him, aren’t you?” she began. “You and Hermione and Ron. And you won’t be coming back to Hogwarts next year.” Harry paused, then nodded. Ginny was a clever girl, and trustworthy as well. “I want to come with you,” she declared. Harry took a step back in surprise, but Ginny pressed on determinedly. “I’m a good fighter; you know that from the DA. I can help you, and I want to be a part of defeating him.”

Harry began to say that it was too dangerous, that he needed her and her family to be safe, but he knew she could counter that argument easily. She had nearly died her first year, and been possessed temporarily by Tom Riddle, and then nearly died again this year. With Dumbledore gone who knew how safe Hogwarts would be now, or any place for that matter? Instead he just shook his head sadly.

“You know you can’t, Ginny,” he said simply. “You aren’t of age for another year, and your mum would never let you go.” The look on the youngest Weasley’s face showed that she had expected this outcome, but she had determined to try anyway. “Besides, you can still be a part of the fight here,” Harry continued, trying to soften the blow. “You and Neville and Susan have to take over the DA next year. Everyone will still need to be able to defend themselves, no matter where they are. And there may be some things that need to be done here as well.”

“What sort of things?” Ginny asked, not sure if he was being serious or just letting her down easy. But Harry shook his head, not willing to reveal anything about the Horcruxes yet, much less his and Hermione’s speculations on their location.

“Besides that,” he teased. “You need to be here to drive all the boys crazy. You’re going to have to get yourself a new boyfriend for next year.”

Ginny’s eyes flashed, as she had intended to steer the conversation in this direction and she eagerly took up his challenge. “I don’t know about that. All the good guys are already taken. You,

Neville ...”

“What about Seamus?” Harry mentally went down the list of Gryffindors, realizing that his Irish dormmate was the only eligible male in his year left for her to choose from.

“Oh please,” Ginny groaned while rolling her eyes. “He’s even worse than Dean. Not even Parvati or Lavender would go as far as he wanted them to when he dated them. And for Lavender, that’s really saying something, you know.”

As she had intended, Ginny put him off balance with that remark. “Uh, no actually, I didn’t know,” he stammered. “I ... er... never really talked to Ron or the other guys about her, or any of you girls for that matter.”

Ginny giggled at his discomfort, and wrapped her arm in his while patting it in mock consolation. “I know, you’re so noble.” Then she pulled back and grinned at him. “Maybe we should hook him up with Romilda Vane?”

Harry grimaced, but continued the banter. “What do you think about Colin?”

Ginny shrugged. “I don’t know, do you think he’ll ever grow up?” Harry thought a moment about that idea. He couldn’t really picture a grown up Colin Creevey.

Ginny stopped and turned to face him, now becoming serious. “What about us Harry? Do you think you and I could have made a go of it if, you know, if you hadn’t ...?”

“If Hermione and I had decided we just wanted to be good friends?” Ginny nodded, and held her breath, her brown eyes boring into his with a hard, blazing look. “Well, it’s possible, I guess,” he began carefully, now getting an idea of where this conversation was heading. “I like you. You’re a good friend, and fun to be with. But I also could have hooked up with Katie, or Cho,” he suggested, picking two girls who had expressed their interest in him.

Ginny was not to be deterred. She needed to know, and wasn’t going to let it go until she got an answer. “You and Cho would never have worked. And I’d be much better for you than Katie – I know you much better than she does, and we’ve spent so much more time together. You and I have more in common, and certain shared experiences,” she pointed out, reminding him that Hermione wasn’t the only girl whose life he’d saved.

“Ginny, you’re a great girl, and ...” Harry deliberately looked her up and down letting his eyes show his appreciation of her physical assets. She wasn’t as curvy as Hermione, but she had a very nice, petite figure. Under this scrutiny, Ginny blushed bright red. She had thought she was long past the stage of blushing whenever he looked at her, but not this time! The thought flashed through Harry’s mind that it was a good thing Ron didn’t see him checking out his sister like this, before he continued his response, taking her hands in his.

“You’re obviously very attractive, Ginny and like I said, you’re a great girl, and any guy would be lucky to be with you. So who knows, if things were different, maybe we could have ended up

together. But ...”

“But I’m not Hermione,” Ginny acknowledged with a sigh. “I’m not the girl who’s stood by you for six years, and never let you down. Who knows you better than you know yourself. Who’s closer to you than anyone could ever be, even when she’s a thousand miles away.”

Harry shook his head with a small smile, glad that she understood. “I can’t imagine my life without her in it. She doesn’t just have my heart,” he said almost reverently. “She has my soul.”

Ginny nodded and together they turned and started walking back to the others, as she linked her arm with his again, in a friendly fashion, nothing more. It had been difficult to give up her lifelong dream, but she had needed this closure. “I don’t suppose I could have one more kiss, something to remember you by?” she asked hopefully. Harry looked at her and rolled his eyes before shaking his head with a chuckle. “Oh well, it was worth a try.” she joked as she gave his arm a squeeze.

As they approached the now empty seats, Ginny turned to him again. “You’re going to beat him, I just know you will. You won’t give up until he’s gone. That’s probably the most impressive thing about you, you know, your determination. Your desire to do the right thing even if it kills you.”

“That sounds like something Oliver Wood would say,” Harry quipped, attempting to cover the awkwardness he always felt when he was complimented like that. “Get the snitch or die trying.” But at the same time he gave her hand a little squeeze to show his appreciation for her confidence in him. Then he grew silent as he mused on her words. It reminded him of the time Hermione had gone off on Dumbledore, saying he’d deliberately fostered Harry’s self-sacrificing trait. Did Dumbledore expect him to die?

Looking up, he spotted Ron holding Hermione while she buried her head into his shoulder, both of them with tears in their eyes. It occurred to him that this was the first time he’d ever seen Ron hug Hermione. He knew this had been a stressful time for her – having to helplessly witness the terrible events of the past few days – and was glad that she’d found this source of comfort from their mutual friend. Harry caught her eye, and their nods indicated that they’d explain later what they’d been up to with the two Weasley siblings.

Ginny broke away and headed towards the castle, realizing that the trio would want to be by themselves. But before Harry reached the other two, he was intercepted by someone he really didn’t want to talk to just then.

“Mr. Potter, I’d like to have a word with you,” the Minister of Magic announced. The two grim-faced Aurors flanking him indicated that this request was not optional. Reluctantly, Harry turned and headed back in the direction he’d just come from, this time with considerably less pleasant company.

“I want to know what happened that night,” Scrimgeour demanded.

“I gave my statement to Auror Shacklebolt during the official investigation,” Harry snapped. I watched Snape kill the headmaster, then he and Malfoy escaped on brooms. Nothing’s changed

since then.”

“But what were the four of you were doing on top of that tower?” the Minister persisted.

“Malfoy figured out a way to bring Death Eaters into the school, and one of them set off a Dark Mark to lure Dumbledore to the top of the tower, where he and Snape ambushed him,” Harry replied in a tired voice, as though his inquisitor was an annoying younger child. “The headmaster and I were in Hogsmeade when we saw the mark, and borrowed some brooms from the Hog’s Head to fly back to investigate.”

“And what were you and Dumbledore doing in Hogsmeade?”

“He was giving me special lessons.”

“In what?”

“How to kill Voldemort.” Harry did not completely mask his sneer at the predictable shudder from the other three wizards. “I’m the Chosen One, haven’t you heard?” he added sarcastically.

“I think I’ve heard about enough of your cheek,” Scrimgeour growled. “Perhaps some time in a Ministry holding cell will loosen your tongue.”

“I don’t think so,” Ron’s voice announced. The three Ministry men spun around to see themselves surrounded by a group of students with wands drawn. Hermione briefly flashed her charmed Galleon in her palm to indicate to Harry how the DA had responded so quickly.

“And just who do you children think you are?” the irate Minister snarled.

“We’re the lot that killed or captured fourteen Death Eaters a few nights ago,” Neville answered with pride, and not a small bit of mockery. “You might have read about us.”

“Well, you can just step aside or be arrested,” Scrimgeour shot back.

“You’d really arrest the hero of the wizarding world and the school children who defeated more Death Eaters than your entire Auror Corps has all year?” Susan countered scornfully. “If so, it would be the last action you’d ever take as Minister of Magic.”

Knowing that his bluff had been called, Scrimgeour turned back to Harry and snarled. “Step one inch out of line this summer, Potter, and you’re mine.” With that he stormed off, escorted by his two Auror bodyguards, under the close watch of a dozen of the best trained fighters at Hogwarts.

“Thanks guys,” Harry called out after his friends. Neville and Susan gave a wave as Ron and Hermione moved to join him.

“Guess this is it, then,” Ron commented as the three of them gazed out over the lake. “Think we’ll ever be back here?”

“Someday,” Harry reassured him. “It’s hard to say what happens now. We’ve got a lot of planning to do.”

“We’re with you whatever happens,” Ron stated confidently as Hermione ducked under Harry’s arm and pulled it around herself, leaning her head into his shoulder.

“I know,” Harry replied as he hugged Hermione and clasped Ron around the shoulder with his other arm. “Just like always.”

-oooOOOooo-

“Amazing,” Rose breathed as Hermione closed the notebook. “She only changed a little bit from that last part but made it sound so different than it really was, like you were with Ron and Daddy was with Ginny, instead of the other way around.” Hermione smiled and nodded.

“But the part about Snape was really shocking,” Rose continued. “He really told Daddy right there that night what really was going on?”

“That’s right,” Hermione confirmed. “But the author didn’t want anyone to know what side he was actually on until the end of the story, so it’s perfectly understandable why she changed that part.”

“What did you do next?” her daughter asked. “The books skip a whole month.”

“Well, I went back to Beauxbatons and took my NEWTs, which is the last thing I wrote about in this year’s journal,” Hermione answered. “I decided to start a new journal for the rest of it, since that was the end of the school year for Harry and Ron, and the beginning of everything else that followed. We’ll start reading it next time.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters The Mission Begins

### Final Year, Chapter 1 – The Mission Begins

Rose looked up from the book she was reading as her mother walked into the room carrying one of her old notebooks, and her face broke into a delighted smile. “Are we going to start the last year now?” she asked excitedly. Hermione nodded as she settled down onto the sofa next to her daughter.

“You need to realize some things before we start,” she instructed the young girl in a serious tone. “The real story is darker in places, and parts of it are not as exciting as she made them in the book.” Rose nodded solemnly. “There are also some more ‘adult’ parts as well,” her mother added with a touch of discomfort. “But you’re pretty mature for your age, and I want you to know the whole story.” Rose nodded again. “And of course, you already know it ends differently,” Hermione finished. This time Rose’s nod was accompanied by a smile.

“OK, here we go.”

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 14

*Albus Dumbledore is dead. Even though we just attended his funeral, it’s still a bit hard to believe. Now the burden is all on Harry. Whatever happens from here on, our fate is in his hands. I just hope that whatever help I can give him, it will be enough. This journal, rather than recording our last year of school, as I originally intended, will serve as a record of our efforts to rid the world of the evil that is known as Voldemort. Only time will tell if we will be successful.*

*Once the funeral was over and people started to leave, it was time to begin implementing our plans. It was a bit tricky, since there were things we needed to do right away, while still maintaining secrecy. Harry had managed to let McGonagall know that we needed to speak with her in private. She realized the need for discretion, since he is now something of a prime target, and will have to keep his movements confidential.*

*Ron had to go back on the Hogwarts Express, as his parents would be expecting him at Kings Cross and would have been very suspicious if he didn’t show up there. I was able to get permission*



*from Madame Maxime to stay in Britain another day before returning to Beauxbatons. Since I wasn't sitting with the rest of the French delegation at the funeral, little suspicion was aroused when I didn't board the flying coach with the others. If anyone inquired about my absence, Madame Maxime quite firmly let them know that it wasn't their concern.*

*Harry accompanied Ron and the others to Hogsmeade Station and boarded the Express, then put on his invisibility cloak and slipped right back off the train and returned to Hogwarts. There he met me in a secluded spot out by the lake and I joined him under the cloak to head back inside the castle. Except for a stop in one of the secret passageways for a little shared affection, we arrived at the Headmasters' Office without incident.*

*After quite a bit of discussion about the relative merits of keeping the whole project a secret among the three of us, we had concluded that the advantages of getting some help outweighed the security concerns. We had to have access to Dumbledore's records, and there was no way to do that without informing McGonagall of at least some of what was going on. And she would certainly know something was up in any case when Harry and Ron don't return to Hogwarts in the fall. So we decided that we would bring McGonagall and Flitwick in on it, and this was the best time to do it.*

"Sloth Grip Roll." Harry spoke the password to the gargoyle guard and shot a grin at Hermione. While Dumbledore's passion had been sweets, the new Headmistress was widely known for her quidditch fervor. Hermione took his hand as they moved up the circular staircase.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger," McGonagall greeted them. "I presume that you are here to talk about next year?" Harry and Hermione shared a quick glance and nodded. "Well, assuming that Miss Granger returns from Beauxbatons, I believe I can assure you that the two of you will be Head Boy and Head Girl."

Harry and Hermione shared another, longer glance before Harry replied. "Erm ... it's actually a bit more complicated than that. First of all, Hermione's taking her NEWTs this year, so she'll be graduated, and uh ... I'm not coming back either." A stunned silence from the two professors greeted this declaration. Hermione gave Harry's hand an encouraging squeeze as she nodded to him to explain, even as her eyes reassured him that she would unfailingly back him up.

Hermione had only been to the Headmasters' office once, and her mind had been rather preoccupied at the time with Umbridge and the betrayal of the DA, so now she took some time looking around in fascination while Harry began to explain the situation to McGonagall and Flitwick. They listened in stunned silence while he revealed that Dumbledore had been preparing him to battle Voldemort. At that point he asked them to take a secrecy vow before he proceeded further.

"Harry? What about these portraits?" Hermione broke in. Harry frowned thoughtfully as he glanced around the office.

“Well, they were all here when I met with Dumbledore, and he never held anything back,” he decided. “So I guess it’s OK.”

“That is correct, young man,” the portrait of the former Headmistress Dilys Derwent observed from her position near the ceiling. “We are bound by the magic that created us to assist the Headmaster, and that includes not revealing anything that occurs in this office unless he wishes us to.” Harry and Hermione nodded their understanding, and turned back to their two professors. During this time McGonagall and Flitwick had managed to overcome their amazement enough to agree to take the vows of secrecy that Harry had requested.

Then they sat back and listened in growing astonishment as Harry, with occasional elaborations and clarifications from Hermione, related his tale. Their amazement, however, was combined with not a small bit of annoyance at some of Dumbledore’s manipulations. When the pair of students got to the part of how Dumbledore had effectively forced Hermione out of Hogwarts they thought for a moment that McGonagall was about to incinerate her predecessor’s portrait. Fortunately for the painting, it had not yet awakened and so did not feel the full effect of her wrath.

Finally Harry came to the subject of the Horcruxes, and the extent of shock and revulsion from the two professors was sobering. For despite the fact that between them they had more than one hundred years of teaching experience, and had seen and heard much in that time, they still had difficulty comprehending that Tom Riddle could have done such a thing. Even more disquieting, from their point of view, was the matter of fact manner in which Harry relayed the information.

“The diary that possessed Ginny was the first one, made while he was still a student. We think it was when he killed Moaning Myrtle. You remember, Professor McGonagall, that I destroyed that with the Basilisk fang. Then there was the Gaunt family ring, which was found and destroyed last summer by Professor Dumbledore. You might have seen him wearing it for a while, and it was what caused the damage to his hand.”

At this Harry paused and exchanged a glance with Hermione. She responded with an almost imperceptible shake of her head, confirming his inclination to keep to themselves the information that Dumbledore had been dying from that curse. “The third was probably Slytherin’s locket, which had also been owned by the Gaunt family. We thought we had this one last week, but it turned out to be fake.”

“You mean ... your mission that ended with Albus’s death was ... all for naught?” McGonagall cried out in dismay. Harry’s shoulders slumped as he nodded glumly, his composure breaking briefly. Hermione responded immediately with a comforting hand on his arm, and took up the tale.

“We’re fairly confident that Hufflepuff’s cup is the next one,” she noted, “although we have no idea of its location. Depending on whether his snake Nagini is one, as Professor Dumbledore suspected, there are either one or two more, most likely artifacts from Ravenclaw or Gryffindor.”

“As far as Ravenclaw is concerned, there are many possessions of hers that are well known,” Flitwick offered. “Several items of jewelry, including a necklace, a broach, and of course her diadem. Also a dagger and her quill, which is currently used as an academic award, passed down

annually to the outstanding seventh year Ravenclaw student. For next year it will be in the possession of Miss Patil, should she choose to return. Finally there is her wand, which has for many centuries been displayed in Ollivander's front window."

"That must be it!" Harry interrupted. "That's why Ollivander disappeared. Maybe he figured it out and Voldemort came and took it back, and captured Ollivander to keep him from telling anyone."

"Do you really think Voldemort would leave a Horcrux out in plain sight in Diagon Alley?" Hermione asked.

"No, you're right. He wouldn't risk something like that," Harry agreed with a frown. Then an alternative explanation occurred to him. "But what if he'd switched wands? He could have taken the real one and left a fake. That sort of thing would be just like him, showing his contempt for the wizarding world by tricking them like that."

"While I agree that Vol ... er, Tom Riddle would have found such a situation amusing, I do not think it likely that Mr. Ollivander would have been unaware of the switch for all those years, given how in tune he is with wands," Flitwick pointed out.

Harry and Hermione nodded their acceptance of that line of reasoning. "I shall do some investigation and compile a list of possible items believed to have belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw, and their last known locations," the diminutive Charms professor decided. "As well as attempt to determine the fate of her wand." Harry and Hermione responded with their appreciation for his assistance.

"I am only aware of two items in existence that belonged to Godric Gryffindor," McGonagall stated after some thought, "and they are both right here in this office. She gestured at the Sorting Hat sitting on one of the bookshelves, and then at the jeweled sword in its display case.

"Could this sword be fake?" inquired Harry, his mind still influenced by the deception of the counterfeit locket. "Maybe Voldemort took the real one."

"I don't think that's likely, Harry," Hermione pointed out. "If it was, Fawkes wouldn't have brought it to you in the Chamber." Harry walked over to the display case and withdrew the sword. McGonagall initially raised her hand to stop him, but then reconsidered. It was said to be dangerous for just anyone to attempt to wield the legendary blade, if one was not worthy. But Harry had in fact already done so without any ill effects, when he was just a second year.

As soon as Harry picked up the sword, he could feel the power emanating from the weapon, recalling the similar feeling from four years previously. "No, this is the real thing all right," he announced.

Having heard the story of how Harry had slain the Basilisk, Flitwick was aware that he must have handled this sword before, but still was amazed at how natural he looked with it. McGonagall was also impressed but managed to maintain her normally stern visage. Hermione, on the other hand, beamed at her boyfriend with pride as he took a few practice swings, unaware of the effect he was

having on the others in the room. Even the portraits murmured among themselves.

*This naturally led to a discussion of the Chamber of Secrets. Harry offered to share his memory with them, and they got out Dumbledore's pensieve. All four of us went in, as I was just as eager as the professors were to see what had actually happened.*

*As I expected, Harry had drastically downplayed what he'd done in his description of the incident to me after I was unperturbed. He actually had to hold onto me a couple of times while we watched, as I was distraught when the Basilisk attacked him, and again when he was dying before Fawkes healed him. I noticed that both Flitwick and McGonagall were pretty shaken up as well. Harry, on the other hand, was focused on the diary, and exactly what happened when he pierced it with the fang. He later told me he was comparing it to what happened to the Horcrux in the ring when Dumbledore destroyed it.*

*Both McGonagall and Flitwick recognized Tom Riddle. I asked if they remembered anything about him, as we needed to figure out where he might have hidden the rest of the Horcruxes. McGonagall said he was a Prefect the year she was Head Girl, so she knew him, but that he was very private and tended to keep his thoughts to himself. Flitwick said that he was closer to Slughorn than any of the other professors, and Harry responded rather dryly that he was already aware of that, and had viewed a memory with Dumbledore of a Slug Club meeting during which Slughorn and Riddle had discussed the concept of Horcruxes. He added that he was pretty certain that he had got all the information out of Slughorn that we were going to get.*

*I changed the subject at that point by mentioning that we suspected that one Horcrux was likely hidden at Hogwarts, and that we thought the Chamber was its most probable location. At that point Flitwick suggested that it was an opportune time to go investigate it right then and there, since Harry and I were still at the castle and it was relatively deserted otherwise.*

*We agreed and Harry pulled his invisibility cloak back out, much to the surprise of the professors. Of course, then Harry had to explain it. McGonagall was aghast that Dumbledore had given it to him all the way back in our first year. Harry grinned as he recalled the time when she had caught us without it after we sent Norbert away to Charlie, and had given us detention. Flitwick found the whole story quite amusing, which earned him a glare from McGonagall. Eventually we got back on track and headed down toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.*

*The Chamber was pretty much like we had seen in Harry's memory, except it seemed a bit smaller, since those were the memories of a 12-year-old and we're quite a bit bigger now. Flitwick charmed the pipe that we had to slide down to be larger, and cleaned it up as well. On our way back McGonagall transfigured some of the rocks into stairs so we could climb back out. The four of us made short work of the cave-in that blocked the passage, which was fortunate since Flitwick would have been the only one who could still fit through the opening that Harry and Ginny crawled back out of four years ago.*

*Unfortunately, we couldn't find anything. I did learn quite a few new revealing charms while Flitwick and I were searching together. I also showed him the Horcrux detection charm I*

discovered at Durmstrang. But it was all to no avail – there simply wasn't a Horcrux down there. It was so frustrating! We were certain that one of them must have been hidden at Hogwarts! But we don't know where else it could be. McGonagall and Flitwick said they'll keep it in mind as they prepare the castle for the next school year, and use the detection charms on any likely hiding places they can think of.

Before we left the Chamber, McGonagall noted that the dead Basilisk was worth a fortune in potions ingredients, and for its skin. Flitwick, though, pointed out how suspicious it would be if a large quantity of basilisk products suddenly flooded the market, so we decided to only harvest part of it right now. Harry can always come down another time to get more.

In retrospect, we shouldn't have been surprised to discover that it was extremely difficult to cut through the basilisk skin, since its toughness is one of its valuable qualities. Harry suggested that he summon Gryffindor's sword from the Headmasters' Office and use that to cut into it, but McGonagall informed us that there were powerful Anti-Summoning charms on that office, as well as on the individual professors' offices. Harry reminded her that Fred and George had summoned their broomsticks out of Umbridge's office, and she cracked one of her rare smiles when she retorted that the strength of the charms are directly proportional to the magical ability of the professor in question.

At any rate, all of us casting severing charms together managed to cut the head off, which we decided was sufficient. There are plenty of valuable materials just in the head, especially the venom glands. Harry also broke off the other fang, and gave it to Flitwick and McGonagall for safekeeping. In the event that things go badly for us, they might need it to destroy a Horcrux or two.

Once we returned to the Headmasters' Office, we discussed our plans for the summer. Harry asked if he could stay at Hogwarts for a while, since he can do magic here but not at home. McGonagall said it would be OK, but that he must stay out of sight. Only the four of us are to know that he's here. He'll confine himself to Gryffindor Tower in the evenings and the Room of Requirement during the day, and travel back and forth under the invisibility cloak. Dobby can pass along any messages if he needs to communicate with her, or anyone else. She commented that her time would be taken up with trying to reschedule the OWL and NEWT exams that were interrupted by Dumbledore's death. They'll probably give them at the Ministry, and have students go there to take them.

I told them I was going back to Beauxbatons tomorrow, to finish up and take my NEWTs. McGonagall told me I could stay with Harry in Gryffindor Tower for the night. Neither of us mentioned the fact that I don't have a bed here this year, or what exactly 'stay with Harry' meant. In this instance, contrary to my usual nature, I decided that a little ambiguity was just fine.

Flitwick asked if there was anything else they could do to help. Harry asked him about the Fidelius charm on Headquarters, so he explained exactly how they worked. Now that Dumbledore is dead, all those who had been told the secret are effectively the Secret Keepers. They can't pass the secret along to anyone else, and only they will know where it is, but they could bring someone else to the house. He commented that this problem of what happens when Secret Keepers die is the

main reason that the charm isn't used very often. Since everyone dies eventually, the knowledge of the existence of certain places or things would disappear forever. Once Harry and my generation pass on, no one will ever see Number 12 again.

Harry then asked about the Fidelius on his home at Godric's Hollow, and how Hagrid could find it to get him out of the wreckage. Flitwick responded that it would depend on how the charm was worded. If it referred to where James and Lily lived, it would be lifted when they died. McGonagall added that it is true that everyone knows where the house is now – there is even a shrine built in the village square. Harry was quite annoyed that he hadn't been told about this, as he certainly would have liked to visit there and see it. He managed to keep it under control, though. I'm sure that going there will be on our list of things to do this year. Flitwick suggested that Moody take Harry to Headquarters next week to investigate, and help him set traps for any unwanted visitors. He was obviously referring to Snape, but we kept quiet about what Snape had said to Harry, deciding to wait and see how that played out.

I then reminded Harry that we had originally come up to the office to pick up any records or other items of Dumbledore's that we might need, including Gryffindor's sword. McGonagall was reluctant to let him take it, but he pointed out that he needed it to destroy any Horcruxes that we might find. She decided to transfigure a fake sword to hang on the wall, so that no visitors to her office would be suspicious if they noticed that it was missing. When she began to look through Dumbledore's possessions, she found that some things had been set aside with instructions for them to be given to us by the next Headmaster.

She decided that we had better take everything we needed now, since representatives from the Ministry would be coming by on Monday to go over his effects, and the fewer questions the better. Flitwick shrunk down all the parchments and books that seemed to be related to Voldemort and boxed them up. Likewise, the pensieve and all the vials of memories went into more boxes. Then there were some gifts that were for Harry, Ron, and me, and labeled that they were to be given to us on our birthdays. Harry commented with some frustration that Dumbledore was evidently still playing games with information. McGonagall, who was by now extremely irritated with his penchant for keeping his associates in the dark, agreed that we should open them now.

My gift was a book of wizarding tales and legends. Thumbing through it, I noticed Grindelwald's mark, the symbol from the Gaunt ring, on one of the pages, and decided that this was the information he'd promised to get for me. Evidently, though, he didn't want me to figure this out for several months yet, if I wasn't supposed to receive it until my birthday. Harry's gift was much more mysterious. It was a quidditch golden snitch. The note with it said it was the one he'd caught in his first ever quidditch match. We were all puzzled as to whether there was more to this than it appeared, but then Flitwick cast a revealing charm on it and informed us that there was something hidden inside it. Since none of us could figure out how to open it just then, we put it aside for later. The gift for Ron had us completely baffled. It was Dumbledore's Deluminator. Why he thought Ron would need this sometime next March – we had no idea.

By then it was getting toward evening, and Harry and I decided to go back to Gryffindor Tower. We thanked the professors for their help, they wished me good luck on my exams, and both of us good fortune for our task.

Back by themselves in Gryffindor Tower, Hermione spread out the materials they had retrieved and began to organize them while Harry called Dobby to bring them something to eat. In less than a minute the enthusiastic little elf had produced enough food that even Ron would have been satisfied, and the two of them spent the rest of the evening munching away and planning.

“I don’t know how we’re going to carry all this stuff around,” Hermione mused as she began to pack things away in Harry’s trunk, which Dobby had retrieved from the Hogwarts Express. “I think I’ll fix some bags up with Extension Charms.” She worried her lower lip with her teeth a moment, pondering the details. “I think I’ll make mine look like a small handbag. What do you want yours to look like?”

“I dunno, a rucksack I suppose,” Harry decided. “As long as you can make it so the sword fits into it.”

“No problem,” she responded with a smile. “Are you ready to call it a day?”

“Yeah, I’m knackered,” he admitted. He wrapped his arm around her as they made their way over to the stairs to the dorms and paused, looking down at her questioningly. Without even hesitating Hermione steered them toward the boys’ stairs, making it perfectly clear that they would be spending the night together.

Trying to keep his nerves under control, Harry used the bathroom first while Hermione sorted through her bag for the things she would need. They exchanged a shy pair of smiles as they passed each other when he came back out and she took her turn, and Harry quickly changed into a pair of pajama bottoms and sat down on the bed to wait for her. For her part, Hermione thought happily to herself while she changed about how much better this night was going to be than the ones she had spent sharing a room with Viktor in Durmstrang. After some deliberation, she decided to just stick with the tank top and knickers she normally wore to bed so as not to put any extra pressure on either of them. Once that was settled, she picked up her hairbrush and returned to the bedroom.

Harry couldn’t suppress a grin as she emerged wearing what he considered to be a very cute set of sleepwear, while admiring her choice for its simplicity and practicality. It also didn’t hurt that the top rode up while she raised her arms to brush her hair, exposing some nice looking curves, as her bare waist was set off by an eye-catchingly small pair of knickers.

“Here, let me do that,” he offered, gesturing to the brush. Hermione’s eyes widened a bit in surprise, then her face softened into a smile of gratitude. She very willingly settled herself down on the edge of the bed in front of him as he spread his legs apart to give her a place to sit. Soon she was purring with delight as he alternately ran his fingers and the brush through her heavy mane, separating the stubborn tangles out in a divide and conquer tactic.

“I love your hair,” he commented softly after several minutes of work. “It’s kind of wild and untamable. It’s sorta like your passion for what you believe in, the way that you won’t back down from anyone.” Hermione couldn’t do much more than nod in reply, as she was so lost in the pleasurable sensation. Any verbal response was limited to moans. To make it even better, Harry

added little kisses to her bare shoulder every so often. She decided right then and there that heaven was having a boyfriend who brushes your hair for you. Or, she amended after a moment's more thought, having a husband who does.

Although Hermione could have happily sat through a half hour or more of this luxury, Harry eventually decided that he was finished, or at least done as much as he could. It was time for a decision.

“What do you want to do?” he asked as he put the brush down and hugged her, pulling her back against his chest.

Hermione had taken plenty of time to think about this, and had her answer ready. “Just hold me and we’ll go to sleep. Some touching would be nice too.” Harry nodded with some relief, and the two of them climbed under the covers and settled into the position they had enjoyed the night before in the Room of Requirement, on their sides with him spooned up behind her. Harry by now knew how she liked to be held, and slid his hand up under her top, meeting no resistance until he encountered the swell of her breast. Hermione confirmed his assumption by taking his hand and pulling it up the rest of the way into place. His other hand entwined itself into her hair. After some mutually pleasurable caressing they drifted off to sleep.

As would be expected for the first time sharing a bed, it took a while for each of them to get comfortable sleeping with another person, but they eventually adjusted. Both of them tended to move around a lot while they slept, and each time one switched positions the other reacted almost unconsciously.

Harry’s preferred positions were on his side or on his stomach, while Hermione slept on her back or on her side. When both were on their sides they automatically spooned up against each other, in either direction. When Hermione rolled to her back, Harry snuggled up against her side, squeezing one of her legs between his, and with an arm and hand resting on her chest. When Harry rolled to his stomach Hermione responded similarly, pressed up against his side with her arm draped across his back and a leg stretched over both of his. But no matter the position, throughout the night both kept in constant contact with the other.

This proved to be of particular advantage when Harry had one of his nightmares. Hermione responded immediately by hugging him firmly and whispering words of comfort into his ear. “It’s OK. I’m here. You’re OK. It’ll be all right. I’m right here.”

Harry awoke to a bright sunlit room to find that Hermione was sitting up on the bed gazing out the window. Pulling himself up a bit he reached out with one hand and brushed his fingers along her arm and up to her bare shoulder. Hermione responded by leaning into his touch and turning to smile at him.

“I’m afraid that this was a mistake,” she commented. Harry wrinkled his brow in puzzlement. The expression on her face certainly didn’t look like she regretted what they’d done.

“Why?” he asked. “That was the best night’s sleep I’ve had since ... well I can’t remember the



last time.”

“Because now that I know how wonderful it is to sleep with you I’ll know what I’m missing, and every night until we can do it again I’ll wish you were in my bed holding me,” she pouted. Harry grinned at the cute look on her face and leaned forward enough to put his hands on her waist, and pulled her down for a kiss.

They enjoyed themselves in this fashion for a time, but soon Hermione’s practical side asserted itself. “We need to get going,” she announced reluctantly as she pulled away and stood up. “Time to hit the shower and get dressed, and if we hurry we’ll be able to have a nice breakfast before I have to go.”

“Maybe we could save time and shower together?” Harry asked hopefully. Hermione paused and looked back at him thoughtfully, and Harry’s heart sped up as he realized she was seriously considering his offer.

“I suspect we wouldn’t get much washing done,” she pointed out. “So it might just take longer than showering separately.”

“You’re probably right,” he reluctantly admitted.

“Perhaps another time.” With that she pulled the tank top off, causing him to catch his breath as she uncovered her lovely bits, then she turned and headed toward the bathroom. Just before she entered she stopped again and, with her back still to him, removed her knickers, then smiled coyly over her shoulder at him and disappeared inside.

“You are such a tease!” he called after her.

“And you love me for it,” she shouted back.

*I sure do*, Harry thought as he let out a long sigh and lay back down on the bed, knowing it might take some time to get his physical response under control after that little display.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 15

*I’m back at Beauxbatons now, but my heart isn’t. It’s going to be very difficult focusing on my exams for the next two weeks. At least I can talk to Harry practically any time I want, so I don’t have to worry about what’s happening to him. Well, I don’t have to but I know I will anyway.*

*Harry left Hogwarts with me and I side-alonged him to my house so that we could stop and visit my parents. They appreciated us filling them in on what’s been happening, although I could see an ‘I told you so’ look on their faces. I made sure to point out that no students were injured at all in the fight, and that it was primarily due to Harry’s foresight. We didn’t go into too many details, but made sure that they know that the situation has changed dramatically with Dumbledore’s death. I also reminded them of their promise that I could make my own decisions about what I was*

going to do after I finish Beauxbatons. They weren't at all happy about that.

They did offer to let Harry stay with them if he needed someplace to go. He thanked them and said he might take them up on the offer occasionally, that he's going to be moving around to different places to keep his whereabouts hidden. I suspect that they hope that if he and I are living with them, we're less likely to get into trouble.

Harry decided he needed some money, so we also stopped at Diagon Alley. He stayed under his invisibility cloak. We're getting more experience at apparating while under the cloak, which should come in handy during our searching. There was a long line at Gringotts, and of course Bill wasn't there to get Harry's money for him, like he did last year. The last we heard was that he was expected to recover fully, but they're keeping him under observation at St. Mungo's for a while longer.

The general mood among the wizarding public scares me. There's a real sense of panic; people had relied so much on Dumbledore to keep Voldemort at bay, that it seems they almost expect him to walk into the Ministry and take over now. Honestly, if people just stood up for themselves and fought back it would be so much more effective. After all, the overall wizarding population has the Death Eaters vastly outnumbered.

A headline on the Daily Prophet screamed out 'How Can We Stop the Killing?' The article that followed added Dumbledore to a steadily lengthening list of leaders and prominent citizens who have been killed or disappeared in the year since Voldemort publicly showed himself, including Madame Bones, Mr. Ollivander, and Mr. Fortescue.

Well, I can't worry about that right now. After I took Harry back to Hogsmeade (and got a very satisfying goodbye kiss) I apparated to London, took the Eurostar through the Chunnel to Paris, and then apparated to Beauxbatons, so I didn't have to worry about checking in at the official French Apparation site.

Now it's time for bed, and I can't help thinking about how comforting it was sleeping with Harry last night. I still get a warm feeling inside remembering waking up this morning with my head on his bare chest, and his arm wrapped tightly around me. The only thing that would have made it better was if I wasn't wearing a top either. Maybe next time.

I knew this was going to happen, but even so I wouldn't give up that experience for anything. I'll just have to figure out how to do it again soon.

I really miss him.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters** **Promising Leads / Troublesome Issues**

### **Final Year, Chapter 2 – Promising Leads / Troublesome Issues 5100**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 18

*News from Harry! He may have a lead on the locket! And he found a message from Snape.*

“Hermione Granger!”

Hermione fumbled briefly with her bag before removing her mirror. Looking around quickly, she darted into an empty classroom and cast some privacy charms, then activated the communication device.

“You won’t believe what I just found! I think I know who RAB is!” Harry announced excitedly. “I’m at Grimmauld Place with Moody. We came to check it out, and add some detection spells, and he wanted me here because I officially own the place now. Right now he’s downstairs setting traps for Snape and any Death Eaters he might bring here, and I came upstairs to check out Sirius’s room. But look what I found!”

He moved the mirror so that it faced a door as he explained. “I’m on the top landing, and there’s Sirius’s room and one other up here. This is the other one.” Hermione leaned forward as the door came into focus, and she read the inscription that Harry was evidently calling to her attention.

*Do Not Enter  
Without the Express Permission of  
Regulus Arcturus Black*

“Harry! You’re right! That could be it!” Hermione exclaimed. “You said that Sirius told you his brother was a Death Eater who was killed when he had second thoughts and tried to get out, right? Voldemort must have found out what he was trying to do and killed him.”

“But Voldemort must not have known the bit about the Horcrux, or the fake one wouldn’t have still been there,” Harry pointed out. “He never got that message. He must have tracked Regulus down and killed him sometime after he wrote it.”

“But we still don’t know whether Regulus managed to destroy the Horcrux he took before he was

killed,” Hermione responded with some frustration.

“It might be here somewhere,” Harry suggested. “I don’t know if I have time to look for it right now, but the three of us should come back here later, maybe after the wedding, and search this room.”

“That’s a good idea,” agreed Hermione.

“There’s more, though,” Harry continued. “When I was in Sirius’s room I found a lot of stuff, including letters to him from my parents. I’ll tell you more about that later. But tucked into one of the letters was a message from Snape!”

“You’re kidding! Really?” Hermione gasped. “How ...?”

“It’s pretty obvious when you look around that this room’s been gone through since ... well, you know,” Harry explained, stumbling over the reference to Sirius’s death. “I think Snape came here specifically to leave me this message. It was tucked into this letter that he knew I’d read if I found it. I’ll read it to you.”

*Potter –*

*The Dark Lord has now turned his attention to the political arena. He will attempt to get others to accomplish his ends. Muggleborns and their families are the target. Take precautions.*

*Further communications will be in code. TMR = LV*

*If this is too much for your feeble brain to comprehend, get Granger to help you.*

*Destroy this parchment.*

Hermione managed a smile as Harry imitated Snape’s sneering voice while he read the cryptic communication.

“What do you think?” Harry asked. “I reckon the code means the letters will be rearranged like Voldemort did with his name.”

“An anagram,” Hermione clarified.

“Right,” Harry responded with a bit of a smile at Hermione’s need to use precise terminology. “But the other part too. I think it’s an attempt to warn us about ...”

“My parents!” she gasped.

Harry nodded solemnly.

*At that point Moody called up the stairs that it was time to go, and he took Harry back to Hogwarts. It wasn’t until later this evening that I got to talk to Harry again. I agreed with his*

decision not to tell Moody about the Horcruxes or about the possibility that Snape's role in Dumbledore's death was part of the Headmaster's plan. For one thing, we have only Snape's word on that, but more importantly, assuming it's true, his life is in increasing danger the more people know about it.

Harry gave me more details about what he'd found in Sirius's room. It appeared that he'd decorated it in a manner that was guaranteed to annoy his family as much as possible. There were Gryffindor colors everywhere, and lots of muggle items, including several magazines. There were even pinups of topless girls on the wall. I had to suppress a giggle at the embarrassed look on Harry's face when he told me about those. All the wall decorations had permanent sticking charms on them.

The letter from his mum that Snape tucked the note into almost made me cry. It was written to Sirius thanking him for Harry's birthday present, on his first birthday. It's so sad that Harry has no memories of his parents, because it sounds like it was such a wonderful, loving home. It's so fitting that the present was a toy broom, and that little Harry took to it so readily. Already at the age of one he was showing that he was a natural at flying. She even included a picture of him flying it around the house. He was so cute!

Then the conversation turned serious. He told me that the Daily Prophet has been running some letters to the editor claiming that Dumbledore died because he was too soft on muggles and muggleborns. These have been accompanied by stories about a new faction in the Wizengamot that call themselves a 'peace party', suggesting that we try to find ways to deal with Voldemort (they used the term You Know Who, of course) that won't involve so much bloodshed. This must be the political initiative that Snape's message referred to.

I'm getting very worried about where this might be going. Harry agrees, and is going to go visit my parents this weekend.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 22

Moody took Harry to see Mum and Dad today, to talk about their situation. They were reluctant to do anything like leave the country (which is ironic, since that's what I've just done for nearly a year because they thought I was in danger) but did accept having Moody put wards on their house. The charms he used won't stop a determined attack, but will alert the Order, and should delay the attackers long enough for them to respond. Harry said he'd be back next weekend when I come home.

The political climate continues to worsen. Several members of the Wizengamot have gone public with statements that seem to blame muggleborns for the trouble we're in. How hypocritical! If the Ministry hadn't buried their heads in the sand for a whole year we'd be in much better shape! And the letters in the Daily Prophet continue to call on the government to do something. Some go so far as to claim that Voldemort hasn't attacked any purebloods, except of course for those like Dumbledore who directly opposed him.

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 28

*Things continue to deteriorate back home. From the looks of the paper, a general uprising against muggleborns is occurring. I've discussed it with Sally-Anne, and she agrees – she and her parents are going to move to France. It's incredible how Voldemort's sympathizers have been able to sway the entire country. The people evidently need someone to blame besides themselves, and muggleborns, who have always been regarded with suspicion, and treated as second class citizens, are the scapegoats. The whole thing is eerily similar to what happened in Germany in the 1930's.*

*Fortunately, I'm going home today and I'm hoping that I'll be able to persuade my parents to get out as well. It's likely that they'll be even bigger targets because of who I am. Harry and Moody are going to meet me there.*

“Look, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, I'm really sorry that you've ended up in this mess, but we really think your lives will be in danger if you stay here much longer.” Harry had been making no headway with this argument since he'd arrived, and he hoped Hermione would have better luck when she got home. Mad-Eye had remained silent during the discussion, but Harry could see that he was becoming increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress. The crusty old Auror was a man of action, not words, and unfortunately, was about to take matters into his own hands.

“We truly appreciate your concern, Harry,” Emma Granger responded yet again, “but we can't simply abandon our practice. Our patients depend on us. It's one thing to have other dentists cover for us for a month while we're on holiday, but ...”

Out of the corner of his eye Harry caught Mad-Eye make a subtle motion with his wand, while muttering a spell.

“You know,” Dan interrupted, “I've always wanted to take a year off and visit Australia. Perhaps this would be a good opportunity.”

“You can't be serious!” Emma turned to him in shock, while Moody repeated his incantation. “That's ... that's a great idea, actually. We should start making the arrangements right away. Why don't you start lining up other dentists to take over our practice, while I start looking into finding places to stay down there.” She turned to Harry in excitement. “You'll excuse us, won't you Harry? You know where everything is – make yourself comfortable.” The two Grangers hurried out of the room to begin their respective tasks.

“What did you do?” Harry hissed at Moody.

“Compulsion charm,” he growled back. “Nothing to it, really. Especially since they really have been wanting to go there. They had been planning it for their retirement. Now it'll just happen sooner.”

“Hermione will be furious when she finds out!” Harry objected. “She’d never use magic on her parents.”

“She should have done it last year,” Moody muttered. “Then she could have stayed here.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” Harry replied somewhat bitterly. “Dumbledore ...” But his objection was interrupted by the crack of an apparition, and the two wizards hurried to the window, wands drawn. There they spotted Hermione on the porch with her trunk, bending down to let Crookshanks out of his carrier. By the time she straightened up Harry was out the door and embracing her.

As he had expected, Hermione’s initial elation that her parents had agreed to leave the country turned to dismay when she learned just why they had changed their minds so abruptly.

“I can’t believe you did that!” she shouted in her vexation when she finally got the other two alone later that day. “I swore that I would NEVER use magic on my parents! They trusted me!”

“Well, it was actually Moody that cast the spell, not you,” Harry noted in an attempt to calm her down.

“You just don’t understand!” Hermione shot back.

“I guess not,” Harry snapped. “Seeing as how I don’t *have* any parents!” A younger, less mature Harry would have stormed away at this point, leaving Hermione in tears. But this time he caught himself and immediately apologized, and Hermione responded in kind and buried her head in his chest as he hugged her to himself. After a few deep breaths to regain control she pulled away and sent him a teary smile.

“At least it was something they had wanted to do anyway,” Harry pointed out gently, trying to mitigate the tension. “It’s not completely against their will.”

“I know,” Hermione moaned as he wrapped one arm around her and she leaned into him. “But it’s the principle of the thing. We need to do things the right way, not just take the easy way out.”

“Hmmp. The easy way would have been to Oblivate them,” Moody shot back unrepentantly. “That’s the standard procedure in cases like this. Aurors do it all the time. And you’re going to have to do that anyway, eventually.”

“No way!” Hermione shrieked in dismay. “I couldn’t possibly do that!”

“Then I’ll do it,” he retorted. “Otherwise they’ll come right back when the Compulsion wears off. Is that what you want?”

“No ... no, I ...” she sagged against Harry and he wrapped both arms around her, offering what comfort and support he could.

“Can it at least be reversed when the war is over, so they can come back then?” she finally asked,

her voice breaking, her body slumped in defeat.

“Why bother?” Moody shrugged. “They’re just muggles.”

“They’re my parents!” she cried, tears streaming down her face.

“Lots of people have lost their parents in this war, Missy,” the old Auror retorted. “At least they’ll still be alive. Just look at ...”

“That’s enough!” Harry snapped, having finally lost his patience with Moody’s harsh attitude. The ancient warrior’s characteristic gruffness and lack of sentimentality were wearing thin. “Tell her what she needs to know.”

Moody’s head jerked around and he stared at Harry for a few long seconds, surprised at his assertiveness. This was not the boy who had been willing to back off and let the adults run his life in previous years. In Harry’s firm glare he now saw hints of the emerging leader McGonagall and Flitwick had told him about, the man who many expected to take Dumbledore’s place as the foremost symbol of the light side.

Grudgingly, Moody informed the distraught young witch that it was possible, but that she would have to be the one to Obliviate her parents if she wanted to be able to reverse it later. A wizard could only safely restore memories that he himself had removed. (On hearing this, both students recalled what had happened to Bertha Jorkins when Voldemort had broken the memory charms that Crouch had put on her.) Moody also added that even then it was not a sure thing.

As Hermione fought to bring her emotions under control, the three of them assessed their current situation. Removing the Compulsion was not really an option, as Hermione’s parents would immediately realize what had happened to them, and there would be no chance of them listening to any further reasoning on the subject. And both students truly believed that the Grangers’ lives were at stake, and that they needed to leave the country. Moody advised that the best course of action would be to not perform the memory charm until after they reached Australia, to minimize the complications that would be involved in getting them there if they didn’t know who Hermione was.

*Trying to maintain an enthusiastic expression while my parents so eagerly discussed their dream-of-a-lifetime holiday was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. I am so angry with what Moody did, as well as with his attitude. The truly disturbing aspect is that his viewpoint is not out of the ordinary in the wizarding world. They really do see muggles as being of no account, that they can be manipulated whenever wizards deem it necessary, without any consideration for their rights as human beings. With that sort of belief, it’s easier to see how Voldemort’s campaign against muggles and muggleborns is succeeding. But I can’t let myself dwell on that for too long or I’ll sink into despair. Focus, Hermione!*

*To increase the likelihood of the Obliviation of my parents being both successful and reversible, I need to be able to practice the spells. I certainly don’t want them to be my first attempt. However,*



*I had no idea how I was going to do that. But Harry immediately volunteered to be my test subject. Of course I initially refused. I wasn't about to risk making a mistake with his memories. But he responded to my objection by simply shrugging and commenting that he had lots of memories of the Dursleys that he didn't mind losing permanently. As I was already emotionally on the edge, I started crying when he said that, and we hugged for a while.*

*It's going to be very difficult, but I'm going to get through this. I have to.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 30*

*Over the past few days, while Mum and Dad have been busy with their travel arrangements, I've repeatedly removed and restored various childhood memories of Harry's. Some of them were pretty awful, and I understand why he wasn't concerned about losing them. I was really shook up when I saw them. There was only one that he didn't get back completely, about being beaten by Dudley's gang. I lost track of which bullies hit him and in what order. On the plus side, I'm pretty confident in my abilities now. Moody was so impressed that he commented that he'd be glad to recommend me to the Ministry for a career as an Obliviator. Neither Harry nor I were amused.*

*Tomorrow Harry's going to go to Privet Drive to start his two weeks with the Dursleys. In a normal year this would be the time he'd return from Hogwarts anyway, and it also makes sense that his time there will dovetail with my trip to Australia. I should be back at just about the time he's ready to leave them.*

*I have my provisional driving license now, and I'm going to take my test for my full license before we leave for Australia, so Mum's letting me drive to Surrey when we take Harry. It will be good practice for me. After I turn 18 in September I'll be able to drive anywhere on the continent, too, which might come in handy while we're hunting Horcruxes.*

*All of the emotional turmoil aside, it's been great to spend these few days with him. Although, it has been frustrating that he's sleeping right down the hall from me, when I really want him in my bed. I haven't given up on plotting to make that happen, but I didn't dare try it here. My parents have been really supportive about our relationship, all things considered, and I don't want to do anything to jeopardize that, or give them any reason to change their minds about going to Australia. But after I get back...*

*There would be the possibility of me apparating directly from my room to his when he's at Privet Drive, but I decided not to risk it. For one thing, the noise from the apparation might catch the attention of his relatives, and he really doesn't need the bother of trying to explain why a girl suddenly appeared in his bedroom. In addition, we know the Ministry is keeping close tabs on Privet Drive, hoping to catch him doing underage magic, or anything else they can pin on him. So, no apparating or any magic use of any kind anywhere in the vicinity.*

*We have found a pretty secluded spot out in the back yard, so before we turn in tonight we're going to get in one last heavy bit of snogging. We'll also have our mirrors, so we'll still be able to*

communicate every day. We'll get by.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 1

*Everything went relatively smoothly today. I got through the drive to LittleWhinging without any major mistakes. Harry and Mum both told me I did great, although there were at least 2 or 3 times when I didn't signal properly, and I'm sure I should have checked my mirrors more often.*

*We'd rung up the Dursleys and let them know we'd be bringing Harry home, so that they didn't need to make the trip into London to pick him up at Kings Cross. I don't think they even know what happened. I urged Harry to tell them, but it will be up to him to decide exactly what to reveal. Both Mum and I managed to keep our interaction with the Dursleys reasonably polite, especially considering what happened the last time we were there. The fact that Harry was only going to be staying for two weeks, and then would be gone for good, improved their dispositions considerably.*

*Before we left we stopped by the park and found a spot that I could apparate to without being seen. So I will be able to come and visit Harry a few times before I leave for Australia. That will make things quite a bit easier.*

*I'm somewhat concerned about finances. Mum and Dad's trip to Australia is going to heavily deplete their savings. Harry has quite a bit of gold in his Gringotts vault, but that won't last forever. I had an idea that might bring in a bit more, and it involves selling Harry's story to a muggle publisher. Harry just shook his head in disbelief when I asked him about it, but told me to go ahead. I'm going to check with Ron, too, although I can already predict his reaction. I'm certain it will involve the word 'mental'.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 2

*I apparated to the Burrow today to visit Ron and Ginny, and fill Ron in on things that have been happening that we can't put into owl post. He was quite excited about Regulus and the idea of searching Headquarters for the Horcrux, but agreed that it would have to wait until later. They're frightfully busy getting ready for the wedding. Bill has been released from St. Mungo's and was told he would be fine. The scars have faded somewhat already, and they think they'll be nearly gone by the time of the wedding.*

*Later Fleur pulled me aside and asked me if I would be a 'provisional' bridesmaid. They don't know if Percy will show up for the wedding or not, but if he does they'll want him to be in the wedding party and will need a partner for him. She told me she considered me a good friend and thought I'd understand about the tentative nature of the request. I assured her that I did, and that I was honored to be considered.*

*Part of me (the part that is insecure about my looks) is dreading the possibility. All of the other*

bridesmaids are so much prettier than me – I'm sure I'll look ghastly by comparison. The colors don't suit me either. On the other hand, I know Harry will tell me I look beautiful. He's such a great boyfriend that way. This also reminded me that I have to find a dress to wear, assuming I'm not a bridesmaid. One more thing to add to the list.

I also gave Ron his special rucksack that I added an Extension Charm to, and told him to try to have it packed and ready to go. He was delighted with it, although I suspect his primary concern will be that we have enough food. But that's OK. We all have our priorities – mine are books, his is food. We'll need both, and if he takes care of packing enough to eat, that's one less thing I need concern myself with.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 7

I've been reading the book Dumbledore left me, and I can't for the life of me understand what connection I'm supposed to make. The story that is marked with the symbol from the ring is called 'The Tale of the Three Brothers'. I told Ron about it when I gave him the Deluminator, and he said the book was a famous collection of children's stories. He was surprised that I'd never heard of them, but I pointed out that muggles have a different collection of fairy tales, like Snow White and Cinderella. Of course, he'd never heard of those either. He had no idea what the significance of this story was, or for that matter why Dumbledore would give him the Deluminator. He did have quite a bit of fun with it, putting out different lights and then turning them back on. I suppose it's possible that Dumbledore just gave it to him as something that would keep him amused while Harry and I worked out the Horcruxes, but I rather doubt it.

At any rate, the story is about three brothers who met up with Death, and were each given a prize for outwitting him. Sort of like any number of stories from mythology, where the gods grant a favor to mortals. One brother chose a wand that would be the most powerful in existence, that would win any duel. The second asked for the power to raise the dead, and received a stone that could accomplish this. The third requested the ability to evade death, and was given an invisibility cloak.

Unfortunately, the first brother boasted about his prowess with his unbeatable wand and was killed in his sleep by another wizard, who stole it from him. The second brother tried to bring back a girl he had loved, who had met an untimely death. But she was not fully restored to life, existing as something more than a ghost but less than human. Eventually he went mad and killed himself so that he could join her completely.

The third brother only used his cloak to hide from Death, and succeeded. After a long, full life, he passed the cloak on to his son and joined Death willingly, on his own terms.

Since we have so much time to kill on this flight, I asked Mum and Dad if they could make anything out of it. Mum pointed out that the gifts turn out badly for two of the three brothers, and that this is common in stories like this. Maybe we're supposed to learn something from the example of the third brother. Dad then wondered if Dumbledore meant it to be a hint about

Harry's invisibility cloak. (He's always been fascinated by that cloak, from the first time Harry showed it to him.)

I hadn't thought of either of those explanations, but perhaps there's something to them. Voldemort wants to live forever, and so the second brother wanting to be able to cheat death, as it were, might be a reference to that. And he's certainly interested in power, like the first brother was. And that didn't work out either. The only prize that ended well was the invisibility cloak. And that's the one that Harry actually has.

Is this supposed to be a clue? That we can't defeat Voldemort by using raw power, but need to use stealth and subterfuge instead? Or I could be going off in the wrong direction altogether. After all, my original question was what is the connection between the Gaunt family ring and Grindelwald, and this line of reasoning gets me nowhere with that. Of course, with Dumbledore, one never knows. It's possible that he's trying to send us more than one message here – sort of a message within a message. I'll discuss it with Harry when I talk to him on the mirrors after we get to Australia.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 14

I'm glad that's finally done with. I wasn't sure if I could do it, but I managed in the end. I kept telling myself their lives were at stake. That still didn't make it easy. Thank goodness I had Harry to talk to on our mirrors. I really needed his encouragement. At any rate, Dan and Emma Granger are no longer aware of the magical world. They also no longer know that they have a daughter.

I had to get away from them as soon as I did it. They would have found it odd to see this unfamiliar girl break down and cry. At least they are happy there. They really have wanted to go to Australia for years. If I don't ever make it back – well, it's not a bad life for them.

Things back here in Britain have gone from bad to worse. The 'Peace Party' in the Wizengamot is calling for negotiations to end what they call the 'conflict' with You Know Who. Scrimgeour, to his credit, has adamantly refused to 'negotiate with terrorists'. I'm certain that he's fully aware of how dangerous his position is, given what's happened in the past to people who have opposed Voldemort so publicly.

Along with that, the outcry against muggleborns is stronger than ever. Umbridge has popped up again and is riding the wave of that movement back into power. She's spearheaded a Muggleborn Registration Act and it passed the Wizengamot last week. Next I suppose they'll make us start wearing yellow stars. She demanded that Hogwarts turn over the home addresses of all muggleborn students, to make it easier for the Ministry to keep track of all of us, but McGonagall refused. As a result, McGonagall is no longer the Acting Headmistress. To their credit, none of the other faculty would do it either. So the Ministry has directed the Board of Governors to appoint a new Headmaster or Headmistress before the next school year.

Since I'm not going to be spending much time at all at home from now on, this won't affect me

directly. They still won't know where to find me. But this is probably only the beginning. As an example of just how bad it's gotten, the Muggle Studies professor at Hogwarts has gone missing, probably captured by Death Eaters. Umbridge's response to that was a comment in the Prophet was that Muggle Studies isn't worth teaching anyway.

Two books have been written about Dumbledore, one an 'authorized' biography and one 'unauthorized', and are scheduled to be released at the end of the month. The Daily Prophet has been running excerpts from both of them. The first was written by Elphias Doge, a lifelong friend of Dumbledore's, and a member of the Order, and is naturally quite complimentary. The other is considerably less so. As one might guess, the book with the more scandalous claims has received a lot more attention. I suspect the truth is likely somewhere in between, so I plan to read both books.

I also suspect that without my first hand experience with Dumbledore's manipulations over the past two years, I would have been inclined to discount the 'unofficial' story. But I'm no longer the wide-eyed innocent girl with an unshakeable belief in authority figures that I was when I first went to Hogwarts.

The good news is that we're going to go get Harry from Privet Drive tomorrow evening. There was a message waiting for me when I returned home that I should come to the Burrow immediately, to join them for the 'mission'. Apparently Moody has cooked up a rather bizarre scheme. I suspect that Harry's not going to like it.

I'm going to owl back that I'll meet them at Privet Drive. I really need Harry to hold me tonight.

-oooOOOooo-

"That was so sad about Grandma and Grandpa," Rose sniffed as she leaned her head against her mother's shoulder. "I can see why they're mad about it, but it doesn't seem like there was much else you could do."

"In hindsight, I should have trusted them more and let them make their own decision," Hermione admitted. "And if I'd been able to take the time to think it through, and realized how they would react, I probably would have. But I had to decide what to do about the Compulsion right there on the spot, and it's hard to comprehend now just how terrified everyone was at the time. I really did think that if they stayed in England much longer they would be killed. And as you'll see eventually, that wasn't so far off. At least they're alive and you have them in your life, even if we aren't as close as I'd like."

"Is the next part where you all turned into Daddy?" the young girl asked eagerly, changing the subject to a more pleasant one. "I'm really looking forward to that!"

"Well, it didn't happen quite the same way as in the book, but that's basically right," her mother confirmed. "But that section's pretty long, so we'll save it until next time."

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## **Notebooks and Letters A Plethora of Potters**

### **Final Year, Chapter 3 – A Plethora of Potters**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 16

*That was the most – I don't know – unbelievable, insane, astonishing, amazing, absurd - experience! Moody, Voldemort, duplicate Harrys ... I hardly know what to describe first. Harry survived yet another encounter with Voldemort! And not merely survived ... No, I think I need to start at the beginning. Or rather, the evening before.*

“Harry Potter!” Hermione spoke the phrase to activate her mirror and waited impatiently for Harry to respond.

“Hermione! You're back?”

“Yes. Meet me at the playground. I'm coming over tonight.”

“Tonight? You mean ...” Harry broke off before vocalizing the implication. Given the late hour, Hermione evidently intended to spend the night with him.

“Exactly. I already took my trunk to the Burrow before I went to Australia, along with Crookshanks,” she related matter-of-factly. “All I have left are a few things that I can easily fit in my expanded bag, and I don't want to wait until tomorrow to see you.”

“Are you sure that's a good idea?” Harry's protest wasn't too forceful, since he very much wanted to see her too.

“Yes, I really need a hug. Badly. Bring your invisibility cloak.”

After a long welcome back hug, interspersed with words of comfort and reassurance, and followed by a very satisfying snogging session, the young couple left the now darkened park and walked back to Privet Drive. It took little effort for Hermione to sneak in the front door and up the stairs to Harry's room under the cloak. There she waited, while reading the newspapers that had accumulated during her absence and exchanging a few short whispered comments with Harry, until they were certain that the other occupants of the house had retired for the evening, before removing the cloak.

It had been a warm day, and both teens were dressed in tee shirts and loose shorts, so they decided to sleep in what they were wearing ‘just in case’. Harry watched in fascination as Hermione removed her bra without taking off her tee shirt (a contortionist trick that she assured him that all girls were able to perform) and soon they were snuggled up together under Harry’s threadbare sheets. Although Hermione had taken a potion to relieve her jet lag, it required a full night’s sleep before it fully took effect, and she was dead tired. Between that, and her very relaxing position wrapped in Harry’s arms, she was asleep within minutes.

As usual, Hermione was awake before Harry the next morning, and she silently changed her clothing. For this day she chose a red knit sleeveless top and a red and white print knee-length skirt, a nice, conservative and thoroughly ‘muggle’ outfit that would hopefully make things as easy with the Dursleys as possible. When she was ready she walked back over to the bed and gazed fondly at Harry. On an impulse, she leaned over the bed and ran her fingers through his messy hair, while reflecting on how many girls at Hogwarts had fanaticized about being able to do exactly that (much less spending the night in bed with him, as she just had). She smiled at the thought before rousing him with a tender kiss.

“Time to get up, sweetie,” she whispered, as he opened his eyes with a smile. “I’m going to go out and walk around for a while, then come back and pretend I’ve just arrived. “How much time do you need?”

“Fifteen ... no make that twenty minutes,” he decided. “I’ll start breakfast and let them know I’m expecting you.” Hermione decided that she would take a stroll over to Wisteria Walk and visit with Mrs. Figg for a few minutes while she waited.

Harry quickly got ready and informed the Dursleys that they would be having a visitor for breakfast – his girlfriend that just in case they didn’t remember was of age and allowed to do magic – who would help him pack his things in preparation for his departure. He further confirmed with them that they planned to be out of the house that evening when his other, more ‘freaky’ friends would come to pick him up.

Precisely on time the doorbell rang and Harry answered it with a grin, and ushered Hermione back into the house. He decided he could risk a quick squeeze and a peck on her cheek, then led her to the kitchen and resumed dishing up. The meal passed in strained silence until Harry and Hermione shared a nod and he cleared his throat.

“Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia?” The two adults in question pulled themselves away from a newspaper and a fashion magazine respectively and reluctantly gave him their attention.

“You understand that there’s a protection on this house while I live here, right?” Vernon muttered and gave a short nod. “And that it ends when I turn seventeen in two weeks?” This time Vernon’s large mustache quivered before he nodded, while Petunia nervously wrung her napkin. Harry gathered himself.



“Well, there’s a chance that someone ... some enemy ... could come looking for me after that, and I think it would be a good idea if you went away for a while,” he suggested.

“And just how do you expect us to do that?” Vernon snapped.

“I’d like to give you some money to help pay for a holiday somewhere,” Harry replied, keeping his voice steady. Hermione reached under the table to give his hand a squeeze in support. His aunt and uncle’s eyes widened in surprise, and Dudley began to pay attention to the conversation, now that money had been mentioned.

“How much?” Vernon asked in a slightly more civil tone.

“Five thousand pounds,” Harry responded.

“Five thousand pounds!” Vernon shouted. “Where would a worthless freak like you get that kind of money?” Hermione’s hand jerked toward her wand at the words ‘worthless freak’, and this time Harry squeezed *her* hand in an effort to calm *her* down.

“Well, erm ...” Harry and Hermione had decided that it would not be a good idea for his relatives to learn that his parents had left him a vault full of gold, and that an alternative explanation was needed.

“Actually,” Hermione broke in right on cue, “I’ve written a story based on Harry’s life and sold it to a book publisher, and these are the proceeds.” This was partially true. She hadn’t heard back from the publisher just yet, but they *were* considering her proposal.

“Who’d want to read a story about him?” Dudley wondered, before stuffing another forkful of eggs into his mouth.

“Well, I wrote it sort of like a fairy tale, you know, like Cinderella,” Hermione explained, adding a subtle dig with the final two words.

The look of disbelief that had arisen on the faces of the Dursleys was replaced on Petunia with one of suspicion as her eyes narrowed, having picked up on Hermione’s implication. “Oh?” she spat out nastily. “And I suppose we played the role of the evil stepmother and ugly stepsisters?” At this, Vernon began to turn purple while Dudley looked around in puzzlement, wondering who in the room the term ‘stepsister’ could apply to. Before Vernon could give vent to his anger Hermione stood and drew her wand.

“Do you want the money or not?”

As Hermione had always endeavored to be as pleasant as possible during her previous encounters with the Dursleys, none of them had seen her ‘irritated to the breaking point ready to hex someone’ mood that Ron triggered so frequently. The three of them cowered back into their seats and nodded.

“Fine. I’ll send you a bank draft.” With that she tossed her napkin on the table and swept from the

room, Harry joining her an instant later.

The two of them spent the rest of the morning in Harry's room, discussing their plans and packing up his remaining things, while speculating on what mad plan Moody had cooked up for the evening. To Hermione's surprise, Harry informed her that he hadn't seen Moody since he'd come back to Privet Drive.

At lunch they had another question for Petunia, who had calmed down since breakfast. This was one that they had wanted to ask when the three of them were alone, and they were happy that Dudley was off somewhere and not joining them.

"Aunt Petunia, can I ask you a question about my mum?" Harry began. His aunt got a sour expression on her face, but responded with a resigned shrug. "I know she told you at least a bit about the magical world ..." He broke off at the shudder of disgust that rippled through her bony frame, but determined to press on. "I was wondering, did she ever mention a friend named Snape?"

The effect of that name on his aunt was startling. "That boy?" she hissed, glaring fiercely at them. "That horrible, awful boy? The one who took Lily from me?"

"Wha ... what?" Harry stammered in surprise.

"He was the one who told her she was a witch," she snapped. "He was the one who filled her head with the notion of going to ... to that school of yours. He ... he turned her against me."

"How?" Harry struggled to grasp what she was telling him. "How did he ... you mean she knew him before ..."

"He wasn't supposed to be in our neighborhood," she declared bitterly. "He didn't belong there. He lived down by the river, in Spinner's End." She said this with a disdainful expression that reminded Harry of the way she regarded dirt on her floors. "But he kept hanging around, spying on us. He saw her do ... things ... and he told her what it meant. At first she didn't believe him, but then ... she started hanging around with him and abandoned me. She left ... she left me behind and went off on that train with him." She slumped down in her chair and buried her head in her hands. Hermione was already up and had moved around the table behind her, and touched her gently on the back.

"Just go," Petunia sniffed. "Just leave like ... like she did."

Silently, Harry and Hermione left the kitchen and returned to his room.

The atmosphere at dinner that evening was essentially a reprise of the one at breakfast. Hermione made several attempts at conversation to which Petunia made polite but short responses, while Vernon mumbled occasionally. For his part, Dudley looked up in amazement each time that

Hermione spoke, as he was clearly not accustomed to the idea of conversation during a meal.

When Petunia began to take away the dishes after they finished eating, Vernon cleared his throat and with somewhat of an effort addressed Harry. “Now then, everything still on for tonight?” Harry nodded. “By the time we get back, you’ll be gone?” Harry nodded again. “Right. I guess that’s that.” Vernon stood up and Harry also rose to his feet. Hermione nudged him and he put his hand out to his uncle. Vernon extended his hand slightly, tried to reach it out to Harry, but pulled it back, letting it hover awkwardly by his side. He just couldn’t bring himself to shake hands with the freak. After several more uncomfortable moments he turned abruptly and left the room.

Harry turned his attention to Dudley who had risen uncertainly. Darting his eyes to the doorway through which his father had just departed and then back to Harry he asked, “So you’re leaving?” Harry nodded. “And you’re not coming back?”

Harry said, “That’s right.”

“You’re gonna fight that ... that guy who killed your parents?” He glanced at Hermione, still standing next to Harry, and eyed her up and down briefly. “Both of you?”

Harry fought down his amazement. This had to have been the longest conversation he’d ever had with Dudley. “That’s the plan.”

“Well, give him the old one-two for me,” Dudley encouraged, making a pair of fists and throwing a mock punch combination.

Harry grinned. “I’ll give it my best shot.” An elbow to his ribs from Hermione prompted him to amend, “*We’ll* give it our best shot.”

Dudley held out a large hand and said, “Good luck then.”

Trying not to flinch at the memory of how often that hand had been raised towards him with less than friendly intent, Harry extended his own and accepted his cousin’s best wishes.

Hermione moved close to Harry and put her arm on his shoulder, and added with a smile, “You take care of yourself, too, Dudley.”

Dudley took another long look at Hermione and turned back to Harry. “How’d you ever get a hot bird like this?”

Harry’s arm found its way around Hermione’s waist. “Just lucky, I guess.”

After the Dursleys drove off to spend the night at Aunt Marge’s, Harry wandered around the house and yard hand in hand with Hermione, reliving with her some of the memories of his life there. He pointed out with some pride the flower beds he had worked so hard to keep weed free, and showed her the hedge where he’d first spotted Dobby watching him the summer before second year.

They stopped at the bushes in the front of the house outside the living room window, where he'd hide and listen to the news on the telly the summer after fourth year, wondering when Voldemort would finally reveal himself. Hermione gave his hand a squeeze as she recalled their exchange of letters that summer, the summer when they'd started exploring their feelings for each other, and Harry shot her a grin before leaning in to steal a kiss.

Up in his bedroom he paused to take in his worn out bed and the broken down desk where he'd do his homework during the summer, pausing often to stare out the window of what he'd frequently considered to be his prison. With that thought in mind, he stopped to point out the marks on the window frame where Vernon had actually put bars on the window, again during the summer before second year. At that point Hermione started to cry, prompting him to draw her into a hug, and they spent some time just standing there holding each other.

"We just didn't understand why you weren't writing to us that summer, like you'd promised," she sniffed. "You were the first good friend I'd ever had, and I was so afraid that you'd abandoned me, and then it turned out that you weren't getting our letters either and were wondering the same thing about us."

"I know," he murmured into her ear soothingly. "But we got that all straightened out. And your letters the other summers were wonderful. Especially the last two."

Hermione pulled back, and smiled as he gently brushed a tear from her cheek. "I'm glad I was able to provide at least *some* happy memories for you about this place."

Harry made one last check of the room, showing Hermione the loose floorboard under which he'd stashed his treasures out of sight of his suspicious relatives, before they went back downstairs and made one final stop. For several long minutes he knelt in front of cupboard under the stairs, Hermione behind him with her arms wrapped around him and her chin on his shoulder, reliving the most painful memories of his existence in this house.

It was well after dark when Harry and Hermione finally heard the noise of people landing behind the house. After taking flanking positions by the kitchen door, Harry cautiously called out for them to identify themselves.

"It's us, you git!" Ron responded with a grin as he led Fred and George inside. "How you been, mate?"

"Relatives not here, then?" Fred wondered, as he and George looked around.

"Nah, they heard you two were coming and bugged out right after dinner," Harry joked, smiling at the disappointed looks on the twins' faces at that news. Meanwhile Arthur, Bill and Fleur came through the doorway, Fleur stopping to give Hermione a hug.

"What in Merlin's name ...? Harry had begun to close the door, only to discover another wave of

wizards entering the suddenly crowded kitchen. “Just how many of you are there, anyway?”

“Fourteen altogether,” Remus answered as he paused to greet Harry, “counting you and Hermione.” Behind him Tonks gave a wave and Kingsley Shacklebolt nodded, while Mad-Eye Moody ushered in a clearly reluctant Mundungus Fletcher. As Harry peered out the doorway into the darkened back garden, he spotted Hagrid holding the reigns of two thestrals, and standing right next to a large motorcycle.

“Why?” Harry inquired, turning back to face the throng. “This is even more than we had two years ago.”

“Security,” Moody answered gruffly. “Had to change the plans.”

“The Ministry’s in a bit of an uproar, everyone jockeying for position, staking out territory,” Shacklebolt offered with a bit more detail. “The new head of Magical Law Enforcement has decided to try to score some points by demanding that anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards be put on this property, and refused to consider a floo connection as well. Says it’s for your safety. And of course, since the fiasco at the Ministry last year cost Edgcombe her job, Magical Transportation pretty much does whatever the DMLE director tells it to.”

“Pius Thicknesse,” Tonks said with a hint of distaste. “We’re not too sure of him. Could be he’s just another blowhard politician, but the effect is to make this more difficult than it needed to be, so it’s also possible he’s been compromised. There’s more and more of that every day. No one knows who to trust any more.”

“Pius Thicknesse?” Harry snorted. “What kind of name is that? I swear I’ll never get used to wizarding names. Whoever heard of the name Pius?”

“Actually, Pius was the name of a Roman Catholic pope in the 1940’s and 1950’s,” Hermione broke in as she came up next to Harry to join the discussion. At Harry’s look of disbelief she added with a shrug, “I did a report on him in primary school.”

“Hermione, promise me that we won’t give our kids any ridiculous names,” Harry asked with a semi-pleading tone. To his surprise, Hermione turned bright red at his request.

“Something you two want to tell us?” Tonks smirked, as the rest of the room suddenly became very interested in their conversation.

“I knew it was a mistake to let Hermione come over here by herself,” George joked. “You work pretty fast, Harry.”

“Can I be the godfather?” Fred added. “Oh, no, that’ll probably be Ronnikins. How about back- up godfather?”

Harry tried to stammer a protest that they had misunderstood him, but couldn’t think of anything that wouldn’t make things worse, so he gave up and resolved to ride out the teasing. Hermione just

buried her head in his shoulder, taking care to hide the smile that had crept onto her face. Once she'd composed herself, and decided that the hilarity had gone on long enough, she pulled back and changed the subject.

"OK, now that you all got that out of your systems," she called out. "Why don't you clue us in on this convoluted plan of Moody's? Just how difficult is it?"

"How about two thestrals, four brooms, a flying motorcycle, and Polyjuice Potion?" Ron answered wryly.

"Polyjuice?" Harry shared a look with Hermione, not liking where this was going. "Who are we going to disguise ourselves as?"

"Not you, mate, us," he grinned. "Seven Harry Potters. A whole quidditch team."

"Yeah, too bad we don't get your skills along with your body," Fred joked.

"We'd be unbeatable," George finished for him.

"Wait, back up," Harry demanded. "You're going to pretend to be me while we all fly out of here?"

"Right in one," Tonks confirmed. "Told you he was smart," she smirked, nudging Remus with her elbow.

"No," Harry shot back firmly. Hermione took his hand as he made this declaration and gave it a squeeze of support. She had figured out the reason for the deception just before he had, and knew he wouldn't stand for it.

"Look, Potter, this is the way it's going to be," Moody insisted as he pushed his way forward. "There may be Death Eaters watching this area. They can't touch you while you're here, but they can once you leave. They probably think you won't go until the end of the month, so we're already throwing them off by clearing out two weeks early. If they do have anyone on watch, we'll confuse them by flying out with seven of you, going in seven different directions. They won't know which one to follow. It's actually less likely that anyone will get hurt this way than if we all went off together."

"Besides, it's not like you have much of a choice," Fred pointed out.

"As there's thirteen of us and only one of you," George completed the threat. Hermione stiffened at Harry's side and glared at the Weasley twins.

"Right then, twelve to two," George amended. "Same result."

"Look," Remus stated, trying to calm the situation. "Everyone here wants to help out. They're all here voluntarily." Harry doubted that was true in at least one instance, but let the former Marauder continue. "You're putting your life on the line practically every time you show your face

nowadays. This way your friends can share the burden a little bit.”

“Let us do this for you,” Tonks added in support. “It’s just a precaution. We don’t really think there will be any trouble.”

“Where will we go, then?” Harry asked, still not convinced.

“Each pair will travel to a different location,” she explained. “For example, you’re headed to my parents’ house. Once inside their wards, you’ll take a Portkey to the Burrow.”

“So why don’t they just attack us at the Burrow?” he objected.

“They don’t know it’s going to be the Burrow,” she replied. “And even so, it has several layers of wards on it, as well as a lot of adult defenders. It would take a full-scale attack to break through, and even then we could hold out long enough to escape.” Harry’s frown showed he still wasn’t convinced.

“It’s not perfect, but it’s the best we can do,” Remus interjected, taking up the argument. “We can talk more when we get there about possibly moving around from place to place to spread out the risk.”

His typically calm, well-reasoned delivery seemed pretty convincing, so Harry turned again to Hermione, seeking her opinion. She raised her hand to his shoulder and gave a small shake of her head. While she was on his side, as usual, this didn’t seem to be a battle worth fighting.

With a sigh, Harry shrugged his shoulders, accepting the situation. He then inclined his head toward Hermione and offered a lock of hair. Producing a small scissors from her handbag, she clipped several strands and passed them to the others.

“Me, Fred, George, Hermione, Fleur, and Dung are going to be the fakes,” Ron announced as Moody passed around the muddy looking potions. “Moody’s got it all worked out who’s flying with who. He’s also got changes of clothing for those of us who aren’t quite your size.”

As the hairs were added to the flasks of mudlike liquid, they sizzled and dissolved, and the potions began to clear until they were bright gold in color.

“Hey Harry,” Ron remarked. “You look a lot tastier than Crabbe.” Now it was Ron’s turn to be subjected to teasing for his unintentionally suggestive remark. After a bit of playful shoving with his brothers and a threat or two things settled down once more. The would-be Harrys downed their potions and grimaced as their bodies began changing.

“Fred!” George exclaimed as he examined his new form. “We’re twins!”

“No, triplets!” George corrected as he pulled Harry into a three-way hug with his brother.

“No, quadruplets ... quintuplets ... sextuplets,” Fred declared as Ron, Hermione, and Fleur changed into more duplicates of Harry in succession.

“Wait a minute, weren’t there supposed to be seven?” George-Harry glanced around as Fred-Harry counted up the Potter clones again. His question was answered as Mundungus stumbled forward, propelled by a shove from Moody. He shot a glare back over his shoulder before downing the remaining vial of the potion.

Harry found the entire situation to be altogether too surreal, as he ended up facing himself everywhere he turned. He shut his eyes tightly, shook his head, and opened them again, but to no avail. It was almost like being in a hall of mirrors.

“Wow, Harry, you really *are* blind,” Ron-Harry teased as he picked up a pair of glasses that Moody had supplied. “Short too,” he added with a smirk as he lifted up his leg to reveal his now overlong trousers.

“Harry, look,” Hermione noted with some excitement. “You and I wear the same size!” Harry turned her way to see a version of himself dressed in Hermione’s red top and red and white skirt, and had to admit that her outfit did appear to fit him. Hermione-Harry shot him the same lopsided grin he had so often given her as she removed the skirt, and added, “I could borrow your jeans if I wanted to,” as she pulled off the top.

The concept of sharing each other’s clothing took on a whole new dimension as Harry stared at this copy of himself, now clad only in a bright red bra and knickers set. A part of him noted that they did fit pretty well, while another noted the empty bra and how much nicer it would look if filled with Hermione. The largest part of him focused on the fact that although he found the idea of Hermione wearing his clothing somewhat arousing, the converse was most definitely not the case. By the time all of these parts sorted themselves out and he found his voice, Hermione-Harry had started to pull on the trousers Moody had provided.

“You aren’t going to leave those on, are you?” he asked nervously, gesturing at the colorful undergarments.

“Of course, since they still fit,” he/she responded with a note of practicality. “I’ll need them again in an hour when I change back, after all.”

Harry turned to see Ron-Harry staring at him with a look that said, ‘ *I’ve seen Harry Potter wearing women’s underwear.* ’ Harry shot him a glare back that replied, ‘ *and if you ever tell anyone you’ll die a painful death.* ’ Ron quickly turned away.

“Couldn’t you at least take the bra off,” Harry asked weakly.

“If I did, I wouldn’t be wearing a bra when we get to the Weasleys,” Hermione explained. “I’m sure you’d like the way I jiggle without one, but I don’t want to give everyone else a show like that.” She leaned closer and whispered, “Maybe a private showing for you later,” which brightened his spirits considerably.

Just as Harry began to hope that this embarrassing scene was coming to an end, Fleur provided the final indignity.



“Bill, zis one ees so leettle!” he/she blurted out, causing everyone in the room to turn his/her way. Unlike Hermione, Fleur had received advance notice of the plan, and under her robes instead of wearing a bra and knickers she had dressed for the occasion in a camisole top and boxer style shorts, with an elastic waist. To Harry’s horror, and his friends’ gleeful amusement, he/she was pulling out the waistband and taking a peek. “Not beeg like yours,” he/she finished, with a knowing look at the eldest Weasley son.

Harry-Fred, Harry-George, and Harry-Ron’s smirks were immediately stifled. “Too much information!” they shouted in unison as they raised their hands to cover their ears.

For his part, Bill flinched as his fiancée, in the guise of a teenage boy, rubbed his/her hand up his leg. The original Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands, thinking it could not possibly get any worse.

Then it got worse.

“Harry is not little!” came a voice of protest. A chorus of gasps greeted this declaration, as once again the entire room turned back to identify the source of this contention.

Realizing too late the implications of her assertion, Hermione-Harry threw his/her hands over his/her mouth in dismay, and darted behind him to hide. After some initial confusion at which of the Harrys was which, it quickly became evident to the onlookers who had spoken out to defend her boyfriend’s ‘stature’, and bedlam erupted.

Mundungus-Harry, holding himself apart from the others, could be identified by his irritated scowl, while Fleur-Harry contented him/herself with a wicked smirk. Ron-Harry, on the other hand, was looking a bit green at the uncomfortable thoughts about the activities of his two best friends that were forcing themselves into his brain. Original Harry and Hermione-Harry were standing together glowing bright red, and Fred-Harry and George-Harry were bent over, hands on their knees, laughing so hard they were battling for breath.

“It’s always the quiet ones,” George-Harry gasped to his original twin, while pulling himself upright.

“Since when has Hermione ever been a quiet one?” Fred-Harry objected.

“Good point.” George-Harry reconsidered. “It’s always the brainy ones then.”

“There you go,” his brother agreed.

Hermione was simply unable to let it go. “Well ... well, you could just take a look for yourselves!” she insisted.

This caused the three Weasley-Harrys to take quick glances down at their crotches.

“Can we *please* change the subject?” Harry groaned through clenched teeth.

Fleur-Harry finally took pity on her embarrassed friend. “I am sorry, ’Arry,” he/she apologized as she came up to his side and took his arm contritely. “I was just teasing you. Eet was just a joke.” He/she leaned up and gave him a kiss on the cheek, then repeated it with Hermione-Harry.

“Oi, stop that!” Ron-Harry protested with another groan at the sight of his best mate getting kissed by ... his best mate. “That looks so wrong!”

“Buck up, old chap,” one of the twins (Harry had no idea which one by this time) consoled Harry as he moved up and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “It could be worse.” Harry gave him a skeptical look. “We could have brought little Gin-Gin along with us.”

“Yeah, she’s been wanting to get into the pants of the Boy Who Lived for years,” piped up the other twin.

“Shouldn’t that be, she’s been wanting the Boy Who Lived to get into *her* pants, brother dear?”

“I think it’s the same thing, Fred.”

“I thought I was George.”

“No, you’re Fred, I’m George.”

“Actually, we’re both Harry, now.”

“All right, pipe down you lot. We’re behind schedule already.” Moody announced, impatient with all the clowning around. “Now all you Potters grab one of these bird cages and head outside. Miss Delacour, you’re with Bill on one of the thestrals.”

“Zatees fine wiz me, I am not fond of brooms,” Fleur-Harry agreed, moving once more to Bill’s side.

“Granger, you’re with Shacklebolt on the other thestral, same reason,” Moody continued.

Hermione-Harry, who had been leaning into Harry’s side (at least he’d assumed it was Hermione; he hoped none of his other clones would be that cozy with him) sighed. “Why does everyone think I don’t like brooms,” he/she grumbled. “I like them just fine. Just because I don’t try to kill myself when I fly them ...” Harry managed a smile and gave him/her a quick squeeze.

“Potter, the real one that is, will be on the motorcycle with Hagrid,” Moody declared next.

“What? Why?” Harry objected. “I’d rather be on a broom.”

“Because that’s what the Death Eaters will expect,” Moody explained brusquely. “Plus, there’s more room for your trunk in the sidecar.”

“I’m liking this less and less all the time,” Harry murmured to Hermione, who nodded her agreement.

“Broom pairs are Arthur and Fred, Remus and George, Tonks and Ron,” Moody finished. “Mundungus is with me.”

The old Auror then began passing out birdcages with stuffed white owls in them. Harry balked once more. What was the point in this? Hedwig could more easily fly to the Burrow. He shared another concerned look with his female alter ego. He was about to voice this new objection as the group started heading for the door when another thought occurred to him.

“Wait, what about Disillusionment charms?” This finally caught everyone’s attention, and they stopped and turned back to Moody for a response.

“Not necessary,” he snapped, “Come on, we’re wasting time.” This response generated some frowns, particularly from Tonks and Remus, who also remembered the flight two years previously and shared a look of concern.

“Something is very wrong here,” Harry whispered to Hermione, who nodded again. He looked back up to see Moody glaring at him while he reached for his hip flask to take another swig. It was his one of his trademark actions, which Harry had observed countless times in past years ...

Suddenly he caught his breath and paled. “Cover me!” he hissed to Hermione whose eyes went wide, although she quickly complied and slipped away from him.

“Stop!” Harry demanded as he withdrew his wand and stepped forward. Moody’s reaction was instantaneous as he quickly pocketed his hip flask while his own wand appeared in his other hand.

“What advice did you give me?” Harry nearly shouted, fighting to calm his nerves and keep his wand steady. Moody’s magical eye whirled in its socket once then narrowed, along with his regular eye, as he stared at Harry. Then he chuckled loudly.

“Good, Potter, good work. Constant Vigilance, right?” He paused for moment, as though expecting that response to be sufficient. When Harry didn’t budge, he continued with some irritation. “You need a more specific question than that, though. When did I give you this advice?”

“During the tournament,” Harry responded quickly. “For the first task.”

More uneasy glances were exchanged among the others in the room. “Uh, Harry?” Ron-Harry began. Harry flicked his free hand at his best mate in a dismissive motion.

“That was two bloody years ago, lad ... but ... I suppose I told you to use your broom, didn’t I?” Moody replied. His wand stayed on alert, and his magical eye spun once more before resting on Harry again.

Harry suddenly relaxed and broke into a grin. “That’s right. You told me to play to my strength.” The tension in the room eased, but not entirely as several more puzzled expressions appeared.

“But ...” Ron-Harry began again. Before he could finish the objection a heavy object flew into Moody’s head from behind, even as Remus sprang forward with the fireplace poker in his hand,

and the room erupted into chaos.

“Stop!” Harry yelled at the top of his lungs. “Everybody freeze! Now!”

Moody had slumped to the floor, unconscious, while Remus stood over him threateningly. Several of the onlookers had latched onto their neighbors in suspicion, while Shackbolt had one of the Harrys in a headlock, his wand at his throat. Everyone turned to the Harry who had shouted, the beginnings of panic in some of their eyes.

“Let her go!” Harry shouted. There was initially some confusion at this instruction, since Tonks was the only female in the room, and she was standing by Remus with her wand out, darting her eyes in several directions. Gradually it was understood by everyone that this demand was directed at Shackbolt and his captive.

“Not until we get this sorted out,” the tall black Auror snapped. “For starters, who are you?”

“I’m the real Harry,” Harry declared, and raised his holly wand up high in proof. Bolstering his claim, Hedwig, who had flown clear of the bedlam and was perched on the fireplace mantle, immediately soared over to her master and alighted on his shoulder. The others in the room relaxed somewhat, as they all realized that a familiar as clever as this snowy owl would not be fooled by Polyjuice.

“And who’s this, then,” Shackbolt snarled next, only slightly mollified. “And what’s this all about?”

“I’m Hermione,” the figure he had subdued panted.

“Prove it,” he demanded.

Tonks, who had been watching intently, caught a glimpse of a red strap where the collar of Hermione-Harry’s shirt had been stretched out from Shackbolt’s not so tender grasp. “That’s Hermione all right,” she confirmed.

“How do you know?” he challenged.

“She’s wearing a bra, Shack,” the pink haired Auror responded, as a small smile flickered across her face. “Now this,” she continued as her expression hardened again, turning back to the unconscious figure at her feet, “Is evidently *not* Mad-Eye Moody.”

“Harry?” Ron-Harry broke in. “What were you on about? The Moody at Hogwarts for the Tournament was a fake!”

“That’s right,” Harry replied grimly, as Hermione-Harry, finally released by Shackbolt, rejoined him. “And most of the people in this room know that. But hardly anyone else does. The Ministry covered it up. And Voldemort didn’t let his Death Eaters in on it either. Only Wormtail and Crouch knew about the plan in advance. In the graveyard when the others showed up he just referred to ‘his loyal servant at Hogwarts’. And after I escaped, I don’t reckon he was in much of a

mood to explain it either.”

“So how did you ...?”

“The real Moody would never have overlooked something like Disillusionment charms,” Harry answered. “And then when I saw him about to take a drink from that hip flask it jogged my memory of all the times I saw the imposter do that at Hogwarts, when he was renewing his Polyjuice Potion.”

“Harry alerted me and I discretely moved around behind Moo ... whoever this is, which was not too difficult because it was hard for him to keep track of all the different Harrys,” Hermione-Harry added. I noticed that Tower of London souvenir paperweight on the end table and waited until his magical eye was focused on Harry, then knocked him out with it.” He/she glanced over at their other former Defense professor, still on guard with the poker. “It looks like Remus had the same idea.”

“I always hated that paperweight,” Harry muttered. “Dudley used to threaten me with it. Glad to see you put it to good use.”

“Nice throw,” Ron-Harry noted approvingly, but with some surprise.

“Well, I *have* been playing quidditch all year, you know,” Hermione-Harry reminded him with a touch of pride. “Since I’m not the best flyer around, I spent a lot of time practicing my throwing accuracy.” He/she glanced around and frowned, then scanned the room again more intently.

“So now what do we do?” one of the twins asked. Several people began making suggestions.

“Wait a minute,” Hermione-Harry interrupted. “We’re one Harry short.”

Ron, Fred, George, and Fleur quickly identified themselves, and the group concluded that Mundungus had done a runner during the confusion.

“Nothing we can do about that now,” Harry decided, taking control of the situation again. “What about this guy?” He gestured to the imposter.

“First, we need to restrain him for when he wakes up,” Tonks pointed out. “But we still can’t use magic here. Do you have any ropes in the house?”

“Not that I can think of,” Harry mused. “Maybe something similar ...”

“How about electrical cords?” Hermione-Harry suggested, gesturing at a lamp that had been knocked over. He/she glanced around the room to see if there were any longer ones, also taking the opportunity for a quick inspection of its other occupants. It was noteworthy that the only three people saying anything were the ones who were most familiar with the muggle environment. The rest of them were standing around uncomfortably, not knowing what to do if they couldn’t use magic.

“There are some extension cords in the garage,” Harry remembered. “Those should work.” Hermione-Harry hurried out to get them, while Hagrid was summoned in from the back garden so that they could all figure out what to do next.

*Harry really took charge after that. There was some resistance from the older members of the Order, like Shackbolt and Mr. Weasley, and Bill didn't seem completely comfortable with it either, but everyone else deferred to his leadership, so they didn't have much choice.*

*We had to assume that there were Death Eaters waiting for us just outside the protection of the blood wards, so the first thing he did was have us consider alternative escape routes. The Knight Bus was suggested, but it would have been targeted immediately when it popped into existence beside the house. Muggle transportation would have been better, but still risky. We might have escaped unseen, but if the Death Eaters had noticed we would have been sitting ducks. They could have blown up a car with us inside it. One thing that Harry didn't even mention was that he could have walked out under his invisibility cloak and escaped easily, but I knew there was no way he'd leave the others, so I didn't bother to bring that up.*

*Once we decided to stay with the original modes of transportation, he made some critical changes. First, he announced that he'd fly on his own broom, not as a passenger on the motorcycle. There were initially some objections to that, but no one could find fault with his reasons. For one thing, the only way we could transport our prisoner was in the motorcycle sidecar. (During our discussion the fake Moody's Polyjuice wore off and he turned out to be a Death Eater named Selwyn.) For another, we had to assume that the entire operation had been compromised, and that the Death Eaters knew that he was the intended passenger of the motorcycle. But the clincher was when he asked if any of us thought that any Death Eater could outfly him on his Firebolt. Of course, no one did.*

*The loss of Moody and Mundungus meant that one of the brooms was freed up. Things were further shaken up when I let it be known that I was going to ride with Harry. He started to object, but then saw the look in my eye and relented. I was not about to let him out of my sight on this one. I convinced the others by pointing out that one Harry on a broom by himself would be too obvious a target. That got us thinking about how to mix up the original plan to maximize the confusion among the Death Eaters.*

*With a little more brainstorming, the escape plan was revised. Shackbolt would take off on his thestral first, alone, which would start them wondering what was going on. Next, five brooms, not four, would take to the air, all heading off in different directions, as planned, with different combinations of occupants. Tonks would morph into a copy of Harry, so we were back to seven again, and would fly with Remus. Ron would fly with Arthur, and Fred and George, still looking like Harry, would fly out solo. So one broom would have two Harrys, two would have one Harry each, and two would have one Harry riding with one non-Harry. By this time the Death Eaters would be completely perplexed, and would probably split up to follow several different brooms. Finally the motorcycle (with no Harrys aboard) and the remaining thestral would take off. (It was agreed by everyone that all Death Eaters would most likely be able to see thestrals.)*

*Harry still wanted everyone to be disillusioned, but it was pointed out that that would defeat the purposes of the switches. We finally agreed to start out disillusioned until someone was spotted, then to drop the spells, which would throw the Death Eaters all into disarray. Before we left, Harry sent Hedwig to the Burrow (which was still our ultimate destination) with a message that let them know that the plan had been found out, and we were changing it, and to be on their guard in case the Death Eaters came there looking for us. He also told her to stay low, and keep to the trees as much as possible. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I had to smile at her reaction. She gave him a look as though she was insulted that he would try to tell her how to do her job. Harry just chuckled and ruffled her feathers, and she nipped at his fingers before she made a noise that sounded like a little huff and took off. We watched out the window as she disappeared like a ghost into the night, and let out a sigh of relief when no spells came shooting her way.*

*I once read a military saying that no plan survives the first contact with the enemy. Well, ours lasted a bit longer than that.*

Once everyone had their assignments, Harry opened his trunk and pulled out his rucksack, then began loading essentials into it. In went the boxed up pensieve, and more boxes of memories. Then several books and stacks of parchment began to follow.

“Can you take some of this stuff, Hermione?” he asked, unaware of the astonished looks he was getting. Hermione-Harry quickly moved to his side and opened her small handbag and began loading it up as well.

“How ...?” the twins began in unison. Ron-Harry had a broad grin on his face, and Remus and Tonks shared a smile as well.

“Cleverest witch of her age, that’s how,” the youngest Weasley son explained proudly to his brothers. “Extension charm, lightening charm, and who knows what else.” One of the Harrys transferring the books blushed at this praise, while the other beamed with pride. It wasn’t difficult to determine which was which.

“OK, that should do it,” Harry finally decided, leaving most of his ordinary books and all of his clothing in the trunk. These could all be replaced if necessary. Soon they were outside mounting their brooms and the thestrals, while Hagrid fired up the old motorcycle.

“Is that ...?” Harry wondered, as he stowed his trunk in the sidecar. Hagrid answered before he could even finish the question.

“Yep. Sirius’s own. The very same one I brungyeh here on all those years ago,” Hagrid stated proudly. “Beauty innit?” Harry frowned in thought before turning to Remus.

“Wouldn’t Sirius have had a silencing option on this?” he asked.

“Sure,” the former Marauder responded, hurrying over to the gleaming black machine.

“And how about an Invisibility Booster?” Harry added. “Mr. Weasley had one on his car.” Large grins lit up the faces of the four Weasley boys at the look of chagrin on their father at those words. Remus reached toward the controls and pushed one button that quieted the roar from the engine, and another that caused the entire machine to vanish, then flicker back into existence before disappearing again.

“These things are tricky,” Remus muttered. “And it will probably fail at the worst possible time.” Harry nodded, recalling his and Ron’s journey to Hogwarts where the invisibility control on the old Ford Anglia had given out after a few minutes.

The last thing they did before leaving was to apply the Disillusionment charms. They knew this would generate a response from the Ministry, but expected to be long gone before the owl, possibly accompanied by Aurors, arrived.

As expected, a swarm of a dozen or more Death Eaters appeared in the sky as soon as Shacklebolt’s thestral cleared the rooftops, but they ignored it as it sped by. For good measure Kingsley got off a few well-aimed stunners to make them pay for their indifference, and two of their opponents dropped from the air. Before they could hit the ground, reinforcements were already arriving, and several of these broke off to collect their comrades.

Once the five brooms, barely visible as ripples in the air, caught the enemy’s attention, all hell broke loose, particularly when they all became visible simultaneously and the Death Eaters realized that things were not what they expected. With little time to think about it, three or four of the flying black-cloaked figures pursued each of the broomsticks, shouting out to their companions in dismay while trying to catch up with the fleeing Harrys. In this confusion, the final thestral with Bill and Fleur soared through an opening and was away almost before the remaining enemy fliers were aware of their presence. At the same time Hagrid ran the motorcycle along Privet Drive until he reached the end of the street, and only then launched into the sky. For several minutes, it appeared that everyone would make it to safety.

Unfortunately, Remus’s words proved prophetic, as the motorcycle, which Hagrid had stealthily steered in the opposite direction of the last thestral, suddenly popped into view as the invisibility charm flickered out again. Far above the whole tableau, where he had easily outdistanced his pursuers, Harry spotted this mishap and shouted out in dismay.

“Hagrid!” Without another thought he pulled his Firebolt into a tight loop and shot back straight at his startled pursuit.

“Harry, no!” Hermione cried. “You have to get to safety!”

“I’ve got to, Hermione,” he shot back. “I just ...” But she already knew. This was what made Harry Potter who he was, and was one of the things about him that made her love him so much.

“I know,” she leaned up close and breathed into his ear. “Just get us out of this alive.” She then trained her wand on the closest target.



“Stupefy!” They were now upon their trailing opponents, who though caught by surprise, managed to split apart and shield themselves from the red streaks of light.

“Blow the brooms out from under them!” Harry shouted to her. “Each one without a broom will take two out of action.” Suddenly he felt the copy of his body behind him tighten against his own.

“Sticking charm,” she answered before he could ask. “Now you can do as many crazy stunts as you want to and I won’t fall off.” Harry nodded and immediately pushed the broom into a barrel roll followed by a power dive, while Hermione sent back two nonverbal explosion hexes at the Death Eaters who had regrouped and were now chasing them again. To her satisfaction, one of the brooms blew apart into splinters and twigs, causing another rider to break off to rescue its former occupant.

Below them Hagrid was pouring on all the speed the old bike could muster, while doing some maneuvering of his own, but it was only a matter of time before one of the green streaks flying at him connected. To their advantage, however, none of the enemy had spotted the attackers coming down on them from above.

To maintain this advantage, the two Gryffindors held their fire until they were within point blank range, then let fly with nonverbal hexes, catching their opponents completely by surprise. Within seconds, four Death Eaters were flailing in midair, screaming for aid, while the pair of rescuers flashed right through their pack like a hawk disrupting a flock of birds.

“This one is Potter!” a familiar voice shouted from one of the black cloaks. “Playing the hero as always!” An inverted loop brought Harry and Hermione once more behind their enemies, and two more dropped to Hermione’s accurate spellcasting before another roll brought them upright again. This time Harry laid down a barrage of *Confringo* hexes before sideslipping his broom and spinning away once more. He found himself heading right for the leader of this group, who he’d immediately recognized as Snape from the previous comment.

Two quick hexes headed right at them, somewhat to their surprise, but one impacted harmlessly on Hermione’s shield while the other flashed by overhead, resulting in a scream of pain as it hit one of the Death Eaters behind them. Harry smiled grimly and gave the briefest of nods to his former potions professor as they passed by each other in the blink of an eye.

By now Hagrid and the motorcycle were only a small speck on the horizon, virtually invisible in the dark sky, and Harry once more accelerated to full speed, intent on leaving this battle as quickly as possible.

But it wasn’t over yet. Just as Harry thought they were in the clear a searing pain shot through his scar, and he instinctively swerved the broom, causing Hermione to shriek as a green flash shot through the space they had just occupied.

“Harry! It’s Voldemort!” she screamed, confirming what he already knew. “And he’s ... he’s flying!”

Harry's first thought was escape, but the dark lord could not be shaken, and his curses came closer and closer, one of them finally shattering Hermione's shield charm and knocking them both off balance for an instant. Harry regained control of the Firebolt just in time to dodge yet another killing curse.

"He's using small apparition jumps to cut us off each time you get away from him!" Hermione shouted before sending a series of blasting hexes at the now quite literal 'Flight of Death' behind them, who easily blocked her attack. Fortunately, it at least bought them some time to gather themselves.

"I'm going to try to lock up our wands again," Harry shouted back to Hermione as he brought the broom around to face their nemesis. "As soon as that happens, blast him with everything you've got. I know we can't kill him, but try to injure him badly enough that we can get away."

He felt Hermione's answering nod against his back and aimed his wand carefully. He needed his spell to connect with one of Voldemort's and he intended to cast his disarming hex nonverbally in an attempt to surprise his foe.

The surprise was on the two Gryffindors, however. Harry's *Expelliarmus* passed right by the streak of light that Voldemort launched at them next, and Hermione only just managed to get a shield up in time to partially block the bone shattering curse. Harry winced in pain as part of it deflected into his shoulder, and heard Hermione cry out behind him as well. But he managed to keep his focus on his enemy and saw his own hex connect, and to his amazement Voldemort's wand flew out of his grasp.

Harry, struggling to steer with his wand hand and his knees, managed to get the Firebolt to respond as he tracked down the spinning sliver of wood and somehow was able to snag the deadly weapon before Voldemort could reclaim it. Another burst of speed increased the separation between the combatants, and the two students turned to see the dark lord regarding them warily.

Wiping blood out of her eyes with one hand, and ignoring the sharp pain in her leg, Hermione sent yet another series of blasting hexes his way, mixing in every variety she knew, and was rewarded by the sight of their hated foe dodging away in desperation, now defenseless without his wand. Realizing his plight, Voldemort quickly retreated toward his followers, who had been left far behind during the high speed running battle which had just taken place.

For an instant, Harry was tempted to pursue, and land a crippling blow on his sworn enemy, but quickly realized that he and Hermione would soon be outnumbered again, and now they were both injured.

"Let's get out of here," came her advice in his ear.

"Good idea," he responded simply, and he once more took his trusty Firebolt up to top speed and streaked away from the battlefield.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## **Notebooks and Letters** **Regrouping and Reassessment**

### **Final Year, Chapter 4 – Regrouping and Reassessment**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 16 (continued)

*Once we were in the clear, we took stock of our situation. Harry thought his left shoulder was broken, or at least separated, and he had no feeling at all in his left arm. I was pretty sure my left leg was broken. Both of those injuries were from that last bone-shattering hex Voldemort threw at us. I also had a gash on my forehead that was bleeding pretty badly, from when his slashing hex shattered my shield. I told Harry I thought it might have been Sectumsempra. I even managed a joke that perhaps we'd now have matching scars. We had plenty of other cuts and bruises, but those were the major injuries.*

*Then we turned our attention to trying to figure out where we were, and where we should go next. From the position of the moon and stars I decided that we were heading south. We had no idea how much the escape plan had been compromised, such that more Death Eaters might be waiting for us at our intended safe house, so we decided we needed to consider an alternate destination. Harry initially suggested that we try to apparate to Hogwarts, but I told him there was no way I could walk up the path from the gate, and that Madame Pomfrey might not even be there. We also considered flying to Headquarters, but London was in the opposite direction from where we were. Then I decided that we weren't too far from my house, and suggested we go there. Harry wondered if it was safe, and I told him that the warning wards hadn't been triggered yet, so I knew no Death Eaters had been there.*

*I made a joke about how under better circumstances this would be romantic, flying alone up here with him in the moonlight. He joked back that it would be a lot more romantic if I hadn't been in the body of a boy! He assured me that my hugs were much more enjoyable when I was a girl. Ironically, it was just about that time when the hour was up and I changed back into my regular body. I snuggled up behind him and rubbed my chest into his back to illustrate his comment, and we both got a bit of a chuckle out of it.*

*At that point I asked him about what happened during that last exchange with Voldemort. Harry showed me the wand he had captured. It wasn't Voldemort's! I asked him if he was certain, and he assured me that he'd recognize that yew wand anywhere. Voldemort must have thought ahead, and switched wands to avoid the very thing we were trying to do, lock up his wand with Harry's. I noted that it was still remarkable that Harry's disarming spell had defeated him, and Harry*

agreed. He wondered if it was somehow related to the fact that his wand had overpowered Voldemort's in the graveyard. I really need to find a book about wand magic. Then it occurred to us that perhaps that was the reason that Ollivander had been captured, that Voldemort needed to know what the consequences of that incident were.

We both grew silent after that, partly from contemplating that idea, but mostly because we were both hurting and tired. Finally we reached my house and landed. Harry used his good arm to support me while I hopped inside, and I barely made it into the living room. We were clearly in no condition to travel any further, but we desperately needed to get in contact with someone to let the others know we were still alive. We also didn't know if the Burrow or any of our other safe houses had been attacked. I decided then and there that I needed to make some more communication mirrors.

I was glad I'd taken an introductory healing course last term at Beauxbatons. I healed our cuts and bruises, and Harry held up a mirror so I could try to close the gash on my forehead. As I suspected, it was worse than a normal cutting curse, and I couldn't get it to stop bleeding. Harry found some bandages in our medicine cabinet and wrapped it up as best as he could. I apologized for not being to mend our broken bones, as we hadn't got that far in class, but Harry assured me he was impressed that I could do as much as I had. By this time I was ready to pass out from the pain in my leg and the blood loss, but then I remembered I had packed some healing potions in my bag. Harry found both a blood replenishing potion and a pain relief potion, which I insisted we share.

Just as we were about to collapse into bed, Hedwig showed up. I don't think either of us has ever been more glad to see her, not the least reason being that she was still alive! She had a message for us from the Weasleys. Everyone had made it back safely! A few of them were injured, but nothing too serious.

We decided that we were both just conscious enough to apparate to the Burrow. They had a lookout posted, and they spotted us as soon as we landed in the lane outside their wards. It was a good thing, too, because I couldn't drag myself a step further, and I don't think Harry could carry me with one arm. Ron and Bill were there in a flash, and Bill levitated me while Ron helped Harry. To our great relief, Madame Pomfrey was there, and she hustled us into beds right away and finished fixing us up. She even managed to heal my forehead completely, since she had watched Snape heal Ron last year. So, no matching scars for us after all. I don't remember anything after that, since she put us both to sleep, but I'm certain there will be a lot for us to talk about today.

"Finished?" Harry had been waiting patiently for Hermione to finish recording the events of the previous day in her journal. He had awakened to find them both in the twins' former bedroom, with her sitting up in her bed writing at a furious pace. Knowing that she was anxious to get everything down before it escaped her mind (not that very many things ever escaped *that* mind, he grinned to himself) he had leaned back and bided his time, pondering for himself the previous day's events, and answering her questions when she needed his perspective on something. It was almost noon now, and he was getting hungry.

“Yes, I think that’s about it,” she decided, biting her lower lip thoughtfully. “There are still quite a few holes to fill, especially about what happened to the others, but I can add that later.” She looked up at him and smiled. “Ready to get dressed and face the world?”

After taking turns using the bathroom (and dressing in separate rooms for propriety’s sake) the pair descended to the kitchen, where they received enthusiastic greetings from the Weasley family and what seemed like the entire Order of the Phoenix.

While the pair of them dug into the delicious meal Mrs. Weasley had prepared, the others brought them up to date. The Death Eaters’ pursuit had been heaviest after Fred and George, their reasoning probably being that Harry was likely to try to make a solo break for it. This earned Harry an I-told-you-so smirk and nudge to the ribs from Hermione. They had both taken a few hits, George getting the worst of it from a nasty slashing hex. He proudly displayed a wicked looking scar on his cheek below his left ear.

“I’m hoping it’ll heal in the shape of a lightning bolt,” he announced. “I’m going to call myself The Boy Who Forgot To Duck.” Harry responded with a groan and shook his head, trying not to smile at the irrepressible jokester. “I reckon Mum should be happy; now she can tell us apart.”

Other than that narrow escape, they had all made it without serious injury to their assigned safe houses, where the wards had all held satisfactorily, and taken their portkeys back to the Burrow. Remus and Tonks had lingered at the site of the breakout to make sure everyone made it out OK. They had been further away from the motorcycle when its Invisibility Booster failed, so they hadn’t reached it as soon as Harry and Hermione had. They did confirm that all the Death Eaters broke off their pursuits of the broomriders as soon as the motorcycle appeared. They also witnessed the appearance of Voldemort, as well as his retreat after his skirmish with Harry. That information had kept everyone else from panicking when Harry and Hermione’s portkey had arrived back at the Burrow without them.

“At least we made them pay,” Ron pointed out. “Shacklebolt got those two straight away at the beginning, and I hit at least one.” Fred and George cocked their heads at that news, impressed at their brother’s ability to connect with a spell while going full speed on a broom, while Arthur smiled with pride and ruffled his youngest son’s head.

“Yes, a stunning spell,” he elaborated. “Straight to the head. Knocked him right off his broom. The rest of them backed off some after that.”

“Surprised, huh?” Ron smirked at the twins.

“I’m not,” Harry broke in. “Especially after how you did in the battle at Hogwarts.” Beside him Hermione nodded supportively.

“How about you guys?” Ron asked eagerly. “You were in the thick of it for a while. Did you get any?”

“Actually, I sorta lost track,” Harry answered, scratching his head and looking to Hermione for her

input. “Seven or eight, at least. I think Hermione got more than I did.”

“Well, you were flying the broom, too,” she pointed out quickly. “Pulling all those fancy stunts. Honestly, I swear we were upside down half the time.” Both of the young Gryffindors only had eyes for each other by this point, and did not notice that everyone had crowded closer, astounded at what they were hearing. “Oh, and you’re right, by the way. You knocked out four and I hit five.”

“Most amazing thing I ever saw,” Tonks broke in. “Harry fired spells with one hand while steering with the other, loops, jinks, rolls, you name it. And Hermione twisting every which way, not holding on at all, getting off shots from every angle you can imagine.”

The thought went through the minds of more than one of the Order members that Harry and Hermione together on a broom were quite possibly a more effective fighting force than an entire battalion of Aurors.

“And you should have seen the way Hermione went after Voldemort,” Harry added with obvious pride as Hermione lowered her head and blushed modestly. “She launched a chain of hexes quicker than any I’ve ever seen. Had him on the run in no time.”

“Now, it wasn’t all me, Harry Potter,” she objected. “You hit him first after all.”

“Wait a minute, what exactly are you saying?” Remus interrupted. “We’re still not clear on why he retreated like that.”

Harry shared a look with Hermione before deciding to reveal the reason Voldemort had broken off his attack.

“I disarmed him,” he stated simply, with his usual modesty. When no one responded to this incredible claim, being occupied with open-mouthed stares, he pulled the wand he had captured out of his sleeve and laid it on the table. “It’s not his real one,” he continued. “Hermione and I think he was afraid that his wand would lock up with mine again like last time, so he used a different one. We also think that maybe that’s why he captured Ollivander.”

Not everyone knew the details of the scene at the graveyard the night of the Third Task, so some time was spent explaining Harry’s reference. Afterward, though, no one could offer any idea of how Harry had disarmed the powerful dark lord, even with his foe using an imperfectly matched wand.

Harry next brought up the topic everyone had been trying not to think about. “What happened to the Death Eater we captured? And for that matter, do we have any idea what happened to Moody? Or Mundungus?”

The members of the Order looked at each other uncomfortably for several seconds before Remus stepped up.

“Before Tonks and I left the scene, we saw the Aurors arrive,” he began. “Hestia Jones was on the

response team, which was part of our planning. We wanted one of our people with them if something went wrong and they were summoned, although we weren't anticipating anything like what occurred. When they arrived, they immediately saw that it was much more serious than a simple case of improper use of magic, and they called for backup."

Remus paused and Harry nodded that he was following, so the werewolf continued. "By that time Kingsley had made it back, and he went out with the second wave. There were a number of dead Death Eaters on the ground, and some injured as well, along with a few who were tending to the injured. Several of these were captured. Between Hestia, Kingsley, and Tonks, we managed to get Selwyn included with that lot. He's at the Ministry now along with the rest of them, awaiting trial."

"And Moody?" Harry asked again, realizing he was not going to like the answer.

Remus sighed before answering. "The only reason Death Eaters keep prisoners is if they are useful to them, or have some 'entertainment' value." Beside Harry, Hermione shuddered as she realized what sort of entertainment Remus was referring to, and Harry gave her hand, which he hadn't even realized he had been holding, a protective squeeze. One of his greatest fears was that she would be captured and subjected to whatever perverse treatment the sick minds of Voldemort's followers could come up with.

Remus finally concluded, "As long as Mad-Eye's replacement was operating, they'd need him alive to keep producing more Polyjuice potion. Once the target's hair has been added, the potion has a short lifetime. Now that he's been exposed ... I don't think we'll ever see Alistor Moody alive again."

A heavy silence descended over the kitchen. Hermione had tears in her eyes, and Harry could feel a few of his own trying to escape. The old Auror had been overly paranoid, and abrasive, but had been extremely dedicated to his work, and fiercely loyal to the light side. His loss, especially coming only a month after Dumbledore's death, was a terrible blow.

"How long?" Harry managed to blurt out after a few uncomfortable moments. *Had the Moody who had set up the wards on Grimmauld Place been the real one or the fake*, he wondered with a rising feeling of unease. *But surely that one had to be genuine, or he wouldn't have been in on the secret*, he quickly reasoned. Knowledge of a Fidelius protected location could not be passed on by Polyjuice Potion.

"We're not sure, but probably sometime in the last two weeks," Remus answered resignedly. "Mad-Eye always worked alone, so it's hard to know for certain. But there was a period of a few days there where we had no contact with him. No one thought anything of it at the time, but ..."

"We don't think Dung had anything to do with it," Tonks broke in, taking everyone's minds off Moody's fate for a moment. "He was basically a last minute addition." Ron and the twins shared a look at that comment, which Harry and Hermione later learned was because Molly had vetoed Ginny's participation, causing the Order to scramble to find a replacement for her. Tonks continued, "Bugging out at the first sign of trouble is pretty much in character for him, so ..." She



shrugged and looked around, and the nods of the others confirmed her assessment. There wasn't much more to say, and most of the Order members drifted quietly out of the kitchen, taking their leave in hushed voices, while Harry and Hermione sat staring at their unfinished breakfasts, no longer hungry.

An orange blur broke them out of their morose thoughts as a large cat darted into the kitchen from the garden, where he had been engaging in one of his favorite pastimes, chasing gnomes, while waiting for his mistress to awaken.

“Crookshanks!” Hermione squealed happily as she hugged him to her chest. “I’ve missed you so much!” While she continued to fuss over the oversized creature Harry caught Ron’s eye over her head and they both shook their heads as Ron mouthed the word, ‘*mental*’. Harry turned back to his girlfriend and her beloved pet and added a few head scratches of his own. For his part, the half-kneazle closed his eyes and purred, accepting the attention that was his rightful due.

*Ron, Harry, and I spent the afternoon catching up. I caught Ginny’s eye as we left the kitchen and could see that she was feeling left out. I know she would have wanted to go along on the mission last night, but Mrs. Weasley would never have agreed. I’m somewhat surprised that she let Ron go, but he is of age after all. I’m going to try to make sure I spend some time with Ginny while we’re here.*

*Ron asked me how things had gone with my parents, which almost made me start crying again. Harry wrapped his arm around me and let Ron know that his concern was appreciated, but that it was still too sensitive of a topic right now. Then he asked Ron to bring us up to date on what had been going on in the wizarding world.*

*Ron proceeded to fill in some of the details of the stories we’d read in the Daily Prophet. I, of course, had been incensed at the Ministry’s actions against muggleborns, but he added some information that Harry and I hadn’t realized – that it’s not just muggleborn witches and wizards that are being targeted. Restrictions are being tightened against werewolves again, which means that Remus can’t get a job. It’s fortunate that Sirius left him some money, because his work for the Order doesn’t pay anything. We also learned that he and Tonks want to get married, but that is now illegal. If they do, Tonks will surely have to give up her job as an Auror.*

*The Ministry is also moving against other halfbreeds. Harry was completely stunned when Ron told him that Fleur’s job at Gringotts was called into question, since she’s part Veela. I don’t think he’s ever considered her anything but completely normal. But we both relaxed when Ron added that the goblins had in effect told the Ministry to bugger off.*

*We got more serious again when Ron added that Hagrid might also lose his job as a professor at Hogwarts. He thinks the best we can hope for is that they keep him on as a gamekeeper. It’s all right, you see, for a halfbreed to tend animals – just as long as he doesn’t have any responsibility for ‘normal’ human students. The whole thing makes me want to scream!*

*In hindsight, I realize that I should have expected this. The analogy I’ve been using with Nazi*

Germany would lead to this outcome as well. The Jews weren't the only group that the Nazis went after. They also locked up and eventually exterminated the mentally ill, and people like the Gypsies – anyone who didn't fit their definition of the ideal human being.

Ron said he's heard his mum and dad talking about this sometimes, along with Bill. Bill thinks that it might go so far that muggleborns are kicked out of Hogwarts, and fired from all Ministry jobs. (They're already only allowed in the lower ranking positions, I understand.) It's ironic, but going to Beauxbatons last year actually worked out to my advantage, in this aspect, as I already have my NEWTs. They can't throw me out, had I been planning to go back, since I've graduated.

After that depressing discussion we moved on to our plans, both short term and long term. We're going to stay here until the wedding. Harry asked if they'd finally sorted out where to hold it, and Ron answered that it would be on the Delacour estate in France. They decided that all of Bill's guests would come to the Burrow, where they would take a portkey to Fleur's house. Fleur's parents are paying for the portkeys. Mrs. Weasley put up some fuss about that, but there is no way the Weasleys could afford them, and after all it's traditional that the bride's family pays for the wedding in wizard culture just as in muggle society.

Harry wasn't concerned with that so much as security. And I agree with him that the Burrow is just too tempting of a target, no matter how good the wards are. We were both relieved at this news, although we tried to keep it under control, since Ron's still a bit uneasy about it. His mum had her heart set on having the wedding at the Burrow, and argued long and hard that it would be safer. This is nonsense, of course, as the Weasleys are among the best known light side supporters and if there were ever an event that was a prime target for an attack, this wedding is it. The Delacour estate will be far safer, and the portkey plan for guests is a good one.

Harry asked Ron if he thought we could continue to stay at the Burrow after the wedding, and have the freedom to go search out Horcruxes whenever we find a lead. Ron was skeptical that it would work – his mum would probably try to stop us. Harry and I indicated that this is what we suspected also, but we thought he'd know best. Harry suggested that we relocate to Headquarters, since that was the first place we wanted to search anyway. Ron was hesitant about that, because of Snape.

At that point we let Ron know that we thought Snape was still on our side. Harry told him about what Snape had said the night he killed Dumbledore, and about the note in Sirius' room, and I added that he'd intentionally let us go and actually took out a Death Eater in the battle last night. Ron was not happy, to say the least. For one thing, he's upset that we didn't tell him sooner. But more than that, he just can't bring himself to trust Snape. Harry said he understood that, but that he and I wanted to keep open the possibility. He reminded Ron that either way, Moody has put some pretty powerful traps in place just in case Snape does try something, which made Ron feel a bit better about it.

As far as longer range, we have a lot of possible places to check out, both in Britain and on the continent, and Harry also wants to go to Godric's Hollow sometime. We agreed that for the week between now and the wedding things would be too hectic to try any searching just yet.

After dinner Fleur pulled Ginny and me aside and announced that we needed to try on bridesmaid

dresses and get them fitted properly. She told me that it was looking more and more unlikely that Percy would come, and so there was little chance that I would need it, but it was better to have the dress ready and not need it than to need it and not have it. I agreed, and besides, it was also a good opportunity for a bit of girl talk with Ginny and Fleur.

The dresses are a golden yellow color, and the most distinctive feature is the low neckline. I'm certain that all the males will love them. Ginny was initially surprised at how daring they are, but quickly became quite pleased when she saw how hers looked on her. My dress shows off even more than hers, but then, I have more to show than she does. But even with her relatively small size, after Fleur finished adjusting the padding and the built-in push-up bra, she had some really nice looking cleavage. Ginny loved it! (It will be interesting to see Ron's reaction when he sees it. Harry's too, for that matter.)

From my point of view, the neckline was the only redeeming thing about the dress. For one thing, golden yellow is just not my color. It makes me look sickly. It would be better if I had a dark tan, like I had after spending a month at the beach at the end of last summer. Fleur apologized for the color, and offered to do a glamour charm on me to recreate that tan, and I told her I'd appreciate that if I did end up wearing the dress. The biggest problem, though, is that the dress makes me look fat. It's designed for slender girls – Ginny looks absolutely stunning in it, and I can imagine that Gabrielle will as well. (Although I'm curious to see how a 12 year old handles that low neckline. She's a 12 year old part-Veela, though, so she can probably pull it off.) I'm willing to bet that Fleur's other bridesmaids are petite little things too. But my waistline is nothing to brag about, and with my hips... I almost hope that Percy doesn't show up, so I don't have to wear it. That's terrible of me, isn't it? Oh well.

Harry and I were not at all surprised to find that the sleeping arrangements from last night were changed (one can always dream, though, right?), and I was moved into Percy's old room. I was disappointed that we got hardly any alone time at all today. After spending a whole night and the entire following day with him yesterday, I suppose I'm spoiled. I'll try to do something about that tomorrow. We did manage to take a walk around the garden tonight before we turned in, and he asked me how I was holding up. I told him I needed more hugs, and he did his best to accommodate me.

-0x0x0-

*The Daily Prophet*  
Thursday, 17 July, 1997

## **Boy Who Lived Escapes Again!**

by Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter has survived yet another encounter with He Who Must Not Be Named. In the late hours of Tuesday night, the use of magic was detected by the Ministry at the house of his muggle relatives. Aurors were dispatched to the scene, and arrived just as the confrontation ended.

*According to a well-placed source at the Ministry, Mr. Potter and some companions were intercepted as they were leaving the home, which has long been rumored to have unusual protections on it to assure his safety. Because they had chosen to exit the premises by broomstick, this confrontation actually took place in the air above the house. It is reported that not only Mr. Potter, but also all of his companions escaped safely from the altercation, although this latter information has not been confirmed.*

*The Aurors on the scene did apprehend several Death Eaters, some of whom were seriously injured. One Auror, who spoke on the condition of complete confidentiality, confided that he had actually seen Mr. Potter and You Know Who exchange spells before You Know Who rejoined his followers. Mr. Potter himself then fled the scene.*

*Another Ministry spokesman stated that Mr. Potter will not be prosecuted for Underage Use of Magic, despite the fact that his birthday is not for another two weeks, since it was determined to be a circumstance of self-defence. There was some disagreement within the Ministry over this decision, as many mutterings were overheard about the inappropriateness of the Boy Who Lived receiving special treatment. (See related interviews on page 4)*

*This marks at least the fourth time that Mr. Potter has faced You Know Who and survived, beginning with the well-known episode that provided him with his fame and widely used nickname. Last year they met in the widely witnessed incident in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, and as related in an exclusive interview with this reporter last year, they also confronted each other at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament in 1995. According to other claims made by Mr. Potter to this reporter, there have been one or two other encounters as well, although details of these are somewhat sketchy. (More information regarding these previous events may be found on pages 5 and 6.)*

*While this reporter (who in the interest of complete disclosure it must be acknowledged has a closer personal relationship with Mr. Potter than any other member of the press) extends her hearty congratulations to him for coming out of this most recent clash alive, others are not inclined to be so charitable. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that Mr. Potter should make more effort to avoid confrontations such as these, in the interest of the safety of the wizarding population as a whole. While it is apparently the case that no innocent bystanders were injured in Tuesday night's incident, this can by no means be guaranteed for any future encounters. (Please see The Daily Prophet's position on this issue on page 2.)*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger - July 17*

*Some very surprising developments today! First was the article in the Daily Prophet, but following immediately on its heels was the invitation from the Minister of Magic. There were some interesting aspects to Rita's story. First, it was relatively accurate, with no real exaggerations or half-truths (except perhaps for the part where she claimed to have a close personal relationship with Harry), which is very unusual for Rita. I think she might be trying to send a message of support to Harry, but is making it so subtle that no one else would catch it.*

The other is the nature of the terms she used to describe the fight – encounter, confrontation, altercation, clash, exchange of spells. She made it sound more like a disagreement than an attempt by Voldemort to kill Harry. Everyone agrees that this was likely ordered by the editors of the Prophet and/or the Ministry, especially considering the editorial on page 2, which came close to blaming the whole thing on Harry. We fear that this could mean that the faction that is pushing for a negotiated settlement with Voldemort now has the upper hand, and is using propaganda like this to nudge the wizarding public more towards that point of view.

So, the bad news here outweighs the good. Now as for the invitation, that remains to be seen, but if our analysis of the Ministry balance of power is correct, this may be a last ditch attempt by Scrimgeour to stay in control. The carrot was an offer to let Harry take his Apparation Exam early, instead of having to wait until after his birthday. He still wouldn't be officially allowed to apparate until after the 31st, but this way he could also avoid any unwanted attention, since no one else would know he was taking the exam. That aspect was quite appealing.

After some discussion, he decided to accept. He'll go in with Mr. Weasley this evening after most Ministry workers have gone home. I wanted to accompany him, but was reminded that I was technically in violation of the Muggleborn Registration Act, so I could be taken into custody if I showed up at the Ministry. And there are definitely some people there who would be eager to get their hands on me. Ron will go with him, though, and take his exam as well.

Later –

They both passed. And the meeting with Scrimgeour went about as we had expected. Harry and I activated our mirrors right before he went into the Minister's office, so I could listen in but not see anything. According to Harry, the change in the man since their last meeting on the day of Dumbledore's funeral was quite pronounced. He's clearly losing the power struggle in the Ministry, and Harry says he looked beaten down by it all.

His request was quite clear. He badly needs a public relations boost, and Harry's surviving a direct attack by Voldemort, along with the rest of us, is a good opportunity for him. It counters the increasing fear that Voldemort's victory is inevitable; that no one can stand up to him. And he can also point out the quick response of the Aurors, and the fact that a number of Death Eaters were captured.

Harry wanted to know exactly what he would have to do, and they eventually agreed that Harry would release a positive statement about the Aurors, and thank them for their timely assistance in the attack on him and his friends. He would also say how much he admired the job that Madame Bones had done in building up the force in response to the threat that Voldemort poses to our whole wizarding way of life. There are some subtle political points in this statement. First, since Scrimgeour was the Head of the Aurors under Bones, the praise reflects well on him. Second, by specifically not mentioning Thicknesse, it undercuts him to some extent. Third, it stresses that Voldemort is a threat to everyone, not just muggleborns, countering the recent propaganda to the contrary.

Harry wanted some assurances as well. First, that the Death Eaters that had been captured would

be securely held. Scrimgeour responded that this was his highest priority as well, and noted that none of the Death Eaters captured at the Ministry a year ago had broken out, nor had the ones captured at Hogwarts last month. And according to him, it wasn't for lack of trying on Voldemort's part. Harry did take the opportunity to remind the Minister just who had been responsible for both of these captures.

Harry also wanted to know about Umbridge, and Scrimgeour finally admitted that it had been a mistake on his part to keep her on after he took over. But he claimed that it was too late to do anything about that now, as she was firmly entrenched in the power structure and with the current situation he didn't have the political capital to move against her. Harry didn't accept that, at least not completely, and he got Scrimgeour to agree to oppose any further moves against muggleborns and her other targets. If everything goes well, and Scrimgeour's political fortunes begin to rise again as a result of this latest incident, he will be able to take her on more directly. We can only wait and hope for the best.

Harry excused himself for a few moments, and visited the loo to consult with me using the mirror. I told him he'd done very well, and I couldn't think of anything else to add. I did have some suggestions for him for the wording of his statement, which he quickly scribbled down on some parchment. He and Scrimgeour are going to release separate statements, so it doesn't look like a direct endorsement by Harry, but Harry's praise for the Aurors will be in the public's mind when Scrimgeour makes his plea for everyone to keep their spirits up and continue to oppose evil, citing Harry's example.

When Harry returned from the Ministry I gave him a very sound hug (and later when we were alone I made it even more memorable). Tonks had escorted the three of them out of the Ministry, and came back to the Burrow with them, and she had some other interesting news.

The final count on the attack at Privet Drive is 3 Death Eaters killed and 8 captured (including Selwyn, the one impersonating Moody). Combined with the ones from the attack on Hogwarts, and the ones from the Ministry last year, they think Voldemort is seriously shorthanded. He's running out of Death Eaters! There was quite a sense of relief at that news, since it means that we're probably safe here at the Burrow for the time being.

She also informed us that Shackbolt had discretely arranged to have the wand Harry captured from Voldemort scanned. It doesn't match the signature of any wand the Aurors have on file, which includes every wand ever checked in at the Ministry of Magic. We concluded that it must have come from Ollivander's stock of unsold wands that was captured along with him last summer. (And no, it's not Ravenclaw's wand, the one on display in the window, either.) Harry is becoming more convinced that Voldemort is quite concerned about the wand issue, to the point that he may become obsessed with it. Since Harry has that mental connection to Voldemort, and has been in his head so many times, I'll defer to his opinion on that.

Overall, though, things seem to be looking up. I'm more optimistic than I've been at any time since Dumbledore died, although we do have a long way to go.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## Notebooks and Letters Bonded For Life

### Final Year, Chapter 5 – Bonded For Life

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – June 20

*Sometimes I'm simply amazed at the fickleness of the wizarding world. Harry's support for Scrimgeour, such as it was, seems to have given the Minister new life. The public's fascination with The Boy Who Lived is as strong as ever. Getting both Harry's comments and the Minister's spin on the incident in the paper the day after the original story was perfect timing. The Daily Prophet fell all over itself backing off its earlier editorial position.*

*So, for the time being at least, Harry's a hero again. The twins have been ribbing him about it. Even though he winces and grimaces at their antics, I know he appreciates the way they tease him about his fame because it's clear that they don't take it seriously. Ginny also managed to get in a pretty good shot. She slid up against his side, batted her eyelashes at him, and simpered, "My hero!" Ron's eyes practically bugged out before he realized she was having him on, but Fred and George were practically rolling on the floor. I played along with it, and grabbed his other arm, pulled him down, kissed his cheek, and gushed, "You're so brave!"*

*Harry didn't know how to respond at first, looking back and forth at Ginny and me, who just stared back up at him with impish grins on our faces. Then he wrapped his arms around both of us and smirked, turned to Ron, and announced, "Well, at least it's a great way to pick up good looking women." I thought Ron was going to have a heart attack, and the twins nearly passed out. The three of us (Ginny, Harry, and me) burst out laughing after that.*

...

*Ron, Harry, and I have been spending as much time as we can talking together and planning. For one thing, Ron and I have been going through some of the more important pensieve memories that Harry and I picked up from Dumbledore's office. Harry had described them as well as he could, but it always helps to see things first hand. There are quite a few of them, though, so we'll be reviewing them for a long time.*

*There was a pretty amusing moment yesterday when I was rummaging around in my handbag, pulling out all sorts of odds and ends while looking for a charms book. Harry suddenly laughed out loud and Ron and I turned to him to find out what had struck him as being so funny. He said I*



reminded him of Marry Poppins – the scene where she’s first introduced to the children and begins unpacking her bag. I smiled and agreed. (Harry claims I giggled, but I do not giggle.) Then we had to explain to Ron who Mary Poppins was, and Harry wondered if she was a witch, since she could obviously do magic. It never occurred to me before how many stories we read and movies we saw growing up had magic in them.

That incident got us talking about what we were packing in our bags to prepare for when we leave, and I told Harry that Ron was taking care of the food. Ron got his rucksack and proudly showed us what he’d managed to pack away so far. He has an enormous quantity of Molly’s stew, which made Harry’s eyes light up. I agree that her stew is quite tasty, and complimented Ron on his choice as it’s also a very practical one-dish meal. Then he showed us the desserts. He has all sorts of pies and pastries, cakes, tarts – you name it, he’s got it. I wanted to chide him for going overboard in this area, but didn’t have the heart to say anything when I saw Harry lick his lips at the sight of the treacle tart.

For his part, Ron was astounded at how many books and how many feet of parchment Harry and I had in our bags. He was in the middle of a snarky comment about it being typical of me to pack practically every book I owned when he turned around and saw Harry pulling Gryffindor’s sword out of his rucksack. That shut him up because his lower jaw was somewhere just above his shoes. I have to admit, it is a rather impressive sight. Then Harry cut him off before he could resume his disparaging remark by saying that I was in charge of deciding which books to bring, that he knew I had spent a lot of time sorting through piles and piles of books, and that he trusted my judgment to make good choices. That show of support earned him a big hug and kiss from me, but a dirty look from Ron.

Harry changed the subject a little when he wondered about accommodations when we’re off searching for Horcruxes. I asked the boys what they thought about us using a wizarding tent. Both of them liked the idea, and Ron thought he could see if his father might once again borrow one of the tents we used at the Quidditch World Cup. Harry was reluctant to go that route, since that would run the risk of more people finding out what we were doing. I suggested we try to borrow the one from the Delacours that we used last summer with Fleur and Tonks. He liked that idea, and since we’ll be seeing them next week it will be a good opportunity to inquire about its availability.

...

Tonight is the full moon, so Remus and Tonks aren’t here. Since Snape fled that night, Remus hasn’t had Wolfsbane potion. This is his second full moon without it, and I feel so bad for him – it must be horrible having to go back to uncontrolled transformations. Tonks took him to her parents’ house, where they have a place to lock him up. If I have time in the next month, I’m going to try to learn to make the potion myself before the next full moon.

Since Fleur also went home to France to work on final preparations for the wedding, it’s a fair bit less crowded around the Burrow now. I’ve been taking the opportunity the past few days to talk to different people and get their opinions on the books about Dumbledore. Most of the members of the Order, as one might expect, liked the complimentary one Doge wrote. A few, Mrs. Weasley for example, said they wouldn’t even consider reading the exposé. Fleur was the most open-minded of

the lot.

The exposé was authored by a man who goes by the name Diogenes Diggle. He's apparently a well-known author of tell-all wizarding biographies whose claim is that his name reflects his style – he's fanatical about unearthing the truth. The uncomplimentary muggle expression for that would be muckraking. On the other hand, a more charitable term might be that he's an investigative author. I suppose we'll have to wait and see exactly what the book says to determine which descriptor is more accurate.

I think it's interesting how both books treat the same topics. The excerpts that have been published so far include Dumbledore's political influence, his troubled home life, and his epic battle with Grindelwald. One book lauds his selflessness and humility in turning down the Minister of Magic job while the other one denounces his behind the scenes manipulation, and claims that the actual Ministers have been puppets under his control. The first book sympathizes with the fact that his father went to prison for attacking muggles, and his sister suffered from a long illness which claimed her life the year he graduated from Hogwarts. The second book counters that Dumbledore shared his father's less than favorable opinions of muggles in his early years, and that his sister was not ill, but rather locked up because she was a squib! Finally, Doge claims that his defeat of Grindelwald was an epic duel, one of the most memorable in wizarding history, while Diggle suggests that the battle was not so noble as most people think.

As far as his being manipulative goes, we've had enough first hand experience with that aspect of his character that I have no trouble accepting those parts of the exposé. And as for his early home life – the real eye-opener for us is that his family lived in Godric's Hollow! Why would he keep that from Harry? As far as I'm concerned, there's even more reason for us to visit Godric's Hollow now.

When I discussed this with Harry and Ron, Harry pretty much shared my skepticism, but Ron's opinions are more in line with his mother's. He pointed out that in our experience Rita Skeeter has consistently bent the truth, or produced outright fabrications. I reminded him though, that Rita hadn't written the book, she had merely interviewed the author and written the stories in the Daily Prophet that contained the excerpts. I did concede that she most likely selected the parts that would make for the most sensational headlines.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 26

Bill and Fleur's wedding was absolutely fabulous! The way everything and everyone looked was simply amazing. And we learned a few interesting things as well. Ron's Auntie Muriel was quite entertaining – she really is a character. Not to mention Luna's father – Xenophilius. (And Harry thought Pius was an odd name!)

Ron provided a few moments of amusement as well. His reaction to Ginny's dress, as I had expected, was quite amusing. When he first got a glimpse of it his eyes bugged out. He spent a few seconds ogling her cleavage before he caught himself, then went bright red. At that point he began

*glaring at any male who looked at her. Eventually he calmed down, but after a while he glanced at her again and then the whole process repeated itself. Simply hilarious! Harry had an interesting reaction to Ginny's dress too, but more on that later.*

*As far as that goes, Ron's reaction to my dress was also entertaining.*

Hermione descended the stairs of the Burrow and passed through the uncharacteristically empty kitchen on her way out to the back garden, taking care not to catch her dress on anything. She was very pleased with how the gown had turned out. It was a pretty shade of lilac, with an eye-catching top. Emboldened by the low cut gowns that Fleur's bridesmaids would be wearing (which thankfully did not include her, as Percy had steadfastly ignored all entreaties to join his family for this celebration) she had chosen a more daring neckline than she would have ordinarily. But rather than the V-shaped neckline and back of that style, she had selected a spaghetti strap top with a scooped neckline and plunging back. The tightly fitted bodice flared into a full skirt, giving her the appearance of a narrow waistline, and hiding her hips.

Further enhancing the effect, she had managed to get a light tan over the last week, which set off the pastel shade of the dress perfectly. She had discovered a clearing in the woods out back of the Burrow, and had spent an hour each day sunbathing, after casting powerful privacy wards of course. Not even Harry had known about it, as she snuck out in the mornings before he and Ron got up. Since she didn't want any tan lines, she had untied the straps of her bikini top and left her back bare to the sun. Despite the privacy wards, she hadn't quite been able to bring herself to sunbathe topless while lying on her back, but she had folded down the triangles of her top and tucked the straps inside so that only a few square inches of her breasts had been covered. The result was that all of the skin exposed by her gown had a nice, healthy glow.

To top everything off, she had once again used the Sleakeasy hair potion to tame her bushy hair, leaving it nice and shiny with just a bit of a wave to it. As at the Yule Ball, she wore it up, pinned by a pair of sparkling jeweled hair clips that Fleur had given her, and the style nicely displayed the attractiveness of her bare shoulders. The overall result had been perfect, in her opinion.

Out in the back behind the house an archway had been set up, and in front of it Ron, Fred, and George were handing out portkeys to the guests as they arrived. George waved her over as soon as he spotted her.

"Good morning, fair lady," he greeted her with a sweeping bow. "I must say you look positively enchanting this morning."

"Thank you George," she responded with a light blush, after a quick glance at the scar on his cheek to confirm his identity. "Have you seen Harry?"

Before George could reply, Ron, having turned towards them at the sound of her voice, broke in. "Wow, Hermione! You look incredible!" he said in astonishment, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

“Thank you Ron,” Hermione sighed. “It’s nice to know that even after being friends for six years I can still surprise you.”

Ron finally managed to tear his gaze away from her torso and looked up in puzzlement. “Erm, what?”

“I mean, you’re clearly shocked that I can manage to look this attractive, right?”

“Well, yeah ... No! I mean you don’t usually look like ...” He was cut off by George’s hand smacking him on the back of the head.

“Sometimes, dear brother, when you’ve dug yourself into a hole like this, the best thing to do is shut up and quit digging.” He turned toward Hermione and then focused his attention over her left shoulder. “Here comes Harry now.”

“Hi guys, I was just checking the wards and ...” he broke off as Hermione turned to face him, a shy, expectant smile on her lips.

“Wow! Hermione, you look incredible!” he said appreciatively, his smile broadening as he ran his eyes down the length of her gown and back up to her face, before reaching out to run his fingers lightly up her arm to her shoulder and leaning in for quick kiss.

“Thank you Harry,” she beamed back at him. “You look great too.”

Ron was unable to let this exchange go unchallenged, and burst out, “Hey, he said exactly the same thing I did! How come he didn’t get yelled at?”

Hermione rolled her eyes and turned to her other best friend, while Harry slipped his arm around her waist and hugged her gently to his side. “It’s the way you said it, Ron. You sounded amazed that I could look this good. Harry didn’t look surprised, or make it seem unexpected.” Ron just shook his head and threw his hands up in the air, despairing of ever understanding the logic of women.

While Ron went off to greet another arriving guest, Fred handed Harry a simple number two pencil. Hermione smiled as she recalled Fleur’s request to her for some ordinary muggle item that she could obtain in large quantities, to use as portkeys. Hermione had bought her a package of ten boxes containing a dozen pencils each before she had left for Australia. The pencil was in pristine condition, unsharpened of course, as Hermione hadn’t wanted to take the time to sharpen 120 pencils, or try to explain the workings of a pencil sharpener to a witch.

“The way this works,” Fred explained, “is the portkey’s set to activate when you step through this arch. There’s another one at the Delacour estate, and that’s where you’ll arrive. Bill and Fleur have somehow managed to make it so that you’ll come out walking exactly the same way you were when you went in, without all the disorientation that you usually get from spinning around when you use a portkey.”

“My goodness, that’s impressive magic,” Hermione declared. “They should try to sell this.”

“It has limited usefulness, since it took about a week to set up, and it’s only good for two fixed points, but Gringotts is looking into the possibilities,” Fred acknowledged. “Businesses with overseas branches for example, where you can’t just apparate.” He paused to glance up at the simple archway standing there unassumingly in the July morning sunshine. “Bill’s a right genius at runes and charms, always has been. The surprise is that Fleur’s right up there with him. We had no idea. Hard to believe such a beautiful woman could be so brilliant.”

Harry frowned. “Just like it’s hard to believe that a brilliant woman could be beautiful?” he asked rather pointedly, glancing from Fred to Hermione.

Fred decided to take his brother’s advice and keep his mouth shut on this one. Hermione, however, smiled broadly at Harry, her eyes sparkling, and leaned over kiss him on the cheek and murmur in his ear. “You are definitely going to be rewarded for that statement Harry James Potter. Just wait until I get you alone later.”

“Erm, OK, I’m ... uh ... looking forward to it,” Harry stammered while Fred grinned and turned away.

As they approached the arch Hermione paused, examining the runes inscribed on it and the way they were positioned. Harry grinned at her incessant pursuit of knowledge but gave her a nudge, knowing that they would be standing here for hours if he didn’t pull her away from her study. Hermione shot him a sheepish grin and took his arm.

“This is a great idea,” he commented. “If they can keep us from falling down on the other side I’m all for it.” Hermione nodded with some relief evident in her expression.

“One of the things I was most worried about this dress was how it would stand up to travel by portkey,” she explained with a shy smile and a slight blush. “The top is cut so low I was afraid it might slip and I’d pop out a little.”

“I’ll be glad to keep an eye on that for you,” he teased with another grin.

She smiled back playfully. “I’m sure you will.”

As they stepped through the arch the portkey activated just as advertised, and they felt the familiar tug in their stomachs. The spinning sensation that normally accompanied portkey travel was different this time, with more of a feeling of forward motion. As they reappeared at the Delacour property in France the impression was more one of stepping off a high-speed escalator or conveyer belt.

Harry took two quick steps and quickly regained his balance but Hermione, unaccustomed to the high heels on the shoes she was wearing, stumbled slightly. Harry’s arm shot out immediately to steady her, and either unintentionally or by subconscious design, he caught her across the chest, with his hand cupping her breast for an instant before he withdrew it.

“Everything still seems to be in place,” he whispered into her ear, resuming their previous banter.

“I knew I could count on you,” she shot back with a twinkle in her eye.

As they paused to take stock of their surroundings, now comprised of the expansive grounds and vineyards of the estate in the wine country of southern France, the attendant on this end of the archway, most likely a Delacour cousin of some sort, approached.

“Bonjour, Monsieur et Mademoiselle. Bienvenue au Manoir Delacour,” he stated politely before switching to English and repeating the message. Hermione immediately seized the opportunity to respond in the local language.

“Merci beaucoup. C'est tres agréable d'être ici, chez vous.”

Their host showed just a touch of surprise before smiling and continuing in a warmer fashion, explaining where and when the ceremony was to take place and how the seating was arranged, concluding by inviting them to stroll around the grounds for a while. Hermione thanked him again and added that they had in fact been there before, and knew their way around, then translated his comments for Harry as they moved away from the entry point.

“So, why not use a sticking charm?” Harry asked, returning to the previous subject.

“I tried one, but it actually worked too well,” Hermione explained as a saucy grin reappeared on her face. “It made the fabric cling to my skin absolutely everywhere, conforming perfectly.” Seeing that he didn’t quite understand the concept she continued, “Think wet tee shirt.”

Harry opened and closed his mouth as his eyes widened. “Oh ... I guess I see your point.” He shook his head at her teasing smirk. “You are evil, you know. Now I’m not going to be able to get that image out of my mind all day.”

“Oh, I think you’ll change your mind when you see the bridesmaid’s dresses,” Hermione teased as she took his arm. “But if you like, I can show you what it looks like later if we’re alone.” Harry’s only response was a groan as they headed off toward the gardens.

Before they had gone far, a familiar face appeared.

“Viktor,” Hermione greeted their Bulgarian acquaintance. “What a pleasant surprise. It didn’t occur to me that you’d be here.”

“Fleur invited me, of course,” he replied with a slight bow. “Ve haf maintained our friendship since the tournament. And you?”

“Bill is the brother of our best friend, and we’re quite close to the family,” Harry responded quickly, stepping forward to shake hands, determined to maintain a friendly manner despite the way he felt Krum had taken advantage of Hermione’s request for assistance at Durmstrang the previous term. “Hermione and I also got to know Fleur pretty well last summer. She helped us out quite a bit with Hermione’s transfer last year.”

“Ah, yes, I recall,” the Bulgarian acknowledged before turning back to Hermione. “I must say, you are as beautiful as ever,” he declared, taking her hand and raising it to his lips. “You look vunderful.” Hermione blushed slightly, but moved closer to Harry, whose arm slid possessively around her waist and settled on her hip. Before letting go of her hand, Krum brushed his thumb across her unadorned ring finger and raised his eyebrow almost imperceptibly. Hermione blushed a bit more deeply this time, and dropped her gaze, somewhat flustered.

Harry caught the unspoken message as well, but forced a smile nevertheless. “Viktor, I want to thank you for all the help you gave Hermione last spring,” he broke in. “It must have been difficult for you, maintaining the ruse like that.”

“I assure you, it was my pleasure,” Krum returned, with a small, satisfied smile of his own. “Anytime I can offer similar assistance, do not hesitate to ask.”

Hermione finally found her voice. “I’m sure we will,” she replied graciously, slightly emphasizing the ‘we’. “And thank you again. Perhaps we’ll see you later, at the reception?”

It was a polite but clear signal that the conversation was over, and Krum bowed once more before moving off, and Harry and Hermione continued on their way.

The couple was strolling through a particularly attractive display of roses when they were tracked down by their host, Monsieur Delacour.

He began by greeting them warmly and welcoming them once more to his estate. Then he lowered his voice and said he’d like to meet with them privately. On seeing their startled expressions, he clarified that he wished to offer his assistance.

“Actually, sir, we were going to ask a favor of you,” Harry responded after overcoming his surprise. The Frenchman nodded, and stroked his beard thoughtfully.

“You are staying ze night?” he asked to confirm their intentions.

“We planned to,” Harry replied as Hermione nodded.

“We will talk tomorrow, zen,” M. Delacour decided. He then summoned a house elf to take their luggage to their rooms. Harry relinquished his rucksack, but Hermione had only brought her handbag, which Harry noticed had been transfigured to match her outfit, with some fancy beadwork added. With some discomfort, both from restraining herself from commenting on the house elf issue, and from the awkward situation of appearing to have no luggage for an overnight stay, she shook her head to decline the offered assistance. Their host, misreading the situation, merely raised an eyebrow and inquired if the couple wished to share a room.

For an instant, Hermione considered accepting, as she very much wanted to share a bed with Harry, but propriety (and the knowledge that Mrs. Weasley would likely learn of the altered sleeping arrangements) won out and she shook her head with some reluctance. Harry quickly stammered that he’d make sure she got her things from his bag before they retired for the night.

Eventually, the guests all arrived and the time for the wedding was at hand. Harry and Hermione found themselves seated on Bill's side of the aisle, behind a large assortment of Weasley relatives. Among the sea of red hair, one elderly woman particularly stood out, Ron's Great-Aunt Muriel, who seemed to have an opinion on everything and everyone, and was not a bit shy about sharing it with whoever happened to be in the vicinity. This included her ire at having to come to France for the ceremony ("I don't see why we should have to take a portkey here; England is a perfectly lovely place to have a wedding this time of year"), her goblin-made tiara, which Fleur was wearing (although the beautiful part-Veela, who had more fashion sense than anyone Hermione knew, evidently required extensive instruction from Muriel on exactly how it should be worn), and her disapproval of pretty much anything French, most especially the overly revealing outfits of the women present ("In my day, we certainly had the sense to keep our ankles covered").

Harry shot an amused glance at Hermione, who turned her nose in the air and daintily crossed her ankles, taking care to adjust her floor-length gown to fall down to the tops of her shoes. He then reached over to give her hand a squeeze as they shared a grin. Across the aisle there was something of a stir as Viktor Krum took his seat, many of the guests twisting and craning their necks to get a better look at the international quidditch star.

The murmuring quieted down as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Madame Delacour walked down the aisle, signaling that the ceremony was about to begin. Bill, Charlie, Fred, George, and Ron appeared at the front in fancy dress robes, and Harry grinned at the sight of Ron tugging uncomfortably at his neck. At that point the music changed, and the assembly turned to face the rear of the garden.

Ginny came down the aisle first, beaming at the people she knew in the crowd, and positively glowing in the attention she was receiving. Gabrielle was next, followed by two girls Harry and Hermione didn't know, the first of whom appeared to be a Delacour cousin judging by the hair, and the other, the maid of honor, a close friend of Fleur's from Beauxbatons. As Hermione had expected, all four had amazingly slender figures, which were set off to perfection by the sleek style and clingy golden fabric of the bridesmaids' dresses.

Fleur, by contrast, was wearing a simple white strapless gown, which displayed her more pronounced curves so exquisitely that it was literally breathtaking. Hermione quickly concluded that the top must have been held in place by magic, as it seemed about to give way at any moment. She subsequently hoped that the practical joker nature of the bride's new brothers-in-law would be suppressed; so that they wouldn't be tempted to find out what would happen if they tried a *Finite Incantatum* on the garment.

"Ginevra's dress is far too low cut," came Auntie Muriel's voice in a whisper that managed to carry to half of the assembly. A large grin blossomed on Ginny's face and she stood up a little straighter, which thrust her chest out a bit more, as attention focussed once more on her. If anyone hadn't noticed her new-found cleavage before, her great-aunt had pretty much guaranteed that they would now. Catching Hermione's eye, she motioned toward Ron, who was glowering at anyone who he thought was appreciating his sister's figure too much, and smiled and shot a wink at her best friend.



Hermione smiled back broadly, then noticed that Harry was also studying Ginny rather intently. “Harry, stop staring at Ginny’s chest,” she whispered, leaning closer to him.

“I wasn’t!” he protested. The look she gave him clearly communicated her skepticism. “I was thinking how good that dress would look on you.” Hermione just rolled her eyes and shook her head, but Harry, leaning his head over next to hers for this discussion, merely glanced straight down and grinned. Immediately below, directly in his line of vision, was firm evidence that supported his contention.

“No,” she insisted, blushing furiously. “I mean the color is not that good on me.”

“I wasn’t talking about the color,” he smirked.

“I know, but you need to consider more about a dress than how well it shows off a girl’s breasts,” she whispered back, elbowing him sharply in the ribs. “See how that gold brings out the copper highlights in Ginny’s hair?”

“Hermione, I really don’t think that any guy here is looking at her hair right now.”

“I know, but women take those things into consideration, and they’re ultimately the ones who decide what looks good,” she explained with a sigh. “Now, notice how that particular shade also sets off Gabrielle’s silvery blonde hair. And she also charmed her skin a little darker. Trust me, that color didn’t work on me at all.”

Harry leaned back thoughtfully, and both of them paid attention to the beginning of the ceremony for a few moments. The wizard who was presiding started by welcoming everyone to the celebration of the union of two souls.

Harry tuned him out and leaned back over to Hermione. “That light purple color looks good on you.”

Hermione smiled back at him and cast a discrete charm that allowed them to continue to converse without disturbing the other guests. “Thank you, that’s sweet of you to notice. Yes, pastels work well on me, especially during the summer when I have a bit of a tan. And by the way, it’s lilac.”

“Lilac?”

“Yes. This particular shade of light purple is called lilac.”

“OK.” Harry checked again to see how the ceremony was coming along, but the officiating wizard was still going strong with his speech, and it was in French now so he turned back to Hermione.

“Light blue looks great on you too.” Seeing Hermione’s questioning look he elaborated. “Your Yule Ball dress.”

Hermione’s eyes sparkled with love, and amusement. “Periwinkle,” she replied simply, her smile growing larger as she took his hand again and squeezed it hard, while nodding back to the front of

the gathering.

The wizard was now asking Bill and Fleur, in French first and then in English, if they would take each other as husband and wife. In the front rows Mrs. Weasley on one side and Mrs. Delacour on the other had both lost it, and were crying softly into their husbands' shoulders.

Harry squeezed her hand back and Hermione turned and beamed at him; her eyes too were full of tears.

"Then I declare you bonded for life."

Harry never saw Bill and Fleur's first kiss as a married couple, never heard the shouts of congratulations and the applause. He was lost in Hermione's glistening brown eyes, as she also was in his emerald green ones, realizing something that he had probably known deep down for some time now, but was now as clear as the bright blue sky overhead.

As the rest of the guests stood and turned to watch Bill and Fleur and the rest of the bridal party move back down the aisle, Harry reached out and took Hermione's other hand as well, pulling her around to face him.

"I want this," he stated simply.

"Harry?"

"I want this. More than anything I've ever wanted in my life. I want it ... with you."

"Oh Harry!" she gasped, realizing what he was saying.

"Hermione, as soon as this is over, when he's gone, will you ... will you marry me?"

"Yes!" was all she managed to gasp before her lips crashed against his and his arms came up to pull her as tightly to himself as he could, her arms following suit an instant later.

After a few seconds she pulled back from the kiss, conscious of the fact that they were in the middle of a crowd, and burrowed her head into his chest, squeezing her body to his for all she was worth. For his part, Harry leaned his head against hers, somewhat in a daze over what he'd just done.

"Should we tell anyone?" she wondered, a large part of her not wanting to share the complete sense of contentment she was feeling just then.

"How about we keep it to ourselves for now?" he suggested. "At least until tomorrow."

"Good idea," she agreed. "We don't need to upstage Bill and Fleur."

*The rest of the day is something of a blur, as my mind was rather preoccupied with the decision*

*we'd just made. We hardly left each other's sides, clinging to each other, almost giddy with happiness. Fortunately for our secret, it was such a festive occasion that everyone else was also in high spirits and so didn't notice the fairly subtle change in our behavior. There were a few moments that did stand out, though.*

*Once the bridal party had moved to the back of the area set aside for the festivities, the chairs were magically moved aside and tables appeared, with white table cloths and lovely arrangements of floral centerpieces, no two alike. After we'd eaten for a while, a dance floor emerged in the space where the ceremony had been held, and music began to play.*

*During the toasts to the bridal couple, once he and Fleur had accepted everyone's best wishes, Bill stood and called for another toast, in honor of the event that had brought them together, the Tri Wizard Tournament. He began by noting the presence of some celebrities among their guests, and thanked Viktor and Harry for their attendance. Then he introduced Mr. and Mrs. Diggory, close friends and neighbors of his family, and asked for a moment of silence in remembrance of Cedric. While Harry didn't particularly enjoy being singled out (up until that point he had managed to remain relatively inconspicuous), he did appreciate that Cedric received his due.*

*Remus and Tonks were at our table, along with a few other Order members. Tonks was wearing one of the more striking outfits among the guests, in line with her rather flamboyant character. I knew that she had spent nearly an hour experimenting with different hair colors and skin tones, combining them with an assortment of fabrics and colors. She had considered a shocking shade of purple, which would have been pretty bold, but settled for bright red hair and a scarlet and gold gown. She was also somewhat bustier than normal.*

*The real surprise came when she leaned over and whispered that she and Remus had something important to tell us. They're going to get married too! When I asked how they could do that with the laws that had been passed, she informed me that the laws were considerably less restrictive in France, and that they decided to do it while they were here. And Remus wants Harry to stand up for him. To keep things simple, (and because Fleur is going to be otherwise occupied!) I'm going to stand up for Tonks as well. What an amazing day this was turning out to be!*

*Ron also learned some important information.*

*Ron had joined Harry and Hermione at their table, and the trio was excitedly discussing the news about Remus and Tonks under the cover of a *Muffliato* spell when Viktor Krum approached their table to request a dance with Hermione. She politely but firmly declined, stating that as she was attending with Harry, she naturally expected to dance with him for the most part. With that she pulled him out onto the dance floor, leaving the jilted Bulgarian seeker behind with their best friend, who had at one time been one of his most fervent fans. Together, they stood looking over the rest of the wedding guests, with Ron wondering if he should ask a quidditch question, or if Krum would be tired of hearing those. Fortunately, he didn't have to wonder very long.*

*"Who is pretty blonde?" Krum asked suddenly, gesturing out to where Luna skipped and whirled by herself, seemingly dancing to music only she could hear.*

“Oh, that’s Loon ... er Luna. Luna Lovegood,” Ron replied quickly.

Krum’s interest in his potential next conquest quickly waned. “Lovegood?” he scowled. “Like that man over there?”

Ron turned in the direction indicated and spotted Luna’s father, incongruously dressed in lemon yellow robes that matched Luna’s gown. “Uh, yeah. That’s her dad,” he replied with some puzzlement at the sudden change in attitude of his companion. “They’re neighbors of ours – live just over the hill from us.”

“If this were not a wedding, I would challenge him to a duel!” Viktor blurted out vehemently. “He is wearing Grindelwald’s sign.”

Completely taken aback at this disproportionately hostile attitude toward a man he considered extremely eccentric, but harmless, Ron took a closer look at the offending emblem. His eyes widened and his breath caught in his throat for an instant. There, on a chain hanging around his neighbor’s neck, was the triangular symbol from the Gaunt family ring!

“Erm, actually, he’s a bit, shall we say, odd,” Ron stammered in an attempt to calm down the irate Bulgarian. “My guess is that he doesn’t even realize that. Grindelwald wasn’t really a big issue in Britain, you know.” *Harry and Hermione needed to hear about this as soon as possible!*

Krum scowled for a short time while he considered that explanation, then shrugged and continued his perusal of the wedding guests.

“Ah! And who is very pretty red haired girl over there?”

“Which one?” Ron asked, breaking away from his musing on the mysterious icon. The place was positively overflowing with redheads, after all.

“The bridesmaid.” Viktor motioned to where Ginny was standing with one of Fleur’s cousins, flirting a little bit, and looking far too attractive in Ron’s opinion.

“That’s my sister.” The challenging tone in Ron’s voice caused the celebrated seeker to raise his eyebrows.

“I see. She is quite lovely, don’t you agree? And just how old is she?”

“She’s only fifteen,” Ron answered through clenched teeth, withholding the additional information that Ginny would turn sixteen in two weeks. It had been bad enough back during fourth year when this famous git had gone after Hermione, who had been three years younger than him. Ginny was nearly two years younger still, clearly far too young for the more experienced international quidditch star.

“Really? She seems quite mature for her age. You must be very proud of her.” Viktor had dealt with jealous brothers before, and knew just which buttons to push. “I believe I would like to get to know her better.”

Ron could only watch helplessly as the older man turned and made his way through the crowd, a wolf stalking his prey. *Too bad Cho Chang isn't here*, he thought in dismay. *She'd be perfect for him*. Looking around desperately, he decided that he should be out on the dance floor to keep a better eye on the two of them. Hurrying out past the last tables, a flash of yellow caught his eye.

“Luna! Erm ... would you like to dance with me?”

Luna's large blue eyes went even wider than normal for a moment before she recovered her detached manner. “Why Ronald, that would be lovely.”

Meanwhile, Harry was deciding that dancing with Hermione was considerably better than his only previous experience with the activity, and something that he wouldn't mind doing a lot more of. While for the most part he focused his attention on his partner and the knowing looks of intimacy they were sharing, he occasionally glanced around to observe the other dancers out on the floor.

“Tonks really stands out in that red number,” he commented, trying to put into practice his newfound knowledge of color coordination. “It seems to suit her.” Hermione smiled and nodded, pleased that he was making the effort to learn something new for her.

“Red's another color that looks good on you,” Harry offered. Hermione cocked her head in surprise.

“You're right. It's one of the few bright colors I can wear. I'm impressed that you're taking this so seriously.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “I suppose you're thinking of the red outfit I wore the day we left Privet Drive?”

“Actually I was thinking of something smaller than that,” he grinned.

She gave a small huff and hit him in the arm. “Harry Potter, honestly. Are you referring to the underwear I was wearing that day?” Then a puzzled expression crossed her face. “But you never saw that on me, actually. You only saw it after I'd turned into you.” She grinned back at him. “Perhaps you should say *you* look good in red,” she teased.

“Nope. I wasn't talking about that either, although I'm positive that underwear looks better on you than it did on me,” he countered. “I was thinking about the red bikini you wore last summer.” She blushed very prettily at that. She remembered quite well how he couldn't take his eyes off her during the time they spent on the beach, on what was definitely the best holiday of her life.

“Although I suppose it couldn't be something as simple as red,” he sighed in mock resignation.

“Crimson,” Hermione replied, laughing lightly at his antics and playing along. “My bikini was crimson. And the color in Tonks's dress is scarlet – scarlet and gold.”

“Gryffindor colors,” Harry decided. “Is that the house she was in?”

“I don't think she's ever said,” Hermione responded after a moment's thought. “Just that she was a troublemaker.”

Harry looked over again at the young Auror dancing with his former Defense professor and decided to change the subject, as there was another aspect of these outfits that he was curious about. "Erm ... is it just my imagination or are weddings the occasion for witches to ... ah ... show off their ... you know?" He shot a glance at the top of Hermione's gown.

Hermione laughed and pulled him closer for a brief hug. "It would certainly appear so," she agreed. Lowering her voice she continued, "Do you like what you see?"

Harry tightened his grip, enjoying the feel of her body pressed into his. "I certainly like the looks of the one I'm holding right now," he murmured back

"I'm glad to hear that," Hermione bantered in return, leaning her head against his chest. "I ... oh my!" She pulled her head back abruptly and Harry turned to look in the direction she was staring. There, over on the edge of the dance floor, Ginny and Viktor were locked in each other's arms, the normally dour dark-haired man smiling faintly at the slightly star struck expression on the younger girl's face as she leaned into him.

"I'm worried about the way he's looking at her," Hermione decided. Before Harry could ask what she meant she clarified further, "I've seen that look before. Let's switch partners when the song ends."

Krum was surprised, but pleasantly so, to find himself dancing with the woman he had just been turned down by only a short time before. Ginny was also surprised, but had no objection to dancing with Harry.

"You look great," Harry declared once they were by themselves. Ginny blushed and accepted his compliment with a shy smile. "That gold dress really goes well with your hair." This time the youngest Weasley gaped for a moment before recovering and smiling weakly. *Her hair? That's what he noticed about this dress? The color? What about...?*

"All right, who are you and what have you done with Harry Potter?" she demanded, breaking into a grin as he grinned back at her question. "Since when do you know anything about color? Not that you're wrong, of course," she added, flipping her long shiny red hair back over her shoulder in an exaggerated motion, followed by a light laugh.

"Hermione's been giving me lessons," he admitted, triggering a heartier laugh from his companion. He paused while they maneuvered around some other dancing couples.

"So, you and Krum ...?" he tried to ask nonchalantly.

Ginny's eyes narrowed.

"I told you last Christmas that I didn't need another brother, Harry Potter," she stated testily. "I don't need rescuing from the famous quidditch star. I'm well aware that he's just looking for a pretty girl for the day. I can handle myself."

Harry shook his head apologetically. "I know you can, Ginny. And ordinarily I wouldn't say anything." Ginny relaxed, but only slightly, her eyes still demanding further explanation. "It's just that Hermione was concerned."

"Hermione? Not Ron?" Ginny queried in surprise. Hermione wasn't normally the overprotective type, at least as far as she was concerned. (Harry was a different story.) The older girl had generally been supportive of her relationships.

Harry nodded. "She wants to talk to you."

At the end of the dance Hermione and Viktor rejoined them and Hermione suggested that Ginny accompany her to the ladies room. Harry just shrugged at his fellow champion and turned away to find Ron again. To his amazement, he spotted his best mate, not at the table shoveling down food, but out on the dance floor with Luna Lovegood! Wondering if his friend was finally starting to see something in the unusual Ravenclaw, he returned to their table to wait.

"Really Hermione, I've dated more than you have," Ginny insisted once the two girls were alone. "While I'm quite certain Harry would never take advantage of you, or even touch you if you didn't want him to, I've had to fight off plenty of roaming hands. And since the only other guy you went out with was Viktor, and it was just the one dance, I think I'm the more experienced one here."

"Well, you're certainly right about Harry, and Viktor was a perfect gentleman, so you don't need to worry along those lines," Hermione explained. "But those elegant manners can put you off your guard and before you know it ... let's just say that Viktor might want to move quite a bit faster, and in a different way than what you've been accustomed to. I don't know if it's a cultural thing or what."

"Just what are you saying, then?" Ginny asked, now confused.

"You know that Viktor and I only had one real date, right?" the older girl asked. Ginny nodded. "Well, the next thing I know he's asking me to come to Bulgaria to meet his parents."

"OK, that does seem a bit fast," Ginny acknowledged.

"I turned him down, of course," Hermione continued. "But the next time I saw him he was talking about marriage." Ginny's jaw dropped.

"You're kidding! But what about Harry?"

Hermione was taken aback. *Surely Ginny hadn't already figured out that Harry had just asked her to marry him?* Then she realized what her younger friend was asking.

"Yes, that's the even crazier part," she agreed. "That happened *while* I was going with Harry!" Ginny could only shake her head in amazement.

"So anyway, I just wanted to give you a heads up so you aren't caught by surprise like I was, if anything more comes of this." Hermione concluded.

“Yeah, thanks, I’ll keep it in mind. I’m not looking for anything serious, just a little fun.” Ginny pondered this information while the two of them started back toward the reception area. “Oh, Hermione? One more thing.” Hermione looked up expectantly. “How good a kisser is he?”

Hermione blushed, then shot her friend a sly grin. “You’ll just have to find that out for yourself.”

By the time they returned, Ron and Luna had joined Harry, and the three of them had gone over to talk to Luna’s father after Ron grabbed a sandwich. Ginny excused herself to rejoin Viktor before Ron had a chance to object, and Hermione moved over to Harry and ducked under his arm, wrapping it around her shoulder. He grinned down at her while Ron rolled his eyes and Luna smiled softly at them.

By then Harry had asked a few subtle questions, and determined that Xenophilius Lovegood had no idea that the symbol he wore had anything to do with Grindelwald, but rather maintained that it was associated with something much, much older and more powerful. Evidently the man was as paranoid as Moody had been, because he refused to expand on the subject in public. Luna immediately suggested that the trio come to her house to visit sometime (although her attention was fixed firmly on Ron as she made this offer) and her father agreed wholeheartedly, promising to tell them more at that time.

Having concluded this little bit of business, Hermione suggested that Ron dance one dance with her, and Harry promptly offered his arm to Luna, inviting her to do the same. At the end of that song they switched, and Ron found himself once again with an eager dance partner, while his two best friends grinned at him and spun away together.

*All in all, it was a glorious afternoon. Several times I told Harry we didn’t need to dance any more, but he just responded that he knew it was something I enjoyed, and he was glad to do it if it made me happy. I love that man so much! Bill danced one dance with me while Fleur danced with Harry. I took the opportunity to ask him about the charms and runes on the portkey terminals. Fleur, on the other hand, had figured out from our body language that something had changed in our relationship, and took the opportunity to tease Harry about it, so he was quite flushed at the end of the dance. Of course, every male who danced with her had that reaction, but in Harry’s case it wasn’t due to her Veela charm, as he’s pretty much immune to it. Instead, she got him riled up by making suggestive remarks about certain activities he might want to engage in with me. She is quite the tease, but I think there were some tips there that I might want him to try out sometime.*

*At one point we noticed that Ron had been collared by his Great-Aunt Muriel, and she seemed to be going on and on about something. After he finally got away he told us that she had some very interesting things to say about the new books on Dumbledore, although he wasn’t quite sure what to make of it.*

*He said she acted like she had some first-hand knowledge of the events surrounding the death of Dumbledore’s mother and sister, and made it sound like the more sensationalistic book had the right of it. We’ll have to talk more about that when we finally get a chance to read the books.*



*Near the end of the day we took him aside and told him Harry had asked me to marry him. That didn't quite go as well as it might have.*

“Bloody hell, mate!” Ron exclaimed in shock. “Are you insane?” Hermione decided that two possible reactions to that insensitive comment would be to burst into tears or burst into laughter. Since she was in such a good mood, she decided on the latter.

“Oh Ron, it's so lovely to hear your opinion on the desirability of being married to me. It's certainly a good thing that I'm marrying Harry instead of you, don't you think?”

Harry was not quite so amused. He wrapped his arm around the love of his life and pulled her to his side, and shot a glare at Ron that should have sent shudders through his friend, had he not still been trying to comprehend what Hermione had just said.

“On the contrary, Ron Weasley, I think this is the most sensible decision I've ever made in my life,” he snapped. “If anything, you should probably question Hermione's sanity for agreeing to marry a walking trouble magnet like me.

Ron only then realized the precarious position his ill-considered response had put him in, but Hermione spared him from any serious injury by putting both hands on Harry's head and jerking it toward her.

“I disagree.” With that succinct rebuttal she pulled his face down to hers and proceeded to snog his brains out. When they finally surfaced several minutes later, their best friend had wisely taken his leave.

*Later in the evening, after the festivities had died down somewhat, Harry and I managed to 'accidentally' get lost in the Delacour mansion, and ended up in an empty room all by ourselves. I took the opportunity to thoroughly reward him for the wonderful things he said during the day, and to celebrate the new 'development' in our relationship. (We're going to get married!!!)*

*Along the way, I showed him the effect of the sticking charm on my top, as I had promised, and he agreed that it looked almost indecent. I also demonstrated how loose the top became when the spaghetti straps accidentally slipped off my shoulders, and invited him to explore a bit to determine the exact extent of my suntan. While he was doing that I explained how I'd sunbathed privately at the Burrow, and suggested that he might wish to join me in the future. He liked that idea very much. We also engaged in a lot of nonverbal communication.*

*What we did not do was discuss the more serious things we had learned at the reception, such as the things we heard from Mr. Lovegood and Aunt Muriel. There will be plenty of time for that later.*

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*



## **Notebooks and Letters** **A Second Wedding, And Trouble Back Home**

### **Final Year, Chapter 6 – A Second Wedding, And Trouble Back Home**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 27

*I woke up with a big smile on my face this morning. I am so happy! I'm going to marry Harry! (I almost squealed out loud when I wrote that sentence. I can't believe I'm being such a girl!) I know, it won't be for some time, and there will be a lot of hard work and difficult times between now and then, but I decided I was going to enjoy the feeling for at least one morning before I started worrying about everything else. One of the best parts of the idea is that it means he's thinking of the future, which means that the defeat of Voldemort is something that he considers to be possible.*

*I'm also happy for Bill and Fleur, of course, and also for Remus and Tonks. Weddings are joyful occasions at any time, but deciding on my own and learning about that of some of our closest friends, while attending that of other close friends makes it even more special. Harry certainly has great timing!*

*We talked about a ring last night, and I told him it wasn't important right now. He objected, but I pointed out that I wouldn't be able to wear it without a concealment charm in any case. I know I haven't seen Tonks wearing one. Speaking of that, we'll find out more today about their plans. It's likely that their ceremony will need to be today, since we're scheduled to return to Britain this evening. Of course, I suppose we could change those plans, assuming the license on the Delacours' portkeys doesn't expire.*

*I think I'm going to go wake up Harry.*

Harry slowly awoke from a very nice dream to an equally nice reality, as Hermione had decided to kiss him awake. He instinctively wrapped his arm around her and pulled her down, so that she ended up lying on top of him, which neither of them minded in the slightest. When she finally broke the kiss, he opened his eyes to see a dazzling smile on her face.

“What has you in such a good mood this morning?” he asked, returning her smile.

“Oh, it could be because I had such a wonderful time at a wedding yesterday,” she mused,

pretending to ponder the question. “Or, it could be because I’ll be witnessing another wedding today.” She paused and bit her lip, cocking her head. “Or ...”

“Or?” he prompted.

“Or it might be because the most wonderful man in the world asked me to marry him yesterday,” she gushed, breaking into a grin

“Sounds like one right lucky bloke to me,” he grinned back, pulling her close again. After another long, tender kiss, Harry leaned back as she curled up against him and he finally began to come aware of his surroundings.

“Isn’t it awfully early?” he wondered.

“A bit,” she confirmed. “But I couldn’t sleep anymore and decided I wanted to be with you. “And ...” she drew back and gave him an impish grin.

“Yes?” He played along with her, unable to resist her uncharacteristically silly mood.

“I was wondering if you wanted to go out and find some nice secluded spot on the grounds and catch some sun, like we talked about last night,” she suggested, coyly tracing her finger across his chest.

Harry’s eyes shot open, his interest now very much aroused, and he unconsciously licked his lips. Then he frowned. “I didn’t bring a swimsuit, or even any shorts.”

“Don’t worry,” Hermione announced with a gleam in her eye. “I brought a suit for you.”

“Which one?” he asked automatically.

“Which one do you think?” she responded in a low, suggestive voice. He immediately figured it out, and grimaced playfully. Of course, he knew which suit she liked to see on him. He also knew which suit he most wanted to see her in.

“And which suit of yours did you bring,” he inquired hopefully.

“Which one do you think?” Her tone of voice confirmed it for him, but he played along.

“The red one?”

She grinned saucily and reached out and tapped him on the nose, confirming his guess.

“Crimson.”

Harry hurriedly got dressed while Hermione went back to put her suit on under her clothes, and they met down in the dining room, where an assortment of breakfast foods had been laid out for them. Hermione inspected the offerings eagerly, happy to see a variety of pastries and other

French items she had grown accustomed to at Beauxbatons, among the more traditional English fare.

While Harry loaded up his plate with a fried egg and toast and sausages, he also accepted her suggestion to try a flaky cheese croissant. Once they had settled into their seats their host joined them.

“Bonjour, Monsieur Delacour,” Hermione greeted him immediately. Harry attempted his own version of ‘bonjour’ only mangling it slightly. M. Delacour returned their greeting and nodded politely, then settled down next to them. After inquiring if they’d slept well, and a few other pleasantries, he grew more serious.

“I thought we might have that conversation this morning, while we have this time to ourselves. I have directed the house elves to divert any other early risers to another dining area for a few minutes. You said you had a favor to ask of me?”

“Yes,” Harry replied quickly. “We were wondering if we might be able to borrow the tent we used last summer.”

“Oh, are you planning to do some traveling?” the older man wondered. Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance, which he noted.

“We might be, but the nature of our movements must be very confidential,” Hermione answered this time. “We felt that we could rely on your discretion.”

“Thank you,” M. Delacour responded immediately, surprising them. “You honor me by your trust.” They quickly worked out the details of the teens’ request.

“Now then, as for my offer to you,” the older man resumed. “Our Ministry of Magic is quite concerned with the situation that is developing in your country. While it is not possible for them to actively oppose the decisions being made by your ministry, there are other avenues of action to which they will not object.” There was a brief silence while the young couple digested this information.

“What about the International Confederation?” Hermione asked. “Is there anything they can do?”

“The Confederation has been in an unsettled state since Dumbledore’s death,” came the response. “They have not yet selected a new Supreme Mugwump. But their authority is limited, at best.”

“Sounds like the United Nations,” Hermione commented, half to Harry and half to herself.

“So, what are you suggesting, then,” Harry broke in, turning the discussion back to the original topic.

“I just happen to have a number of leftover portkeys,” their host informed them with a conspiratorial smirk. “For some reason we seem to have ordered far more than were required. They are all set to bring the user to this estate. I thought you might find a use for them.” Harry and

Hermione exchanged another glance, somewhat confused. They had indeed discussed the usefulness of having portkeys available to get out of a tight spot, and one that would deliver them to a location guaranteed to be in friendly hands would indeed be valuable. But why the quantity that Fleur's father seemed to be offering?

"I see that I should clarify further," M. Delacour continued. "There are already quite a few British wizarding families fleeing your country due to your ministry's restrictive policies. Several of them have resettled in my country." Hermione immediately nodded her understanding, recalling that her friend Sally-Anne's family had already made that decision. "It appears to us that this will soon become an even more urgent matter. We suspect that you might be in a position to assist with this process." The French wizard folded his hands on the table and leaned forward. "Please give these portkeys to any family who might find themselves needing to leave your country on short notice. We will take care of them when they arrive, and assist them as well as we are able to make new living arrangements."

Harry and Hermione fell silent, contemplating this most generous offer. Their host was suggesting that they, in essence, help smuggle refugees, mostly muggleborn wizards and witches and their families, out of Britain. And he was offering to make the Delacour estate the terminus of this latter day underground railroad.

"Won't you get in trouble for the unauthorized portkeys?" Hermione wondered. "After all, this will vastly exceed the terms of their original authorization."

M. Delacour favored them with a mirthless smile. "The responsibility for enforcing international portkey regulations lies with the Ministry of the country of destination. Your ministry will file a complaint with my ministry, which will assess a fine, which I will pay. My understanding is that it will be one Galleon per violation." They all chuckled at the implication. By imposing such a trivial penalty, the French would be in effect thumbing their noses at the British, and sending a not so subtle message of disapproval of the policies of their neighbor across the Channel.

*As we concluded our conversation, Gabrielle stumbled into the room, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. I quickly changed the subject, asking if there was a good place somewhere on the estate for Harry and me to relax and enjoy the sun. Gabrielle immediately perked up and announced that she knew just the spot. She hurried through her breakfast and raced out of the room to change into her swimsuit. She was so excited! It was quite the change from the sophisticated young lady at the wedding yesterday. Today, she's back to being the young preteen girl with a crush on Harry Potter.*

*Her crush on Harry manifests itself differently than Ginny's did. She's not a bit shy around him, just excited. Fortunately, she isn't clinging to any romantic fantasies, but rather has actively supported my relationship with him. I'm glad I made sure that Harry danced with her at the wedding. It really made her day.*

*She took us to a nice little pond, hidden away in a copse of trees. She told us that Fleur used to come here, and had magicked up a raft to lie out in the sun on, later sharing the secret spot with*

her younger sister. The raft has permanent cushioning charms on it to make it nice and comfortable. While Harry and I relaxed and basked in the sun, the little tease kept sneaking up on Harry and splashing him, then giggling and swimming away when he tried to get her back. She's at that age where she sometimes wants to be grown up but sometimes still wants to be a kid. More than a girl but less than a woman. I suspect it's trickier with her being a part-Veela.

The swimsuit she wore also nicely illustrated her almost-but-not-quite maturity. It was a cute, but not overly revealing two-piece. (Not nearly as skimpy as mine.) She is physically more developed than an average twelve year old, which I assume is also an aspect of being part-Veela. She has very nice legs, and her bust is much larger than mine was at that age. She's more like how I looked at fourteen. On the other hand, she's not completely outside of the normal range of development for girls. Lavender, for example, was that developed at age twelve, and I'm sure Susan also was, although I never shared a room with her, and didn't really know her well back then.

We enjoyed the hour we spent at the pond so much that we wondered if we might stay over in France another day and spend a day on the beach at the Riviera. I teased Harry that he'd be able to see all those topless girls again. After he turned red, as I'd intended, he got me back by asking if I'd be among the topless girls. Not a chance! I'm only just barely brave enough to show myself to Harry like that. There's no way I would be able to let anyone else see me.

That made me wonder if we should ask Ron if he wanted to join us if we do go to the beach. Given how much he stared at my top at the wedding, I don't think I'd be comfortable wearing a skimpy bikini around him. Harry confirmed that he thought Ron would go spare on a topless beach.

By the time the three of them returned to the mansion, Ron was in the middle of breakfast, making his way through a mound of sausages.

"Hi guys, where you been?" he called out, fortunately taking care to swallow first. "And why does Hermione have a red string tied around her neck?"

Harry and Hermione shared a smile, and Harry grinned at Ron. "It's crimson," he corrected.

"Huh?"

"The color is crimson, it's part of Hermione's swimsuit, and the reason she's wearing it is that we've just been for a swim with Gabrielle at her secret pond." Harry gave the young girl a wink, which elicited a grin and a giggle before she dashed from the room.

Ron shot Harry a strange look before turning his attention more closely to his other best friend. His gaze dropped from the red string around her neck down to her torso, no doubt trying to extrapolate the rest of the swim costume from this miniscule beginning. He frowned as his result consistently came up short of an adequate amount of coverage.

Harry broke off his mate's analysis, feeling he'd stared at Hermione's chest long enough, by stepping in front of her and blocking the view. Ron blinked and turned a guilty look toward Harry,

hoping he wasn't about to get hexed. When he saw only amusement on his fellow Gryffindor's face, he relaxed and then remembered the message he'd been asked to pass on.

"Tonks and Remus want to talk to you as soon as you've dressed and had breakfast."

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand and nodded toward the stairs, indicating that she wanted to change out of her suit (not because it was wet – she was a witch after all – but she reasoned they'd be more comfortable in regular clothing), and they both announced that they'd be ready in a trice.

*Tonks was as giddy as I've ever seen her when we finally met up with them in M. Delacour's study, which he'd assured us would be completely private. It's understandable, of course, since she's getting married today. I suspect that I'll be pretty giddy on the day Harry and I marry, too. While I was thinking of that, I gave Harry a nudge and shot him a questioning look, while mouthing, 'Should we tell them now?'. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then smiled and nodded. Of course, that made Tonks even giddier, and she squealed and gave me a hug. Remus beamed at us and congratulated Harry, telling him he'd figured it was only a matter of time, as he could tell we were so well suited for each other.*

*By the time we finished working out the details of their wedding, Tonks had settled down. At this point she turned quite serious and informed us that she'd resigned from the Aurors. Robards will find her letter of resignation on his desk when he arrives for work tomorrow morning. Even though we'd known it was probably inevitable, it was still something of a shock, as she's been an Auror ever since we've known her. Remus revealed that the two of them were going to go underground and continue to carry on the battle that way. Tonks added wryly that they'd likely be more effective than she'd been working for the Ministry. I can well imagine that would be the case. She can literally disguise herself as anyone, and Remus has had lots of experience in blending into the darker parts of society. They will be a formidable team. I suspect that this may well lead to increased attrition among Death Eaters.*

*Then Remus rather pointedly asked us if we were doing something that the two of them could help with. Harry and I shared a look. I shrugged, letting him know it was his decision and I'd support him either way. Then he did the same with Ron and Ron nodded. Harry announced that we should all make ourselves comfortable because this was going to be a long story.*

*Since they already knew there was a prophecy about Harry and Voldemort, and had probably guessed at what it might say, Harry started there, then told them in general terms about Voldemort's efforts to make himself immortal. Both Remus and Tonks took the information calmly, keeping their emotions under control, and asked some perceptive questions. They clearly understood how sensitive this information was, and suggested that they take a vow of secrecy that would prevent them from revealing any of this knowledge. After some deliberation, we agreed. As long as Voldemort has no idea we're searching for his Horcruxes, he's not likely to bring them up in questioning, in the event that either of them is captured and tortured. And it's more likely that any questioning would be carried out by his Death Eaters, and there is little chance that they are even aware of the Horcruxes' existence.*



At that point Harry gave them the specifics of the Horcruxes we knew about and the ones we suspected. It was agreed that Remus and Tonks would mostly operate on their own, but that we would call them in for assistance to retrieve one if we had a solid lead. At that point I mentioned the mirrors. Remus, of course, recognized the idea, as he'd been aware of the pair that James and Sirius had used. He was quite interested in the fact that I'd made two different types – ones keyed to two specific people and ones that could be used by anyone. I'd finished three more, of the general type, intending one each for Harry, Ron, and me, but it now makes more sense for them to have one of them. So Harry will carry one, Ron one, and Remus one. I don't actually need one of those, since I can still communicate with Harry on the original pair, in the event that we're separated. And that's not likely to happen very often.

Harry told them they were free to use Headquarters whenever they needed to, and that the three of us would also be staying there for the immediate future. They both knew about the traps Moody had set for Snape, but were still a bit concerned about us living there by ourselves. Harry pointed out that with what we'd told them about the prophecy and the mission we'd undertaken, we would likely be in much more dangerous situations than that. Neither of them liked that thought, but eventually accepted it. Then Harry revealed that he and I had reason to believe that Snape was still working on our side. Ron scowled at that. He still doesn't trust Snape at all.

Initially the pair of them also were skeptical, but after Harry and I explained our reasoning, the messages Snape had given him, and his actions during the battle at Privet Drive, they at least conceded the possibility. They're taking a wait and see attitude, which will include a critical examination of the value of any future information we might get from him.

The final thing Harry mentioned was his desire to go to Godric's Hollow. Remus thought about that and surprised us by apologizing. He felt bad that Harry had never been there, and that he knew so little about his parents. It was evidently a matter of him assuming that Sirius or Dumbledore had told him more. Harry made a sarcastic comment about Dumbledore's reluctance to share any information with him. This generated a raised eyebrow from Remus, and a confused look from Tonks, but after seeing the look on his face neither of them pressed him for details.

"I declare you bonded for life."

Once again, Harry and Hermione's eyes were locked together as these words were pronounced, as they beamed at each other from their respective places at the sides of the bride and groom. This time the audience was considerably smaller, and the venue was the great room of Delacour Manor. Only a few of their closest friends witnessed the marriage of RemusLupin and NymphadoraTonks, and the need for secrecy necessitated them keeping this knowledge to themselves.

Molly and Arthur had returned home the night before, to handle farewell duties for all of their guests using the portkeys to the Burrow. Bill and Fleur were, of course, off on their honeymoon. Charlie stayed around to attend, as he had been in school with Tonks. The younger Weasley children, who had all had Remus as a Defense professor and had interacted with Tonks during the summer at Grimmauld Place, were also present. The only other attendees were Andromeda and Ted Tonks, Mr. and Mrs. Delacour, Gabrielle, and a few other Order members.

Mr. Delacour had offered to perform the bonding at the ceremony, which surprised Harry and Hermione. To Hermione's inevitable question, he replied that any wizard could perform a bonding, since the magic in the vows came from the couple being married. Their host also offered roses from his gardens for the bride's bouquet, and some as well for the maid of honor to carry. He took Hermione and Harry out to the garden to help select them, and she chose bright red ones for Tonks.

"So what's the official name of this color?" Harry had asked with a grin. Hermione smiled and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek, then explained that roses often had evocative names. They decided that this one should be 'Passion Red'. Tonks was going with violet hair today (it was her wedding and she was determined to wear her favorite color). Hermione thought a deep red color would complement it nicely. While she was cutting some, Harry found an extraordinary dark purple variety that he called to her attention. She agreed that it would go perfectly with her lilac gown, and rewarded him with a much more thorough kiss. (Not being so vain as to require two different dresses for the two weddings, she would naturally wear the lilac one again for today's ceremony.)

Before leaving on her honeymoon, Fleur had insisted that Tonks wear her wedding gown, as her gift to the new couple. The gown had needed no alterations, since Tonks could make herself fit into any garment, except for the low cut strapless top. The spell that had held it in place had evidently been a personal charm of Fleur's. After a rather revealing 'wardrobe malfunction' (fortunately, Hermione and Gabrielle had been the only ones present to witness it) Hermione conjured up some white spaghetti straps and sewed them onto the top so that Tonks's modesty might be preserved during the ceremony. Hermione reminded her that the conjuration was not permanent, but cheekily added that she didn't expect that the gown would need to stay in place for more than a few hours.

Tonks smirked and agreed, adding that Remus was quite vigorous in that particular area, virility and stamina being some of the few benefits of his lycanthropy. She also opined that Fleur was in for a real treat, if Bill had acquired a touch of these particular traits. As she expected, this revelation generated a furious blush from Fleur's twelve-year-old sister, but she also noted a similar glow on Hermione's cheeks. Upon prompting, Hermione revealed that she and Harry had not yet progressed to that stage of their relationship. On reflection, Tonks decided that she was not surprised, given what she knew of Harry and Hermione's character.

But the level of intimacy between their two teenaged attendants was the furthest thing from the minds of the newlyweds as they turned to accept the applause of their small group of friends. As Harry and Hermione joined hands to follow them, it appeared that they would enjoy a smaller scale repeat of the joyful merriment of the previous day.

Unfortunately, the happiness was soon interrupted. Just as they were all sitting down to eat, Harry winced and grabbed his forehead. As Hermione looked on in concern, he grimaced and determined to fill his mind with pleasant thoughts, specifically his love for Hermione. He ended up focusing on the look on her face when he asked her to marry him, and that did the trick.

Once he relaxed he realized that Hermione was squeezing his hand, and he leaned over to reassure

her. “Voldemort’s really excited. It must be something really big because this is the first time he’s let anything slip through all summer. I managed to drive it off, though.”

“How?” Harry grinned, knowing he could have safely bet the entire value of Gringotts that she’d ask that follow-up question.

“I just thought about how much I love you.” The look that filled her face at that response made him want to wrap her up in his arms and carry her away somewhere private, but they were in the middle of a wedding reception. They settled for a gentle, loving kiss and turned back to their meals, somewhat subdued with the realization that something bad was happening.

They didn’t have to wait long. While everyone else was still enjoying their dinner, before Harry had even had a chance to give his toast (which Hermione had helped him prepare) an owl soared into the hall. A gasp of recognition from Tonks alerted everyone to the fact that it was an official Ministry owl, one used only for emergency communications. A hush fell over the small gathering as Tonks took the parchment, read it, and paled. Beside her Remus took the scroll from her limp hands and gave it another look. Then he rose to his feet.

“Rufus Scrimgeour has been assassinated.”

The uproar that greeted this announcement drowned him out temporarily, and Harry and Hermione’s hands instantly found each other and squeezed hard, as they shared a horrified stare. Quickly, though, the initial outburst subsided and the group quieted enough to hear what else Remus had to say.

“Pius Thicknesse is now the Acting Minister,” he continued in a somber voice. “The borders have been sealed and all international portkey authorizations have been cancelled. And all Aurors have been ordered to report in immediately.” At this he locked eyes with his new bride.

Hermione found herself on her feet, being pulled along after Harry as he swiftly covered the short distance to Remus’s side. “Well, I guess Robards will find out about my resignation a few hours early,” Tonks quipped as they arrived, having recovered from her initial shock and now using an attempt at humor to battle the dread that was settling over everyone. She grabbed a quill and scribbled out a hasty note on the back of the fateful parchment and returned it to the waiting owl. Without any further delay it launched itself from the table and disappeared from sight. “I suppose I’m technically AWOL now. But Robards is a pretty good guy and ...” She shrugged and her shoulders fell as Remus quickly wrapped his arms around her.

“I suspect they’ll have more important things to worry about than sending a team here to arrest you,” her new husband suggested soothingly. “This just means we become fugitives a day sooner than we would have otherwise. I think we can still stay here tonight, though.” The small group that had gathered at the head table all agreed with that suggestion. Since the British border wards would repel any incoming portkeys until the emergency decree was lifted, they all would have to apparate back home from one of the International Apparation points. But that would need to wait until the next day.

The festive mood had vanished, however, so after everyone finished their meal, and made a few half-hearted attempts at some slow dances, they called it a night. The small company of friends returned to their rooms pondering the implications of this latest development, and realizing that none of them were good.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 28

*We made it back home, but not without a few anxious moments. Harry sat with me in my room last night and held me until we'd both settled down, and we talked about what we had to do. The idea of a stop at a beach on the Riviera now seemed rather frivolous. It was time to get back to our task. When I finally fell asleep in his arms, he tucked me into my bed and returned to his room.*

*This morning we accompanied the remaining Weasleys and the rest of the Order to Paris and the International Apparation point. Remus and Tonks stayed behind, not sure how they'd return, but realizing that the Ministry officials would snap them up instantly if they were identified. It was decided that Harry and I would investigate the situation in Paris to see if we thought we could sneak through, before making a decision. What we saw there sickened me. It was like a scene out of a Holocaust movie. There were British Ministry officials checking the identities of everyone after they passed through the French checkpoint, but before they were allowed to apparate back to Britain. Any 'undesirables', mostly consisting of muggleborn witches and wizards, were taken out of the line and sent to a separate location. I fear that those people may never see their homes again.*

*My heart was in my throat as I watched, from under Harry's invisibility cloak, while one family was pulled aside. The father was evidently a halfblood or a pureblood, but the mother was a muggleborn. When they separated her from the others, her children started crying and the father struggled with the Aurors, shouting at them to let her go. He was stunned and portkeyed away. At this point the children, a boy and a girl about five and seven years old, became positively terrified. Harry started to move forward to help them, and I had to hold tightly to his shoulder to stop him from revealing himself.*

*It wouldn't have done any good. Fred and George were much closer, and they immediately tried to go comfort the children, but before they could reach them the DMLE officials had scooped them up and taken them to their mother. The kids calmed down, but now I imagine they'll share her fate. Harry turned to me with a look of fierce determination in his eyes, and I knew immediately that neither of us would rest until we'd rescued as many muggleborns from this corrupt Ministry as possible.*

*While it was a good thing that we held back and concealed ourselves, since it could easily have been me being pulled out of the line, it was extremely frustrating not to be able to do anything. We decided that we needed to get back to England as soon as possible.*

*Back at the Delacours, Remus and Tonks merely nodded grimly at our news, as though they had expected it. Tonks suggested that we take the Channel tunnel train back to London, like Harry did*

when he came to France last summer. Harry balked, worrying that the Ministry might have the other end being watched. I was also somewhat concerned about the expense, since we're having to watch our costs this year. Then Harry wondered why we couldn't just fly back.

It was rather amusing, given the dire circumstances, to see Remus and Tonks's reaction to that suggestion. Wizards apparently never fly between countries. It's just not done, therefore they didn't even consider the possibility. Tonks finally informed us that it's illegal. Harry's only response to that was, "Whoops." I couldn't help myself – I burst out laughing. The expression on his face – it started out as chagrin but changed to resignation with a touch of deviousness – was so precious. It never occurred to him when he flew from Hogwarts to Beauxbatons last February that such things simply weren't done.

We were amazed to learn that the two of them didn't think they could do it even if they wanted to, as they wouldn't even know which direction to go! Wizards apparently never study geography. Given how they travel, I guess I can understand that. They rarely need to know how to get from one place to another, they apparate or they floo. Just like you don't need to know where someone lives in order to ring him up on the phone. They did know that France was across the Channel from England, but not much more than that.

So Harry and I took charge. Fortunately, I'd packed my broomstick in my bag, and Harry always carries his Firebolt with him. To even out the loads Tonks rode with Harry and Remus with me. I let Harry lead since he'd made the trip before but I had a pretty good idea of the route to follow just in case we lost contact. We disillusioned ourselves, of course – Constant Vigilance, right? (We still miss Mad-Eye terribly.)

To save time we floored from the Delacour estate to an office M. Delacour keeps in Paris. This reduced the length of our flight to just over 300 km – about three hours at normal cruising speed. We arrived at Grimmauld Place by supertime.

Ron was already there, along with Fred and George. Mrs. Weasley was terribly conflicted. She didn't want him to go, but after hearing about the scene at the Apparation Point, she knew the Burrow wouldn't be safe for me, at least. She finally agreed, so long as Fred and George went with him and stayed until some other adults arrived. She also sent along an enormous amount of food. Cooking up a storm is the way she deals with stress.

Fred and George stayed until after supper. While we ate, we told the three of them about flying back. All of them thought it was brilliant. When we finished eating, the twins wished us luck, told us to let them know if we needed any help, and headed back to their shop. The two of them are pretty bright, so I suspect they have some idea of what we're up to. And they were almost as strongly affected by that scene at the Apparation Point as we were, so I have a strong feeling they'll be cooking up some plans to help muggleborns escape as well.

After we finished eating we sorted out the room situation. Remus and Tonks took the guest bedroom on the first floor. It's away from the rest of the bedrooms, so they'll have more privacy. Ron fell in love with Sirius's room, so Harry told him he could have it. He claims it's the Gryffindor color scheme, but I bet the topless posters on the wall are also a factor. It's just as well

*– I doubt if Harry would be comfortable with all the reminders of Sirius, and this also puts Ron on a separate floor from us.*

*We all insisted that Harry take the master bedroom on the third floor. I put my things in the other bedroom on that floor. I have no intention on actually sleeping in this room, though. As soon as I'm finished writing this and everyone else has settled down for the night, I'm heading across the hall.*

Harry sat on the edge of his bed, his mind flooded with thoughts, concerns, and emotions, not the least of which was the young woman in the bedroom across the hall. From the look she'd given him when they were selecting their bedrooms, he had an idea he might not have seen the last of her this evening. His suspicions were proven correct when a light tapping sounded on his door. It cracked open, and Hermione's head poked in.

"Hi," he greeted her softly as she slipped in and closed the door. "I thought you might be stopping by."

Hermione stood there for a moment smiling nervously, not quite as confident as she'd been a moment ago. "I thought you might want to brush my hair again," she temporized. Harry's smile evaporated her insecurities as he scooted back on the bed and opened his arms in invitation. Hermione smiled back and removed her dressing gown, draping it over a chair, and slid up on the bed in front of him. As he worked on her hair, she closed her eyes in contentment and snuggled closer.

When Harry announced that he was finished, Hermione sat up and pulled her camisole top off, leaving only her knickers. She smiled coyly at the wide-eyed look this generated as she proceeded to pull the bedclothes back.

"I'm, uh, not quite sure I'm ready for ..." he stammered as he lay down next to her and allowed her to curl up under his arm.

"I'm not either," she explained, adding a light kiss on his shoulder to show her appreciation for his thoughtfulness. "But I've been wanting to do this ever since that last night at Hogwarts, and I want to keep doing it every chance we get. Cuddling up together and sleeping with you holding me is all I need right now. I just think I'll like it better dressed like this, and I bet you will too." She raised herself up enough so that he could see her sly grin, and he grinned back.

"No disagreement there," he proclaimed fervently, grinning broadly back at her. The young lovers teased back and forth a while longer, then fell asleep in each other's arms.

-oooOOOooo-

Rose giggled as her mother leaned back and closed the notebook, a soft smile on her face. "Are you sure sleeping was the only thing you did?" she teased.

“You have no idea how good it feels to sleep cuddled up with the man you love,” Hermione replied softly. “That feeling of comfort, contentment, and safety is at least as important in a relationship as making love.” She smiled down at her daughter and reached out and hugged her. “You’ll understand some day.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters**

### **Return to Grimmauld Place**

#### **Final Year, Chapter 7 – Return to Grimmauld Place**

Harry woke first the next morning, which was unusual since Hermione was the early riser of the pair. Of course, the lock of curly hair tickling his nose might have had something to do with it. Another factor was likely that he'd had a good night's sleep for a change, free of the nightmares and other stressful thoughts that often kept him from peaceful slumber. The reason for that was now curled under his right arm, her bare torso pressed against his side. Her arm was flung across his chest with her hand possessively clasped onto his left bicep.

His breath caught in his throat as he regarded the angelic vision before him. In his eyes it was one of the most incredible sights he'd ever seen. The idea that someone would love him enough to do this ... he closed his eyes again to savor the sensation. It was almost intoxicating.

Hermione had been right, yet again. The skin to skin contact enhanced an already nearly indescribable feeling. Holding each other like this generated a sense of such comfort, such contentment, such ... rightness. It made him want to stay just like this forever – or at least as long as possible.

Given her desire to maximize skin contact by wearing as little as possible, Harry wondered if he should go without his pajama bottoms in their future nights together. He worried that this would make the temptation to go further than they should nearly irresistible. On the other hand, he knew that Hermione was strong willed enough that she wouldn't do anything until she decided she was ready for it, and that he'd never, ever force her to do anything she didn't want him to. He decided he'd bring it up the next time they slept together, which hopefully would be again that night.

His hand that was on Hermione's upper back and shoulder had been stroking her soft skin for a while without him being conscious of it, and now she shifted against him and gave a slight moan of pleasure. From the change in her breathing he could tell she was waking up, so he gently kissed her forehead as her eyes fluttered open.

“Good morning.”

“Mmm. I don't suppose I could talk you into waking me up like that every morning, could I?” she asked with a smile. In response Harry pulled her more tightly to himself.



“We seem to be thinking along the same lines. I was wishing I could wake up every morning with you in my arms,” he admitted.

“I’d like that very much. I’ll just have to perfect my sneaking skills, so I can get in here every night and back out the next morning without being detected,” she replied with a sly smirk.

“What, are you or are you not a witch?” Harry challenged. This caused Hermione to pull back a bit so she could shoot him a puzzled look. His response was a chuckle. “You weren’t here the summer Fred and George learned to apparate. They would pop back and forth from their room to Ron’s and my room all the time. You don’t have to walk across the hall. You can go into your room, lock the door, and be in here the next second.

Hermione shook her head, somewhat embarrassed that she hadn’t realized that possibility. “You’re right, of course. Whenever I think of apparation I think long distance travel. It doesn’t occur to me as something to do when walking a few steps is just as easy.”

“Well, as much as I hate to let go of you right now, you should probably pop back into your room so we can get dressed and go down for breakfast,” Harry decided, glancing at the clock on his nightstand.

“Oh no, I’m not going anywhere without a proper good morning kiss,” Hermione declared as she rolled on top of him. Harry, of course, had absolutely no objection to her stipulation.

Once that had been accomplished to her satisfaction, Hermione climbed off of Harry and sat up, noting with a grin his close attention as the sheet fell away from her torso. Pulling him up beside her, she snuggled up next to him and leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Now that the weddings are over, there’s something else we need to plan,” she announced with a knowing look.

“What’s that?” Harry wondered, not picking up on whatever she thought was so obvious.

“Your birthday, silly,” she chided, slapping him playfully on the arm. “It’s only two days from now!”

“Oh, you’re right. In all the excitement it slipped my mind,” he admitted. “It’s not quite as big a deal now since I’ve already passed my apparation exam. It will be nice not to have to worry about getting caught doing underage magic any more, though.”

“Harry, what about a celebration?” she sighed in exasperation. “You know, cake, presents, that sort of thing?”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. I’m not used to those things yet I suppose. It’s only been the last two years that anyone’s celebrated it with me.

Hermione determined not to get annoyed right then at the reasons for that situation. “So, what sort of present would you like?”

Being asked that question by a topless girl sitting in his bed pretty much guaranteed that Harry's thoughts would go in a certain direction, and he responded with a lascivious grin.

"Besides that!" Even though she was laughing at the face he made, Hermione felt it necessary to smack him again.

Harry scratched his head. "I don't know, I already have everything I want."

Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed, "Honestly, Harry, you have fewer possessions than anyone I know."

"But I have you," he countered, wrapping his arm around her waist. "What else do I need?"

Hermione melted into his embrace. "Harry Potter," she sighed. "That's the cheesiest line I've ever heard. She tipped her head up and kissed him on the cheek. "But I love it."

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 29

*Remus and Tonks were already gone by the time Harry and I got down to the kitchen. They'd left a Daily Prophet on the table and a message for us to sit tight here until we heard from them again. Not much was available for breakfast, so Harry made toast and I found a bit of jam in the cupboard and some pumpkin juice in the cold box.*

*The Prophet focused on the selection of the Interim Minister of Magic, Pius Thicknesse, and the changes he'd vowed to make. I don't think it could be much worse if the Death Eaters had simply taken over. He rejected what he called the failed policies of Dumbledore and Scrimgeour, and insisted that a new approach to resolving the 'current conflict' was necessary. Therefore he vowed to negotiate an end to the hostilities that 'will produce a peaceful outcome that we can all live with'.*

*He's obviously playing on everyone's fear that if they continue to oppose Voldemort they will be next to die. It's becoming clear now that this has been Voldemort's strategy all along, going all the way back to the killing of Madame Bones last year. If he keeps eliminating the strongest voices opposing him, eventually no one else will step up. And as far as our wizarding government is concerned, that time has apparently now arrived. Those of us who will continue the fight will have to do so without the help of the Ministry. Well, if that's what it takes, that's what we'll do.*

*On a lighter note, Hedwig arrived with a message from Ginny. She was glad to hear that we'd arrived home safely, and wanted to make sure we know that she was willing to help us in any way she could. She also had some more personal information, that she couldn't send along with Ron, and hadn't had a chance to tell us on Sunday because of how busy we were getting ready for Tonks and Remus's wedding.*

*She just wanted to let us know that she'd survived her evening with Viktor with her virtue intact,*

but that she was glad for my warning. He had indeed suggested that she visit him in Bulgaria before she returned to Hogwarts in the fall. She was ready for it, though, and let him know she didn't think that would be possible, without getting too flustered by the invitation. Harry and I were happy to hear that everything had worked out to her satisfaction.

Ron finally dragged himself down to the kitchen as Harry and I were finishing up and wanted to know what was for breakfast. We told him what we'd had, and he grimaced, but allowed that he supposed he'd have the same. Then he sat down and waited. After a few seconds Harry shot me an amused look and asked him if he was waiting for one of us to feed him. He looked at me and started to say, "Well, since Tonks isn't here that leaves Her..." before he noticed me scowling at him and tapping my wand against the palm of my hand.

I informed him in no uncertain terms of the new reality in his life – cooking is not something only females do. Harry stepped to my side and put his arm on my shoulder, indicating his support of my position. He added that he'd done plenty of cooking for his relatives, and would certainly be doing his share here, and that he was that sure I'd be willing to draw up a schedule of duties that would use our various talents most efficiently. I shot him a pretend glare for his subtle mocking of my organizational nature. (Honestly, someone needs to make schedules – those two would never get anything done otherwise!)

The funny part was the look on Ron's face – shock at the idea, the dawning realization that we weren't kidding, fading to horror at the prospect of having to feed himself with his nonexistent cooking skills. When we could no longer hold it in we both burst out laughing, and then assured him that we'd teach him what he needed to know. Today's lesson – how to make toast. While he was struggling with getting it light brown but not burnt Harry joked that perhaps Ron should specialize in clean-up duty. Ron joined us in our laughter at that point, knowing that we'd never let him starve.

He then quipped that we needed to get Kreacher back here for that task. I didn't let that get me riled up about house elf abuse because I knew he was joking – Kreacher's track record with keeping the place clean was dismal. I still think he could have been handled better by Sirius, but didn't see the need to bring that up now.

After we all cleaned up together, and I taught the boys the few cleaning spells I knew (I assigned Ron to learn more from his mum the next time he gets to the Burrow) we sat down to discuss our plan of action. Harry wants to get started right away on helping muggleborns who want to get out of Britain. I reminded him that while Ron is free to go anywhere he wants, I'm technically a fugitive from the Ministry, and if things go the way we suspect they will they'll start putting more effort into looking for me. And he's still underage for two more days, so if something happens and we end up exchanging spells, they'll immediately have reason to arrest him too. With that hanging over his head he won't be fully effective in whatever we do. Once I laid it out like that they both agreed, especially since we only have to wait until the end of the week.

The obvious choice at that point was to begin searching for the locket Horcrux, starting with Regulus's room. That project ate up the rest of the morning, with nothing to show for it. We did learn a bit more about Regulus. He was a slightly built boy with messy black hair, and played

Seeker for the Slytherinquidditch team. (An interesting resemblance to Harry, actually.) We also found a whole pile of newspaper clippings about Voldemort. But no locket.

As we were heading back up after lunch Ron stopped on the first floor landing and suddenly asked if we knew exactly what the locket looked like. Harry recalled that he'd seen it in one of Dumbledore's memories of the Gaunts so we fetched the pensieve and the memories and had a look. As soon as we spotted the locket hanging from Merope's neck Ron let out a cry of triumph.

It seems that the Weasleys and Harry have already found this locket! The summer before fifth year they were all cleaning here at Headquarters, getting rid of a whole host of dark objects and infestations of nasty creatures and one of the items they found was a locket that looked just like Slytherin's. It was in a cabinet in the drawing room, as Ron recalls. He further explained that they'd put it in a sack with the rest of the stuff to be binned. That whole experience must have made quite an impression on him, as he went into a bit of a rant about the different nasty items they encountered. We finally had to stop him to get back on track.

Despite that, Ron was quite pleased with himself. I wasn't here that summer, so I had no idea that all that had happened. Harry was so preoccupied with his hearing at the time that he doesn't remember much of it either, so we are indeed lucky that Ron is with us. It's good that he had an opportunity to feel useful, as he's often overshadowed by Harry and me.

Important note – in addition to seeing the locket, we heard Marvolo Gaunt refer to the ring as being engraved with 'the Peverell coat of arms'. That's the symbol we've been talking about! The one marking the story of the 3 brothers in the book Dumbledore left me, the one Viktor called Grindelwald's mark, the one Mr. Lovegood was wearing. This gives us a new name to research – Peverell.

We still needed to find out what happened to the locket after they found it in the drawing room, however. Harry and Ron thought that either Remus or Tonks might have remembered how Sirius had disposed of the rubbish, so it looked as though we'd have to wait until they returned to ask them. We might well have had quite a search ahead of us.

But then Ron pointed out that Kreacher had been constantly nicking stuff back whenever he got a chance, Black family items with sentimental value to him. I offered the opinion that this didn't seem too unreasonable, but Ron just glared at me and told me I hadn't been bit by a doxy or been attacked by a clock. At any rate, Kreacher had evidently stashed his recovered treasures in his cupboard in the kitchen, so we hurried down there to search it.

Unfortunately, nothing was there. Whatever keepsakes he'd salvaged and squirreled away were gone; only a tattered, dirty old blanket remained. Had Kreacher moved his stash to Hogwarts when Harry had sent him there? Harry immediately called him to find out.

The old house elf's reaction was unexpected, to say the least. After a few of his typical mutterings about blood traitors, mudbloods, and Harry's general unworthiness as a master he was silenced in mid-rant by Harry's question about the locket. He became completely distraught, moaning about how he'd failed Master Regulus.

*There were parts of the story that he adamantly refused to divulge; evidently Regulus's order for him to tell no one about the locket carried more authority in his mind than Harry's order to tell us. He was quite willing, though, to reveal what had happened to it, and to all his other treasures. Mundungus Fletcher had stolen them all.*

*Any respect I might have had for that scoundrel is completely gone. Stealing the few trinkets that were so precious to this poor, pathetic creature just to make a few Galleons by selling them on the black market is simply despicable. Harry, of course, already felt pretty much that way about him, after catching him that time in Hogsmeade with the Black family dining service.*

*We were able to ascertain from his reactions that Kreacher was familiar with the note Harry found in the fake Horcrux, as well as the fake itself, which must have been a Black family heirloom, and that he'd been ordered by Regulus to destroy the real one, but failed. While I'm certain that the tale of how Regulus (possibly assisted by Kreacher) managed to get Slytherin's locket out of the cave and back here is a fascinating one, all we really need to know right now is how to get it back. I assume Remus and Tonks will have some ideas for how to accomplish that.*

*I'm so proud of Harry for what he did next. He got down on his knee and thanked Kreacher for his help, then told him we would get the locket back and destroy it like his master Regulus wanted. That got the first positive response I've ever seen from the bitter old elf. But the best part is that he offered the fake locket (the Black family heirloom) to Kreacher to partly make up for all of his other treasures that Fletcher had stolen. In response, Kreacher started crying and actually hugged Harry!*

*We have quite a story to tell Remus and Tonks when they get back!*

Remus and Tonks were surprised to find Kreacher present when they returned, even more surprised that he was acting civilly towards Harry, at least, and positively amazed that he had cleaned up the kitchen. They had brought some food and other things to stock up the pantry, but once they began unpacking the provisions Kreacher shooed everyone out and insisted on putting everything away himself.

The trio filled them in on their discoveries of the day while the now helpful house elf prepared supper. Neither of the adults were too surprised at Mundungus Fletcher's actions, as they had been fully aware of his thieving tendencies.

"That issue caused almost as much division in the Order as Dumbledore's complete confidence in Snape," Tonks commented as Remus nodded his agreement.

"Most of us didn't have nearly as much willingness to look past people's faults and see the potential good in them as Dumbledore did," he admitted. "Of course, in my case I benefited by it, so it was hard to complain about his trust in others whom I considered less than trustworthy."

Harry had no desire to rehash Dumbledore's tolerance of poor behavior in his 'projects', so he moved the discussion on. "What's our next move in tracking down Fletcher?" he asked.

Remus and Tonks shared a grim smile. “Leave that to us,” she answered. “We have a pretty good idea of where he hangs out and who his contacts are, and they’re not the sort of people or places you three want to be dealing with.”

While they were eating the older couple (now newlyweds!) related what they had learned during their investigations of the day.

“Thicknesse is serious about negotiating a settlement with Voldemort,” Remus announced resignedly. There’s been some delay while they work out exactly who will do the negotiating. It’s not like Voldemort’s going to walk into the Ministry and sit down with him personally.”

“Here’s the part you lot are really going to love,” Tonks added sarcastically. “Umbridge has been named Acting Director of the DMLE. And she’s directed that all investigations and other activities against the Death Eaters be suspended pending the outcome of the negotiations.” She paused to take a bite while the trio registered their disgust.

“Instead, she’s directed the Aurors to focus on rounding up muggleborns who are still in violation of the registration act. And guess whose name is at the top of the list,” she added with a wry grin, gesturing toward Hermione. “I don’t suppose you happened to do something to get on her bad side, hmm?”

Despite the gravity of the situation Harry and Hermione shared a laugh. “You might say that,” Harry agreed. “Seeing as how Hermione is the one who got her personally acquainted with a band of unhappy centaurs. It was quite an unpleasant experience for her, and the centaurs weren’t too thrilled with her either.” The others chuckled at the thought of how that encounter must have played out.

“Too bad we couldn’t have left the ugly toad with them,” Ron suggested. “It would have saved us a lot of trouble now.” Harry wholeheartedly concurred, while Hermione, though she shook her head in mock disapproval, did *not* disagree.

“Gee, and here I thought it might have something to do with your relationship with The Boy Who Lived, who I gather was her least favorite student at Hogwarts,” Tonks suggested.

“Well, that too,” Hermione smirked, giving Harry a playful nudge. “You see, he’s always getting me into trouble.” There followed a spirited exchange among the trio, with the boys recounting various incidents where Hermione had not exactly been the most innocent participant.

After a few minutes Remus redirected the conversation. “Tonks spent the day wandering through the Ministry, impersonating at least three different workers, trying to get a sense of how everyone’s reacting to the changes. She especially focused on the Auror Corps.”

“There’s quite a bit of grumbling about quitting, with some comments along the lines of ‘why don’t we just hand the whole place over to the Death Eaters?’,” she revealed. “But relatively few of them are serious about it, at least right now. It’s more of a wait and see attitude. Some are enthusiastic about going after the muggleborns, like Dawlish for example, but those are basically

the ones who already had a strong anti-muggleborn bias.”

“Kingsley is still assigned to the muggle Prime Minister’s office,” Remus noted. “It’s an obvious ploy to isolate him and keep him out of the way, but it also allows him relatively free movement. So in some ways that’s a plus for us. We can easily contact him without fear of anyone at the Ministry intercepting our messages. Hestia is now our primary source in the Auror Corps, for as long as she keeps her job at least.”

To the three teens’ questioning looks about the last remark he added, “If things go the way we think they will her association with Dumbledore may make her a target for reprisals.”

On that somber note the discussion ended, and the conversation was relatively sparse for the remainder of the meal as each of the participants reflected on the implications of this latest turn of events.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 30

*It’s pretty quiet today, especially compare to the excitement of yesterday. Ron and I have spent some time making plans for Harry’s birthday. Ron at first couldn’t understand why I blushed when he asked me what I was getting Harry, then decided he didn’t want to know. Since the only people who can come here are Order members, and most of them think this location has been compromised, it’s only going to be a small party. Fred and George have sent word that they’ll be here, and they promised to get Ginny here too. They’ll come up with some excuse to spirit her away from the Burrow if they have to.*

*We aren’t completely isolated, since we have the mirrors to communicate with Remus and Hedwig to take messages to the Burrow and Hogwarts. Hedwig isn’t too happy with us right now, though. Harry was worried that she’s so distinctive that she could be identified and attacked, so I found a charm that would turn her feathers a dull, nondescript gray color. She’s been sulking all morning.*

*Amazingly, Kreacher has really attached himself to Harry. His change in attitude is quite remarkable. He’s almost as eager as Dobby at times. I think he’s been yearning for another master ever since Regulus and Mrs. Black died, and now has found what he considers an acceptable one. Because Harry is so set on finding and destroying the locket, which was the last command Regulus gave before he died, that makes him worthy of Kreacher’s loyalty.*

*This treatment doesn’t necessarily extend to the rest of us, but I’m hoping that will improve with time. For now, he treats me pretty much like I’m invisible. Harry has ordered him not to call me a mudblood or Ron a blood traitor, but he doesn’t know any other way to relate to us, so he ignores us. My hope is that he’ll eventually see what high regard Harry has for the two of us, and that will influence his behavior.*

*He’s also confused about Tonks. On the one hand, she’s a Black by birth, but on the other her mother was disowned by his former master. His solution seems to be to show her neither affection*

nor hatred, but rather indifference. That's fine with her. He's also neutral toward Remus. The fact that he's a werewolf doesn't seem to bother him at all.

Being reminded of Dobby, Harry wondered if he could come here to help Kreacher take care of the place. We discovered that won't work. A house elf can't interfere with another house elf's domain. Since Kreacher is bonded to this house and Dobby isn't, he can't use his magic here. On the other hand, either of them could work at the Burrow, for example, since no house elf is bonded there.

Evidently Hogwarts is different. Either the magic of that place is such that multiple house elves can bond with it, or none of the house elves working there are formally bonded, in the way that Kreacher is bonded to the Black family or Dobby was bonded to the Malfoys. I found all of that information quite interesting. When I get the time I really need to study up more on house elves and their magic.

Since we're basically killing time today, I'm going to have a go at making Wolfsbane potion. I don't necessarily expect to get it perfect on the first try, but hope to succeed by the next full moon. (Harry just gave me a look of disbelief at the 'don't expect to get it perfect on the first try' statement. I had to smack him for teasing me like that. Then he had to hug me to get me to stop hitting him, and one thing led to another. That actually worked out quite nicely!)

Ron found us snogging and wondered what had brought that on. Harry told him it was because Hermione's such a perfectionist. I just smiled.

I suspect that Ron thinks that Harry and I are weird.

Later –

Harry got Kreacher to reveal the story of the locket and the cave this evening, working it out in bits and pieces. It was more horrible than I could have imagined! We were sitting in the drawing room and Harry had to pull me onto his lap to comfort me. I was crying so hard by the end! It wasn't just me. Ron looked like he was going to lose his supper, and Harry was pretty choked up too. It was especially difficult for him since he had experienced the situation personally, including the effect of the poison and being attacked by the Inferi, and he had to relive it while drawing the information out of Kreacher.

First, Regulus came home one day and told Kreacher that Voldemort needed a house elf, and that he'd volunteered Kreacher's service. He considered it a great honor, so of course Kreacher did too. Voldemort took Kreacher to the cave (Harry basically described the setup so that Kreacher didn't have to do much other than nod or add a few words here and there.) and the two of them went to the island in the same boat Dumbledore and Harry used.

The huge difference was that Voldemort made Kreacher drink the poison! Then he put the Horcrux in the basin and simply LEFT KREACHER THERE TO DIE!!

The only reason Kreacher escaped is that Regulus had ordered him to return home when they were finished, and a house elf must obey his master's orders. That meant that he was somehow able to



evade the Inferi, and since house elf magic is different than wizard magic, he was able to apparate out of the cave and back here, despite the anti-apparation wards.

*Note – I think this ability of house elves could be important for us. It's an area where we have an advantage over Voldemort, since he considers house elves to be beneath him, and therefore is apparently ignorant of their capabilities. Dobby, for example, would likely jump at the chance to do something to help Harry.*

*To finish the story – at some later point in time, after Regulus had become disillusioned with Voldemort and decided to work against him, he got Kreacher to go back to the cave with him. Mind you, this was with no regard whatsoever for the horrible experience Kreacher had the first time he went there! And this time it was no better. At least Regulus drank the poison himself, but Kreacher had to stand there helplessly and watch him weaken and get those horrible hallucinations. It must have driven him mad to not be able to intervene, since Regulus had ordered him to retrieve the locket and take it back home. He was actually forced to stand there and let his beloved master die! Harry didn't press him for details, since Kreacher was lying on the floor weeping at this point, but it's safe to assume that the Inferi dragged Regulus into the lake and killed him.*

*So that's where we are now. It's not hard to see why Kreacher would have gone insane. But with Harry now talking about retrieving and destroying the locket, Kreacher will finally be able to see his former master's last command carried out. I dearly hope it will afford him at least some peace of mind.*

*I most definitely need to have Harry hold me tonight.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – July 31*

*Happy Birthday Harry! I gave him a special present this morning. Let's just say it was a different kind of French lesson. He vowed to return the favor on my birthday. I told him I thought it would be best if we practiced between now and then, and he agreed wholeheartedly.*

*Unfortunately, this isn't a very good time for a celebration. We did our best but it's difficult to get up much enthusiasm in the face of the news from outside. At least from now on we'll be able to start doing something about it.*

*Fred, George, and Ginny came, as promised, and Hagrid surprised us by showing up as well. Kreacher even baked a cake. Harry got some useful gifts – a summon proof wand holder, from Remus and Tonks, and a second notice-me-not holder for a hidden back up wand in addition to some nasty little tricks from the twins and Ginny. Hagrid gave him a moleskin pouch that he said had some 'interestin' qualities. Apparently it's useful for hiding things. Only the owner can retrieve them. Unpleasant though the thought may be, it could come in handy if we're captured.*

*Professor McGonagall sent her regards with Hagrid, as she's very busy preparing for the*

upcoming school year. Without a Headmaster, all of the work falls to her. In addition to that position they are short 2 teachers – Defense and Muggle Studies – and the Board of Governors, who must hire them in the absence of a headmaster, is dragging their feet.

She also sent along an interesting list – the names and muggle addresses of all current muggleborn students and recent graduates going back ten years. She included a note that said that she'd never been prouder of any of her Gryffindors than she was of the three of us when she learned of what we were planning to do to help muggleborns, on top of Harry's other burdens. She also vowed that the Ministry would only get their hands on such a list from Hogwarts 'over her dead body'.

The news that cast a pall over our modest gathering was the announcement from the Ministry that they'd come to an agreement with Voldemort. (Of course they used that You Know Who nonsense in their press release. I wonder if they had an actual treaty to sign if they'd write You Know Who in the document itself. Honestly!) The Minister called it 'a peace we can all live with', continuing the emphasis on how this is going to avoid getting everyone killed. At least they didn't repeat Neville Chamberlain's 'Peace for our time' farce. Of course, being wizards, none of them would be familiar with that quotation. They also made several references to 'security'. Benjamin Franklin's famous words come to mind – 'Those who would sacrifice freedom for security deserve neither'.

In a separate statement they strongly urged the wizarding population not to take independent action, and specifically called for the disbandment of all 'vigilante groups', an obvious reference to the Order. Remus and Tonks assured us that this wouldn't stop them, but it would make things more difficult for others who might have supported their efforts.

It gets worse. Much worse. The details of the agreement haven't been announced yet, but Tonks managed to get hold of one of the copies that was being circulated among the higher-ups at the Ministry. (I do hope she isn't taking too many risks.) As a gesture of good will, all Death Eaters being held by the Ministry are being released. With one fell swoop Voldemort is back at full strength. And he no longer has the Aurors to worry about. They will only act if he violates the terms of this agreement.

And what did he give up? He agreed to cease all attacks on 'true' wizards – in other words, not including muggleborns. He further agreed to hold off taking any action against the 'mudbloods' 'provided the Ministry deals with the situation in an acceptable manner'. The Ministry will next announce that in order to comply with these terms they will provide 'protective custody' to all muggleborn witches and wizards and their families .

I fear that we're about to see the wizarding version of concentration camps.

This information is scheduled to be released over the next two weeks, giving the people time to get used to each step before breaking the next. An effective way to enslave a complacent population – one barely tolerable step at a time.

What this does is free up all of his resources to come after Harry. Once he's defeated Harry I'll

*bet that ‘agreement’ won’t be worth the parchment it’s printed on.*

*Happy birthday, Harry.*

*Celebration’s over. It’s time to get to work.*

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*

## Notebooks and Letters The Greater Good

### Final Year, Chapter 8 – The Greater Good

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 10 (Sunday)

*Whew! It's been a busy 10 days. We decided that we had to move as quickly as possible, before the Ministry fully implemented its plan. The disadvantage of that strategy was that not everyone is convinced of the gravity of the situation. Although they're uneasy about the direction things are going, few are desperate enough to abandon their homes and flee.*

*We had our best success among the Gryffindors. We started with Dean Thomas, and then Colin and Dennis Creevy. They actually wanted to stay and help us fight, but we persuaded them that going with their families and keeping them safe should be their first priority. They made us promise to call them on the DA Galleons if there's a major battle, and vowed to come and fight alongside us.*

*After we got through the Gryffindors, we moved on to the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. I never really noticed before, but there is a fairly consistent number of muggleborns in each year – between 6 and 8, which gives a maximum of 1/5 of the class. For our year it was 6, two each in Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw. And on average one or two of those students drops out, like Sally-Anne did in our year. This would seem to indicate that muggleborns make up 15 to 20 percent of the population of the wizarding world, at least here in Britain.*

*If the Ministry does intend to round them all up, where are they going to keep them all?*

*I really don't want to think about one of the possible answers to that question, as it seems so completely barbaric. But it did happen in a perfectly civilized country like Germany when Hitler implemented his 'Final Solution' to the Jewish question.*

*The Hufflepuffs were reasonably receptive of our help, and all of them accepted the portkeys except for the Finch-Fletchleys. They simply refused to believe that something like that could happen to them, and poo-pooed our attempts to persuade them otherwise. Their business and social obligations made it impossible to just leave the country on such short notice, didn't we know? I could tell that Justin was mortified that his parents used such a condescending tone toward a boy who is the wizarding equivalent of the Prince of Wales.*

*Ah yes, the British upper class. The muggle version of the purebloods. How ironic that in our world those same purebloods consider them to be lower than their own working class servants. If this turns out the way we believe, they will be in for a rude awakening. I only hope they survive the experience. Justin apologized profusely as we left, but told us he had to stay with his family, even if we were right. Harry assured him that we understood his desire to protect them. We all wished him good luck.*

*I have a bad feeling that we might never see Justin again.*

*The Ravenclaws were more difficult to persuade than the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. They needed to hear a convincing argument. Fortunately, I was ready with my evidence, culled from the reports in the Daily Prophet, and my analogy to the Nazis in Germany. Even so it was a hard sell.*

*We started with Terry Boot, since we knew him from the DA, and Kevin Entwhistle, the other muggleborn in our year, who was at least familiar with me from my Arithmency and Ancient Runes classes with him. Terry and his family considered our presentation thoughtfully, and then Terry informed them a bit more about everything Harry has done.*

*They were impressed that someone so famous was taking the time to visit with a class of people whom the wizarding world mostly looked down on. Harry pointed out that his mother was a muggleborn, as was I, his girlfriend (he almost slipped up by calling me his fiancée, but caught himself just in time), but that he was mostly doing it because it was the right thing to do. That impressed them even more. They not only took the portkey, but Terry offered to help us convince the other members of his house while his parents worked to put their affairs in order as best as they could before they had to leave.*

*With Terry's help, we were able to make a stronger case with Kevin, and eventually prevailed upon him and his family to accept one of the portkeys. He also has a younger sister at Hogwarts, so we took care of two in one visit. Eventually we managed to get through to most of the muggleborns in that House.*

*Overall, of the 45 muggleborn students at Hogwarts last year, from 40 different families, we gave out 36 portkeys. Quite an accomplishment for a week and a half's effort!*

*This week we'll start working on older muggleborns. Tonks tells us they will probably be more difficult as we go up in age. For example, her muggleborn father has been living in the wizarding world for 40 years, and doesn't really have much to do with the muggle world any more. So it's hard for wizards and witches in his situation to consider the possibility that everything they've known for most of their lives could be taken away from them. Right. Just like the Jews who had been loyal Germans all their lives couldn't believe that such a thing could be done to them.*

*We'll see how it goes. According to the schedule Tonks obtained, the announcement about the muggleborns will be made tomorrow, and they'll be given one week to turn themselves in. On the one hand, that should help us convince the people we talk to that things really are that serious. On the other hand, the Ministry is counting on the reaction among the rest of the wizarding public to be more subdued, given all that's happened in the previous two weeks.*

Immediately following the original announcement of the cease fire, or truce, with Voldemort, there was a lot of celebrating. I suppose I can't blame people for being excited, with the terror that they've been living with for the past year seemingly being lifted. No longer having to worry that their homes might be attacked at any time would generate a huge sense of relief, I'll admit.

It was in this context that the next announcement came, last week, about the Death Eaters being released. Of course the Ministry made it sound as if it wasn't that bad. They were being 'paroled' with their agreement that they wouldn't engage in any further illegal activity, and they were required to pay large fines. Also, they made certain to emphasize that they weren't releasing anyone who'd actually been convicted of murder.

Furthermore, there was no amnesty offered to Death Eaters who were still at large, for any illegal activities that they had not yet been tried for. This means that Snape and Draco Malfoy, for example, are still on the wanted list, as is Bellatrix, who was the only one who escaped from the battle at the Department of Mysteries. But Lucius and his ilk are all free and clear. And I suspect that the Aurors will be instructed not to pursue the others too vigorously. It wouldn't surprise me at all if the charges against them were quietly dropped at some later date.

The whole thing makes me want to scream. Harry and Ron want to blow something up. That actually sounds more productive. I think we'll set up some targets down in the basement and practice our blasting hexes.

Tonks reports that the Aurors (most of them anyway) are pretty disgusted. Many are considering resigning, and as their primary duty will now be rounding up muggleborns rather than going after Death Eaters, she believes that as many as half of the Auror Corps will actually go through with it. Remus thinks that's been the plan all along. He predicts that in a week or two Umbridge will announce that there will be no need to replace those who have left, since the threat from the Death Eaters has been eliminated. (She'll most likely dress it up in fancier language like the need to 'reposition the Ministry's resources to respond to other security concerns'. By that she'll mean the primary mission of the DMLE will be to round up the muggleborns, werewolves, etc.) Unfortunately, and as infuriating as the idea is, I'm afraid I have to agree with him.

As for us, we'll just keep on fighting and hope the British wizarding population eventually catches on to what's going on. I only hope that happens before it's too late.

Tomorrow is Ginny's birthday. Ron is going to go to the Burrow for her party. I'd really like to go too, but I think I'd better not. There are too many people in the Ministry who know of my friendship with the Weasleys. (I'd like to think I could trust Percy not to give me away, but that's by no means certain either.) So someone might get the idea to drop by unannounced to take me into custody. Harry's undecided about whether he should go. I've convinced him that I'll be fine here by myself, but he also pointed out that somebody like Umbridge, or a Voldemort sympathizer in the DMLE, would love to get their hands on him, and worry later about what the charges would be. Obstruction of justice, at the very least, and then resisting arrest, would do for starters.

...

*In the evenings I've been reading the books about Dumbledore. At first we thought we should all read them, but I'm such a faster reader than Harry or Ron (not to mention just a touch more enthusiastic about it) that we decided that I'd read them and when I came to a passage that was interesting or useful, read it aloud. So Harry and Ron play chess and I interrupt them occasionally. They always gripe good-naturedly about it, but I know they realize how important this could be so I don't let it bother me. Especially the way Harry takes the opportunity later after we've gone to bed to express his appreciation. I'm getting lots of great backrubs out of this!*

“Check.” Ron looked up at the dismayed expression on Harry's face and smirked. For his part, Harry tried to ignore the taunts of his chess pieces regarding his lack of skill at the game, and sighed at his hopeless position.

“Hermione, haven't you got anything to read to us right now?” he moaned. “I'm not sure my ego can take any more of this.” Both boys looked over at where Hermione was curled up on the sofa with a book, and saw that she was watching them with an eager look on her face. Harry smiled at her while Ron groaned.

“As a matter of fact,” she began as Harry joined her on the sofa while Ron dragged himself away from the chess set and took his seat in the armchair facing them. “I've been waiting for you to finish. This chapter I've been reading is extraordinary. It puts a whole new light on the development of what Dumbledore believed in, his philosophy of wizarding life and wizards' roles in the world. It's entitled '*The Greater Good*' .

Hermione began to summarize some of the things they already knew and added in some new information, from both books, about Dumbledore's childhood. His family had indeed moved to Godric's Hollow, both books agreed, his father had been imprisoned for attacking muggles when he was ten years old, and he'd gone off to Hogwarts leaving his mother, brother, and sister behind. And all agreed that he'd been a brilliant student, and won numerous academic and leadership awards.

“Now, here's where the amazing part starts,” Hermione went on. “Did you know that BathildaBagshot also lived in Godric's Hollow?”

“The author of our History of Magic textbook?” Harry asked by way of clarification. “Now that you mention it, I do remember seeing that name in the letter I found from my mum to Sirius, but I didn't make the connection.”

“Yes, it's the same person, and not only did she live there when your parents did, and still does in fact, but she also did back when Dumbledore lived there. *And* she was a friend of the Dumbledore family – one of his mother's few friends according to the one book. But get this – she was also the aunt of Gellert Grindelwald!”

“*The* Grindelwald?” Ron asked in amazement. “The dark lord Dumbledore defeated?” Hermione nodded.

Harry frowned. “OK, that’s an amazing coincidence but I don’t see how …”

“But I’m not finished yet,” Hermione interrupted. “He came to visit his aunt in Godric’s Hollow, and met Dumbledore, and they became friends!”

“They what!? You’re kidding!” Harry exclaimed as he moved closer to her and looked over her shoulder at the book lying open on her lap.

“I don’t believe it,” declared Ron, scowling as he folded his arms across his chest. “Does Doge say that or is it just in Diggle’s book?”

Hermione replied patiently, realizing that it was difficult for Ron to accept these negative characterizations about the man who he’d grown up being told was the greatest wizard alive.

“Both books say that he returned home after he finished at Hogwarts to take care of his sister when his mother died. Doge writes that the two of them had intended to take a Grand Tour – travel the world together for a year – which was common in those days, but that Dumbledore stayed home and he ended up making the trip by himself. So he doesn’t really know what happened at Godric’s Hollow that summer. Diggle, on the other hand, claims to have interviewed Bagshot extensively.”

“Doesn’t prove anything,” Ron insisted stubbornly. “How do we know that Bagshot even had anything to *do* with the Dumbledores?”

“But wasn’t your Aunt Muriel saying something similar at the wedding?” Hermione countered. “Didn’t she say her mother was a friend of Bagshot’s?” Hermione frowned in puzzlement for a moment. “Speaking of that, did you say Muriel was your great aunt? So she was your mother’s aunt? I mean, your mum is just a little older than my parents. In order for Muriel to have been around when this was going on she must be at least sixty years older than your mum.”

“Mum refers to her as Great Aunt Muriel,” Ron clarified. “There could be a couple of ‘greats’ in there, I dunno exactly.”

“So she really could be as old as Dumbledore then,” Hermione decided. “And she would have first hand knowledge of the events of that summer.”

Ron shook his head. “She was going on about the scandal of Dumbledore’s sister – Ariana was her name – and his mother’s death. That’s the sort of thing she’s interested in,” he revealed. “She was trying to say that his mum had her locked up and she tried to escape and killed her by accident. And she was also nattering about Dumbledore and his brother Aberforth getting into a fight during the funeral. Sleazy stuff like that. She didn’t say anything about Grindelwald.”

“That may be, but it does show that there were some odd things going on back then, and Doge conveniently glossed over all of it in his book,” Hermione argued. “And what your aunt says seems to confirm at least some of Diggle’s claims.”



Ron frowned, still not convinced, and Hermione continued. “So anyway, Grindelwald had just been expelled from Durmstrang and apparently he came to Britain to visit his aunt. She introduced him to Dumbledore, since she felt sorry for him, not having any friends his own age, and says the two of them hit it off immediately. They were practically inseparable that whole summer.”

Ron began to object again that there was no proof of that, but Hermione waved him off. “Ron, there’s a picture here of the two of them together! And the book has copies of some letters that Dumbledore wrote to Grindelwald, which his aunt must have saved!”

Harry leaned closer to look at Hermione’s evidence while Ron sat dumbfounded for a few seconds before moving to her other side to view it as well. They had no idea what Grindelwald looked like, so didn’t recognize the smiling blonde haired boy in the photograph, but could definitely see traces of the Headmaster in the hundred years younger version of himself that was the other teenage boy.

“Now, listen to some of the things he wrote in the letters,” Hermione instructed. “Wizard dominance is for the MUGGLES’ OWN GOOD ... power gives us the right to rule, but also gives us responsibilities over the ruled ... We must seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD.”

She looked up at the two boys to gauge their reaction. “This is the basic theme of the letters – the use of power to control people, and make decisions for them for their own good. Hence the chapter title. What it looks like is two brilliant students, completely enamoured with their abilities, making grandiose plans for world domination,” she reasoned. “Possibly the sort of daydreaming lots of kids do, except one of them evidently decided to put the plan into action.”

“It does sound like him,” Harry agreed.

“Who? Dumbledore? No way!” Ron objected. “Look, you two have only been in the wizarding world for six years, so you maybe aren’t aware of everything he’s done. He can’t be anti-muggle. He’s always supported muggle issues, like my dad’s Muggle Protection Act, and he’s always spoken in favor of muggleborns. It’s always cost him politically, too. He could have easily been Minister if he hadn’t made so many enemies by being so insistent about respecting muggles’ rights. You read what they were writing after he died.”

Hermione was about to point out to Ron that his argument could be considered as a point in *favor* of what she’d concluded, rather than against it, when Harry spoke up again.

“No Ron, that’s not what I meant. I wasn’t talking about his attitude towards muggles. I meant the way he treated *everyone*. Like he was this all-wise, all-knowing father figure. He decided what was best for everyone – for the ‘greater good’ like Hermione said – then manipulated the people around him into doing things his way.”

Before Ron could disagree with this characterization, Harry continued. “Just think about all the stuff that happened to us over the years. You don’t think I was manipulated to do some, or maybe even all, of those things? Think about how the obstacles protecting the Stone played right into our abilities. Same thing with the basilisk and the Chamber. Or how about the way I ended up in the

Tri-Wizard Tournament. Maybe we didn't realize it at the time, but what he did to Hermione last year kinda puts those events in a different light. And remember, he admitted to us that he had decided last summer that he needed to separate Hermione and me *for my own good* .”

This time Ron did not respond, but merely sat there shaking his head. As much as he might want to, he couldn't deny that Harry's claims made sense.

To give Ron a chance to consider Harry's assertion more fully, and to keep Harry from getting too worked up about it, Hermione turned to another point. “I have to wonder about what happened after that summer,” she commented. “Obviously, they didn't work together to act on this philosophy. What I think is that Grindelwald went on ahead on his own with the plan to take over the world, and set himself up as a dark lord. When Dumbledore, who had insisted that they were acting only for noble purposes and would not use more force than necessary, saw what his friend was really like he must have come to the realization of how easily his ideals could be subverted to evil. It must have been a terrible blow to his convictions. You know how people our age can be so certain that they are right about something.”

Hermione paused to share a look of chagrin with Harry as the full impact of this last comment hit home. Both of them had notable examples of being caught up in that particular youthful attitude. “I can see how he might have become quite disillusioned about the whole thing,” she finished quickly.

“But not so much that it changed his basic idea that he knew what was best for everyone,” Harry pointed out.

“Yes, perhaps it merely caused him to change his methods,” Hermione agreed. “Instead of forcing people to do what he wanted he used a more subtle approach to persuade them of the correctness of his views.”

Before Harry could get going again on Dumbledore's techniques of manipulation, Ron broke in. “It would be nice if we could talk to him about all this and get his point of view,” he suggested. “Maybe go to Hogwarts and ask to speak with his portrait?”

Harry shook his head. “It wouldn't do any good. Even when he was alive, he'd never give a straight answer about anything. I doubt if his portrait's any better.”

“There's another point of view that we're missing entirely that might be useful here,” Hermione asserted.

“Whose?” Harry and Ron wondered simultaneously.

“Grindelwald's.”

“Isn't he dead?” Ron asked in surprise. “Dumbledore defeated him. I always thought that meant he killed him.”

“No, he’s still alive, but imprisoned,” Hermione responded. “Given the way we’ve seen Dumbledore act these past few years, I don’t think he believes in killing anyone, no matter what they’ve done. Voldemort might be an exception,” she added to Harry.

“Yeah, but I’m the one who has to kill *him*,” Harry replied with a touch of bitterness. “So Dumbledore’s hands would still have been clean.”

“In any case, I think we might be able to learn more about this from Grindelwald, if we can get him to talk to us,” Hermione continued hastily. “I did some research on him after my trip to Durmstrang last spring. He’s been held in a magical prison in Germany all these years. Since our search for Horcruxes could very well take us to the continent, we could stop and see him along the way.” Neither of the two boys could find any fault with that suggestion, so one more item was added to their already full slate.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 11

*Harry and I were right not to go to the Burrow today. Ron came back after his visit to report that Percy had shown up with a DMLE ‘escort’. The man claimed that he had evidence that they were harboring a fugitive, and demanded to be allowed to search the place. Mr. Weasley objected, but he was told point blank that he was risking his job if he didn’t cooperate, and that the DMLE already had an extensive file on him detailing his subversive activities. Since I wasn’t there anyway, and there was no evidence that I had been, he stepped back and allowed the search.*

*When the Ministry official came up empty, Ginny innocently asked who they were looking for. He snapped that they knew very well who, and that if they knew what was good for them they’d tell him where I was. Mrs. Weasley then stepped up and said that they hadn’t seen me for nearly a month, and as far as they knew I was out of the country.*

*As Ron was finishing the story I remembered that Crookshanks was still there at the Burrow! But Ron already knew what I was thinking when he saw the alarmed expression on my face, and told me that Crookshanks had hidden in the garden in one of the gnome holes while the DMLE was there. He is such a smart cat!*

*Along the same lines, the wards on my parents’ house were tripped today. We managed to restrain ourselves from going to investigate until we were sure that whoever it was had left. Then Harry and I apparated there, but stayed under his invisibility cloak. There wasn’t any damage done to the house, and no Dark Mark, so we’re pretty sure it was the DMLE again.*

*With any luck they’re persuaded that I’m no longer in Britain. We left plenty of evidence in the house – the electric and the water have been shut off, and it’s obvious that no one is living there. If they talked to any of the neighbors, they were all aware that my parents took off on holiday and intended to be abroad for a year. They intentionally didn’t leave any contact information, though, and didn’t tell anyone exactly where they were going.*

*The announcement about muggleborns being taken into protective custody was in the Daily Prophet this morning, but the paper made no editorial comment on it one way or the other. As I feared, a large portion of the wizarding public just doesn't seem to care. Even though that's what I expected, it still hurts.*

*All in all, it was a pretty upsetting day. One of those days where it seems like the world is against you. Harry was great about comforting me. He's had plenty of days like this, so he knew just how I felt. And it was nice to let him console me for a change, since I so often do that for him. I really like the relationship we have. It's a true partnership.*

*-0x0x0-*

*From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 12*

*Finally a bit of good news, if you looked at it the right way. As we had hoped, the announcement yesterday has really lit a fire under the muggleborns we contacted today. Persuading them that the Ministry is serious and that they need to flee the country is much easier than it was last week.*

*We also discovered that we aren't the only ones working on this problem; Fred and George have been spreading the word as well, among some of the recently graduated students. It started with Alicia Spinnet, the former chaser on the Gryffindor quidditch team, who's one of their best friends. I hadn't even known she was a muggleborn until she joined the DA during our fifth year, even though she was in my own House. Some muggleborns at Hogwarts are like that – they try to hide their non-wizarding heritage from all but their closest friends. I can understand their reasoning, with all the taunts I was subjected to. But we got to know each other better during the DA meetings, and we compared notes about our experiences.*

*At any rate, Fred and George, along with Lee Jordan, have been visiting their muggleborn classmates and those a year or two above them, telling about the family they encountered on their way back from France, whose mother was separated from them. Everyone knows the Weasley twins, and when they're serious about something people sit up and take note. So that story was even more effective coming from them.*

*They're also supplying some of their WWW products to each of the families they contact, which can be used as distractions when the DMLE arrives, in order to buy them time to escape. When we ran into them we made a mutually profitable trade – they took some of our portkeys and we stocked up on their diversionary pranks.*

*I know we don't have enough portkeys for all the muggleborns in the country, but we should be able to hand out all the ones we have by the end of the week. Everyone else will have to make do on their own. It's not perfect, but it's the best we can do. (Now that's something that I would never have written five years ago! If something wasn't perfect, it was simply unacceptable for me. Fortunately, I've gained a bit of perspective since then.)*

*Later –*

We heard from Dean. He and his family are now safe in France. He contacted Harry through their DA coins, which Cho and Luna had modified last year to send text messages. That really was a brilliant piece of magic.

Although limited to phrases of only a few words each, he managed to communicate that he was the first one to arrive at the Delacour's, and that they were made to feel very welcome. His mum is a domestic worker, so they didn't have as much trouble pulling up roots and leaving as many other families would have. He shrank all of his family's possessions and managed to get them all into his Hogwarts trunk. I imagine it was quite the treat for his mum and sisters to see him do magic, as this is the first summer that he's been of age. Of course it would have been a more of a treat under better circumstances.

M. Delacour is going to hire his mum to help out around the estate, and act as an intermediary for the other muggle families that will be arriving. That sounds like a win-win situation. Dean again said he wanted to come back here and help us, but Harry told him there really wasn't anything he could do right now, so there was no sense taking the risk.

A little while later we received a similar message from Colin. He, Dennis, and their mother and father showed up in France a few hours after Dean did.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 13

Some news about the locket today. Or rather, news about where it isn't. One of Mundungus Fletcher's primary contacts for fencing the things he stole was the barman of the Hog's Head Tavern. Tonks knows him well, as she spent a lot of time in that bar while she was on duty at Hogwarts last year. He told her that Mundungus never tried to sell him anything like that locket. So maybe he still has it?

There was another curious aspect to this story. She referred to the barman as Aberforth. That's right. When we asked her about it she confirmed that he's Dumbledore's brother Aberforth! So when we had that meeting in the Hog's Head to organize the DA, Dumbledore would have known about it immediately! I wonder how many other sources of information like this he had. I bet he knew a lot more about what was going on than we suspected.

...

The wolfsbane potion is coming along pretty well. I think I'll have an acceptable potion ready by this weekend. The full moon is on Monday, so it will be just in time. Remus was quite touched, and told me he really appreciated it. I could also see in Harry's eyes how proud he was of me. I got a great hug out of it.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 15

*I do not believe this! Honestly, what other bad news can we get this week? No, mustn't tempt fate by thinking like that. Nobody died. But this is so revolting, so maddening. It just makes me sick!*

*Umbridge has just been named as the Headmistress of Hogwarts for this year! Unbelievable.*

*In hindsight I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. She seems to be the golden girl of the Ministry right now – the one they put in the high profile positions where they need someone who unquestioningly toes the party line. Another muggle term that would be appropriate here is 'hatchet man'.*

*And the comments that the foul toad made in her interview especially set me off. She started by bragging about her work in reforming the DMLE and changing its focus to deal with the newly discovered threats to proper wizarding society. Then she explained that her work at Hogwarts two years ago remained unfinished, and that she intended to remedy that.*

*What really took the cake was when she asserted that her efforts during the past few months were all leading toward the same fundamental goal – the elimination of all muggle influence in the wizarding world. That her recent oversight of the implementation of the muggle control legislation was essential to her plans for Hogwarts.*

*You see, muggleborn witches and wizards are not fit to be educated with normal students. And now, with the policies of the new, more enlightened Ministry, they will be receiving their training elsewhere. In other words, while they're in custody. I wonder if there will be any magical training for them at all, or if the entire thing is all a farce.*

*The targets in the basement really took a beating from me today.*

*...*

*Tomorrow we will be going to see Luna and her dad, hoping to learn more about that mysterious symbol that has been popping up so often. Even if nothing useful comes of it, it will be nice to see Luna. I expect that she will do or say something unusual and amusing that will take our minds off these other concerns.*

*-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-*

## **Notebooks and Letters** **The Deathly Hallows, Lovegood Style**

### **Final Year, Chapter 9 – The Deathly Hallows, Lovegood Style**

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 16

*Today is the day we've arranged to visit the Lovegoods. Ron seems rather more eager than one would expect. Harry and I have managed to restrain ourselves from teasing him about wanting to see Luna. It would most likely result in him getting stubborn and denying that he has any feelings for her, and he might even be able to convince himself. We'll see what happens while we're there.*

*I expect it to be quite an unusual experience, given what we know about the family.*

They had apparated to a location near the Burrow that Harry and Hermione were familiar with, then Ron pointed out a hill nearby. A few seconds later they reappeared atop it, looking down in one direction at the crooked little house that Ron had grown up in, and then in the other direction at a much stranger looking one. It appeared to be a great black cylinder rising vertically into the sky.

"That's the place," Ron announced. "I've never been inside but Ginny used to go there to play with Luna when she was little. Looks like a giant rook, don't you think?"

Hermione frowned, thinking that the house looked nothing like a bird, rather more like a castle, then realized that of course Ron was comparing it to a chess piece. She looked up to see Harry grinning at her, undoubtedly aware of the sequence of thoughts she had just gone through, and shot him a dirty look. He grinned again and took her hand, following along after Ron as they picked their way down the hill. Ten minutes later they were at the entrance, where a hand-painted sign proclaimed this to be the home office of *The Quibbler*, edited by X. Lovegood. A second offered mistletoe for sale, hand grown by L. Lovegood.

As they pushed open the gate and stepped on the zigzagging path to the front door (*of course, they couldn't possibly have a straight, normal entranceway like anyone else*, Hermione thought to herself with a smile) Luna burst through it and skipped out to meet them. She was as excited as they'd ever seen her, and yet she moved back and forth along the winding path in what seemed to be a well-practiced dance.

“Hi Harry, hi Hermione!” she greeted them eagerly, before drawing herself up and taking a breath. “Hello Ronald,” she smiled shyly. “I’m glad you could come.” Ron was unable to answer for a moment, as he gathered his own composure and looked her up and down, startled at her appearance. She was wearing a bright blue sundress with a fitted bodice and waist and a flared skirt, which ended just above her knees, revealing that Luna possessed a long, slender figure with very nice looking legs. With her long blonde hair and blue-grey eyes, the dress looked fabulous on her.

“Hi Luna, we’re happy to be here,” Harry responded, covering for his best mate. “This looks like a very interesting place.”

“Thank you, would you like to have a look around?” she offered, smiling at Harry and Hermione before shooting an anxious glance at Ron.

“We’d love to,” Hermione answered brightly, moving forward while Harry gave Ron a nudge behind her back.

“Erm, yeah, we would,” the redhead finally managed. “You, uh, sell mistletoe then?” he added, motioning to the sign.

Luna beamed at him. “Yes, would you like to buy some? It’s guaranteed to be nargle free.” Ron reacted predictably and turned bright red as he considered the normal use to which mistletoe was put.

This time Hermione bailed him out. “Perhaps at Christmastime,” she allowed. “Is this where you grow it?” On either side of the path as they moved closer to the house were two trees that sprouted several bushy growths of the parasitic plant.

“Yes, I’ve experimented with several different kinds of trees and shrubs,” Luna responded brightly. It grows best in fruit trees, like crabapples and pears, but it tends to get infestations more often then. I think the nargles are attracted to the sweet juices of the fruit. So I tried other kinds. I’ve had the best luck with silver birches. They have the prettiest leaves as well.”

The trio stood and admired her efforts, as well as the other unusual shrubs in the yard, for a few minutes before they entered the house itself. The floor plan was focused around a spiral staircase in the center of the structure. On this level were two semicircular rooms, a kitchen and a dining/living room. It was the strangest kitchen any of the three had ever seen, as the stove, sink, cold box, and all the cupboards were curved to fit against the walls of the round structure. They were also painted in bright colors – red for the stove, blue for the cold box, green for the sink, and yellow for the cupboards – and covered with flowers, birds, and butterflies. The decorations had a decidedly childish style, and the three suspected they were Luna’s additions to the decoration scheme over the years.

Xenophilius called out from the living room to greet them, but before they could sit down to talk Luna pulled them all up the stairs to see her room. The second level evidently contained her father’s bedroom and office, while her bedroom occupied the third floor. It was a completely



circular room, and again her furniture fitted into the curve of the walls, including her bed, which was shaped like a crescent moon. But it was what was *on* the walls that caught their attention.

“What do you think?” Luna gestured and then stood there as her hands clasped together nervously. It was obviously her proudest creation. Painted on the wall, encircling the room, were six faces – Harry, Hermione, Ron, Susan, Neville, and Ginny. The one of Ginny was older, having been there first, while the other five had evidently been added the previous summer. Linking all the paintings, weaving itself around and through the pictures, was a golden chain. Upon closer inspection, the links of the chain were letters, a single word repeated over and over in golden ink: *friends*

Hermione was the first to react, running over and hugging the younger girl. “Oh Luna, it’s wonderful!”

Harry joined them seconds later, wrapping an arm across the blonde girl’s shoulders and giving a squeeze. “She’s right. It looks great. And I know what you mean about how important friends are.”

Luna’s eyes began to tear up and she smiled at Harry as Ron arrived. Just as he attempted to join in the group hug, she broke away from Hermione and turned to him. His arms ended up wrapped awkwardly around her back while she threw hers around his neck. Harry and Hermione stepped back and smiled at each other as their hands joined automatically.

When the group of friends finally returned downstairs Xenophilius invited them to make themselves comfortable in the living room. In his normal workclothes their host appeared to be even more eccentric than he had at the wedding. He had long, white hair, which had been worn loose at the wedding but today was tied back in a ponytail. He also had a slightly fanatical look about him that Hermione decided to call the ‘mad scientist look’. All he needed was a white labcoat and safety goggles to complete the picture. He reminded her of the scientist in the movie *Back To The Future* from about ten years previously.

Once they reminded him that they’d come to hear the story behind the circle in a triangle symbol he wore on a chain around his neck, his demeanor changed. He cast a furtive glance around the room and pulled out his wand to cast some privacy spells before sitting down and staring off into space, evidently trying to decide the best way to proceed.

“The sauna!” he declared as he jumped back up to his feet. “That’s the proper place for it.” He paced over to the window and peeked out, then returned, muttering to himself before noticing his guests’ look of bewilderment.

“The sauna is a traditional expression of hospitality in the country of my ancestors,” he explained absently. “It is a way to express trust in your companions, display openness, and show you have nothing to hide.”

“Daddy, are you certain?” Luna queried with a wide-eyed expression that seemed a bit different from those that she normally exhibited.

“Yes ... yes, that will do nicely. The true believers are a close-knit group as you know, my dear, and that would be an appropriate setting.” He glanced around once more, as if expecting someone to pop up from behind the sofa. “And it will afford us the necessary privacy as well.”

The trio shared uneasy looks. “Erm, Mr. Lovegood, I don’t know if ...” Harry began in protest.

The older man stopped and examined him critically. “You are asking me to share information that is held only by a trusted few, Mr. Potter. If you are not willing to demonstrate a similar level of trust ...”

“Oh no, that’s not it at all, Mr. Lovegood,” Hermione broke in. “It’s ... it’s more a matter of us not being prepared, or ... properly attired ...”

Their host relaxed and waved off her concerns. “Not a problem, my dear. We have everything you’ll need.”

He then pulled out his wand again and tapped an empty section of floor near the entrance to the room from the kitchen, and a continuation of the circular stairway appeared, descending to a lower level. When they reached the bottom, they were in a vestibule of sorts with four doorways, not unlike a miniature version of the circular room in the Department of Mysteries. The floor, ceiling, walls, and doors were all made of wood, redwood Hermione guessed, recalling what she’d read about saunas.

Mr. Lovegood turned to Luna and motioned to one of the doors, and she guided Hermione toward it while he beckoned Harry and Ron to follow him through one adjacent to it. The two boys stared at each other in stunned silence as he explained to them the ritual procedure that should be followed for the proper sauna experience – first a shower to ensure that the skin is clean, then the sauna itself where the high temperatures stimulate large quantities of perspiration to open the pores and cleanse the body, finishing up with the plunge pool to cool back down to normal temperature.

Each of them was shown a shelf where they could store their clothing, and directed to a stack of blue and bronze colored towels – Ravenclaw colors, Harry decided. The boys deliberately avoided looking at certain body parts as they showered, then quickly dried and each wrapped a clean towel around their waists – Harry and Ron chose blue and Xenophilius a bronze one. When he decided the two of them were ready, their host led them back out into the vestibule and through another door, into the sauna itself.

Meanwhile, Hermione couldn’t wait to get her blonde friend alone to clarify an important detail of the sauna experience. “Luna, what exactly do we wear in the sauna itself?” she blurted out as they removed their clothing in the other changing room.

“Oh, just a towel,” Luna replied calmly as Hermione heaved a sigh of relief. As she allowed the cool water of the shower to rinse her off, Hermione noted the now fully revealed form of the younger girl. She was tall, slender, and definitely a natural blonde. She had long legs, a slim waist, and slightly smaller breasts than her own, but which were sized nicely for her more slender frame.

Hermione couldn't decide if she could be best characterized as a less curvy version of Fleur or a taller version of Ginny, then determined that her blonde hair tipped the analogy in favor of the newlywed French witch. Unlike Fleur's silvery blonde hair, Luna's was more of a light yellow or straw color, characteristic, along with her blue eyes, of people of Scandinavian descent. All in all, Hermione concluded, the unusual girl could be described as having the body of a fashion model. For example, right now she could easily picture her friend in one of those topless, mixed gender Abercrombie & Fitch adverts that had the Americans in such an uproar.

As the two girls chatted during their showers, Luna confirmed Hermione's guess about her family's background, stating that she was a mixture of Swedish and Finnish. She and her father had developed their taste for the sauna from their travels to the two countries in their searches for the Crumbled Horn Snorkack. She laughed that although it was generally accepted that the sauna was a Finnish invention, the Swedes claimed their own version called a *bastu*. But as far as she was concerned, it didn't matter since she counted equal heritage with both nationalities. For her part the blonde Ravenclaw was fascinated by Hermione's tan lines, having a uniformly pale complexion herself.

"By the way," Luna added as the two girls wrapped themselves in towels, blue for her and bronze for her guest, which Hermione noted uncomfortably were not as wide as she thought necessary to cover both her top and bottom sufficiently. Once she sat down it would be difficult to avoid exposing herself, even more so for her taller companion. "You wear the towel *into* the sauna. You take it off as soon as you sit down on the bench."

"What!" Hermione nearly shrieked. "Luna, I can't go naked in there!"

"Why not?" Luna asked with a smile that Hermione didn't think was entirely innocent. "Harry's seen you nude, hasn't he?"

"Well ... well, yes," Hermione sputtered. "But Ron hasn't! And I didn't really intend for him to ever get the opportunity either!" She decided that there was no point in saying anything about Luna's father, for whom being nude in the presence of women was evidently not uncommon.

"Oh, I see," the blonde girl replied with a frown, before her face cleared again to regain her normal look of pleasant unconcern. "I think I can help you out with that."

While Luna explained her plan, the two boys were just then getting the unwelcome news about the dress code in the super-heated room. Unfortunately, by then it was too late to politely back out, and a certain part of them recognized that there was some advantage mixed in with the embarrassment, if the two girls also followed the custom.

They listened in mortification while Mr. Lovegood demonstrated how they sat down on the bench and opened their towel and laid the ends on either side of them, then explained that if a certain part of them responded too vigorously to the experience, it was considered proper etiquette to cover it with the end of the towel until it subsided.

When he finished, the pair summoned up their Gryffindor bravery, swallowed hard, and complied,

still making sure not to let their eyes linger on either of the other male midsections.

At this point Luna walked in, followed reluctantly by Hermione, who quickly took in the scene. The sauna was of the 'dry heat' variety rather than a steam room, which dashed her last hopes that a foggy mist might provide a modest amount of cover. The room was roughly two meters square, constructed completely of wood, with two benches along opposite walls. Mr. Lovegood was sitting on one bench, while Harry and Ron sat across from him, Harry closest to the door. Both boys stiffened uncomfortably as the girls entered, fighting the urge to cover themselves.

Luna made no effort to disguise her inspection of the attributes of the pair of Gryffindors, and Hermione couldn't resist a glance to make her own comparison. She noted that neither of them had a significant size advantage, at least not in their currently softened state. While the older girl hesitated in the doorway, the blonde Ravenclaw crossed calmly in front of everyone and took a seat next to her father, opposite Ron. Then she leaned back and opened her towel and let it drop to the bench.

As expected, this captured the full attention of both boys, and Hermione took the opportunity to slip in and settle closely up against Harry, determined to use his body to shield her from Ron's view as much as possible. Then she hesitantly unwrapped her towel.

Feeling Hermione's bare leg press against his own, Harry tore his gaze away from Luna and gave her a small, apologetic shrug, to which she managed to return a slight smile, as he turned his attention to her. Despite her nervousness bordering on terror, Hermione's smile broadened at seeing his appreciative inspection of her body.

Looking past him, she noticed that Luna had allowed her legs to fall apart to a comfortable amount of separation, exposing herself to the rapt attention of the red-haired boy across from her. This prompted Hermione to consider her own legs, which she now realized had been tightly squeezed together, almost painfully so. There wasn't really much danger of Ron seeing anything down there, especially at this angle, so she managed to relax a little and parted them slightly to reveal a small, neatly trimmed triangle of tight curls. Sensing the struggle she was going through, Harry dropped his hand to her thigh and gave a small squeeze of comfort. Hermione smiled again and increased her resolve to calm herself and focus on the information they had come to obtain.

Their host, however, appeared to be in no hurry to get started; his head was resting against the wall and his eyes were closed, seemingly in meditation. It was possible, Hermione decided, that he was allowing his guests an opportunity to accustom themselves to the awkward situation, which she appreciated if it were indeed the case. As she looked around again, finally able to focus on something other than her own nudity, she observed that Luna's plan to keep Ron's attention on herself, and therefore away from Hermione, was working quite well.

Whenever Ron thought to glance over in Hermione's direction to check her out, Luna shifted her own position, letting her legs fall further apart, leaning forward or leaning back and folding her arms under her breasts, or stretching; crossing and uncrossing her legs, sometimes bending her knee and raising her leg up to rest her foot on the bench, and once even turning sideways and lying lengthwise along the bench. Each time it drew Ron's eyes back to her, and amazingly she managed

to keep this up for the entire time they sat in the sauna. Harry quickly caught on to the scheme, and also helped by leaning forward to block Ron's view whenever he turned toward Hermione.

From her own observations, Hermione had just concluded that she had a strong preference for black vs. red pubic hair when the inevitable reaction occurred in the bodies of the two boys she was comparing, and their respective bits began to swell and rise from their resting places. In an almost choreographed response, both boys quickly grabbed the ends of their towels and flipped them into place to cover the display. This, however, caused small tents to emerge in their laps, which gradually grew to greater proportions.

Hermione blushed and managed to stifle a laugh as she caught herself rooting for Harry to win this seeming competition, even as he was so desperately striving for the opposite effect. A quick look at the faces of her two friends revealed that they both had their eyes tightly shut and were mouthing a few words over and over, clearly in an effort to distract their thoughts. (Harry later told her that his mantra had been 'Uncle Vernon in a speedo, Aunt Petunia in a bikini', which she agreed should have been revolting enough to banish any possible erotic notions.) Then she shared a glance with Luna, who grinned back at her, and both girls rolled their eyes and waited patiently for their male companions to regain control.

Once the excitement had subsided, Xenophilius, almost as if on cue, opened his eyes and inquired, "So, are you now prepared to learn about the Deathly Hallows?"

The teens managed to put aside (well, mostly) thoughts of naked bits and nodded eagerly. Over the next ten minutes the white-haired man informed them that the symbol he wore was a sign that identified himself to other true believers, all of whom were determined to unearth the truth about the mysterious Deathly Hallows, and locate the legendary objects, which as the trio had suspected were the same three items given by Death in the Tale of the Three Brothers. He explained that the symbol was actually composed of three parts, the triangle representing the Cloak of Invisibility, the circle representing the Resurrection Stone, and the vertical line that bisected both of them representing the unbeatable wand, variously referred to as the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, or the Wand of Destiny.

As Hermione grew more accustomed to the fact that she was talking face to face with a naked man while also naked herself, she fell into her typical investigative behavior, asking questions, seeking clarifications, digging for details, and essentially assuming control of the interrogation.

The devout believer asserted that his group held that whoever could unite the Deathly Hallows would be the Master of Death. It wasn't quite clear exactly what that meant – if this person would be immortal, or able to make life or death decisions for whomever he wished, or some other relationship with death. There seemed to be differences of opinion among the Questers on that point.

He did inform them that it was universally accepted that the Cloak of Invisibility was a *true* invisibility cloak, rather than an ordinary cloak with a disillusionment charm (similar to the Weasley twins' Headless Hats) that would eventually wear off. Harry and Ron exchanged raised eyebrows at that statement. Harry's cloak was every bit as effective now as it was in his father's

time, and they hadn't realized how unusual that fact was before hearing this information.

Mr. Lovegood also confirmed that it was believed that the Resurrection Stone really could bring people back from the dead, although in what form he didn't know, and that the Elder Wand did indeed pass from wizard to wizard as each recipient defeated the previous owner. (Which seemed odd, now that they thought more about it, since it was supposedly an unbeatable wand.) Mr. Lovegood explained that incongruity by revealing that the succession more often involved treachery than a direct duel.

At one point Harry's attention had begun to wander a bit as Hermione and Xenophilius recounted the known history of the Wand of Destiny, which she had indeed read about. He and Ron had each experienced a few more moments where they'd needed to cover themselves briefly, Ron more so than him, due to the way Luna was teasing him. Harry was certain that she was doing it on purpose, although the expression on her face, a calm serene look that seemed to indicate that nothing about this situation was at all out of the ordinary, gave nothing away.

Right now Harry's interest was focused on Hermione, specifically on the beads of sweat that were forming on her upper chest, trickling leisurely down her breast following the curves he so enjoyed, to ultimately drip from the tip of her nipple onto her thigh as she leaned forward slightly to nail down a detail. This delightful scrutiny was suddenly interrupted as she straightened up and gasped, "Peverell!", then leaned back against the wall to process this newly discovered connection. This motion inadvertently contributed to her ongoing effort to protect her modesty, as it put her out of Ron's field of vision just as her exclamation caused him to turn his attention away from Luna and towards her.

"Yes," the elder Lovegood clarified. "The three brothers of the tale were Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus Peverell. They were the original owners of the Hallows – Antioch of the Elder Wand, Cadmus of the Resurrection Stone, and Ignotus of the Cloak of Invisibility."

As Harry and Hermione shared a look of understanding about the Gaunt (now Peverell) ring, their host suddenly announced, "I think that about covers it, and we've reached our time limit in the sauna. Now on to the pool for a cool-down."

The three Gryffindors wasted no time wrapping their towels back around themselves, while the two Lovegoods moved at a more leisurely pace. The five of them exited through the door opposite to the one they'd entered through, and found themselves in a much larger room with a shower and an oval shaped pool of still, cool water, slightly longer than the sauna had been. Within the pool, around its perimeter, was a ledge below the surface for sitting on, which would bring the water level to the tops of the user's shoulders.

Xenophilius headed for the shower, removed his towel, and rinsed off before stepping into the pool. Luna followed him in the shower, then turned and smiled at Ron and held out her hand, offering to hold his towel for him. The youngest Weasley male, with his face as red as his hair, turned his back to her as he unwrapped his covering and quickly rinsed, before taking the towel back and holding it in front of himself. It didn't prevent either of them from examining each other over the fabric barrier, and Luna shot him a wink as she turned away from him and stepped down

into the plunge pool. Ron couldn't hide his grin as he followed her, and sat down on the opposite side of the pool, assuming the same relative positions they had occupied in the sauna.

Harry gallantly held up a towel in front of Hermione as she rinsed, and continued to keep it in place as she lowered herself into the other end of the pool, then quickly rinsed himself and joined her, once more taking up his spot between his two friends.

With nothing more to ask about the Deathly Hallows (but with plenty of things to discuss among themselves after they returned to Grimmauld Place, in light of this information) Hermione cast about for another topic of conversation.

"So Luna," she inquired, "what do you think about your chances to win Ravenclaw's Quill this year?"

"The blonde girl tore her attention away from Ron, with whom she had been exchanging tentative smiles, and gave Hermione one of her slightly disconcerting wide-eyed stares. "How did you know about that?"

"Oh ... well, I guess we were talking with Professor Flitwick about Ravenclaw artifacts," Hermione hastened to explain, turning to Harry for support. He nodded to Luna in agreement.

"It was one of the things he mentioned, you know, like her diadem, her wand, those sorts of things," he added.

Luna shrugged unconcernedly. "OK. I was just wondering. It's one of those things we don't often discuss outside of our House. I actually think I have a good chance. I'm the top of my year at DADA, of course, because of Harry, and I'm also the best at Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. Potions has been much better since Professor Slughorn took over. Snape and I really didn't see eye-to-eye."

Ron burst out laughing at that quite believable revelation, and the other two chuckled as well, as they tried to visualize an interaction between the odd, unflappable Ravenclaw and the unpleasant, insulting potions master.

"Her wand and her diadem are the most well-known, of course," Luna continued, seemingly oblivious to the mirth she had created, but given away by the twinkle in her wide blue eyes.

"Well, her wand is quite familiar because it was displayed in Olivanders, but what does anyone really know about her diadem?" Hermione countered. "No one's heard anything about it for over a thousand years, right?"

"I have," Luna answered off-handedly. "I even know where it is."

Harry had begun massaging Hermione's shoulders, causing her to close her eyes and slide down a bit into the cool water, but this revelation caused her to sit up straight and stare across the pool at the other girl in amazement. "What? How?" she sputtered.

“The Grey Lady told me,” came the response. “Didn’t you know that she’s the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw, Rowena Ravenclaw’s daughter?”

Hermione’s mouth opened and closed but no sound came out, so Harry broke in. “I didn’t think the Grey Lady ever talked to anyone,” he commented doubtfully.

“Oh, I talk to her all the time,” Luna shrugged. “It’s a very sad story, actually. She stole the diadem from her mother and ran away, but then her mother got very sick, and sent her fiancé to bring her back, only he really wasn’t her fiancé any more, well, he wanted to be but ...”

“Luna!” Harry broke in again, as Hermione was still stunned into silence, perhaps because all of the ‘facts’ in her reference books were being systematically ripped to shreds. Luna paused in her dissertation and looked over to Harry, eliciting a smile. “Where is it?” he asked urgently.

“Oh, sorry. It’s in Albania.”

“Albania!” Hermione shrieked as she shot to her feet in the waist deep water. “Harry, that’s where ...” She was unable to finish her observation about the obvious connection with Voldemort because Harry had reached up both hands, put them on her shoulders, and forcibly yanked her back down onto her seat. This action resulted in the creation of a large wave that quickly traveled to the opposite end of the pool where it caught Ron right in the face, as he was staring open-mouthed at the way Hermione had just exposed herself.

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione put the notebook down and turned to scowl at Rose, who had been snickering and giggling on and off ever since the part where Hermione first panicked about the nudity, but was now laughing uproariously, holding her stomach and trying to catch her breath.

“It’s not that funny!” she protested.

“But Mum, that was hilarious,” Rose gasped. “After you’d spent all that time in the sauna working so hard to keep Ron from getting a good look at you, and then you jump up and flash your boobs right in his face.”

Hermione groaned. “It was so embarrassing.” A touch of pink tinted her cheeks at the memory, even twelve years later. Rose responded with another giggle.

Hermione huffed, but Rose saw her mouth twitch just a bit. “Look, do you want to hear the rest of it or not?” she demanded.

“Yes Mummy,” Rose said contritely as she sat back up and wiped the mirthful tears from her eyes.

“And ...?”

“And I promise not to laugh at you ... even when you do silly things.”



Hermione tried to glare at her daughter again, but the impish grin was just too much for her, and she found herself grinning back. “Well alright then, as long as we’re clear on that.”

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione had been unable to look Ron in the eye for the rest of their time at the Lovegoods, but by the time they had returned to Grimmauld place they had reached a silent understanding that neither would ever bring up the experience again. Ron had enough sense not to try to compliment her (‘Hermione, you have a really nice looking pair’ wouldn’t exactly be appreciated) and Hermione wasn’t about to offer any opinion whatsoever on his ‘equipment’ (it was much better if they both pretended that she hadn’t noticed anything).

With that issue more or less resolved, the trio settled themselves in the drawing room to discuss the critical information they’d received.

“What do you want to talk about first?” asked Harry.

“Let’s get the obvious out of the way,” suggested Hermione. “I think Albania has to be at the top of our list for the Horcrux search. If Luna knows the story, and where the diadem was hidden, then it’s certainly possible that Tom Riddle could have learned of it as well. And with all the time we know he spent in Albania ...”

“I agree,” Harry stated with a look to Ron, who nodded. “As soon as we finish here with the locket.”

“Now, about the Deathly Hallows,” Hermione continued. “That symbol keeps popping up in too many places for it all to be a coincidence. And after we heard Marvolo Gaunt mention the Peverells, I checked and they were a well-known wizarding family. The name died out more than a hundred years ago, though.”

“I think that there could be a real basis for the story, even if parts of it were exaggerated,” Harry suggested. “For example, they might have been created by a powerful sorcerer or sorcerers, rather than Death itself.”

“Dunno about that,” Ron interjected. “Mum always said there was some truth in all those tales. And Death as a real character pops up a lot. Quite a few wizards believe in him. Who else would decide whether someone turns into a ghost or not?”

“Well, that part doesn’t really matter,” Hermione pointed out, not wanting to get into a theological discussion. “Dumbledore deliberately marked that story with that specific symbol. He must have known the symbol was part of the legend, or whatever you want to call it. And it’s the same symbol on the ring. The question is, which one of the Hallows was he trying to draw to our attention? Which is the most important one?”

“Well, I think that’s pretty obvious,” Ron answered. “It’s the Wand.” Harry looked at him oddly.

“I was going to say the Ring,” he informed them.

“Well, it’s three for three then, since I think the key to the story is the Cloak,” Hermione added. They all looked at each other for a moment, then grinned at their lack of conformity. People often forgot that the famed Gryffindor trio were all unique individuals with often widely divergent viewpoints, but the three of them were certainly aware of that fact.

“OK, I think Harry picked the ring because he has more reason than almost anyone to wish he could bring back people from the dead,” she suggested with a sympathetic glance at him. He nodded glumly, confirming her supposition. “And Ron, I think the power of an unbeatable wand really appeals to you, right?”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t need the other two if you had an unbeatable wand,” Ron confirmed. “No one could stop you from doing whatever you wanted.”

“Except that wand has changed hands lots of times over the centuries,” Hermione pointed out. “Perhaps not in straight-up duels, but the fact is that the owners of that wand, if all the stories really are about the same wand, often ended up dead.” Ron shuddered at that reasoning, but didn’t contest the point.

“Well, the Cloak is the ‘correct’ answer, the one your parents expect you to answer when they tell the story,” Ron pointed out. “It stands to reason that’s the one *you’d* pick. The brother who chose it is the one whose life turns out the best. It’s a morality tale.”

Hermione frowned at Ron and was about to snap off a comeback, but hesitated. Then she offered a half-hearted smile. “You’re right, that *was* my reasoning,” she admitted.

Ron was stunned into silence, and Harry’s head snapped back as he blinked in amazement. *Had Hermione ever admitted that Ron was right in an argument?* Hermione rolled her eyes at their reactions and shook her head with a sigh.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” she advised. “What I meant to say is that was my *initial* reasoning,” she continued. “But remember, if this is a hint from Dumbledore about how to defeat Voldemort, we have to look at it from that angle. Voldemort is extremely powerful, and has mastered death, in a sense, so one possibility is that it’s saying that we can’t overpower him, but need to use stealth, which the cloak represents. Which we’re pretty much already doing, so I can’t see that this is helping us much.”

“So you think it’s all symbolic, and that we’re not supposed to focus on the actual Hallows themselves, but what they represent?” Harry asked.

“Up until today I did, yes,” Hermione replied. “But now I’m not so sure.” She paused and drew a breath. “I think we already have one of the Deathly Hallows.”

“I do too,” Ron responded. The other two turned to look at him in surprise. “Harry’s invisibility cloak.”

“I don’t know, Ron, the odds of his cloak being the very same one in the story ...” Hermione objected.

“If it’s not it’s just as good as the original,” Ron argued. “You heard what Mr. Lovegood said about it. That describes Harry’s cloak perfectly.”

“He’s right about that,” Harry noted.

“Well, perhaps,” Hermione acknowledged, “but it doesn’t matter. In either case we don’t need to go looking for that particular Hallow. Either we already have it or we don’t need it.” After a few seconds thought the two boys nodded their agreement at that line of reasoning.

“What I was going to say is that I think the ring is one of the Deathly Hallows,” she announced.

“The Resurrection Stone?” Harry asked. “Hermione nodded. “But we don’t have it any more,” he pointed out. “We don’t know what Dumbledore did with it.”

“I think it could be what he hid in the snitch he left to you,” Hermione suggested.

“But why? What am I supposed to do with it if it is?” Harry remarked irritably. “Why did he insist on playing these stupid games with us?”

“That’s the part I haven’t figured out yet,” Hermione admitted. “Either of those questions actually.”

Harry ran his hands through his hair in frustration, then sighed. After a minute he gathered himself and shook his head to clear it, then turned to the other two.

“I was thinking along different lines,” he revealed. “What’s the most important part of the story from Voldemort’s point of view?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “It’s the wand.”

“Why do you say that?” Ron asked. “With the way he’s so obsessed with not dying, I’d have thought it was the Resurrection Stone.”

“Right now what he’s obsessed with is how to beat me,” Harry insisted. “Specifically, how to get around the problem with our wands. He already tried with a different wand and it didn’t work for some reason. But if he heard that there was an unbeatable wand, he’d do anything to get it.” He looked at Hermione next to him and then at Ron across from him, both of whom wore expressions of consternation. “It may be that the most important thing we can do about the Deathly Hallows is figure out where the Elder Wand is and keep it away from him.”

“Do you really think so?” Hermione asked with some trepidation. The task they already faced was difficult enough, without adding to it something of this magnitude.

“I reckon I have a better feel for what he’s thinking than pretty much anyone alive,” Harry replied glumly, tapping the scar on his forehead.

“There’s one more possibility,” Ron said after they’d all contemplated Harry’s assertion in silence for a while. “What Mr. Lovegood said about the goal of the Questers.”

“You mean to unite the Hallows?” Hermione clarified. Ron nodded.

“Whoever has all three of them would be the Master of Death.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters Moves And Countermoves

### Final Year, Chapter 10 – Moves And Countermoves

Ron Weasley was terribly conflicted. He could not get a certain blonde girl out of his mind. More specifically, the image of a certain naked blonde girl. Never in his wildest imagination could he have imagined himself spending an afternoon sitting across from a naked girl while also naked himself, and being unable to do anything except look at her. Much less that the naked girl in question would be Luna Lovegood! An incredibly sexy Luna Lovegood! A Luna Lovegood who had certainly grown up from the little girl who used to play with his sister.

No, this Luna Lovegood had somehow turned into a living goddess with a body that still made his throat go dry. Last night these new images of her had fueled his nocturnal exertions, which had been so vigorous they had put the silencing charms on his room to the test. When he'd tried to divert his attention to the topless pinups in his bedroom that normally provided the stimulus for this activity, the faces on all of them had somehow morphed into the blonde haired, blue-eyed Ravenclaw. In the end, he'd given up trying to redirect his thoughts and let himself go.

During that same encounter the previous day, he had also received quite an eyeful of his female best friend. Although he had only had the one real good look at her, he could certainly now say that she had very fine looking breasts, something he had wondered about ever since Bill's wedding. But that mental picture, as nice as it was, was definitely *not* wank material. There was a code about these things after all, and one of the rules was that you did not fantasize about your best mate's girlfriend. Even if you had desired her at one time. It might have been more difficult to resist if she had been the only girl in the sauna with him, but that was not the case.

He had viewed Luna in every conceivable posture that he could have wished. It had even seemed as if she was *trying* to get him hard. Leaning forward displaying her breasts so prominently that he could almost reach out and touch them. Leaning back with her legs apart. Winking at him and then turning and walking away, wiggling her bare bum at him. He realized now that there was a good chance that she was, in fact, deliberately teasing him. If so, it had certainly worked, several times in fact. He'd had to resort to the most repellent mental images he could think of to get his wayward libido back under control. Visions of a naked Umbridge, then of Umbridge and Filch together, ultimately did the trick. But he sincerely hoped he'd never need to call upon those particular thoughts again, he decided with a shudder.

But Luna Lovegood? Loony Luna? Actually, he'd found himself thinking about her on and off,

after occasions where they'd found themselves in each other's company, like Bill's wedding for example. But never so intensely as he was now. And he suddenly realized that he hadn't thought about Hannah all summer, even though they had been more or less together at the end of the school year.

As he wandered through Grimmauld Place pondering these thoughts, Ron found Harry sitting in the drawing room looking into the pensieve, immersed in a memory of Dumbledore wearing the ring. Thankfully Hermione was not present – probably up in the library, he decided. Ron sat down across from his friend and waited nervously for him to emerge from his research.

“Hey, Ron, what's up?” Harry asked as soon as he returned to the present.

“Could I ask you a question? It's something that's been on my mind this morning,” Ron responded. Harry cocked his head, curious at Ron's demeanor, and nodded.

“What do you think of Luna?”

Harry smiled to himself. He'd suspected that yesterday's revealing situation might have enabled Luna to finally get Ron to look at her the way she wanted him to – as a potential romantic interest.

“I think she's a really great girl,” he answered, knowing his evaluation wasn't in the area his best mate was currently focussed on. “She's loyal, smart, funny ...” He paused to see Ron's expression of impatience. “Pretty attractive too, don't you think?” he added with a grin.

Ron shook his head. “Attractive! That's an understatement. She took my breath away. She was amazing ... I couldn't believe it ... I can't get the way she looked out of my head.” He looked up at Harry again. “Her body was incredible ... not that I've seen all that many naked girls to compare her to, mind you. Just her and ... well, what I saw of Hermione yesterday ... sorry about that,” he finished with a guilty look.

“Don't worry about it,” Harry reassured him. “Nothing you could have done about it, really.”

He personally thought Hermione's figure better than Luna's, though he knew he was biased. But if you liked slender girls rather than fuller figured ones, Luna did have an advantage. Although the other girls Ron had found particularly attractive had been more generously endowed, like Fleur or Lavender, so he suspected that the shock of the full nudity had been a big factor in his friend's analysis.

“As for Luna, I paid more attention to Hermione yesterday, but I have to agree that she looked pretty good,” Harry observed. “Not that I have all that much more experience viewing girls' naked bits than you do. Besides Luna yesterday, and Hermione, there was only Cho,” Harry assured him, conveniently omitting his experience at the topless beach in France. As he noticed Ron nod his head somewhat relieved at this information, however, he had an evil thought and continued, “and Alicia, Angelina, and Katie, of course.”

“What!” Ron's eyes went wide.

“Well, yeah, in the quidditch locker room showers,” Harry went on with a shrug.

“No way!” Ron objected.

“Sure, after every practice we all showered together. It was Wood’s idea to build up team unity.” To his own amazement, Harry was still managing a straight face. “I thought sure Fred or George would have told you about it.”

“Wait a minute ...” Ron’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Angelina put a stop to it when she took over as captain though,” Harry added, improvising hastily. “I suppose it was because with you and Ginny on the team it would have been kind of awkward ... you know, being siblings and all ...”

“You git! You’re having me on,” Ron shouted. “I was on the team for two months before she replaced you.” Harry could no longer hold it in and burst out laughing.

“Yeah, but I sure had you going for a minute there,” he chortled. Ron scowled and responded by punching him in the arm. But Harry considered the diversion a success if it got them away from discussing Luna and Hermione’s bodies.

“So, Luna turns you on, she’s super nice, she makes you laugh, and for reasons I don’t understand she seems to like you,” Harry summarized with a grin. “So what’s the problem?”

“She’s Luna!” Ron complained.

Harry’s grin quickly turned into a frown. “What exactly is that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

“It’s hard to change the way I think of her,” Ron tried to explain. “She’s different, you know? She’s not like other girls.”

“From the way I see it, that’s an advantage,” Harry retorted, his frown deepening. “What are you really saying?”

“What will it look like if I get together with her?” Ron answered quietly as he looked away from Harry’s penetrating gaze. “What will other people think?”

Harry waited several long moments before answering. “You’re asking the wrong person that question, Ron. I’ve long since stopped worrying about what other people think about me. But if it’s that important to you, that you’d give up the possibility of getting something going with a wonderful girl like Luna because of it ... well, I guess you’ll have to make that decision for yourself.”

He then got to his feet and waited until Ron looked back up at him. “But if it’s going to be a problem for you, don’t you dare start something with her and then drop her. I will *not* stand for her getting hurt because you can’t get your head out of your arse. Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I’d rather be in the library right now.”

As Harry strode from the room Ron slumped back into his chair and blew out a long breath. For a second there he'd feared that Harry might hex him. And to be honest about it, he would have deserved it. He was well aware that his attitude wasn't exactly admirable, but there it was. Like his best mate had said, he needed to decide whether he could handle the teasing with anywhere near the grace that Luna herself always did.

Terribly conflicted indeed.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 18

*We've been on pins and needles all day, waiting to hear how successful we were with our warnings to the muggleborns. Dean and Colin have been alerting us whenever another family arrives in France using one of our portkeys. There were quite a few over the weekend, including Terry's and Alicia's. So that's everyone we know personally, except Justin, of course, since his family wouldn't take one.*

*We had an anxious moment when Tonks called in on the mirror. She and Remus have been staying at her house every month for the full moon and so were there again tonight. Thank goodness Remus had taken the wolfsbane potion I made because he was coherent this time when he transformed. I think it's entirely possible that someone in the Aurors knew what had been going on because they arrived shortly after moonrise to take both Mr. Tonks and Remus into custody.*

*Tonks was able to hold them off while her dad got away, then she grabbed Remus and side-along apparated him away. Unfortunately two of the Aurors were seriously injured and so now Tonks is at the top of the wanted criminal list.*

*What evidently happened is that there were mixed feelings among the group of Aurors that showed up at her house. Some of them were friends of hers, and didn't try too hard to keep her dad from escaping, but others considered her to have crossed the line by having a relationship with a werewolf, and were fully intent on arresting her as well. Those were the two who were injured.*

*Umbridge and Thicknesse, of course, were furious, and have now issued an attack on sight order for all three of them (Tonks, Remus, and Mr. Tonks). Ironically, since her mum is a pureblood (from the ancient and noble house of Black, no less) she was left alone through the whole incident.*

*They're back here now. It was quite unnerving to see Remus as a werewolf. We'd been there that time during third year when he transformed, but we'd not actually had a good look at him that night. The first time Padfoot dragged him away as soon as he changed and the second time we were busy with Buckbeak trying to rescue Sirius. He and Tonks went down to the basement, and will spend the night there.*

*Wait! Justin's DA galleon just activated!*



Given the nature of the attack (rounding up muggleborns) Hermione reluctantly agreed to stay behind while Harry and Ron apparated to Justin's home. Upon arrival well away from the manor style house, they disillusioned themselves and approached cautiously.

What they found was a standoff. DMLE personnel had the place surrounded and cut off, with Justin and his family apparently holed up inside. The main gate at the entrance from the road had been blown away, and there was considerable damage at the front door and entry way. There an expensive luxury car had been wrecked and overturned, and a few unconscious bodies, most of them in servant uniforms but one wearing Auror robes, could be seen lying nearby.

As the situation seemed to be stable for the moment, the two Gryffindors stopped and watched, waiting to see what would happen next. At Hermione's insistence they had their communication mirrors activated so that she could follow what was happening and offer advice, much as she had on the fateful mission to the cave.

It didn't take long for the muggle police to respond, as a security alarm had likely been activated. But a few words and memory modification spells dealt with them in short order. But then, help of a different sort arrived, as Ernie Macmillan and Susan Bones, Justin's fellow Hufflepuffs, appeared on the scene. Given that Susan was the niece of their former boss, and Ernie was also from a prominent pureblood family, the Ministry wizards took this intervention more seriously.

At this point Harry and Ron agreed to split up, with Ron joining Susan and Ernie while Harry snuck into the house to find out what was happening inside. As Hermione kept him apprised of the progress of the group outside by means of whispered comments through his mirror, Harry found the situation inside to be grim indeed.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Finch-Fletchley were down and clearly injured in the entrance hall, with Justin taking cover in the rubble of the doorway in a near panic. To say that he was happy to see Harry was an understatement.

"Harry! Merlin, I'm glad you're here!" he gasped. "What's going on outside?"

"It looks like the DMLE has the place surrounded," Harry responded quickly while moving to check more closely on the condition of the unconscious adults. "Susan and Ernie just arrived and are talking to them, and Ron joined them. I don't know how long they can hold them off, though. We've got to get you guys out of here."

"Not yet," Justin insisted desperately. "We can't leave my sister. She was out riding after dinner but I haven't seen her since. You have to get her first. Please Harry, find her!"

Harry would have preferred to hold the fort while Justin searched for his sibling, but couldn't convince his Hufflepuff classmate to leave his position. Making his way through the house and out to the grounds in the rear, he disillusioned himself again and began searching the property. At Hermione's suggestion he cast the *Homenum Revelio* spell, and after several long minutes struck paydirt.

In the loft of the stables, he found a young girl hiding under a pile of hay, shaking with fear. “It’s all right,” he called out softly. “I’m a friend of Justin’s. We’re going to go find him and your parents and get away, OK?”

A head of long sandy hair tentatively emerged and Harry lit up his wand tip so she could see him. As she took in his messy black hair and the telltale scar her eyes widened. “You’re Harry Potter!” she gasped.

Thankful that in this case at least his fame was useful, Harry quickly persuaded the girl, who he discovered was named Jennifer, to come with him back up to the house. Unfortunately, before he could rejoin Justin they ran out of time. As the two of them slipped back into the rear of the house Harry felt a tingle in his magic as an anti-apparation ward went up, and realized it meant that a renewed assault was imminent. An explosion that blew a gaping hole in the front wall of the manor confirmed his fear.

“Justin!” Jennifer screamed. Harry grabbed hold of the distraught young girl before she could run into a firefight, but she ignored him, struggling to break free. “Mum! Dad!”

“Harry!” came a shout through the dust and debris. “We’re cut off. Take Jennifer and get out of here. I can’t hold them off much longer!” A loud crash punctuated his declaration, and then he fell silent. Harry looked down into the tear-streaked face of the girl in his arms and nodded. As she buried her head in his shoulder he touched the unsharpened Number 2 pencil in his pocket and spoke the activation phrase – *‘Of The Court’*

Without the guiding arches that were used at Bill and Fleur’s wedding, the portkey trip reverted to the normal gut-wrenching, dizzy experience that was typical of that mode of travel. But before Harry had even picked himself up he heard Hermione’s voice over his communication mirror. “Harry! Where are you?!”

Harry pulled the mirror up to his face and responded quickly. “Hermione, I’m all right. I just activated the portkey.”

Before he’d even finished the second sentence he saw Hermione look away and shout, “Ron wait! He’s OK!” and he realized that she was working both mirrors at the same time. As he waited for her to turn her attention to him, he tightened his hold on the near hysterical girl with him. After a short exchange with his other half to assure her that everything was fine on his end, he broke their connection so she could concentrate on Ron.

“Mr. Potter?” came a heartbreaking sob from below him. “What happened? Where are Mum, Dad, and Justin?” Harry felt his heart sink at what he knew he had to do next. He’d almost rather be facing a Death Eater attack than to have to explain to this young girl that she might never see the rest of her family again.

He knelt down and hugged her to himself, and she buried her head in his shoulder again. “First,” he responded gently. “Call me Harry, OK?” Jennifer nodded after a brief hesitation and he continued. “I’m not exactly sure what happened to Justin and your mum and dad. Those wizards

came to take you all away and your mum and dad didn't want that to happen. That's why Justin shouted at me to get you out of there, because he didn't want them to get you too. Remember?" The young girl trembled in his arms, but nodded again. "So they're probably going to take them somewhere and hold them for a while," he concluded.

"But why?" Jennifer asked uncomprehendingly. "Why would they want to do that to us?" Harry was silent for a moment. How did one explain to a daughter of privilege that there was another world where a large part of the population considered her to be beneath their notice?

Harry was saved from having to answer just then by the arrival of the welcoming committee.

"Harry, what are you doing here?" Dean asked as he strode out quickly from the main house to the portkey landing area. Before Harry could answer a head of silvery blonde hair streaked by his Gryffindor roommate. He just had time to shift Jennifer to his left arm before Gabrielle launched herself into his right side.

"Arry! Eet's so good to see you again!" she squealed happily. On his other side, the frightened young girl shrank into him and whimpered, not yet comprehending what was happening here. Seeing this reaction, the clever Gabrielle grasped the situation almost instantly. Pulling away from Harry and straightening herself up, she reached out her hand and said politely. "'Ello. My name ees Gabrielle Delacour. Welcome to my family estate."

The young English girl had been drilled repeatedly on formal etiquette, as befitting her station in life, and suddenly had something familiar to grasp on to. Without releasing Harry completely, she reached out her right hand and responded, "Jennifer Finch-Fletchley. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

The French part-Veela smiled broadly and tugged on Jennifer's hand, urging her forward. "As am I. May I show you around?" Jennifer hesitated to move away from the only person she knew in this strange place, and turned a nervous look back toward Harry.

"It's fine Jennifer," he reassured her. "Gabrielle is a good friend of mine and the Delacours are wonderful people. Lots of other English kids have come here in the past week and they're taking good care of them. This is the place I suggested that your family come to when I visited you two weeks ago."

The Finch-Fletchley heiress finally assented and released Harry's hand. As the two girls moved off, their conversation gradually became more familiar.

"Tu parles français?"

"Oui, un peu."

*Ron waited with Susan and Ernie to see what became of Justin and his parents, then returned back here before the DMLE wizards could get any ideas about questioning exactly how he'd happened*

to show up there at that particular time. Justin and both of his parents were taken away unconscious, and the servants were obliterated. No one could get close enough to see what else the DMLE obliviators did to them, as far as establishing a cover story, but I imagine we'll read about it in the London Times.

Harry stayed the night in France, making sure Jennifer was settled in all right and discussing the refugee situation with M. Delacour and Dean, who had assumed leadership of the older Hogwarts students present. When Gabrielle brought Justin's sister down to breakfast the next morning she announced that her new friend was a witch herself who had just recently received her Hogwarts letter. Jennifer added somewhat shyly that she'd been very disappointed when Umbridge made her announcement that muggleborns would no longer be allowed at Hogwarts, but now she would be joining her new friend Gabrielle at Beauxbatons for the upcoming school year, just as she had been told I had done the previous year. (This last bit had evidently been the clincher in her decision – Harry claims that she wanted to emulate the so-called brightest witch of our generation but I think she was more swayed with the 'Harry Potter's girlfriend' part of the story.)

When Harry wondered during our conversation later that morning how he should go about coming back to England, I grinned smugly and informed him that I'd already sent off Hedwig with his Firebolt, and I expected him home for lunch.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 23

Finally! We're making some progress. Two different things happened today. One was expected; one came as a surprise.

Tonks and Remus finally tracked down Mundungus Fletcher. That man can apparently be quite slippery if he doesn't want to be found. No one had heard anything about him since the night he ran out on us at Privet Drive. For all we knew, he might have been captured and/or killed. At any rate, Remus overheard something in Knockturn Alley about where he was hanging out, and Tonks disguised herself as a layabout and made the grab.

As for the locket, he no longer has it, and hasn't had it for some time. He was going to try to sell it to Borgin and Burkes, but happened to be in their shop when some Aurors came in to question them in regard to the Vanishing Cabinet Malfoy used to sneak the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. Things were pretty crazy back at that time, and he was swept up with the rest of the suspicious characters in the store and taken into custody.

So true to character, he tried to bribe his way out by offering some of his loot to an unscrupulous low-level Auror. Well, the thing that most caught the man's fancy was the locket with the serpentine S on it. Ironically, Fletcher tried to boost the value by claiming it was once owned by Slytherin himself, even though he didn't actually believe that. It figures that the only time he tells the truth is by accident when he's trying to lie! It turns out the crooked Auror was a Slytherin, so that aspect of the locket really appealed to him.

*Tonks obviously knew the Auror in question, so now she'll try to track him down. We're concerned because the Ministry is a much more dangerous place to be for her since Monday, but she just shrugged it off. That woman is really stepping up and putting it all on the line!*

*The other item of note was that we received a message from Snape! Kreacher brought it to us this evening after dinner. It was rather cryptic, to say the least.*

First Hermione, then Remus, then Tonks had cast different detection spells on the parchment until all were satisfied that it wasn't jinxed or charmed in any way. Finally Harry untied the string and opened it, read it, and frowned. Then he spread it out on the table for everyone to look at.

*HG  
ranged  
part*

"That's it? Ron asked in confusion. "What in Merlin's name is that supposed to mean?"

"It's in code," Harry answered while Hermione furrowed her brow in concentration.

"Are you sure it's from Snape?" Tonks queried.

"Yes, that looks like his handwriting, and it's in exactly the form we were expecting," Hermione replied distractedly.

"Well, the first part must refer to Hermione – HG – those are your initials," Ron declared.

Hermione quickly dismissed this possibility. "No, if that were the case it wouldn't be in code. But that's a good ruse, in case someone else somehow intercepted the message."

"What's the code?" Remus inquired. "Are you going to be able to decipher it?"

Hermione sat up and smiled. "I already have. It's an anagram, you see. You have to rearrange the letters of each line to get the actual words."

"Well, the only way to rearrange the first word is to change it to GH," Harry pointed out.

"Right," Hermione agreed, turning to him. "And what do you suppose that stands for?"

Harry's eyes lit up as the answer came to him. "Godric's Hollow! He's telling us that we need to go investigate Godric's Hollow. There must be a Horcrux there!"

"Wait, though," Remus cautioned. "What about the rest of the message?"

"Exactly," Hermione nodded. "That's a two word warning."

"Danger!" Tonks blurted out. "The first one is danger, right?"

“Correct, and the second?” Hermione continued.

“Could be several things,” Ron pondered. “Prat, Tarp ...”

“Trap!” all four of the onlookers concluded simultaneously.

“Danger, trap,” Harry mused. “So we need to go to Godric’s Hollow, but he’s warning us that it’s a trap. So what are we supposed to do?”

“You won’t do anything,” Remus declared. “This is the sort of thing that Tonks and I can help with. We’ll go and check the place out, and try to discover what the trap is. We can’t risk you going there until we figure that out.” Left unsaid, but understood by everyone, was that he still needed to be convinced that Snape was trustworthy.

Harry wanted to object, but realized, albeit reluctantly, that the sole remaining Marauder was right. He felt Hermione’s hand give his a squeeze, and knew that she was aware of his inner struggle.

“That should work out well, then,” she declared. “You two can do that while we’re in Albania.”

“But Hermione,” Harry objected, “do you really think that with everything that’s going on here we should just pack up and leave the country for who knows how long?”

Before Hermione could respond, Remus broke in. “That’s exactly what you should do. Remember, we can’t take on Voldemort until the Horcruxes are gone. Finding and destroying them is your job. But we won’t just be sitting on our thumbs here while you’re working on that. We can use that time to reduce his forces a bit.”

“Yes,” Tonks added darkly. “We have some definite plans in that area.”

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 27

*This is just too much! It turns out that Umbridge has the locket!*

*It was more of a challenge for Tonks to find out what happened to it than we had expected because all the Auror passwords had been changed at the Ministry, probably after the incident last week that resulted in Tonks being declared a wanted criminal. But as near as she has been able to piece the story together, the Auror that took the locket as a bribe was a bit too free about showing it around. So Umbridge blackmailed him, and demanded that he turn it over to her. She’s been using it to pass herself off as a distant descendant of Slytherin, claiming that she’d recently discovered it among some family heirlooms.*

*So now all that remains is to take it back from Umbridge. Harry and Ron were really eager to carry out this scheme but Tonks just laughed at them. “What do you think you’d do,” she teased, “polyjuice yourself into some Ministry employee you’ve never met and know nothing about, then*

try to sneak into a part of the Ministry you've never been before and just grab it off of her desk?" The sheepish looks she got from the pair of them indicated that that was not too far from what they had in mind. Harry scowled at me when I couldn't completely stifle a laugh, but then he finally gave in and chuckled about the idea.

Once again, Remus and Tonks counseled us to be patient and wait.

We aren't going to be able to wait much longer. I think it's only a matter of time until someone finds us here. We've noticed strangers hanging around the square out front, who are obviously wizards from the looks of them. Even though none of them can actually see the house, the Blacks were a well-known wizarding family and apparently at least a few people were aware that they lived somewhere in this vicinity. Also, it's become more and more evident that Mundungus is willing to sell pretty much anything, which may include the location of this house. He can't tell anyone where it is, but he could certainly bring someone here. So, as soon as we've dealt with the locket, we'll abandon this place. Kreacher can still keep an eye on things here, and can certainly deal with anyone who manages to get in after we've gone.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – August 31

Yes! The locket Horcrux has been dealt with! Three more to go now!

On Friday Tonks discovered that Umbridge wore the locket all the time. That meant that they didn't need to break into the Ministry to get it – they could ambush her at home. They decided to do that over the weekend. Tonks morphed herself into a muggle that lived near Umbridge's house. When they knew that she was home alone, Remus hid under the invisibility cloak while Tonks rang her doorbell, pretending to be soliciting for something. When Umbridge saw who it was, she immediately snarled at her and started to slam the door in her face, but Remus stunned her before she was able to. Then they took the locket, and a few other valuables to make it look like a robbery.

We had considered waiting until school started and then get it back from her by waylaying her at Hogwarts, but rejected that idea. We didn't want her to blame some students and take it out on them. McGonagall helped out by letting us know that Umbridge would be making one final visit to her house yesterday to pick up some things.

The only downside to the plan was that Umbridge decided that it was a group of muggleborns who'd discovered where she lived, and attacked her for her role in creating and enforcing the anti-muggleborn restrictions. Today's Daily Prophet carried the story, and she was quoted as stating that this incident goes to show that the restrictions on this sort of people are justified, and should perhaps be tightened even further.

Today we destroyed the locket.

Harry had tried, without success, to persuade the others to let him destroy the locket by himself, just in case something went wrong. Ron countered that Harry was the one person who was NOT expendable, and if anyone should be protected it was him. Harry wouldn't even consider that, so the others all stood in a semicircle around him with their wands out, ready to cast shielding spells, while he laid the locket out on a hard slab in the basement.

"What do you think, should I just smash it or try to stab it?" Harry asked.

"You stabbed the diary," Ron pointed out.

"But Dumbledore just swung the sword at the ring and cracked the stone," Hermione added. "So it doesn't seem to me that it makes much difference, as long as the object is destroyed."

"Should he try to open it first?" Tonks wondered.

"We all tried to open it when we first found it two summers ago," Ron responded. "None of us could."

"It's possible that it would open if you spoke Parseltongue," Remus suggested, having given the matter some thought. "That's how you opened the Chamber of Secrets, right? Perhaps that was a standard technique used by Salazar Slytherin on items he enchanted. But I'm afraid opening it might activate it somehow and release the soul fragment."

"How about if I try to smash it first, and if that doesn't work I'll try to stab it, and if that doesn't work either I'll try to open it?" Harry suggested. The other four agreed with that plan and braced themselves while Harry raised the Sword of Gryffindor.

The end result was somewhat anticlimactic. The locket proved to be no match for the sword, and shattered from the force of the blow. An eerie scream, similar to the one that had come from the ring and the diary, burst out and quickly faded. Then all was silent, but only for a few seconds until Harry found his arms full of Hermione, who was shortly joined by Ron, Tonks, and Remus as hugs and shouts of triumph filled the room.

Five very relieved wizards and witches celebrated well into the evening.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 1

*We decided to see our friends off to Hogwarts today, before we leave the country for a while. But we suspected that Platform 9 ¾ might have been staked out by the DMLE watching for us to do exactly that. So instead, we apparated to Hogsmeade and disillusioned ourselves and waited at the station for the Hogwarts Express to arrive. Tonks later told us that we'd made a good choice, as she was at Kings Cross keeping an eye on things and there were indeed Aurors there looking over the crowd.*



“Ron, stop fidgeting,” Hermione chided as the trio waited (some more patiently than others) at Hogsmeade Station. “It will get here soon enough. You know what its schedule is.”

“Easy for you to say,” Ron grumbled. “You brought a book to read. I haven’t had anything to eat since lunch.” Hermione rolled her eyes and managed to refrain from noting that Ron could have brought a book of his own, or even a quidditch magazine, if he’d wanted. (She had made the intriguing discovery that if you were holding a book when you disillusioned yourself, you could still see the book just as well as you could the rest of yourself.)

“Well, it better not be late,” Harry grinned. “When Ron’s stomach starts growling it will give us away.” Fortunately, he couldn’t see his mate’s disillusioned glare at this jibe. And also fortunately, in order to maintain the clandestine nature of their visit, the whistle sounded just then announcing the arrival of the big red engine and its cars.

As they watched the students disembark and move on to the waiting thestral-drawn carriages, they noted grimly how much smaller the group was this year. In particular, the Gryffindor and Slytherin seventh year classes contained only a small fraction of their original number. With the trio off on their Horcrux quest, Dean now in France, and the Patils having returned to India to escape the Death Eater threat, only Neville, Seamus, and Lavender remained.

Likewise just three Slytherin seventh years exited the Express – Tracey Davis, Daphne Greengrass, and Blaise Zabini. Regardless of whether the new Ministry policies cleared them of their complicity in the attack on Hogwarts, McGonagall had made it clear that Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson, and Bulstrode were not welcome back. Even when Umbridge was named the new Headmistress, the word got back to the newest Death Eater recruits that returning would be hazardous to their health.

The Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw houses were not unaffected either, as all of the muggleborns were absent, as well as other pureblood and halfblood witches and wizards who had followed the example of the Patils.

Umbridge had already begun to make her mark as Headmistress. Auror Dawlish had been brought on to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. Firenze had been immediately banished back into the forest by the toad-like witch, who had refused to even set foot in the castle until what she considered to be a part-human creature was gone. Fortunately, he was accepted back into the centaur herd, which was more sympathetic after the events surrounding Dumbledore’s death.

Her next victim had been Sybil Trelawny, who had been fired and sent away in humiliation. She would never be seen or heard from again, as a certain dark lord had been waiting to get his hands on her for some time. Yet another Ministry hack had been hired to teach Divination ‘according to Ministry approved guidelines’. The Muggle Studies Professor had simply not been replaced, and the course terminated, since Umbridge considered muggles beneath the notice of wizards and not worth learning about.

Harry heard some sniffles next to him as they watched Hagrid lead the first years to the boats, and his hand found Hermione’s in the dark. He gave her a comforting squeeze as the two of them

wistfully recalled their first sight of Hogwarts while crossing the lake in those same boats, six years ago to the day. It had been the day they first met, neither of them having the slightest inclination at the time what adventures, tribulations, and downright terrors awaited them together with their best friend now sitting on Harry's other side. But both knew that neither would have given up any of it, since it had brought them to each other.

Finally only one carriage remained, as Neville, Susan, Luna, and Ginny lingered, having been alerted that their friends were planning this visit. With one last careful look around, and a few revealing spells to make sure no one else was nearby, the trio canceled their disillusionment and emerged from the darkness to hurry over and say their farewells.

Harry immediately went up to Neville, and parted with one of his greatest treasures as he handed over the Marauder's Map. "I reckon you can make better use of this than I can," he explained to his reluctant friend as Ginny joined them on his other side. Neville nodded and tucked it carefully away inside his robes while Harry accepted a goodbye hug and kiss on the cheek from Ginny. Then the two boys embraced briefly.

"Good luck," Harry muttered. "With Umbridge around you'll need it."

"Don't worry," Ginny responded quietly. "We have some plans for her. She's going to regret ever coming back to Hogwarts. You three just worry about taking care of yourselves."

Meanwhile Hermione had sought out Susan and gave her one of the DA master Galleons. "Thanks Hermione," the Hufflepuff girl responded. "I'm glad you remembered. This will come in quite handy."

"Just don't do anything too dangerous," Hermione cautioned. Susan raised an eyebrow.

"That's rather ironic coming from you, considering all the deadly situations you and those other two Gryffindors you hang around with have managed to get yourselves into, don't you think?" she pointed out. Hermione shrugged and managed a grin, before the two friends exchanged heartfelt hugs. As they broke apart Ginny joined them and repeated the gesture, then pulled away with a broad smile.

"Looks like everyone is saying goodbye in their own way," she snickered as she motioned over Hermione's shoulder. Hermione turned and broke into a smile of her own.

Standing off by themselves, Ron and Luna were locked into a passionate kiss of epic proportions.

"Guess he finally decided," Harry commented with a grin as he came up behind Hermione and wrapped his arms around her.

The five of them waited another minute before Susan and Neville boarded the waiting carriage hand in hand, and Ginny went over to fetch Luna. She finally pulled herself away from her new boyfriend and made him promise to write while he was away. While Ginny hugged her brother, Luna calmly warned him to stay away from the Blibbering Humdingers. As he turned back to

rejoin his friends, a red-faced Ron avoided looking either Harry or Hermione in the eye, but on the other hand he was unable to erase an ear-to-ear grin from his face.

The three best friends watched the thestrals pull the carriage through the gates of Hogwarts until it was out of sight, then sighed. It was indeed a strange and disquieting feeling to not be with their classmates and friends, but they had a different path to follow.

As one, the trio turned and apparated away, leaving the station at Hogsmeade empty once more.

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione looked up from her notebook to see her daughter shaking her head. “So none of that happened?” she asked. “You didn’t really sneak into the Ministry by flushing yourself down a toilet?”

Hermione’s expression showed her disgust. “Goodness, no!” she grimaced. “That may have been the single most revolting thing she wrote, I think. I have no idea why she had such a fixation on toilets! Between the troll incident and the time we spent in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom I certainly had my fill of them.”

“And you destroyed the locket the day after you got it?” Rose went on. “You didn’t wear it around your necks for months?”

“We’d have had to be pretty stupid to do something so ridiculous, don’t you think?” Hermione pointed out. “Especially after what happened to Ginny with the diary?” She scowled. “Honestly, I don’t know why she had to make us look like complete idiots for so much of that book.”

“So no there was no doe patronus, Daddy didn’t dive into a frozen pond to get the sword, and Ron didn’t see that vision of you and Daddy kissing. None of that was real?” Rose concluded while her mother shook her head.

“Well, that last part was based on an actual conversation Harry and Ron had while we were in a forest in Albania,” Hermione allowed. “Let me find it for you.” She started flipping pages in the notebook to locate the reference, when she happened to glance at her watch.

“My goodness, look at the time!” she exclaimed. “You need to get to bed!”

“But Muuum!” Rose whined. However, her mother would not be swayed, and the not-quite-old-enough-to-stay-up-late girl trudged unhappily off to bed, but only after receiving assurances that they would return to the story as soon as possible.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Notebooks and Letters Soul Searching

### Final Year, Chapter 11 – Soul Searching

Rose hopped eagerly onto the sofa next to her mother while Hermione reached for the well-worn notebook that chronicled the fateful year that was to have been her final one at Hogwarts, but was instead occupied with the Horcrux hunt.

“Don’t forget, you were going to tell me about Ron and Daddy talking about you,” the young girl prompted.

“That’s right,” Hermione recalled. “I suppose that’s as good a scene as any to look at next. But first, I need to tell you a bit more about the tent.” She leaned back and closed her eyes a moment, sorting through her memories.

“If you remember from the last book, it was a magical tent that had four rooms – a kitchen, living room, and two bedrooms – which could be expanded or contracted based on the needs of the users within a fixed total floor space. We spent most of our time together in the living room, so we made that a comfortable size for the three of us. And Harry and Ron’s bedroom was sized for two people while mine was a single. What it did *not* have, however, was a full bathroom; only a small water closet in each bedroom, with a basin and toilet.”

Now Hermione opened the journal and found the notes for the particular event she intended to relate. “By that time we’d been camping for weeks and weeks, and after a while you get tired of cleaning yourself with scourgifying spells,” she explained. “So one day we were camped by a lovely little lake, and I decided I wanted to have a bath.”

-oooOOOooo-

Harry was sitting on a rock overlooking the lake, keeping a lookout and watching Hermione undress by the shoreline, when Ron walked out of the tent.

“Hi, what are you up to .... whoa!” Ron began to ask before he spotted the female member of the trio shedding her clothing. He quickly walked past Harry, then turned his back to the lake and faced his best mate. “Sorry about that. You are one lucky wizard, you know that right?” he smirked.

“You better believe it,” Harry agreed. “Except for that whole ‘dark lord wants me dead’ thing, of course.”

“Yeah, besides that,” his friend grinned. Then he turned serious. “I’ve been meaning to say something related to this, actually,” he declared. He paused to gather his thoughts for a moment, then took a deep breath. “Wouldn’t you rather share the room with her instead of with me?”

Harry regarded his best mate thoughtfully. He and Hermione would certainly prefer to go back to sleeping together, but she had taken the single bedroom in the tent, with Harry and Ron sharing the other, out of consideration for their best friend’s feelings. They had been limited to snatching brief intimate moments where they could, whenever they had a bit of time by themselves, without flaunting them in front of Ron.

“You’re sure that you’d be OK with that?” he asked carefully, wanting to be certain.

“Yeah, I will,” Ron responded with a shrug. “I admit there was a time there for a while when if I’d run across a boggart it would have turned into you and her snogging your brains out. That and my mum telling me she’d rather have you as a son instead of me.” He paused and grimaced. “But I know I’ve got to get over it, and I’m almost there. Getting together with Luna’s been a big help. She’s convinced me that she actually likes me for me, and not because I’m Harry Potter’s best friend.”

“She really does, you know,” Harry affirmed. “And she’s as loyal as any Hufflepuff I’ve ever met.” He took a long look at Ron to be certain he was being completely straightforward about his offer. “So you’re really sure, then?”

Ron leaned forward and gave Harry a mock shove on the arm. “Yeah, I am. Now why don’t you go down there and get naked with your girlfriend while I keep watch up here. I’ll definitely keep facing in this direction.”

Harry grinned and headed down toward the lake, where Hermione was now immersed nearly to the top of her breasts. He quickly stripped down and waded out to join her.

“Need someone to scrub your back?” he asked suggestively.

Hermione gave him a quizzical look. “I thought you were keeping watch,” she wondered as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him.

“Ron’s taking care of that,” he responded with a grin. “Don’t worry he’s mostly watching in the other direction.” Hermione chuckled. Since that day at the Lovegoods the idea of Ron seeing her starkers no longer put her into a panic. Besides, at this distance he wouldn’t have nearly the view he’d had from a few feet away in the pool. Harry continued. “But I have some news that I do believe you’ll really like.”

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione cleared her throat and closed the book again. “That’s probably enough – I’m sure you get the idea.”

Rose huffed in annoyance. Things had just started to get interesting! Then she looked up at her mother slyly. “So, is that when you and Daddy started having sex?”

“Rose Elizabeth Potter!” Hermione gasped. “I cannot believe you could ask me that! I would never have said anything like that to my mother.”

“I guess that’s just the way I was raised,” Rose shot back, still smirking. “You always said we could be open about things with each other.”

Hermione just shook her head, muttering something about ‘kids these days’. “Well, it wasn’t like that at all,” she finally responded. “You know very well how I feel about waiting until marriage. We’ve had *that* discussion plenty of times.”

“Mother,” Rose retorted, drawing out the word the way a typical preteen girl would, while rolling her eyes. “I know when my birthday is, and I know how to count to nine. According to the book, you and Daddy would have still been living in the tent when ...”

“That just goes to show, you can’t believe everything you read,” Hermione answered primly. Mother and daughter stared at each other for a few seconds after this assertion before a snort from Rose started them both chuckling at how incongruous that statement would have been coming from Hermione when she was Rose’s age.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Rose pointed out cheekily.

“And I’m not going to either,” Hermione chided. “There are some things children don’t have to know about their parents.”

“But Mum ...”

“I know what’s really bothering you, don’t worry. You’ll understand by the time we finish.” Rose folded her arms across her chest and scowled, but her mother would not relent. Turning her attention back to the notebook in her lap, Hermione frowned.

“I think we should probably skip ahead a few months,” she decided. “Otherwise it would start to sound like a never-ending camping trip. I’ll just give you the highlights.” She began flipping pages, pausing occasionally to refresh her memory or confirm a detail.

“What it all boiled down to is that we spent a lot of time searching in Albania, we *did* find the place where the diadem had been hidden, but it wasn’t there anymore. And we discovered that Voldemort had been in the area during the time between when he had left Britain and when he resurfaced and began his rise to power. So, while we didn’t find the diadem, we pretty much confirmed that Voldemort had taken it and most likely used it to create a Horcrux. In addition, we also uncovered a lot of evidence that he came back in some sort of spirit form, possessing first

animals and then a few people, for most of the decade when his whereabouts were unaccounted for after October 31st.”

“While we were in the area, we also spent some time in Greece, since Dumbledore’s notes included a few possible ancient magical sites in that country that he might have utilized as a hiding place for a Horcrux. We came up empty there, too, although we did learn some fantastic things about magical history. Then we moved across the Adriatic to Italy, checked out a few more leads, and then finally went up to Germany. This all took us about three months, and we chased down dozens of possibilities.”

“During that time we kept in touch with Remus and Tonks through the enchanted mirrors, and with Susan, Neville, and Ginny by messages sent back and forth with Hedwig,” she noted. “Some of their adventures were actually quite a bit more interesting than ours were. Luna and Ron exchanged letters as well,” she added with a smile, “but Ron didn’t share those with us.”

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 13

*Remus and Tonks have made several visits to Godric’s Hollow, trying to determine the nature of the trap that Snape warned us about. They couldn’t find anything. Tonks even morphed herself to look like Harry, and walked past the remains of his house, with no results. No signs of a trap of any kind, and no evidence of a Horcrux in the house either. We’d thought there might be something in the room where Voldemort attacked Harry, but they snuck into the house and couldn’t detect any residual dark magic at all.*

*They’ve concluded that either the message from Snape was phony, or that he was misleading us or was mistaken. It’s also possible that there was a trap there, but when the entire summer went by without them catching us, the Death Eaters gave up. I’m not sure which explanation I believe. Harry still wants to go there when we get back, but we’ll still disguise ourselves, perhaps with polyjuice.*

*Now that they’re finished with that task, they’re devoting all their time to going on the offensive against the Death Eaters. They plan to track them down and take them out one or two at a time. For example, Knockturn Alley is a popular place to either spot Death Eaters or to obtain information on their whereabouts. Remus says they already have several targets in mind.*

*It’s somewhat disconcerting to think of the kind, gentle professor and the fun-loving witch with purple hair in the roles of cold-blooded assassins. On the other hand, Harry and I might well be doing the same thing if we were there and didn’t have Horcruxes to search for. I do wonder if I could actually ‘pull the trigger’ if it came to that. I know I killed some Death Eaters in the battle at Privet Drive, but that was in self-defense. I’m not saying that it’s not the right thing to do, just that it would be difficult.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 24

Communication with our friends at Hogwarts is considerably less frequent, due to the distance Hedwig has to fly. But we received several letters today, and they had some interesting news. Neville and Susan are now leading the DA, which is back to being an underground organization of course, now that Umbridge is the headmistress. Nevertheless, the interest among the students has skyrocketed after their successful defense of the castle during the Death Eater invasion last June. Fortunately, the Room of Requirement is infinitely flexible in accommodating them.

It is apparently quite different than it was for us during fifth year, however, since they are receiving the full support of the rest of the professors (except for the two that Umbridge just hired, of course). Also, most if not all of the Voldemort sympathizers among the students are now gone. It seems that Umbridge has little control over the school, and is headmistress in name only. I wonder how much help she gets from the portraits. Harry reminded me to caution them about that; Dumbledore told him that the portraits in the school are magically bound to assist the current Head, so they have to watch what they say when near any portrait.

Ginny is the new Gryffindor quidditch captain, although she comments that the sport isn't nearly the all-consuming pastime that it used to be. All of the students realize that there are more important things going on, and seem to have a better perspective on what is really only a game after all. (I have to be careful not to say too much along those lines around Harry and Ron, though, as they were pretty saddened when they read what Ginny wrote.) Ginny reports that her main efforts are focussed on pranking Umbridge. She is being aided considerably in this effort by her brothers, as Fred and George have a standing offer to all Hogwarts students of half off the price of any prank that is to be used against the Toad.

We were somewhat concerned when we learned that Ginny had been caught breaking into Umbridge's office to set some pranks, and was punished with the blood quill like Harry was. She regards it as an honor, though, and assures us it won't happen again. Not that she won't do it again, mind you, just that she won't get caught again, now that she knows about the portraits.

Some bad news – Umbridge has demoted Hagrid and brought back Professor Grubbly-Plank. He's still the Hogwarts Gamekeeper, though, and Neville writes that he's not complaining. As long as he can stay at Hogwarts, which is the only home he's known for more than 50 years, Hagrid says he'll be OK. I worry, though, that this might just be the first step. Harry and Ron point out that Umbridge is likely to keep him on in that position just to make the point that taking care of animals is an appropriate occupation for a half-breed. I suspect that they're right.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 12

Remus and Tonks have now 'eliminated' 7 Death Eaters, including Rookwood and Jugson, and the Ministry has finally taken some action. They had been ignoring it, trying to stay out of what they still insist is a conflict that is none of their concern. But the more influential Death Eaters have complained enough that they finally issued a statement condemning the attacks against innocent



citizens as the work of outlaw groups. It fell just short of specifically naming the Order.

A weird situation has arisen. The Death Eaters are still hunting muggleborns (and Harry, of course). The Ministry is also hunting muggleborns to put them into their 'protective custody' camps. And a third group has arisen, comprised of individuals who have been termed 'Snatchers'. These people are hunting down muggleborns as well, and turning them over to whichever side will pay the most (usually the Death Eaters). Against these are Remus and Tonks and some sympathetic former Aurors and Order members who are either assisting the muggleborns in hiding or fleeing the country, or hunting the Death Eaters. All in all it's a very dangerous game.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – October 31

Today is a mixed bag of memories. It's best known as being the date of the death of Harry's parents and the first defeat of Voldemort, of course, but also it's the 6th anniversary of the day I became friends with Harry and Ron. I've been trying to emphasize this aspect. I know Harry appreciates my doing this, but he pointed out that it's also the day Ginny first opened the Chamber of Secrets, as well as the day his name came out of the Goblet of Fire. Rather an auspicious date, all things considered.

We received another letter from Hogwarts. McGonagall and Flitwick asked Neville and Ginny to send along their regards, and let us know they are bearing up reasonably well under a new set of Educational Decrees (basically by ignoring most of them). They also reported that Slughorn has agreed to brew Wolfsbane Potion once a month, no questions asked, in return for some of those Basilisk ingredients we harvested last June. Ginny also described some outrageous pranks she's pulled off, such that Umbridge now rarely leaves the Headmaster's office.

I don't think this is related to Ginny's pranks on Umbridge, but Fred and George's shop was attacked by Death Eaters. They had some nasty defenses in place, as one might expect, and 3 Death Eaters were killed, with 5 injured. The Ministry's response was to charge the twins with public endangerment. So they're now officially out of business and in hiding. They've moved in with Bill and Fleur who have put their house under the Fidelius charm. Obviously, I have no idea where it is, although Ginny reassures us that we'll be let in on the secret as soon as we go back to England.

Susan reports that the Hufflepuff 6th and 7th years are plotting a rescue mission to break Justin and his family out of the internment camp they're in. They're taking what she calls a Hufflepuff approach rather than a Gryffindor approach – i.e. – taking time to gather support and plan rather than having a few of them bravely but recklessly storming the castle. It was her way of teasing Harry a bit, and he responded with a good-natured grin when I read it to him. His and Ron's main reaction was to wish we were back there helping them.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – November 16

After weeks of tedium, something extraordinary occurred today. Kreacher suddenly showed up! He was an absolute wreck, and it took some time for us to understand what had happened. Grimmauld Place has been destroyed! The most sickening part is that Kreacher fully expected to be executed for letting it happen. He actually knelt in front of Harry, waiting to be beheaded. Once Harry managed to calm him down and assure him that he had no intention of doing any such thing, we were finally able to get the story out of him.

It turns out that Mundungus Fletcher finally sold us out, and brought some Death Eaters to Grimmauld Place. (It may have been Death Eaters or it may have been Snatchers, that part was difficult to determine.) They searched through the house but came up empty-handed – it appears as though Kreacher was thwarting them somehow. Finally, Mundungus tripped and fell down the stairs and broke his neck. It was clear from the way Kreacher worded it that this was not an accident – Kreacher finally got his payback for the slimy thief stealing all his treasures. At that point the men with him gave up and decided to just torch the place, which led to an all out battle between them and Kreacher. Somehow they managed to stun him, and left him down in the kitchen to die as the whole house burned down around him.

But these wizards, just like pretty much everyone else in the wizarding world, didn't understand house elf magic, and before the building was completely destroyed his magic revived him. As near as we could determine, the only reason that he survived, rather than sacrificing his life to save the house, which he made it seem like a house elf would normally do in this situation, was that he had another message from Snape for Harry. It evidently was quite a dilemma for him, but in the end he decided that from what he had observed of Harry, he'd rather have the message than risk losing it while Kreacher tried to save the house. (Even though we may not have realized it, all house elves become attuned to their master's wishes and so Kreacher spent the time while we were there in August studying Harry.)

The message had apparently been delivered to the house sometime last month, but we foolishly had neglected to leave any instructions for Kreacher as to what to do with one if it arrived, so he had been holding onto it for Harry. And so he escaped from the building just before it came crashing down on him. The only other thing he managed to save was the Black family locket that Harry gave him, which he always wears around his neck. So when he arrived here, even though he made what he thought was the correct decision, he still expected to be punished for failing to protect the house he'd been bonded to, and the standard punishment for a house elf in such a situation is death.

It took most of the morning for Harry to convince him that he wasn't going to be punished at all, and that Harry appreciated what he'd done. Harry also tried to tell him that he'd rather have Kreacher alive, even if it meant losing the house, but that was too much for him to accept. I'm certain that Harry was sincere in that, particularly since neither Sirius nor Harry had any affection whatsoever for that place. The real tragedy, as far as its loss was concerned, was that the houses on either side probably also burned down with it. We can only pray that the people living in those homes managed to get out alive.

We're not sure what's going to happen to Kreacher now that the house he was bonded to was destroyed. (I notice that I'm now able to write the words 'Grimmauld Place' so I conclude that the

Fidelius has also been broken.) Kreacher seemed to think that he should go to serve either Narcissa or Bellatrix, but Harry quickly assured him that he still wanted him, even though he didn't have a house for him to take care of. I immediately agreed; we certainly don't want him bonding to either of them! I'd offer my parents' empty house for him to live in, but I know he would balk at that, since he still has that residual anti-muggle sentiment that the Blacks instilled in him. So for now, Harry sent him back to Hogwarts, but this time with the instructions that he was to notify Harry if he received another message, or learned anything that he thought Harry should know. (Andromeda Tonks would be another option, I suppose. We should check with her to see if she wants a neurotic house else.)

Now, as for the message, it was again a simple parchment with 3 lines:

Strong git  
Stare glen  
ta, luv

This one took a bit longer to decipher, but once I decided that each line was one word, we finally got it – Gringotts Lestrage vault. If that's correct, one of the Horcruxes is in the Lestrage family vault at Gringotts! That makes sense. He left one Horcrux with Malfoy, and Bellatrix was certainly his most fanatical Death Eater, so he left another with her. Also, the Lestrage family was among his original followers.

So, now we just have to figure out how to break into Gringotts! Polyjuice perhaps? Harry thinks Tonks might be able to impersonate Bellatrix and get in that way. We decided to wait until we get back to England and talk to Bill about it.

Speaking of getting back to England, the news from back home is not good. Ginny and Luna were kicked out of their Defense class by Dawlish for being disruptive, and threatened with expulsion. This may be related to what's going on outside of Hogwarts. Mr. Lovegood has been skewering the Ministry in the Quibbler. And to top it off, Mr. Weasley was fired from his job at the Ministry, as were all the other former members of the Order, including Hestia Jones and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

This was most likely in response to the success of Tonks and Remus and the others fighting with them in their attacks on Death Eaters. To make matters even worse, Tonks's father was captured by a band of Snatchers. It appears that the muggleborns left in Britain have either disappeared into the muggle world or have chosen to stay and fight back, and he was one of those. They've gathered in bands, hiding out in forests and such, and make attacks on whatever targets they can find. The Ministry's response to this is to crack down even more on the ones they're holding in the internment camps.

Ron is understandably anxious about what's going to happen to his family, given the loss of income from both the twins and his dad. He was already starting to complain about how things were going, and now it's likely to get worse. He's frustrated that we haven't found anything for more than 2 months. He's also not happy with the food situation. He can't cook at all, of course and my cooking class last year was in French cooking, which is considerably different than English cooking (which happened to be one of the major points of contention between Fleur and

Mrs. Weasley). He grumbles whenever we have anything other than traditional English dishes. And since we've been in Albania, then Greece, and are now moving to Italy, it's pretty much impossible to find things like pudding or steak and kidney pie.

Ron even went so far as to claim that if his mum were here she could just conjure up some good English food. I immediately pointed out that that's impossible – no one can conjure food, it's against the Universal Laws of Transfiguration. That got us started on another row before Harry stepped in and shut us up. Fortunately for my sanity, Harry, who was basically starved for most of his life, never complains about anything we have to eat.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 1

What I'd long suspected has now been confirmed. Ron and I are definitely not compatible. Thank goodness we never tried to make a go of a relationship. If Harry weren't here I think we would have killed each other by now. In these last 2 weeks things have come to a head, and we agreed last night that Ron would go back to England. It's not that I don't understand what he's going through, but I really do think it's best for all concerned that he leave.

Fortunately, we're still friends, and it's better that we did it this way and came to a decision that we're all satisfied with. I shudder to think what would have happened if we'd just let things fester with us each saying more and more spiteful things to the other until one of us exploded and walked out. I expect that would have been Ron, because there's no way I'd leave Harry, and if he hadn't, then I think Harry would have had to demand that he leave. I'd have hated for Harry to have to make that decision, even though I know that he'd choose me over Ron.

We agreed to join up again when Harry and I return. We'll both have had some time to cool off by then, and if we go to Bill's house as seems to be our likely course of action there will be other people around to act as a buffer. We won't have to be in such close contact all the time. If they're tight for space, Harry and I can camp out in their yard in the tent.

It's tempting to try to analyze what it is that causes Ron and me to always be at odds, while I get along just fine with Harry. It's not that I don't disagree with Harry sometimes, it's just the way we go about handling those disagreements. I could try to delve into their respective psychological make-ups (and mine too, to be fair about it) and I suspect it goes back to the way we were raised and how we respond to conflict, but that's probably not a productive use of my time right now.

Northern Italy isn't too far from the Delacour estate in southern France, so we're going to drop Ron off there before Harry and I head on to Germany to try to interview Grindelwald in his prison. The Delacours will figure out how to help him sneak back into England.

On the battlefield there, our side just suffered a near disaster. The Death Eaters finally worked out Remus and Tonks's strategy, and set up an ambush. Tonks was badly injured and 3 other Order members were killed, including Hestia Jones. Remus and Shacklebolt were also injured.

*Remus talked to us about it on the mirror, and urged us to stay the course. He said everyone in the Order knows what they're getting into, and are willing to give their lives to help defeat Voldemort. He stressed that it's not Harry's fault when someone else dies. I'm glad he said that, since Harry has a tendency to react that way to bad news.*

*Remus told us that Tonks will be out of action for about a month, but that she's already planning how to hit back at them. The good news, especially from my point of view, is that they got Dolohov. Last month they killed both Lestrangle brothers. There are only a handful of inner circle Death Eaters left, most notably Bellatrix, Lucius Malfoy, Avery, and Macnair.*

*-0x0x0-*

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 12

*We finally got in to see Gellert Grindelwald today, and it was definitely worth our while. The prison (Nurmengard) has very high security, and it took a whole week to get the proper clearances. Part of it was that we're traveling in secret, so we had to make our contacts with the German Ministerium für Magie v ery discreetly. It actually helped that Harry is currently on the outs with our Ministry back home, because the German Ministerium, like most ministries in Europe right now, is none too pleased with what's going on in Britain.*

*The years in confinement have not treated Grindelwald well. There is almost no trace of the grinning, bright-eyed blonde boy in the picture from Bathilda Bagshot left in this broken old man. One can still sense the power in him, despite his age and condition, just as one could in Dumbledore's presence. Interestingly, he seemed to be expecting us. It appeared that he wasn't completely isolated from the wizarding world, and had at least some knowledge of what's been happening for the past 50 years. We eventually learned just how much.*

*"Ah, come in my young friends," the gray haired, sallow faced old wizard rasped. "Please forgive my inability to offer you more hospitality, but as you can see I am not situated to entertain visitors here." Harry motioned Hermione to take the single chair in the small room, and took a position behind her, while the aged former dark lord settled himself on the room's simple cot. "So, this is the famous Harry Potter," he continued, "the protégé of my old friend Dumbledore. I had wondered if I might be receiving a visit from you. And if I am not mistaken this must be your Schlammlut companion I haf read about." Harry stiffened as he deciphered the insult to Hermione, but she raised her hand to cover his in a silent request to let it slide.*

*"We were hoping you might be able to answer some questions," Harry suggested. Grindelwald responded with a resigned shrug, as if to say he didn't really have any choice in the matter.*

*"We're interested in learning more about this symbol," Hermione explained quickly, pulling out a parchment with the familiar triangle in a circle. "We'd been told that you used it while you were at Durmstrang."*

*"But of course you are," Grindelwald responded, ignoring the puzzlement this assertion generated*

in his two interrogators. “The Deathly Hallows do tend to haf that effect on people.” Hermione resisted the urge to comment on what this response revealed about the extent of his knowledge, and forced herself to wait to hear what else he would divulge.

The decrepit old wizard leaned back on his bed and closed his eyes. “Vere to begin ... I suppose you must know of my association with your headmaster, and the plans ve made together before he lost his nerve. Vell, without his aid I sought another source of power, a means to bring our vision into being. Ven I returned home I decided to study the art of vandmaking vile I developed my plans, and who better to learn from than the greatest vand crafter on the continent? As it happened, Gregorovitch vas a member of a secret society dedicated to unraveling the legend of the Deathly Hallows.”

“One of the Questers?” Hermione blurted out.

“Ah, you know of them? Yes, the very same,” Grindelwald nodded. “He, of course, vas most interested in the Vand of Destiny. As vas I, for an invincible vand would be most useful to me in my own quest. So I quietly learned vat he knew about it, and ven I discovered who he believed to be the current master of the vand, I took my leave and tracked the man down. And ven I killed him, I became the master. Now nothing could stop me from fulfilling *my* destiny.”

Hermione wasn’t sure what she wanted to ask first, so Harry was the one to fill the silence. “But Dumbledore did defeat you,” he pointed out, not very tactfully.

The dark wizard’s eyes flashed menacingly. “Yes, he did, the coward!” he spat. Then he glared at the astonished looks this statement generated. “I suppose you haf heard all about the magnificent duel ve fought, in vich the great Albus Dumbledore defeated the evil Dark Lord Grindelwald.”

“Sure, everyone knows about that,” Harry replied with some confusion. “It’s on his Chocolate Frog card.” Hermione couldn’t stop herself from shaking her head slightly, but did manage to refrain from rolling her eyes at Harry’s cited source of historical knowledge.

“And who vas there to vitness this epic battle?” the German wizard challenged. Harry just shrugged but Hermione saw the implication.

“Probably the same number of people who witnessed Harry’s defeat of Voldemort when he was a year old?” she suggested.

“Precisely,” the other famous dark lord of the century confirmed, impressed not only that Hermione had come to the correct conclusion so quickly, but also with the analogy she had drawn. “Ve battled, that much is true. Vevere both powerful vizards, and our skills vere evenly matched. But as the Master of the Vand of Destiny, there vas no question that I vould be victorious. It vas a short contest, and I had him on his knees at my mercy. It vas then that he begged me to spare his life, citing our old friendship. I had not planned to kill him in any case, merely to prove to him that my path had turned out to be superior to his, that I had surpassed him, that I vas without question the greatest vizard in the vorld. I released him and accepted his surrender.”

“But ...?” Harry broke in before Hermione could stop him.

“But Albus Dumbledore proved himself to be a man without honor!” the shrunken and defeated old wizard hissed. “As I reached out to return his wand he withdrew a second one from his boot and cursed me with it, taking me by surprise. Yes, the great and noble Dumbledore won only by employing treachery.”

“Then what happened to the Wand?” Hermione asked, breaking the stunned silence that had fallen upon the room. “That would mean that Dumbledore became its master, wouldn’t it?”

This time it was Grindelwald’s turn to be surprised. “But ... I thought you knew. Albus has been the master of the Wand of Destiny for the past fifty years. I assumed that was why you were here, inquiring of its history. Surely *you* had the Wand now? I was under the impression that the man who killed him fled the scene.”

There was an awkward silence as Harry and Hermione pondered how to explain the sequence of events that had led them to that prison tower, and how much could be safely divulged. After a moment Harry motioned to Hermione that she should handle the explanation.

“Professor Dumbledore never told us, or anyone else as far as we know, about the Wand. But he did leave us some information on the Deathly Hallows that led us to believe you might be able to tell us more about them,” she began, choosing her words carefully. “But ...” she looked back at Harry and he nodded, “... there’s a chance – no, it’s actually pretty likely – that Voldemort is now after the Wand. And he might find his way here as well to try to get this information out of you.”

Grindelwald straightened himself noticeably. “He will get no such information from me,” he declared forcefully. “I may not be permitted to do magic here, but my mental defenses are as powerful as ever.”

“Then he’ll kill you,” Harry replied solemnly.

The German one-time dark lord shrugged. “If it comes to that, I am prepared. My only goal all these years was to outlive Albus, and I have now achieved that. There is really no reason for me to hang on to this life any longer.” He directed a shrewd look at his two visitors. “I could end my life now if it would help your cause.”

“But why?” Hermione blurted out. “Why would you want to? Help us, that is.”

“I have little to do in this place except read, and ponder,” the aged wizard replied. “I have taken particular interest in the machinations of Albus during this time, so by extension I have studied your life most thoroughly, young Mr. Potter. I have found you to be a most honorable wizard, perhaps more so than any I have ever encountered. If only part of what I have learned is true, you have faced and overcome more difficulty than any wizard of your age ever has. And yet you have not succumbed to the temptation to turn on your enemies and seek power for yourself.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his position behind Hermione, and she reached her hands up to his

and gave them both a squeeze while Dumbledore's one-time nemesis continued. "I haf also had time to contemplate my own actions, and examine my mistakes, as vell as those of my old friend. His errors may haf been different than my own, but both ultimately derived from our arrogance. It would be interesting to see if you are able to avoid the trap that claimed us."

Harry was unable to respond to that statement, and although Hermione certainly had some thoughts on that particular topic, she kept them to herself for the moment. But as they were preparing to leave, Harry had an idea.

"Erm, if you're willing, and depending on how long it takes for Voldemort to find his way here," he suggested, "it might be to our advantage if you *did* let him know that Dumbledore took the Wand from you, especially if you can keep him from learning that we know anything about it." He briefly laid out his idea, and Hermione and Grindelwald quickly came up with a way to implement it. On their way out of the dark fortress, after they retrieved their wands from the prison guards, Hermione placed a passive detection rune on the outside wall of the tower room.

*We decided to make one more stop before we return home – to visit a retired wandmaker by the name of Gregorovitch. If Voldemort is indeed seeking the unbeatable wand, the trail could very well lead him in that direction. Another detection Rune at that location could come in handy.*

*Then, it's back to Hogwarts to pick up a very special wand.*

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-



## Notebooks and Letters

### The Wand, The Graveyard, The Snake, And The Lovers

#### Final Year, Chapter 12 – The Wand, the Graveyard, the Snake, and the Lovers

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 19

*We're back in England now, and we're going to meet Ron at Hogwarts this evening to fetch Dumbledore's wand. We've worked it out so that Hagrid's going to come to the gate and let us in.*

*Ron has been staying at Bill's house instead of with his parents. He told us it was too risky to go there, as the Burrow's under surveillance. Most likely because they're still trying to capture me, but it might also be because some Voldemort sympathizers in the Ministry are hoping to catch Harry. So it was a good decision on Ron's part to not let them spot him either.*

Harry and Hermione approached the Shrieking Shack under his invisibility cloak, and a quickly whispered *Homenum Revelio* spell indicated that the disillusioned form of their best friend was waiting for them. After assuring themselves that no one was nearby, they removed the cloak and greeted Ron warmly, Hermione with one of her famous crushing hugs. After a few minutes spent catching up, they restored their concealment and apparated up to the Hogwarts gates, where Hagrid soon appeared. A quiet greeting alerted him to their presence, and he quickly let them in and led them back to his hut. Along the way he explained that they should be safe from detection there, since Umbridge avoided going anywhere near the Forbidden Forest. Beneath the cloak the two Gryffindors shared a grin, recalling the incident that had instilled that particular phobia in the much loathed headmistress.

At Hagrid's hut they were surprised to find McGonagall, Flitwick, Ginny, and Luna eagerly anticipating their arrival. While Luna threw herself into Ron's arms, Ginny explained. "Susan and Neville are on Dawlish distraction duty tonight, as Luna and I wanted to see you guys. And your message was mysterious enough that the professors wanted to find out what was going on."

"Dawlish distraction duty?" Hermione couldn't resist asking. She noticed that McGonagall and Flitwick pretended not to hear that part.

"The DA members take turns getting detention with him in the evenings," the petite redhead whispered conspiratorially. "That keeps him in his office every night and makes it easier for the rest of us to get together for training without being stopped in the hallways."

McGonagall cleared her throat, at which Ginny grinned and stepped back. “Now, Mr. Potter, what’s this all about?” the stern Transfiguration professor inquired.

Harry tried to answer as casually as he could. “I need Dumbledore’s wand.”

There was a stunned silence in the hut for several seconds, then Ginny snorted and shook her head. “Well, is that all? And here we all thought it was something unusual.”

McGonagall was the next to recover. “Whatever on earth would you need that for?”

“Actually, the fewer people who know why the better,” Hermione responded before Harry could answer, and to add her support to his request. “In fact, it’s pretty dangerous for you to even know that we have it. It might be better if you were all obliviated after we fetch it.”

“Can we assume that this is important with regards to defeating You Know Who?” McGonagall asked, uncertain about this proposal and wanting to be convinced. “Surely you don’t believe that Albus’s wand is one of the ... items you’re seeking.” She caught herself before saying the word ‘Horcrux’, not certain if everyone present was fully aware of the details of the Trio’s mission.

“No, this is something else entirely, but it might be just as important,” Harry assured her.

Luna finally broke away from her snog session with Ron. “Did you ever find Ravenclaw’s diadem?” she asked in her typical abrupt but breezy manner. Hermione shot a hard look at Ron, but he paled and shook his head quickly, signaling that he hadn’t told Luna anything. Hermione relaxed slightly and decided that Luna was bright enough to conclude that they’d follow up on her tip, given how strongly Hermione had reacted to the information that day in the plunge pool. The memory of that reaction brought a brief flush to her cheeks and she noticed a grin flash over Harry’s face next to her. She managed to resist elbowing him in the ribs in return.

“No,” Harry replied, seeing that Hermione was still trying to regain her composure. “But it might help if we knew exactly what it looked like.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Flitwick spoke up for the first time since their intention of breaking into Dumbledore’s tomb had been revealed. “There’s a statue of Rowena Ravenclaw herself wearing the diadem in the Ravenclaw common room. I’ll take you to see it, but it would be best if you came back over the holidays when there aren’t so many students present.”

“That would be great,” Hermione responded, “but let’s get back to the issue of the wand. We understand that you really want to know why we need it before you’d let us damage the tomb, but ...” she paused to glance at Harry, seeking his opinion.

“I agree with Hermione,” he stepped in quickly. “Obliviation might be best. Ron?”

Ron had missed the beginning of the conversation, but had now picked up the gist of it. With his arm still wrapped around Luna’s waist, he nodded his agreement, then gave her an apologetic shrug.

McGonagall was still hesitant. “I understand your concern, but since Professor Flitwick and I would be among those requiring our memories to be adjusted, you don’t have ready access to an Obliviation expert.”

Harry grinned. “How about someone who Moody said could be hired by the Ministry as an Obliviator any time she wanted the job?”

Upon hearing the details, no one in the group was the least bit surprised that Hermione would have been able to master the tricky spell. Thus reassured, their eagerness to hear the story behind Dumbledore’s wand (even if they knew they would forget it within five minutes) made them all agree to Harry’s terms.

Once again, they were all speechless.

If it had been anyone other than Hermione Granger telling them that not only did the fabled Wand of Destiny exist but that their renowned headmaster had actually wielded it for the past fifty years – a story that they would have fully expected to hear from Luna, to cite an obvious example – they would have either put it down to a colossal prank or suspected that the teller had taken leave of his senses. Even so, it was all they could do to keep from scoffing (except for Luna, who thought it perfectly reasonable). It was finally the deadly serious nature of the assertion that persuaded them that Harry and Hermione were not having them on.

Still shaking their heads, the two professors led the small group surreptitiously down to the lake beside the great white tomb of the most famous Headmaster in Hogwarts’s history since Godric Gryffindor. Flitwick himself did the honors, neatly carving a hole in the white marble so that Harry could dart in and retrieve the ill-fated wand from where it was still clasped in the unmoving hands of the great wizard. He deliberately avoided looking at the face of the man about whom he now harbored such mixed emotions, and hastened back out into the cold nighttime air. Without another word Flitwick expertly sealed the opening, and the small group scurried back to Hagrid’s hut, where Hermione promptly erased the incident from the minds of all but her two best friends.

As soon as she’d finished, Harry spoke up. “Well, thanks again, Professor Flitwick and Luna, for clearing that up about the diadem. We’ll be sure to stop back next week.”

“But Harry, what about your mysterious errand?” Ginny wondered.

“It’s taken care of,” Hermione responded quickly. “We don’t want you to give it another thought.” A look of understanding passed between the two professors, and was quickly caught by the two students, then by Hagrid.

Under the cloak once more, Harry and Hermione passed through the gate alongside their disillusioned friend. “So, are you going to come to ...” Ron began, then frowned when he couldn’t continue. “Whoops, I forgot. Read this.” He dug a slip of parchment out of his pocket and held it out in the direction of his friends until his arm bumped into one of them. A bit of wriggling later, the couple was reading the words.

*Bill and Fleur Weasley live at Shell Cottage, Tinworth, Cornwall*

“Got it,” Harry announced when they’d finished, as Hermione incinerated the secret message. “As far as what we’re going to do next ...”

“I ...er, we have plans,” Hermione broke in. “It’ll be our first Christmas on our own as a couple, you see, and I wanted to do something special. We’ll come to stay with you after, OK?”

Ron was silent for a while, as he processed this information. It was probably inevitable that things like this would happen more and more, he realized, and he just had to deal with it.

“Boxing Day then?” he asked.

“Sounds great,” Hermione replied, relieved that he hadn’t pushed, or that Harry hadn’t objected, since she’d not had time to run her idea past him. “Thanks for being so understanding.”

Upon reaching Hogsmeade Station, Ron bade them farewell, and disappeared away. Harry, whose arm had been around Hermione’s waist the entire time they’d been under the cloak, as was their standard procedure when traveling together beneath it, pulled her a bit closer in a hug.

“So, just what exactly is Hermione’s Plan?” he teased.

“I thought we might treat ourselves to a few days off and relax,” she replied hesitantly. “Get a hotel room in town, do some Christmas shopping, go out to eat, maybe take in a show or a movie ...”

“Can we afford that?” he wondered.

“If you mean can we afford to take the time, I think we need to,” she responded with a bit more confidence. “It’s important to take a break every now and then, and we’ve been going nearly nonstop since September. If you mean do we have enough money, I think so. Living in the tent for the past nearly four months didn’t cost a thing, and we were pretty frugal with food. We haven’t spent a thing on entertainment, and ...”

“OK, OK, you’ve convinced me,” he laughed, giving her another hug. “Now, tell me more about this hotel. I assume you already have one picked out?”

“Well, you know me,” Hermione smiled back. “I like to fully research things before I commit myself. The one I have in mind isn’t in the center of town, so it’s not too expensive, but it’s still convenient to shopping and entertainment.”

“Does it have room service?” Harry asked with a salacious grin.

“Not only that, the rooms have Jacuzzi style tubs that can hold two people,” Hermione retorted with wicked grin of her own.

“Brilliant!”

Just over two hours later Harry found himself relaxing in chest deep, hot, bubbly water, with Hermione in front of him leaning back against his chest. She had just given him a thorough scrubbing, and now he was returning the favor. As he rubbed her down his hands did tend to linger, though, on her more interesting parts.

“Hermione, you really outdid yourself this time,” he sighed. “I must say you have the absolute best ideas.”

“Mmmm,” was the only response she could manage, as a particular ministration sent a tingle through her body. Eventually she added, “I’m glad you’re enjoying this as much as I am.” Then she just closed her eyes and relaxed, allowing her other senses to take over.

Eventually they decided that their skin was going to wrinkle if they stayed in any longer, and climbed out of the tub, Harry going first and handing Hermione a large, fluffy towel as she emerged. He couldn’t help giving her a head to toe inspection, and when his gaze returned to her face he noticed that she was biting her lip, a sign that she was nervous about the topic she was about to bring up. As they toweled themselves off he gave her a reassuring smile, indicating for her to go ahead with what was on her mind.

I had an additional idea,” she told him, her voice now serious. “I got some information on Godric’s Hollow. Your parents are buried in a church graveyard there. I thought on Christmas Eve we might go there and attend the service, then stay after to visit their graves.”

Harry was nearly overwhelmed with emotion upon hearing this, and wrapped her up in a tight hug.

“Hermione, I love you so much!”

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 21

*This has been an absolutely fabulous weekend! We spent the whole day Saturday shopping and seeing all the Christmas decorations, and Harry didn’t complain a bit. He was actually pretty excited about it, having never had the opportunity to see the city decorated up for the holidays.*

*Today we did some more of the same but also took in a movie. The next few days we’re going to play tourist, and visit places like Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, and the Tower of London and Tower Bridge. If we have time I’d like to spend a day at the British Museum.*

*The movie we saw was Titanic, which just opened last month and is sure to be a major hit. Of course, Harry made a joke about it when I first made the suggestion, saying he already knew how it was going to turn out (the boat sinks!) but I just rolled my eyes and told him there was more to the movie than that. It really was a fascinating movie, with a very touching love story, and I cried a bit when it became clear that she was going to lose him.*

*The ending did hit a bit close to home, and generated some discussion as we walked back to our*

hotel.

“So, what was your favorite part?” Hermione asked while they made their way through the crowds outside the theater. They paused to fasten their coats and pull their scarves tight, as a light snow had begun to fall, and Harry wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to his side. She shot him a grin. “Besides the nude scene, that is.”

“Well, that was certainly a highlight,” he shot back playfully. “Do you think you would pose for me like that?”

“I might, if you could draw worth a lick,” she teased. “Maybe we could get Dean ...” She broke off and laughed at the horrified expression on his face at the thought of her posing nude for his Gryffindor dormmate. “So what would you do with a picture like that if you had one?” she continued.

“Might come in handy if you’re not around for awhile,” he replied cheekily. She decided that the only proper response to that was to hit him on the arm. The more serious aspect of that thought, the exact circumstances that would cause her to ‘not be around’ crept into both of their thoughts.

“I guess I admired his spirit, the way he never gave up no matter how bad things got,” Harry decided, as the conversation grew more somber.

“Kind of like you,” she pointed out, tightening her arm around his waist to punctuate her thought.

“Like what he said at the end, that he planned to write a strongly worded letter of protest to the shipping line,” Harry continued. “I think he knew he was going to die, and he was still concerned mostly for her, trying to make her laugh.”

Hermione stopped and turned to Harry, wrapping both arms around him and laying her head on his chest. “You’re not going to die, Harry, and neither am I,” she insisted, her voice breaking slightly. “We have too many things we want to do. We’re going to get married, and have a family, and live long lives together. We have to believe that, Harry.”

“I know, Hermione,” he whispered back. “And I’ll do everything I can to make that happen.”

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 24

*We’re getting ready to go to Godric’s Hollow. We decided to polyjuice ourselves, on the chance that there’s still some danger there. We’ll take the invisibility cloak as well. Harry’s going to leave his rucksack here in the hotel, but I’ll take my handbag, which I’ve altered again into a nice looking evening bag. Among other things, I’m putting in Gryffindor’s sword. Just in case.*

*We had an amusing discussion about the polyjuice potion, deciding what we wanted to look like. I stocked up on hair last summer by visiting a barber shop and a beauty salon, and asked Harry*

*what color hair he wanted. He immediately answered red – he always wanted to be a Weasley. So I asked him if he had a name picked out and he said ‘Barney’. I wondered where that came from and he got the cutest guilty look on his face. I finally made him tell me – he’d been watching the telly while I was getting ready this morning and there was a children’s show with a purple dinosaur on it that kept telling all the kids how much he loved them. It was so sweet!*

*However, I told him I wasn’t sure if I could go along with him in red hair, and that he couldn’t expect any hugging or kissing while he looked like that. At his puzzled look, I asked him what he’d think if I gave myself long straight red hair. He immediately got the point. We eventually decided that I’d go as a blonde and he’d have brown hair. Neither of us look anything like ourselves.*

They apparated to the outskirts of Godric’s Hollow, and found themselves standing hand in hand in a snowy lane, lined with cottages on either side, Christmas decorations twinkling in their windows. As they entered the village they came upon a small square, surrounded by several shops, a post office, a pub, and the church that was their destination. In the center of the square was a war memorial, a simple obelisk covered with names. To their surprise, as they passed it, it began to transform.

“Harry!” Hermione whispered. “It’s you!”

Apparently the wizarding world had its own idea of what needed memorializing in Godric’s Hollow, for standing there before them was a statue of a man with unruly hair and glasses, a woman with long hair and a pretty face, and a baby in her arms. Harry tightened his grip on Hermione’s hand, and she turned to him, her eyes shining through the snowflakes clinging to her eyelashes. Harry swallowed hard and managed a return smile, blinking away the moisture in his eyes that had nothing to do with melting snowflakes.

Hermione made no move to leave until Harry tugged on her hand, indicating that he’d had his fill, and the pair of them headed toward the church, where the music had already started playing. Slipping inside and hanging up their cloaks and scarves, they found an empty pew near the back.

Harry followed Hermione’s lead, since she was much more familiar with Christmas services than he, and she held the hymnal out where he could follow along. The church was lit only by a few dozen candles along the aisles, but it was enough to make out the words to the familiar carols. As the service ended with *Silent Night*, the two of them waited until most of the worshippers had gone, accepting friendly greetings of ‘Happy Christmas’ before they made their way out into the graveyard behind the old stone church.

There, behind an old rusty kissing gate, they found rows and rows of tombstones emerging from the snow, in a haphazard arrangement that suggested that they went back hundreds of years. They reluctantly released each other’s hands so that they could separate to search more efficiently, but also kept their free hands clasped tightly on their hidden wands.

“Here’s the Dumbledore plot,” Harry called out in a low voice. “Looks like his mum, dad, and sister.” Hermione waved to indicate she’d heard and moved into the next row. Harry paused

briefly, feeling once again a mixture of sadness and resentment at his former headmaster, that he had not shared the information that they had this connection, much less brought him here at some point in his life to pay his respects. Why had this needed to be hidden from him?

“Harry, over here!” Hermione whispered excitedly.

“Did you find them?” Harry asked quickly as he stumbled in her direction. He noticed that she was in an area where the stones were much older, some of them crumbling, and many of them covered with moss or buried in weeds.

“No, but this one’s important too,” she informed him as he came up to her side, their hands automatically joining again. “Look.”

The name was difficult to read, but definitely started with a P. But what caught his eye first was the symbol above it – the now familiar triangle in a circle, the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. Hermione had taken a brief look around before pulling out her wand and cleaning the moss off the name. The last name was Peverell. Their hands tightened in each other’s grasp in excitement as the first name emerged – Ignotus.

“The brother with the Impenetrable Invisibility Cloak,” Hermione recounted softly. “Who passed it down to his descendents. Who lived in Godric’s Hollow.”

“Guess Ron was right,” Harry concluded. Beside him Hermione nodded. After another few moments they separated again to continue their search.

The little church was empty and dark, and he’d been tempted to illuminate the tip of his wand but decided not to, instead depending on the light of the crescent moon. In the shifting shadows cast by its dim light, he finally made the discovery.

“Hermione, I’ve found them.” Hermione was only a row away and hastily joined him. As she pulled his arm around her shoulders and wrapped her own around his waist he felt a heavy sensation in his chest, much more intense than what he’d experienced while looking at the memorial statue. Being here, in the presence of the mother and father he’d lost when he was just a year old, the feeling was nearly overwhelming, but for the strong support of the woman at his side.

This headstone, being relatively new, was easy to read. The white marble almost seemed to shine in the dim moonlight. His father’s name on the left, his mother’s on the right, sharing a common date of death – October 31, 1981.

Now the tears came, emerging hot and heavy from his eyes, cooling as they tracked down his cheeks and fell to the ground. Beside him Hermione tightened her grip but remained silent, providing him the strength to stay standing instead of falling to his knees in his grief. He didn’t need to look at her, knowing that she was there for him was enough, and he returned the pressure of her embrace. With a twirl of her wand a wreath of Christmas roses appeared, and she directed it gently down to rest on their graves, coming through with exactly what he needed yet again.



At length he decided it was time to go. He'd needed this visit, this connection with his past, this reaffirmation of who he was and where he came from. But now it was time to return to the present, and the present was Hermione, and their mission. With his arm around her shoulders, and hers still around his waist they picked their way back through the tombstones, to the kissing gate and the darkened church beyond, without a word being spoken. None were necessary.

During their time in the graveyard the Polyjuice had worn off, so before they emerged from the darkness behind the church, they once more donned the invisibility cloak. There was one more visit to make, to try to determine why Snape had wanted them to come here. With directions from Remus they made their way past the pub, filled with Christmas revelers now that the church service was over, and down a dark street leading out of the village. Wizarding homes tended to be located on the outskirts of the villages they shared with muggles, and those of the Potters, Bagshots, and Dumbledores were no exception.

The street had turned into a lane, and the cottages with their gaily twinkling Christmas lights had become more sparse, when they finally spotted the dark mass at the very end of the road. No lights illuminated this abandoned wreck of building. The hedge had grown wild and waist high grass contrasted with the neatly manicured lawns of the other homes in the village. Most of the cottage was still standing, but part of the upper floor had been blown away in a horrible accident that had claimed the lives of the young family who had once lived there, or so the other villagers believed.

Hermione voiced the thought that had also entered Harry's mind. Why had no one ever rebuilt it? In any other town houses like this were razed and the property sold, and eventually a new structure housed another family who had no knowledge of the people who had lived there before, except what they gathered from the gossip of their neighbors. Why not this one? Was it the remains of the *Fidelius*, or were there still active Muggle Repelling Charms? Did the other residents of Godric's Hollow even know it existed?

Their intention was to enter the house, to see if they could spot something that Remus and Tonks had missed, some clue to a possible Horcrux, or at least the Founder's relic that Voldemort had intended to use that fateful night. But as soon as Harry touched the heavily rusted gate to push it aside, two things happened.

First, another transformation occurred, and part of the rubble on the ground turned into another memorial plaque that explained one set of their questions.

**On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981, Lily and James Potter lost their lives. Their son, Harry, remains the only wizard ever to have survived the Killing Curse. This house, invisible to Muggles, has been left in its ruined state as a reminder of the sacrifice made by the Potters, and a monument to the victory of the Boy Who Lived**

Then, a figure appeared, approaching them, a heavily muffled figure of what appeared to be an elderly woman. As she passed the last of the occupied houses, they concluded first that she must be a witch, next, that she might be Bathilda Bagshot, the other well-known resident of Godric's Hollow, and finally, that she was there to talk to *them*.

But they were under the invisibility cloak, presumably the one perfectly impenetrable invisibility cloak. Did she possess a magical eye like Moody's that could sense them even if he couldn't see them? The old woman stopped in front of them, stared straight at Harry (and seemed to ignore Hermione) and beckoned him to come with her.

"Are you Bathilda Bagshot?" he queried. The muffled figure nodded and turned, expecting him to follow. As she led them back up the lane, and then turned down the first side street, Harry fell back so he and Hermione could discuss the situation without being overheard.

"I'm not sure she even knows I'm here," Hermione whispered.

"I noticed that too, maybe she can only sense that there's someone under the cloak, and assumed it was just one person," Harry suggested.

"I think she knows it's you, though," Hermione pointed out. Harry then suggested that when they arrived at whatever destination Bathilda was taking them to, Hermione remain under the cloak, and she agreed. Neither of them needed to add the phrase, 'Constant Vigilance!' Both of them had their wands in their hands, ready for action.

At the end of the second street, set somewhat apart from its neighbors, was another house with a yard that was rather overgrown, again in contrast to its neighbors. Harry suspected that this one too was protected by Notice Me Not Charms, and its owner must not feel the peer pressure that normally worked in a village such as this to assure that every yard was properly manicured.

Their guide paused to unlock the door, and led them inside, still having not spoken a word. Whatever message she had for them evidently required privacy. A slight prickling of his scar as they entered put Harry on even higher alert.

The inside of the house looked terrible, and smelled worse. It appeared that no one had lived here in months, dust coated everything and there was some old, moldy half-eaten food on the kitchen table. A squeeze of his hand let Harry know that Hermione also felt that there was something terribly wrong here. While Bathilda had her back turned, Harry slipped out from under the cloak, leaving Hermione covered.

The phrase 'dead man walking' flashed through Hermione's mind as their host unwrapped her shawl, revealing a white head of hair and a wrinkled, pale face with unseeing eyes. Was she blind? Had she sensed them by some other means?

The old woman gestured again and began to climb the stairs to the second floor, although it seemed that such a task would be beyond the capability of her broken down body. Harry followed her while Hermione lingered for a few seconds, taking the opportunity to quickly scan the kitchen and sitting room for the presence of dark objects.

But up in the bedroom at the top of the stairs, the slow motion tableau abruptly ceased. Harry's scar burst open with a blinding pain, and he staggered backward, falling onto a dusty old bed. As his hand shot to his forehead, he barely glimpsed a horrifying transformation as the crippled old

woman dissolved into a massive snake that coiled itself and raised its head to strike at him.

With a shout to warn Hermione Harry raised his wand, then fired off a blasting hex just before rolling out of the way of Nagini's first strike. To his shock, his hex just bounced off of his attacker and he landed heavily on the floor, trying to gather himself before the snake could strike again.

*"Sectumsempra !"* Hermione had raced up the stairs at the first sound and appeared in the doorway just in time to see Harry's hex deflect into the ceiling, blowing open a large gaping hole, so she went for something stronger, and cast the borderline dark slashing curse.

But it was also to no avail, impacting harmlessly on the seemingly impervious hide of the creature. Harry again dodged its second strike, moving as quickly as he could, hampered as he was by the searing pain that lanced into his head. Now he was backed against the wall of the small bedroom, his options for movement limited, as he tried to come up with a curse that might be more effective than the ones cast so far.

*"Depulso !"* Hermione cast this, not at the attacking serpent, but at the floor beneath it, blowing it away and sending Nagini crashing down to the lower level of the cottage. But before she could reach Harry, the rest of the floor also gave way, and the two of them fell through as well.

A quick cushioning charm assured their safe landing, and they scrambled to their feet even as the dazed serpent gathered itself for another strike. *"Protego !"* Harry incanted, and the snake's attack was blocked by the shimmery blue glow, although they were pushed back by the force of the strike.

Harry cast the shield spell again while beside him Hermione fumbled with the strings of her evening bag. "Harry! Try the sword!" she gasped, holding the bag open before him. Without an instant of hesitation he reached inside, took hold of the familiar hilt, and withdrew the gleaming blade just as Nagini lunged at him once more. This time Hermione defended them, levitating the kitchen table to block the attack, and then raising it to crash down on their foe as the giant snake recoiled again.

The blade of Gryffindor cut through the air as Nagini's head rose through the splintered wood, and severed it cleanly before the snake could try to evade. A final burst of agony threatened to tear apart Harry's skull, as an unearthly shriek filled the room, emanating from the now dead body of Voldemort's familiar.

Hermione wasted no time pulling Harry out of the kitchen and into the sitting room, and he staggered along after her, following her lead while he tried to clear his head. "Are you OK?" she called out as she retrieved the precious cloak and picked up their discarded hats and scarves.

He nodded and reached out his hand to her. "I will be. I think we found what we came for. Let's get out of here before someone else shows up."

The young couple reappeared in their hotel room and immediately collapsed onto the bed in each other's arms. Hermione was overcome briefly, shaking uncontrollably now that the immediate danger was past, and Harry held her tightly, murmuring to her how incredible she'd been in the fight, and how she'd saved his life. These comforting words were cut off, however, by another flash of pain and he winced at the raw rage pouring through the link he shared with the master of the creature he'd just destroyed. Hermione, having regained her poise, now returned the favor and began stroking his forehead and the raw, red, jagged wound.

"Oh Merlin, he's really angry now," Harry managed through his gritted teeth. Neither of them needed to speculate why, since both had recognized the telltale signs of a Horcrux being destroyed, having now witnessed four of them either directly or indirectly. But try as he might, Harry was unable to close the connection this time.

Hermione recalled that the last time this had happened, at Remus and Tonks's wedding, Harry had told her he had driven Voldemort out of his mind by concentrating on his love for her. Accordingly, she pushed him onto his back and crawled on top of him, after first casting aside their cloaks and heavy outer clothing, then claimed his lips and proceeded to kiss him as passionately as she could.

It worked, and soon he was responding as forcefully as she was, and more clothing began to disappear as things heated up and hands started to roam. Finally they broke apart and faced each other, lying on their sides, while they caught their breath.

"Harry, I don't want to wait any more," Hermione breathed huskily.

"Are you sure?" he whispered back, knowing exactly what she was referring to.

She nodded as her hands reached out for him again, bringing him closer to her body, desperately needing the reassuring contact. "Either of us could have died tonight," she reasoned. "And there's no guarantee that this sort of situation won't happen again. I don't want to take the chance that we might never ..." Harry silenced her with another passionate kiss.

The remainder of their clothing disappeared in no time at all, and the covers of the bed were thrown back, even as their hands never stopped touching each other. The decision having been made, both of them wanted to take the time to make it special. Hermione grabbed her wand and cast a charm on herself that Fleur had taught her, designed to eliminate the pain of a witch's first time, then showed Harry how to draw the rune for the contraception ritual she had learned at Beauxbatons. He watched with increasing excitement as she vanished her pubic hair, and he cast the rune on the newly uncovered skin, then stroked it tenderly while she completed the ritual. By the time she finished she was also breathing heavily, and they both pulled each other into another loving embrace.

And in the early hours of Christmas Day, the young witch and wizard joined together and gave their bodies to each other completely, and without reservation.

-oooOOOooo-

“Mum?”

Hermione’s head jerked up and spun to face her daughter as she blinked several times to clear her thoughts.

“What happened?” Rose continued now that she had her mother’s attention. “You just sort of faded out and you’ve been sitting there staring at a blank page.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Hermione replied as her face reddened. “I suppose I got lost in my thoughts. Where was I?”

“You and dad had just apparated back to your hotel room after killing Nagini and you were holding on to each other, and then you kissed him to drive Voldemort out of his head,” the young girl explained impatiently. “What happened next?”

“Oh ... oh, well, we just went to bed and kept holding each other all night,” Hermione stammered.

Rose rolled her eyes in frustration. It seemed to her that would have been a perfect time for her parents to make love. Honestly, with the way things were going in this story it was hard to see how they’d ever managed to conceive her. Then she looked back at her mother, who was once more staring at the notebook with a contented smile on her face.

A smile of her own crept onto the bright young girl’s face as the realization hit her. OK, so maybe her parents weren’t so out of it after all.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters**

### **Another Step Closer To The End**

#### **Final Year Chapter 13 – Another Step Closer to the End**

Hermione awoke the following morning with an overwhelming feeling of contentment. As she opened her eyes she found Harry already awake and gazing at her with a contented smile of his own. She smiled back as they each reached out to draw the other into an embrace.

“Good morning. Happy Christmas,” he whispered.

“Happy Christmas to you too. I love you,” she returned fervently.

“I love you too. How are you feeling?” he asked as he tightened the hug.

Christmas morning in a warm, comfortable bed, wrapped in a naked embrace with the man she had just made love to for the first time the night before, Hermione didn't think it was possible to feel much better than this. Even the bit of soreness between her legs, which presumably was the concern that prompted Harry to ask the question, felt good. “Perfect,” she replied, punctuating her declaration with a kiss. Harry responded in kind, and it was some time before either spoke again, other than a few murmured endearments.

“What has you awake so early?” Hermione wondered as they pulled back to catch their breath. She was nearly always the first to wake up when they slept together.

“I had a lot of things on my mind. Then I woke up and saw you lying there and I couldn't help just watching you, hoping this was real and not a dream. It's hard to believe I could be this lucky,” he admitted.

“Well, believe it,” she declared. “Personally, I think I'm the fortunate one to have you. Last night was wonderful. It was everything I'd dreamed it would be.” She snuggled back into his embrace and sighed, allowing herself to enjoy the contentment for a while before she continued. “I suppose you're also thinking about what happened at Godric's Hollow.” She felt him nod against her head. “Me too. Want to talk about it?” Another nod.

Hermione rolled over to look at the bedside clock, taking care to remain within Harry's arms, and he adjusted his grip accordingly, so that his hands were now cupping her breasts, which elicited another smile on her part. “It's just gone past eleven,” she declared. Let's lie here and enjoy

ourselves a bit more, then get up and order brunch.”

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 25

*As Harry and I compared notes, we discovered that we mostly had similar thoughts. First we established that Bathilda Bagshot was dead, and had been for some time, and that Nagini must have been possessing her body somehow. Assuming that was the trap that Snape warned us about, how is it that she never appeared when Remus and Tonks checked the place out? Tonks even walked around looking like Harry right in front of the house, whereas we were under the invisibility cloak. I commented that I had the feeling that she wasn't using her eyes to see, and was sensing us some other way. Then Harry reminded me that it seemed that she only sensed him, not me.*

*We concluded that it was because of his connection to Voldemort. He noted that he felt his scar tingling as we entered the house, and it's happened in the past that his scar reacted when Voldemort was present, going all the way back to first year with Quirrell.*

*I'm starting to get a very bad feeling about this. That there's possibly more to that scar connection than we thought. Nothing I've read, and no one I've talked to, suggests that a curse could establish a connection like this, where Harry can unintentionally not only get flashes of what Voldemort's feeling, but actually get visions where he sees things through Voldemort's eyes. Yes, possessions are well documented, but they're always due to an active spell cast for that specific purpose. The only thing that even comes close is Ginny's possession by the Horcrux in the diary, and even that was intentional on Tom Riddle's part.*

*I really don't like where this line of reasoning leads, and I refuse to go down that path on Christmas Day. If necessary, we can consider it further when we've dealt with the other Horcruxes.*

*On the good side, there were several positives about the whole visit. We destroyed another Horcrux, and not just any Horcrux but the one we thought would be the most difficult to get at. Harry finally got to visit Godric's Hollow and see the house he lived in and visit his parents' graves. And we learned more about his possible connection with Ignotus Peverell and the Deathly Hallows. It seems pretty likely that we have two of them now, and possibly all three if the Resurrection Stone is indeed in the snitch Dumbledore gave him. We're not exactly sure what we're supposed to do with them, though. Will it be like the legend and Harry will be the Master of Death? Will that allow him to kill Voldemort more easily? It's frustrating that there simply aren't any books available that I could look at to research this more thoroughly.*

*We both tried out Dumbledore's wand – or I should say the Wand of Destiny. Harry's decided that 'Wand of Destiny' is too cumbersome so he calls it the Elder Wand. (I think he means it's too ostentatious of a title. He's never been comfortable with the whole 'destiny' idea either.) In any case, it works for us but doesn't do anything special. Both of us get better results with our own wands. Interestingly, we discovered that Harry can use my wand almost as effectively as his own,*

much more so than the Elder Wand. And I can use his as well. I think I like that – it suggests that our magic is compatible, that we belong together.

Of course, in order for the Wand to have its full power it has to be won from its previous owner. It obviously doesn't recognize Harry as its master, so we figure that must be Snape, since he killed Dumbledore. I wonder if that's why he was so insistent that Harry make certain that everyone knew he did it. Is it possible he knew Dumbledore's wand was the Wand of Destiny? It's hard to believe that he would know when neither McGonagall nor Flitwick did.

So, there are two potential benefits to us removing the wand from the tomb. The most important is to keep it out of Voldemort's hands. If he does track it to Grindelwald, and discover that Dumbledore had it, he would likely realize that he could become its master by killing Snape, which neither Harry nor I have any trouble believing he would do without a second thought.

The other thing to consider is that Harry could also become its master, if he were to kill or defeat Snape. It doesn't seem likely that he would kill him, although it's possible that a situation could arise in which that happened, during a battle where Snape was fighting with the Death Eaters, for example. Harry certainly wouldn't kill him only for that reason. As far as winning it from Snape by defeating him in a duel – well, we'll consider that if the opportunity presents itself.

Later –

We've decided to wait and open our presents along with Remus and Tonks and the Weasleys tomorrow at Bill's house. But Harry had a very special one for me to open today. It was his mother's engagement ring!

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it. I started crying when I realized he wanted me to wear it. It's so beautiful! It's a one carat diamond with a tiny emerald on either side.

I asked him how he'd managed to get hold of it. He was pretty pleased with himself that he'd pulled it off without me knowing. He's been cooking it up with Remus using the mirrors. Remus told him about the ring, and said he thought it was in the Potter family vault, which Harry should have access to now that he's seventeen. Bill looked into it at Gringotts and they confirmed the vault's existence, but they wouldn't let him take out any of the family heirlooms even though he had Harry's key. So Tonks morphed into a duplicate of Harry and she went in with his key and picked it up.

Other than that excitement, we've had a nice, quiet day here at the hotel with just the two of us. I'm sure that we'll have a good time tomorrow seeing everyone again and having a chance to catch up with all of the Weasleys, but having the time to ourselves was lovely.

As Hermione finished writing in the journal and gazed once again at the incredible ring on her finger, she wondered what would happen when they turned in later that night. Would there be a repeat of the previous night's activity, or should that be a special, one time only event until after they were married?



The look in Harry's eyes as they undressed for bed answered her question, with no ambiguity whatsoever.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 26

*From the grin Fleur gave me as soon as we walked through the door of her and Bill's cottage I knew she could tell what Harry and I had been up to. Veela must have some sort of sixth sense about these things. Fortunately, her reaction went unnoticed in the general commotion over my new ring. Ginny was particularly excited, and even Molly smiled and wished us well. We quickly broke up along gender lines as the males took Harry aside and congratulated him, along with the ribbing one would expect from a gathering of Weasleys. I think it was just as bad for me, though, since as soon as the men were out of earshot Tonks made a few ribald comments of her own, which caused Fleur also to extol some of the joys of being newly wed.*

*Once that 'ordeal' was out of the way and we rejoined the men, Harry and I told everyone about our adventure in Godric's Hollow. Ron was a bit upset that he hadn't been there with us facing Nagini. Remus and Tonks, who were the only others present who know about the Horcruxes, clearly caught the significance of what we'd accomplished, although they were rather agitated about the fact that we'd been caught by the trap that they'd failed to discover. In the end, all agreed that everything seemed to have turned out for the best.*

*Later, when Harry and I had a chance to meet with Remus alone, we explained our theory about how Nagini/Bagshot was somehow keyed specifically to Harry, which is why she didn't reveal herself to them, nor was she aware of my presence. From the troubled expression on Remus's face as he digested that information, I deduced that he might be thinking along the same lines as I was. We'll have to get together sometime when it's less crowded to explore those thoughts further.*

*Tonks is coming along in her recovery from her injuries, although she couldn't be on her feet for more than a short time. At least she's out of bed now. She told us it was driving her batty, being laid up, and she in turn was probably making life miserable for Remus. He quickly assured her that she was doing no such thing. It was cute to see the way he fussed over her. Even though she outwardly protested, we could tell that she enjoyed having him taking care of her.*

*Her mother, Andromeda, was there for a while, and agreed to take in Kreacher if things didn't work out for him at Hogwarts. Since her husband, Ted, has been captured she's by herself in her house. While this is certainly unfortunate for her, it does mean there would be less conflict with Kreacher, as she is a pureblood while Ted was a muggleborn.*

*Later in the afternoon, after all the presents had been exchanged and we'd had our fill of Fleur's French cuisine (Molly even managed to restrain herself from offering too many opinions on how it should be cooked), Harry, Ron, Remus, Tonks, and I sat down with Bill to discuss the question of how to obtain an item from a Gringotts vault. Ron had already told him that we had to do this as part of our effort against Voldemort, and Bill was very understanding about the need for secrecy, so he didn't press us for details on exactly what we needed from Bellatrix's vault.*

What it boils down to is that in order to remove something from a family vault, you either need the key and written permission, or need to be the actual person owning the vault, in which case they take a blood sample if you don't have your key. Obviously, we have neither of those. We considered the possibility of having Tonks impersonate Bellatrix, but the blood sample would likely give her away. (We're not certain, since she is Bellatrix's niece, so she technically shares her blood to an extent. That might be good enough, but again it might not. The consequences of trying and failing are extremely unpleasant, so we'd only let her try that as a last resort, even though she's willing if necessary.) Polyjuice might work better, since the blood would be real, but that would require getting a hair from Bellatrix, which is almost as unlikely as getting her vault key.

The other option is for us to 'break in'. Bill made some discreet inquiries, and was actually granted an interview with Ragnok himself, once Harry's name was mentioned in conjunction with Voldemort. The goblins' response was that they were sympathetic to our cause, but that the integrity of their bank was at stake. The bottom line is that they would have to oppose us, and that blood would have to be shed for them to uphold their 'honor', but that if we were willing to pay the price it was possible.

It's hard to believe that the goblins would be willing to barter with someone's life like that, but Bill reminded us that they have a different culture than we do. That motto on the front door isn't just for show. The obvious question is which of us would be willing to give our lives to get the Horcrux out of that vault. The whole thing is almost too distasteful to consider, so I'm not even going to speculate at this time. The only certain thing is that it can't be Harry, although I'm afraid that he might be the first one to volunteer. I am certain that not one of us would let him.

So, none of the possibilities seem very promising at this point. And right now we don't even know which Horcrux is in that vault, so even if we did get in we wouldn't know what we were looking for, although it's probably either Hufflepuff's Cup or Ravenclaw's Diadem.

Fortunately, the rest of the day was quite a bit cheerier than that conversation, and we enjoyed Fred and George's antics, and catching up with Ginny about what's been happening at Hogwarts. Fred and George are taking the loss of their shop in stride, and are turning their pranking talents toward creating more nasty surprises for Death Eaters. It's a cat and mouse game, albeit a deadly one, with them and the rest of the resistance changing tactics frequently, as the Death Eaters catch on and come up with counter traps. Ginny reports that things are somewhat similar at Hogwarts in their battle against Umbridge and Dawlish, although not as dangerous.

When it was time to turn in, Harry and I retired to our tent out in the yard, since things were pretty crowded in the house, as we expected. Fleur shot me another grin as we left the house, and teased me about remembering to use a Silencing charm. I assured her that I was quite conscientious about all my charms.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 27

Today's Daily Prophet had a story about Bathilda Bagshot's house being destroyed, with her body found inside. It mentioned that she'd been dead for some time, but didn't speculate on what had happened to her house. We're fairly sure it was Voldemort destroying it in a fit of rage after his familiar had been killed. I wonder how close it was – how soon after we left that he arrived. No matter, we're safe now and the Horcrux is destroyed.

Remus suggested, and we agreed, that we should stay here for a few days, as Voldemort may be watching for us to show ourselves so that he can take revenge. According to Remus, he's been spending a lot of time in Eastern Europe this month recruiting. Harry suspects that what he's actually doing is searching for the Elder Wand. In any case, Remus intends to go to the continent himself and shadow him, trying to undermine his efforts. Plus, things are a bit hot here in Britain for Remus, after that battle with the Death Eaters at the beginning of the month. The Ministry would like to get their hands on him and some of the Order members, or others in the resistance, to make an example of them. Their negotiated peace looks bad when fighting of that magnitude is still going on.

So, we'll stay here for a while and keep Tonks company. That will also make Remus feel better. In the meantime, I'm organizing our search of possible Horcrux locations in Britain. I have 42 potential sites, broken down by likelihood. We have 15 strong candidates, mostly magical sites like Stonehenge and the Avebury Stone Circle with the rest being of lower probability.

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – December 31

Some interesting news just came in over the WIZARDING Wireless Network. The Hufflepuffs carried out their rescue mission to break Justin and his parents and other muggleborns out of their internment camp today! They were being held on an island in the Irish Sea near the Isle of Man. The rescuers caught the guards completely by surprise, as they were mostly looking ahead to their New Years Eve celebration (and possibly hitting the Firewhiskey a little early).

The planning and execution of the operation were superb. They infiltrated the camp and stunned all of the guards, with only minor injuries, and had the inmates whisked away with portkeys before the Ministry even knew they were there. Upon their arrival in France, the French Ministry immediately granted all of the captive muggleborns political asylum, so that must have been coordinated in advance as well.

What they found in the camp was appalling. This 'protective custody' was nothing more than a prison where those being held were subjected to the most brutal and inhumane conditions. Many of the muggle relatives of the witches and wizards died (or were killed by the guards as a sick kind of sport), including Justin's parents.

Susan was clever enough to bring along a reporter who knew her from her aunt's time as head of the DMLE. Given that students from prominent pureblood families like her and Ernie Macmillan were involved, it's more likely that the rest of the wizarding population will take notice. (Even Zacharias Smith took part in the raid, and his family is quite influential.) This really puts the

*Ministry on the spot, as their alleged safekeeping of muggleborns has been revealed to be a farce. In his interview Ernie particularly emphasized the fact that these were fellow witches and wizards being subjected to these conditions. Hopefully this will turn the tide with public opinion.*

*This is related in a way to some conversations Harry and I have been having in private, particularly since our getaway in London last week. He's not sure if he wants to remain in the wizarding world when this is all over. I let him know I was having similar doubts. I used to think that the most blatant prejudice against muggles and muggleborns was from a small, extremist faction in the wizarding world. With the events of this past year I now realize just how widespread these attitudes are. It's something we'll have to give more thought to at a later time.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – January 2

*Today is the day we're going to visit Hogwarts to get a look at the statue of Ravenclaw wearing the diadem. McGonagall sent word that this is an ideal time since Umbridge and Dawlish are back at the Ministry trying to help do damage control after the exposure of the conditions in the muggleborn internment camp. The Ministry's first reaction was to issue warrants for the arrest of the students involved, but there aren't many DMLE officials who would be willing to go after Susan Bones, especially in the face of the outrage they felt. And then, as it became clear that the entire Hufflepuff House was behind the rescue, and when the full story of the conditions in the camp came out along with pictures in the Daily Prophet, the uproar from the public stopped those plans in their tracks. Most likely some second or third tier Ministry personnel will end up taking the fall as the top officials try to cover up. We'll have to wait and see how it all plays out, but overall this revelation can only help our cause.*

This time McGonagall herself met them at the Hogwarts gate, but as a precaution they remained under the invisibility cloak as they crossed the grounds and entered the castle. For his part, Ron was using a new invention from Fred and George to conceal himself – an invisibility hat. It was a modification of the Headless Hats they had developed during their last year at Hogwarts, in which the invisibility field now extended to cover the user's entire body. Unlike a permanent invisibility cloak, however, the effect only lasted for a short time, and the twins were currently working on extending that period.

Flitwick met them outside the Ravenclaw common room, and informed them that he'd made certain that all of his students would be occupied elsewhere in the castle. Then they turned to the entrance. Rather than a portrait guarding a hole that one climbed through, there was merely a plain door with no handle, only a bronze knocker in the shape of an eagle. They watched as Flitwick reached up and rapped it once.

“What came first, the phoenix or the flame?” the eagle asked in a soft, feminine voice.

“Huh?” Harry asked in bewilderment. “Why ...?”

“It’s the Ravenclaws’ version of the password,” McGonagall explained while Flitwick looked on with satisfaction. “You have to answer the question in order to get in.” Hermione brightened immediately, then turned thoughtful as she pondered the riddle.

“What if you get it wrong?” Harry wondered.

“Then you have to wait until someone else comes along who answers it correctly,” Flitwick replied eagerly. “It’s a learning device, you see?”

“But how would anyone know which of those came first?” Ron objected. “It’s not like anyone was around to see it.”

“What do you think, Miss Granger?” Flitwick asked of the young witch who he’d always wished had been sorted into his house.

“I think,” Hermione deduced, “that it’s a question that has no answer, because it leads to circular reasoning. Just like a circle has no beginning and no end.”

“Nicely put,” the eagle proclaimed, and the door opened. As the others stepped through, Hermione hung back slightly, wishing they had time to answer more of the door’s questions. But Harry, knowing what was going through her mind, just grinned and pulled her along, shaking his head.

Whereas the color scheme of the Gryffindor common room was red and gold, the Ravenclaw counterpart was draped in blue and bronze. It also had considerably more windows, affording a spectacular view of the nearby mountains, and giving the whole room a much airier feeling. Appropriate, Hermione decided, for a house whose symbol was an eagle.

After a quick glance around their attention was drawn to a statue of white marble, in a niche across the room from the entrance. As they approached the likeness of Rowena Ravenclaw, they could make out a small, delicate circlet on her head, which reminded Hermione of the borrowed tiara that Fleur had worn at her wedding. For an instant the thought flashed through her head that Aunt Muriel’s prized jewelry could be the missing heirloom of Ravenclaw, now made into one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes, but this was immediately discarded. There was no way that the dark lord would hide one of his precious soul repositories with a member of a light side family like the Prewetts.

“That’s it?” Harry blurted out, ending Hermione’s train of thought. “That’s a diadem?”

“Well, yes,” Hermione answered, giving him a strange look. “What did you think a diadem was?”

“I don’t know, something more impressive than that though,” he complained. “I mean, it’s supposed to be a crown, right? Like kings and queens wear?”

“Ah, but she wasn’t actually a queen, you see,” Flitwick explained as Harry moved closer, peering at the head of the statue with a frown. “I’m sorry if it disappoints you.” Hermione could see that the diminutive professor was a bit put off by Harry’s reaction, and approached him with the

intention of getting him to lighten up his criticism. She was brought up short when Harry turned back to face them with his eyes wide.

“I ... I think I know where this is!”

There was a momentary silence as the other four processed this amazing declaration. Then they all joined into a jumble of excited voices. “What ...? How ...? Where?” Harry just held up his hands and shook his head until their questions died down.

“I think I saw it in the Room of Requirement last year, when Professor Trelawny was hiding her empty sherry bottles. So much else happened later that day that I’d pretty much put it out of my mind,” he explained. Now that he thought about it, he remembered that while he’d been in the room he’d called up Hermione on their mirrors right during the extra session she had attended at Beauxbatons on nude rituals, and a touch of red flashed across his face. Hermione’s matching color confirmed that she’d recalled the event as well.

“The Room of Requirement?” Ron prompted, not understanding why that reference would embarrass his friends like this.

“Uh ... yeah, why don’t I show you my memory of it and see what you think,” Harry stammered quickly so as to forestall any other questions. He proceeded to unshoulder his rucksack and withdraw the pensieve that Dumbledore had left him. While he set it up on a table and focused on the memory he wanted to withdraw, Flitwick stepped up to examine the charmed rucksack.

“Nice charm work, Mr. Potter,” he commented with admiration. “Or should I say, Miss Granger?” he added as he took in her slightly embarrassed smile of pride in her spellcraft.

“Yep, that was all Hermione’s doing,” Harry noted absently as he deposited the glowing memory strand in the pensieve. “So, is everyone ready?”

Harry led the five of them into the version of the Room that was crammed full of discarded items of every sort. Hermione shot him a dirty look as they passed his memory self pausing before the lewd display of scantily clad witches, then huffed and grabbed Ron’s arm to yank him along as he stopped to gape at it himself. Before long, Harry found the spot he was looking for – an out of the way corner where a finely crafted tiara rested atop a cupboard.

“What do you think?” he asked breathlessly. “Is that it?”

“I believe it is,” Flitwick pronounced after a close inspection. “But where exactly is this place?”

“It’s a version of the Room of Requirement where students, staff, and house elves hide old stuff they don’t want or need any more,” Harry answered. “I suppose we can just go up to the seventh floor and guess at which phrase will summon it until we hit on it.” He shared a grim look with Hermione. “When I found it last year I reckoned we could always get Trelawny to let us in if we needed it again, but ...”

McGonagall and Flitwick nodded sadly at the loss of their colleague, the first victim of the latest Umbridge regime. “But if you said the house elves use it,” McGonagall pointed out, “perhaps one of them ...?”

Harry shook his head. “I asked Dobby about it last year but he said the house elves were sworn to secrecy about it.”

“Hmm,” McGonagall mused. “Perhaps we can get around that.”

The group exited the pensieve and Harry called Dobby, and the excitable house elf immediately appeared. After one of his typically overly enthusiastic greetings, he quieted down as McGonagall asked him, under her authority as Deputy Headmistress (as the actual Headmistress was currently out of the castle), if he would retrieve an item for them from the hidden storage area. Dobby, who didn't need much of an excuse to bend the rules where Harry Potter was concerned, agreed. Harry took Dobby back into the pensieve to show him exactly what they were looking for and where it was, and the zealous little creature popped away, returning less than a minute later holding the long sought after heirloom.

“Thanks Dobby, this is exactly what we wanted,” Harry declared as Dobby carefully handed over the tiara.

“Dobby is always happy to be helping Harry Potter sir,” the bubbly house elf insisted. “Yous can call Dobby anytime yous be needing something.”

“Well, this is a very important object that will help us defeat Voldemort, so you helped a lot,” Harry assured him. He turned to the others with a look of grim satisfaction. “Well, shall we destroy it right here, then?”

“Are you certain that this is indeed a Horcrux?” McGonagall asked anxiously. “It's such a shame that a priceless artifact that's been lost for so long has now reappeared, only to be destroyed.”

Harry turned to Hermione, who stepped forward and cast the revealing spell that she'd discovered and used once before, on Slytherin's locket. The glistening diadem, which Harry had set down on one of the tables in the Ravenclaw common room, turned red, then darkened, before resuming its original appearance. She caught Harry's eyes and nodded.

“Does anyone else want to do the honors?” Harry asked, as he grasped the jeweled handle of Sword of Gryffindor inside his rucksack and slowly withdrew the blade.

“No, it should be you, mate,” Ron responded immediately. “Let's not take any chances with this. We know you can destroy them, we don't need to find out that it doesn't work for someone else.”

Thinking ahead, Flitwick had conjured a stone slab and Hermione levitated the diadem into place. The gleaming sword flashed once again, and the fifth piece of Voldemort's soul was no more.

-0x0x0-

*It's been a quiet couple of days since we returned from Hogwarts. Suddenly we find ourselves with not much to do – we'd planned on an exhaustive search of potential Horcrux hiding places, and then stumbled on the Ravenclaw Horcrux at Hogwarts, where we'd suspected it would be in the first place. Since we believe the last one – Hufflepuff's Cup – is in the Lestrangle vault at Gringotts, we've been sitting around brainstorming ways to get at it. Unfortunately, we've come up empty so far; it seems we need to find Bellatrix and either obtain a hair or some skin from her or steal her vault key.*

*Remus is now in Russia. He just reported in on his mirror that Voldemort has secured the services of a clan of giants, which will be bad news if he manages to get them to Britain. He doesn't seem to have gone after Gregorovitch yet.*

*Hogwarts starts up again tomorrow, so Fred and George are going to the Burrow to say goodbye to Ginny tonight, and Ron is heading off to see Luna. Harry and I will have a relatively peaceful meal with Bill, Fleur and Tonks. Tonks is looking better now, but she still tires easily.*

*Hold on – there's some shouting coming from the cottage.*

A scream from Fleur split the air as Harry and Hermione clambered through the entrance to their tent, causing them to draw their wands and quicken their pace as they hurried toward the cottage. Once there they were startled to see the normally jovial Fred and George with looks of utter horror on their faces, shaking as they stumbled their way through their tale.

“Dark Mark ... place torn apart ... Mum and Dad dead ... Ginny missing.”

Hermione gasped as the awful news sunk in, then turned to Harry and cried out, “Harry, call Ron on your mirror and warn him! The Death Eaters may go there next!”

Harry was shaking as he fumbled for the mirror in his pocket, having trouble wrapping his mind around the enormity of the situation. *Mr. and Mrs. Weasley dead! Ginny captured!*

Before he could activate the communication device, they were interrupted by a loud crack of apparation. Nerves nearly shot, the witches and wizards gathered outside the house turned with their wands raised against the intruder, despite the fact that the *Fidelius* charm assured that he would be friendly.

Ron stumbled as he appeared, his face white as a sheet. As soon as he recognized his friends and siblings, he shouted, “The Lovegoods have been attacked! Mr. Lovegood is dead and Luna's gone! We have to ...”

But the looks on his brothers' faces told him what he'd feared. His warning was in vain.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-





## Notebooks and Letters Malfoy Manor

### Final Year, Chapter 14 – Malfoy Manor

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – January 4/5 (nighttime)

*The past few hours have been utterly chaotic. We've finally gone to bed but no one can sleep. I'm lying on my side trying to organize my thoughts enough to record what happened. Harry's behind me with his arm wrapped around me, offering suggestions.*

*After Ron arrived there was quite a bit of shouting until Bill took charge. He decided that we'd apparate back to the Burrow to do whatever we could. I added that we needed to be careful since some of us were still wanted by the Ministry, and that Aurors would eventually show up, if they weren't there already. So Harry and I stayed under his invisibility cloak, and Fred and George took along their invisibility hats. That left Bill, Fleur, and Ron to interact with any DMLE people we encountered.*

*There really wasn't much we could do. No one was there when we arrived, so Bill and Fleur retrieved the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley while the rest of us checked the place over. To their credit, they put up a pretty good fight. The Death Eaters must have taken their dead and wounded with them, but it was pretty apparent that there were more than a few.*

*In addition to the Dark Mark we found a message burned into the side of the house. One word – POTTER – in large letters. The meaning was pretty clear. Voldemort hasn't been able to get at Harry any other way, so he's trying to get to him by going after his friends and strongest supporters. That could also be why Ginny and Luna were taken prisoner (besides the other obvious reason, that they're young, attractive females).*

*When the Aurors finally arrived, Bill dealt with them while Fleur took charge of transporting Mr. and Mrs. Weasley to St. Mungo's. She showed some real inner strength – Harry and I could hardly bear to look at them. They'll remain there until the burial arrangements can be made. (There are no undertakers in the wizarding world, since anyone can cast preservative charms.) But no one is thinking about that right now. Everyone's focus is on what happened to Ginny and Luna and how to get them back.*

*Ron went with some of the Aurors to the Lovegoods, where he described what he'd found there. The scene was the same, even including the message burned into the wall. I'm impressed that Ron*

*held up as well as he did – no rants or screams of rage at all. At least until we got home. Then everyone could let it out.*

*Before the Aurors left they told Bill that the Longbottoms had also been attacked, but unsuccessfully. Their manor perhaps had better protections on it, but in any case Neville and his grandmother managed to hold them off until they could escape. (Note added later – Mrs. Longbottom had an ‘illegal’ emergency escape portkey.)*

*Another important piece of information – the floos at all three houses had been blocked. That means Voldemort has a sympathizer inside the Department of Magical Transportation. That’s not too surprising, since that’s the department that Thicknesse headed before he became Minister.*

*When we all got back to Bill’s there was a lot of anguish and grief, tears, screaming, and vows of retribution, but eventually it became obvious that there was nothing more we could do for now. Bill used Hedwig to send a note to Charlie. We’ll tell Remus tomorrow when he calls in on his mirror. We don’t dare call him on it because he might be undercover somewhere.*

*Time to try to get some sleep. I suspect we’re all going to need Pepper Up potions in the morning.*

The debate the next morning picked up where it left off the night before. Fred and George wanted to go blow something up, and Ron was right with them. The only thing stopping them was the lack of an obvious target. Hermione had a feeling that it wouldn’t be long before they’d just pick a known Death Eater home and attack it. When she mentioned this to Harry at one point, he just nodded. He was inclined to go along with them if they did.

Hermione, Fleur, and Tonks (when she was able to make herself heard – she didn’t really have the strength to engage in a long, drawn out shouting match at this point in her recovery) argued that they couldn’t go off half cocked and without any plan or purpose other than revenge. It finally fell to Bill to restrain his brothers, as he supported the women’s viewpoint – for the time being. The most persuasive argument was that this course of action was likely to just get Ginny and Luna killed.

When Remus finally checked in and was quickly informed of the attacks and abductions, he also cautioned restraint. At that advice, Fred grumbled that it was easy for ‘them’ (meaning Remus and the women) to sit back and do nothing – it wasn’t *their* sister who was likely being tortured and raped. This very nearly got him hexed by Fleur before Bill managed to pull her from the room.

At this point Harry stepped up and shoved Fred down into a chair. Hermione had gone pale and was about to shout something back at Fred herself when she caught the look in Harry’s eyes and fell silent. A second later everyone else saw it too. George, who had been about to step up in support of his twin, backed off, and Ron shifted uncomfortably. All of them had seen that look of pent up rage in Harry before, and none had any desire to be the target of it.

“Don’t you *ever* think,” Harry snarled in a low voice that was even more effective than if he’d shouted. “That *any* of us don’t care about Ginny or Luna. Everyone here wants desperately to get

them back. And if you have any ideas of how we can do that, let's hear them. But as long as there's a chance of getting them back alive we can't do anything that would bollix that up."

It went without saying what he was trying to avoid. Everyone present remembered well the disaster at the Department of Mysteries that had cost Sirius his life, for which Harry still blamed himself for rushing into an unknown situation without any sort of plan.

No one even considered challenging Harry on this, and some semblance of order was restored to the room. Hermione moved over to the table where Tonks was sitting and worked with her at generating a list of potential sites where the girls might be being held. Fred and George busied themselves with brainstorming which deadly pranks might be useful in a rescue mission, while Harry tried to calm down Ron, who was growing increasingly more agitated over Fred's comment about rape and torture.

By midmorning, after the initial energy that had been channeled into making preparations had started to wear off, and despair was beginning to take over, the situation took an abrupt turn when Kreacher popped into the room. As everyone shot to their feet and wands were drawn, he quickly handed a parchment to Harry, bowed, and popped away.

Hermione was immediately at his side. "What's it say?" she demanded, as Harry opened it up. Rather than answer, he spread it out on the table and everyone crowded around to look.

*May flo  
Roman*

*key soul ale*

"It's another message from Snape!" Ron shouted. Hermione merely nodded as she'd already reached for a quill and another piece of parchment, and was hurriedly rearranging letters. In a few seconds she had the first two words.

"Malfoy Manor!" Harry called out, looking over her shoulder. With another glance back at the original parchment, everyone quickly concurred with this analysis. Fred and George immediately moved away from the table and went back to their stash of materials, and Ron began pacing back and forth. It was clear that the three of them were ready to move out now.

"Wait," Tonks hissed, turning from her seat next to Hermione. "We still need a plan. And there's more to the message." Growling in frustration, the trio of Weasleys threw themselves onto a sofa and glared at her.

"The next part's trickier," Hermione complained. "If we follow the pattern he's been using in the other messages, it should be one word but ..." She frowned and tried something else. "Hang on, I've got it. It's three words." She jotted them down and pushed the parchment over to Harry.

"All you seek," he read in a low voice. Then he looked at Hermione as he passed the parchment to Tonks and Fleur. "Do you think ...?" Hermione nodded.

“Besides Ginny and Luna, either Bellatrix or her vault key is there, or both,” she concluded.

The discussion turned contentious once more. While it was obvious to everyone present that this was a trap designed to lure Harry to Malfoy Manor to be captured, Ron, Fred and George didn’t care. They argued that Harry should stay behind but that shouldn’t stop them. Bill put his foot down and declared that getting themselves killed wouldn’t bring their parents back, or save Ginny. Ron bitterly asked if he would be arguing this way if it were Fleur who was being held prisoner. While Bill and Ron went toe to toe, Harry and Hermione exchanged a desperate look, wondering what each of their responses would be to that question about the other.

After Bill and Ron calmed down, Fleur wondered if they even knew where Malfoy Manor was, and the twins assured her that its location was well known; their father had raided the place more than once searching for dark objects. Tonks tried to suggest that they wait for Remus to return, but the Weasley boys weren’t willing to wait that long – it would take more than a full day for him to make his way back from Russia, with all of the international apparation points he needed to go through.

“At the least we need a diversion of some sort to give the main attack force a chance,” Hermione maintained.

“Do you have any way to contact Snape?” Fleur asked her as they stood together, a bit outside of the main conversation. Hermione shook her head as Harry joined them.

“No, but you’re right that we really need someone inside, who’s familiar with the house, so we don’t waste our time searching through the whole place,” she agreed. Suddenly Harry’s head snapped up.

“Dobby!” he shouted.

The response was nearly instantaneous. By the time everyone else in the room had turned to look at Harry the little house elf had appeared before him.

“Harry Potter called Dobby? What can Dobby be doing for Harry Potter today?”

“Dobby, you’re a lifesaver!” Harry declared, dropping to his knees and hugging his small friend. “Do you know where the Malfoys would keep someone prisoner in their house?” Dobby’s normally bulging eyes grew even wider, but then he nodded. Everyone held their breath in excited anticipation as Harry asked the next question. “Can you get us into there, without anyone knowing?”

Trembling, Dobby hesitated for a few seconds before answering. Later, in retrospect, those present would realize that should have been an indication that something was wrong. The insanely loyal house elf had always responded instantly and eagerly to anything Harry asked of him.

Finally, the former Malfoy bonded elf answered solemnly. “Yes. Dobby can do that. Dobby will do it for the great wizard Harry Potter.”

Slowly – too slowly for Ron, Fred, and George – the rescue plan took shape. Fleur didn't want Bill to go, and Bill didn't want her to go. Likewise for Harry and Hermione. Bill decided that he would be most effective on the outside, probing the wards. This would appear to be in preparation for the main assault and would serve as a distraction to divert attention from the infiltrators. Fleur insisted that she would accompany him. Both agreed that they would bug out at any sign of trouble. Ron gave Bill his communication mirror, so the inside group could signal when they needed him to make his presence known.

Harry convinced Hermione that this was an opportunity to confront Snape, and that he might be needed to help retrieve the vault key. There was also the fact that Dobby was doing this for him alone. Hermione didn't even try to convince Harry that she should go along. She just put her foot down and declared that there was no way she could let him go into danger without being by his side. Given the number of times in the past that her help had made the difference between success and failure, Harry couldn't deny her. Tonks tried to claim that she had to accompany them, but no one was willing to allow that, as she could barely stay on her feet for the amount of time that would be required, much less fight effectively.

Harry, Hermione, Ron, Fred, George, and Dobby popped into existence in a dark musty room below Malfoy Manor and were immediately greeted by a female voice that cried out in terror. The five humans quickly turned in the direction of the noise while Dobby dropped to his knees from the exertion of transporting the group. While he struggled to regain his strength the first voice broke into hysterical sobs while a different voice called out.

“Who's there?”

“Luna! Is that you?” Ron answered excitedly. “Ginny?” Hermione lit her wand tip as the five rescuers hurried toward the captives, only to be brought up short when the glow from her wand brought them into view. Luna, completely naked, was sitting up against the wall of the cellar while Ginny, also naked but for two torn scraps of fabric wrapped around her top and bottom in an inadequate attempt to protect her modesty, was curled up in her lap still whimpering.

Fred and George awkwardly averted their gaze while Ron struggled with wanting to rush up to see if Luna and his sister were all right but not wanting to further embarrass them. Hermione didn't hesitate, and quickly transfigured each scrap of fabric into a blanket, then knelt down and pulled Ginny away from Luna so that each girl could be covered up. As soon as he saw what she was doing Ron joined her and pulled Luna into a hug as soon as she had the blanket around her, while Hermione did the same for Ginny.

Harry, when he saw that Hermione had this situation under control, took a quick look around the rest of the cellar, and soon spotted another body huddled against a different wall. He cautiously approached the unmoving figure and determined that it was an old man who was alive, but just barely. An illumination spell provided his identity – Ollivander, the wand maker who'd disappeared a year and a half previously.

While Hermione murmured words of comfort to Ginny, who gradually started to calm down, she began to analyze the situation in the underground prison. The two girls had been stripped, and by the looks of them beaten, at the least, and then dumped here. Luna, being somewhat more accustomed to nudity, and being the more coherent of the two, had given Ginny what little covering was available, and had attempted as best she could to take care of her friend.

At this point Luna pulled herself away from Ron (though still remaining within his grasp) and explained what had happened. In an eerily detached voice, she described how the two girls had been brought down here and kept in the dark for a while, then taken upstairs where the resident Death Eaters had amused themselves by ripping their clothing off, a piece at a time. Once they were completely naked they'd been subjected to leers, taunts and quite explicit declarations of what was going to happen to them, while also being pinched, poked, and prodded with wands. They'd even gone so far as to spread Ginny's legs apart and speculate on how tight she'd be. After some time this eventually escalated to stinging and then bludgeoning hexes. When the pair of them were nearly unconscious, they'd been brought back down and dumped once more.

"So ... Ron asked hesitantly, "they didn't ...?"

"They haven't raped us yet, no," Luna responded calmly. "This is the humiliation part. I believe they intend to break our spirit first. That way there's less chance of us injuring one of them either by fighting back or through an accidental magic release while they're ..." She was cut off as Ginny burst into sobs again and Ron tightened his grip.

"But you're gonna be OK now," he assured her. Luna finally let her self-control slip a bit and relaxed into his arms. Meanwhile Hermione soothed Ginny once again, and the petite redhead stopped crying and took several deep breaths.

"All right then?" Hermione whispered to her. Ginny nodded.

"I was just so scared," she tried to explain. "Luna kept saying you guys would come for us but ..." Hermione nodded in return as she rubbed the younger girl's back, and Ginny gradually gathered her wits. Then Hermione stood up and let Fred take hold of his sister, and walked over to Harry who was waiting patiently as everyone worked things out. He took her hand and gave it a hard squeeze. They weren't out of the woods yet.

"You guys still going through with the rest of it?" Fred asked Harry as he helped Ginny to her feet. Ron whispered briefly to Luna as George stood by to take her from him.

Harry nodded and turned to Dobby, frowning at his pale appearance. "Dobby, can you ...?" he asked with some concern. The loyal house elf stepped forward determinedly.

"Dobby is being ready to do his part," he affirmed.

"Well, then take these four this trip and we'll bring Ollivander on the next one," Harry decided, pulling out his communication mirror. "Bill? We got in all right and have Luna and Ginny. Fred and George are bringing them out to you. Everything OK on your end?"

“All clear out here,” Bill responded. “Just let us know when you need us to get their attention.”

The two witches and two wizards took hold of Dobby, and disappeared with a much louder pop. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged uneasy looks. “That didn’t sound good,” Ron commented as they all listened for sounds from the floor above that might indicate that they’d been detected. Hoping it wasn’t too late, Hermione quickly cast a silencing charm.

A few seconds later Dobby popped back in, and they knew immediately that something was very wrong, as he collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Dobby!” Harry gasped as he dropped to his knees at the prone figure of his small friend and gathered him into his arms. “What’s wrong? What happened to you?”

Dobby opened his eyes and looked sadly up at Harry. “Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter sir. Dobby was not strong enough. Dobby is not being able to finish his task.”

“Dobby, no! Hang on! You’ll be OK!” Harry pleaded as the house elf closed his eyes again. Hermione knelt behind Harry and wrapped her arms around him, not knowing what else to do, while Ron stood watching with his eyes wide.

Dobby took several halting breaths and managed to open his eyes once more. “Is honor ... for Dobby ... to give his life ... for great wizard ... Harry Potter.”

“NO!” Harry was shaking as he took great heaving breaths, and Hermione had tears streaming down her face. Gently laying Dobby’s unmoving frame back down, he stood up again, disbelief on his face. Everything had been going perfectly, and now ... how were they going to get Dobby to a healer? How were they even going to get out of here?

“Kreacher!” Harry suddenly called out. With a loud crack that made the three teens wince, Kreacher appeared with a questioning look on his face.

“What are master’s orders?” he inquired in his usual raspy voice.

“Kreacher, what’s wrong with Dobby? Can you help him?” Kreacher’s head snapped back in surprise as he took in the still form lying before him, then he shook his head.

“Is nothing that can be done. Disgraced elf Dobby has betrayed former master’s secrets. House elf magic not permit this.” The grief-stricken teens sagged back against the wall as they realized what had happened, that Dobby had just sacrificed himself, knowing that he would not survive the task they had asked of him.

“Can you take us out of here,” Harry asked hopefully, but not expecting a positive response. Kreacher shook his head again. “House elves cannot take wizards through other wizards’ wards, only in the house they is being bonded to.”

“Can you take Dobby, then?” Hermione asked quickly, noting the distinction Kreacher had made. This time the ancient house elf nodded.



“Then take him to the Hogwarts hospital wing, as fast as you can,” Harry all but shouted. Kreacher gave him a look that told him he was wasting his time, but nodded to acknowledge his master’s order. He stooped to pick up his fellow elf, and then disappeared with another loud crack.

The three teens stood staring into the empty space where the elves had been, stunned at the disastrous turn of events, before finally pulling themselves together.

“What are we going to do now?” Ron asked.

Harry and Hermione stared up at the ceiling, wondering if their enemies had detected their presence. “Figure out how to make contact with Snape, I reckon,” Harry decided hesitantly. “There’s no chance of apparating out of this cellar, I suppose ...” Ron and Hermione shook their heads, agreeing with his assessment. “... and I doubt it’ll be easy to find an unsecured floo connection. So let’s hide ourselves and get going. Everyone have some decoy detonators?”

The other two agreed and Ron activated his Invisibility Hat while Hermione joined Harry under the cloak. Just then they heard the sounds they’d been dreading – footsteps coming down the stairs to investigate – and they immediately extinguished their lit wand tips.

“I told you, I thought I heard something,” Draco Malfoy’s voice sounded just before the door flew open and four dark shapes entered the room. A muttered incantation caused the lights to come up and reveal Snape, Crabbe, and Goyle flanking the scion of the manor.

“They’re gone!” Malfoy shrieked, as Crabbe and Goyle looked around the room in confusion. “I knew something was going on down here! How could they have escaped?” Angrily, he turned to storm back up the stairs, but Snape stopped him.

“It was Potter,” he hissed. “I’m certain of it. He’s the one we set this trap for, and he fell for it, just sooner and in a different way than we expected.” He raised his voice. “Potter! I know you’re in here! Show yourself!”

Harry and Hermione held their breaths under the cloak, both trying to decide if this was part of Snape’s plan, or if they should stay hidden. Snape finished a slow turn, taking in every corner of the dark musty room and then raised his wand. “No matter. We can easily determine if he’s still here. *Homenem* ...”

Before he could finish the revealing spell, Harry threw off the cloak, reasoning that if he finished the incantation all three of them would be detected, but this way Ron could remain hidden.

“Well, well, Mr. Potter,” the dark eyed potions master sneered. “We finally meet again. *Expelliarmus* !” He had never lowered his wand, and the disarming spell caught Harry and Hermione by surprise. Their wands flew into the air and Snape effortlessly caught them.

“You’ve been quite an irritation to the Dark Lord lately,” he continued in a venomous tone. “But we knew you couldn’t resist playing the hero once again.” His eyes turned to Hermione, who stared defiantly back at him, hoping it was all an act. “And you were even foolish enough to bring

the mudblood along with you ... for our *entertainment* .” He turned to the three Slytherins waiting slightly behind him, who were still amazed that Potter could be standing there in front of them. “Take her upstairs and *prepare* her. I do believe you may be in for a ... gratifying afternoon. Pity that Granger and Potter won’t enjoy it nearly as much.”

Harry and Hermione shared a desperate look as Crabbe and Goyle stepped forward. This had always been Harry’s worst fear – even more than his own death – Hermione captured and subjected to unspeakable evil at the hands of the Death Eaters. They had time for no more than a quick hand squeeze as the two hulking Slytherins each seized one of Hermione’s arms, roughly jerking her through the door and up the stairs. Malfoy shot Harry a lewd smirk and turned to follow them.

“Oh, and send Pettigrew down, Draco,” Snape added before he was out of sight. “He and I will have an interesting conversation with Potter while we wait for you to have your fun with the mudblood.”

While Snape was addressing Malfoy, Harry took the opportunity to dart his eyes to where Ron had been, then shot a glance to the stairs, silently urging him to follow Hermione. He knew Snape had something in mind, but was fearful of what might happen to the love of his life while the potion master’s scenario played out.

As soon as the door closed, Harry rounded on Snape. “Is it here? How are we going to get it?”

“Patience, Mr. Potter,” the oily former professor chided with a derisive sneer. Then he flicked his wand, conjuring a chair behind Harry. Another silent gesture and Harry was forced to sit on it, and with a final twirl he was bound and tied to the chair, but with his arms free. “You are going to persuade Wormtail to provide us with some assistance.”

Pettigrew appeared in the doorway and entered, darting anxious looks between the two wizards. Sounds of a struggle taking place in the room above distracted Harry for a moment before he noticed Snape motioning him to go ahead.

“Peter, I need your help,” he began. Pettigrew merely stared at him as though he were daft. “You owe me,” Harry continued his argument. “I saved your life.”

The rat-like man’s beady eyes widened in fear as he processed this declaration. A scream from above distracted Harry and he gritted his teeth, trying not to think about what was happening to Hermione. But the interruption enabled Pettigrew to come up with a counter.

“No, you were going to send me to the dementors instead,” he whined. “I escaped on my own that night.”

“I stopped Remus and Sirius from killing you,” Harry insisted. “If I hadn’t you never would have got the opportunity to escape.”

“Oh, just get it over with,” Snape hissed. “*Imperio* !” Pettigrew’s eyes immediately clouded over.

“Change into your animagus form and search Bellatrix’s room until you find her Gringotts vault key, then bring it to us.”

As soon as the rat-faced man had gone to carry out his orders Snape turned back to Harry. “Quickly, we don’t have much time! How many of the others have you found?”

“All of them,” Harry responded. “This is the last one.” Snape’s dark eyes widened dramatically; he had clearly not expected Harry to have been so successful. But their conversation was interrupted by another scream from Hermione. Harry gritted his teeth as he recognized the distinctive sound of unbearable agony, the product of the *Cruciatius* curse. This elicited another sneer from Snape.

“How are we going to get her away from them?” Harry demanded. “We have to get out of here as soon as Wormtail gets back.”

“Ah, but there is where you are mistaken, Potter,” Snape smirked, clearly enjoying Harry’s torment. “You seem to be under the impression that you are in charge here. You see, unless you do exactly as I say, your mudblood lover will die.”

“What!” Harry screamed. “You’re supposed to be helping us! You took a vow!”

“I vowed to aid you in defeating the Dark Lord, and to do whatever I could to keep you alive until you face him,” the black-robed, black-haired Slytherin corrected smugly. “Then I will finally be free of both of my masters. But there is nothing in my vow about keeping Granger alive.”

“But I need her help to defeat him,” Harry argued desperately.

“On the contrary, I suspect that her death will provide an even greater impetus,” Snape countered nastily. “But it need not happen if you only follow my instructions.”

Harry slumped back, temporarily stymied. Snape held all the cards and he knew it. “What do I have to do?”

The potions master reached into his robes and drew out a stoppered flask with a shimmery substance inside. “First, here are some memories that you will need. I believe that you will discover that Albus did not always have your best interests at heart. But you will also learn what else must be done.”

He then withdrew a vial from another pocket. “And you will drink this,” he declared, this time in a tone of utter malice.

Harry tucked the flask of memories away in his moleskin pouch, but was taken aback at the sound of Snape’s voice. “What will it do to me?”

Snape’s face darkened even further. “It will make you suffer as I have, by destroying everything you love.”

“What! How?” Harry sputtered. “And why should I take it if it’s going to kill Hermione and my other friends anyway?”

“Let me explain exactly what our friends upstairs have planned for you, Potter,” the dark man hissed. “Once the Dark Lord has been notified that you have been ensnared in our trap, it will take him several hours to return. In the meantime you will provide a great deal of amusement for them. They’ll torture Granger for a while, and then take turns having their way with her while you are forced to watch. After they’re finished with her they’ll kill her in a *most* painful manner.” He smiled in grim satisfaction at the dismay and horror that enveloped Harry’s face.

Then he added, “It’s too bad Weasley’s not here, or they could use him as well. It would be a variation of their favorite tactic for breaking a man. First they rape his wife, multiple times, in front of him. Then they put him under *Imperius* and force him to rape his own daughter, while his wife watches. Then they kill both the wife and daughter. More times than not, the man will take his own life rather than live with that knowledge. With any luck Weasley would do the same once he realized what they’d made him do to Granger.”

Snape smirked again as Harry fought back the bile rising up in his throat. “Now, Potter, your father stole the only thing I ever loved, and I hated him with every part of my being. Then you showed up and forced me to remember what I’d lost every time I looked at you, you with your mother’s eyes on your father’s face. Now at last I will have my revenge! I’ve spent months perfecting this potion. Once the Dark Lord is gone, *if* you survive, it will destroy your memories of everything you love, leaving you with nothing but hate. The same way I have been forced to live for the past twenty years!”

Harry wanted to argue back, to tell Snape that it was his own fault, that he’d driven his mother away with his own actions and attitudes. But if the evil git hadn’t admitted that to himself by this time he never would. But what should he do now? Taking this potion would destroy the life he and Hermione had hoped to have. But at least she would still be alive. There was really no choice at all. He had to sacrifice his love for her life.

He swallowed the potion. He had never hated another person as much as he hated Snape right then. He vowed to himself that he’d kill him as soon as everything was over.

Soon Pettigrew returned with the precious Gringotts vault key, which Harry added to his secret pouch. He turned back to the traitorous rat. “Thank you Peter. I release you from your life debt. If you want to leave Voldemort’s service, you’re free to go.”

Pettigrew just stared at him for a moment, then backed away slowly, shooting suspicious looks back and forth between the other two wizards. Then he turned and raced for the steps. He never made it, as a red beam of light slammed into his back and he fell unconscious to the floor.

“Stupid Gryffindor!” Snape spat at Harry as he levitated Pettigrew out of the doorway and bound him securely. “Once you released him from his debt there’s no telling what he’d do. We can’t afford the risk.” Come on now, they’re probably waiting for us. Wait for my signal before you attack.” He handed Harry both his wand and Hermione’s and turned away.

“Wait!” Harry insisted. “There’s one more thing we need to do.” Snape turned back in irritation as Harry reached into his moleskin pouch again.

“What now, Potter?” he complained impatiently. Then his eyes reflected his surprise as he recognized the wand Harry pulled out of the pouch. “What are you doing with Albus Dumbledore’s wand?” he demanded.

“You have your secrets, I have mine,” Harry retorted. “All you need to know is that this is important and it’s part of Dumbledore’s plan. Your vow forces you to follow it, right?”

“I ...” Snape glared at Harry, but the Gryffindor teen stood his ground. “All right, what is it?” he snapped.

“You hold onto this wand, and I’ll pretend to break free and disarm you. Then you’ll still have your own wand to fight with.” He handed the Elder Wand to his nemesis, who hesitated, but took it. “And I’ll decide when we go.” Before Snape could object he pulled out his communication mirror.

“Bill, are you still there?” he asked as the mirror activated.

“Right here Harry,” Bill responded quickly. “What’s going on? We’ve been getting worried.”

“We ran into a bit of trouble, but we have the key. Now we need a diversion. Give us twenty seconds, then start trying to bring down the wards.”

Hermione fought with all her willpower to suppress the rising panic she was experiencing. The two Cruciatus curses had left her throat raw, her nerve endings fried, and her body limp. She was fully aware that it was just part of the softening up process, as they methodically stripped away her clothing, her dignity, and her will to resist.

Right then she envied Luna’s ability to withdraw into her mind, leaving the outside world behind. To set herself apart from reality. The odd Ravenclaw had been through this nightmare a few hours ago, and successfully emerged with her wits and her dignity intact. As her clothing was stripped away bit by bit, Hermione tried to ignore what was happening and focus on how she would react when the tables were turned. She simply *had* to assume that they would indeed turn eventually.

She closed her eyes and attempted to convince herself that she’d already been through something similar, being naked in front of a stranger, and she’d dealt with it just fine. It wasn’t quite the same, but it was something to grasp onto.

Her eyes shot open when a stinging hex impacted on her bare bum. No, her tormentors had no intention of allowing her to close her eyes and ignore them. Hermione tried not to pay attention to what they were saying, but couldn’t avoid the comments completely.

“A bit more meat on this ’un ... better tits, that’s for sure ... a bigger arse, too ... hey Crabbe, you

like em big, bet you can't wait to get into this one!" Raucous laughter ensued.

Hermione choked back a cry of dismay. So they *were* going to rape her! She tried to relax her muscles that had tensed up, painfully tight, at that thought by repeating a mantra over and over in her mind. *Stay alive. Whatever it takes. Stay alive. Help is on the way.*

"So we are gonna have a go at her?" Goyle asked. "Thought it was too dangerous."

"Come on, haven't you wanted to put this mudblood bitch in her place for years?" Draco taunted his dormmate. "We'll just stun her first."

*Stay alive. Help is on the way. Stay alive.* Once more Hermione tried to focus on what she would do once she was free. She began to prioritize her targets, and slowly her panic abated and her stomach, which had been threatening to empty itself, relaxed somewhat.

Right up until Goyle grabbed her breast.

Ron fought back an overwhelming urge to start cursing every Death Eater in sight, forcing himself to bide his time, waiting for the right moment to strike back. He'd bit his lip to keep from crying out when Hermione had been *Crucioed*, and the metallic taste of blood lingered in his mouth. He'd also turned away so he didn't have to watch when they'd started stripping her clothing off, but he couldn't shut off his ears, and so had to endure their disgusting remarks. He could only imagine what she might be going through just then, and struggled to keep himself from thinking about how Luna had been in a similar situation prior to their arrival. His only consolation was that Hermione and Luna were the toughest minded women he knew. If anyone could survive this experience, they could.

He'd not quite decided at what point he'd drop his cover and intervene, but so far she was keeping it together so he could wait a bit longer. He desperately hoped that Harry and Snape would join them soon. He fervently hoped that Harry would understand later why he'd held back. While staying alert to what was happening to Hermione, he carefully noted the situation in the rest of the room. After he'd snuck up the stairs following Malfoy, he'd quietly made his way to the opposite side of the room and was currently crouching out of the way, next to a statue of a lightly clad woman pouring water into a pool.

Apparently all of the Death Eaters in the mansion were gathering here to witness the spectacle, the sick bastards. Many of them were clustered in a sitting area at one end of the lavishly appointed drawing room (more like a small ballroom, Ron thought). Others were standing in the center of the room beneath an elaborate crystal chandelier that had once presided over a long dining table, now pushed up against one wall to clear out more space for the 'entertainment'. Hermione was also there, spread out on display on a raised platform. At the opposite end of the room Bellatrix was holding court with the most senior Death Eaters present, Lucius Malfoy, Macnair, Avery, and Nott. The elder Crabbe and Goyle were with the group gawking at Hermione, cheering their sons on.

Ron had already deployed his decoy detonators, sending them into the sitting area with the largest concentration of enemies, where they'd do the most damage. These were the twins' most advanced model, and were set to explode only when he jabbed his wand in their direction. Once the fighting started, he knew he'd have to start casting spells as fast as he could, before his opponents could recover from the initial blast.

During the long months living in the tent, Hermione had insisted that he practice his nonverbal spellcasting. He had decided that instead of trying to learn to do it with as many spells as possible, like she had, he would focus on mastering two or three, being able to cast them with both speed and power. Now all the work would pay off, as he intended to cause as much havoc as possible.

Hermione's shriek drew his attention back in her direction, and he flinched once more as he saw Goyle squeezing her breast with such vigor that it would be certain to leave a bruise. Not sure if he could stand this treatment of his best female friend any longer, he braced himself and raised his wand, gritting his teeth at the roar of laughter Goyle's assault generated.

"Just control yourself a bit longer," Malfoy snickered, "we have to wait until Potter gets here. Besides, I'm going first." He looked around at his leering comrades and made a decision. "Tell you what, drag her over and bend her over the table. That way I won't have to look at her ugly face."

Crabbe and Goyle obediently each took one of Hermione's arms, and forced her chest down onto the polished tabletop, so that her bottom was exposed to everyone's view. Two other Death Eaters grabbed her legs and forced them apart as Malfoy shrugged off his robes and pulled down his trousers and underpants, then began to stroke himself.

Hermione struggled with all her might, but to no avail. If she could only get one of her feet free, she wished desperately, she might be able to kick Malfoy between the legs before he could force his way into her.

Just then Harry entered the room being held at wandpoint by Snape, and seconds later all hell broke loose.

A loud alarm sounded as Bill began breaking through the outer wards outside the mansion. Taking their cue, Ron and Harry both acted instantly. As Ron set off his detonators, Harry cast a nonverbal *Expelliarmus* on Snape, catching the Elder Wand expertly as everyone else turned toward the sound of the explosions at the end of the room. Without wasting a second, Harry then cast one of the spells from Dumbledore's notes that he'd been practicing for just such an occasion – a wide area Stunning hex – at the group of wizards gathered around Hermione.

When Dumbledore had cast it in his office back in fifth year, when he was being threatened with arrest by Fudge, the silvery streak had flashed around the room and knocked everyone unconscious. Since Harry wasn't as powerful as Dumbledore, his only knocked them off their feet, dazing them briefly. Fortunately Hermione, who had rolled off the table and dropped to the floor as soon as she'd been released, wasn't hit. As she scrambled to her feet Harry threw her wand to her, then turned to the last group of Death Eaters and began a furious assault.

This was the most dangerous group, and he promptly targetted the biggest threat first – BellatrixLestrange. She was also the first to react, and had already spotted what he was doing.

“*Sectumsempra* !” While Bellatrix was prepared to block whatever he threw at her, she never expected such a dark hex from the light side hero, and it caught her completely by surprise. Although she managed to duck to the side, the slashing hex sliced through her right arm, carving a deep gash from her shoulder to her elbow, laying it open like a piece of meat under a butcher’s knife. She screamed and staggered back, her wand dropping from her now useless hand. But by this time Harry had already turned his attention to the rest of her group.

Over by the statue, Ron was not immediately detected in all of the confusion, no one noticing right away that spells were coming from more than direction. On the opposite side of the room from Harry, he first poured an array of stunners and reductor curses into the carnage created by the decoy detonators, until not a single Death Eater was left standing. Then, not wanting to risk firing into the central crowd for fear of hitting Hermione, he began to engage the same targets Harry was fighting, catching them in a withering crossfire.

For Hermione, it was now payback time. Upon catching her wand from Harry, she immediately began hexing everything near her. Heedless of her lack of clothing, she never stopped moving, firing an incredible variety of spells, all of them nonverbal, at an amazing rate. None of her opponents could figure out what was coming next.

Her first target was Draco Malfoy, and she ensured that he would never sexually assault anyone again. Her first hex disarmed him and threw him across the table he’d just had her pinned against, and her second was aimed directly at his groin. *Confringo* ! Every male in the vicinity, most of whom were still staggering to their feet from Harry’s wide area stunner, winced as Draco screamed in agony before promptly passing out.

The sight of a naked witch bouncing around firing spells was distracting enough to the lower level Death Eaters, who were more used to having their prey lying helpless before them, that their reaction times were slowed significantly. Try as they might, they were unable to land anything substantial on this fully exposed woman.

Finally the ones who had not yet fallen to her hexes gathered together for a unified attack. But Hermione was still one step ahead of them. Jumping up to the top of the table, she cast yet another explosion hex, not into their waiting shields, but at the base of the chandelier above them. *Expulso* ! The chandelier crashed into the massed Death Eaters in a shower of crystal shards, pinning them to the floor and shredding them with flying fragments of glass.

For his part, Snape collected himself at the base of the wall that Potter’s overpowered disarming hex had hurled him against, and stumbled to the other end of the room, cursing the existence of impetuous Gryffindors. He still hadn’t figured out what Potter was doing with Dumbledore’s wand, but had to admit, if only to himself, that having Potter disarm him, while still permitting him to retain his own wand, was a useful tactic. He briefly regarded Granger and her obscene display, and decided she didn’t need or deserve his aid, finally reasoning that he would be most effective by securing the room so that no one could escape. Accordingly, he crouched down near



the door and began to pick off his fellow Death Eaters who were still pulling themselves from the wreckage Weasley had created.

Back at the other end of the room, Nott and Avery had fallen, along with Bellatrix, but Malfoy and Macnair remained, backed against the fireplace. Their battle with Harry and Ron was at a standstill; the two Gryffindors couldn't get anything past the shields of the experienced Death Eaters, and with their opponents firing at them from right angles, the older pair couldn't catch a free moment to strike a decisive offensive blow. Finally, mimicking Hermione's successful attack on Nagini at Godric's Hollow, Harry fired a Reductor curse into the fireplace behind them.

As the flaming debris from the exploding hearth caught them from behind, both wizards were momentarily distracted from their shielding by their burning robes, and Harry and Ron quickly knocked them out. Without pausing to catch their breaths, they both spun anxiously toward the sound of the crashing chandelier. Harry immediately leaped onto the table to join Hermione, while Ron went about stunning every Death Eater who was still moving.

"Hermione! Are you all right?" Harry cried, grabbing her into a hug while simultaneously pulling off his robe to drape it over her. With no immediate threats remaining, the adrenaline rush that had been driving her during the fight subsided, and she collapsed into his arms, shaking uncontrollably.

Over her shoulder Harry caught Ron's eye, then turned to where Snape was standing by the entrance to the room, somewhat in shock at what the four of them had just accomplished. Thirtysome Death Eaters had been taken out, including five of the most deadly. Knowing that Potter had good reason to turn on him at any moment, and not wishing to give him time to come to that decision, Snape quickly began issuing instructions.

"Weasley, go bring up Ollivander. Potter, see to Granger, make sure she's able to travel."

Harry had no need to be told to do that; she was already foremost in his thoughts. But there was still the matter of getting out of the deadly manor. Snape also anticipated this question.

"I have a portkey already prepared. It will take you to a deserted mill by a river in an empty part of a rundown muggle town. From there you can apparate to wherever you wish. I suggest that you obtain medical attention for Ollivander as soon as possible. I'll take care of things here."

Harry quickly contacted Bill again, telling him they were finished and to return to the cottage. As Ron appeared at the top of the stairs, levitating the unmoving form of the old wandmaker before him, Harry stared into Snape's eyes for a few seconds. While he wanted more than anything to blast the evil bastard to bits, he couldn't risk it. He now had no doubt that Snape would strike back at Hermione if he attacked, and in her current state she was in no condition to defend herself.

"This isn't over yet," he snarled. Pulling Hermione more tightly against himself with one hand, he caught the portkey that Snape tossed at him (an empty potions bottle) with the other. Ron took hold of Ollivander and put his other hand on the bottle and nodded. Harry touched his wand to the portkey and the foursome vanished from the room.

With the only sound in the room the water trickling from the now destroyed fountain, Snape walked from one end to the other, taking in all the dead and unconscious wizards, and one particularly despicable witch. Bellatrix had either bled to death or would shortly. Lucius Malfoy and Macnair would likely not recover from their burns, as they'd been stunned before they could extinguish themselves completely. Draco Malfoy, along with both Crabbes and both Goyles, was already dead, as were most of the others who'd been crushed under the falling chandelier. Granger had been merciless in her retaliation. About half of those caught in Weasley's explosions were dead, and the rest injured. Overall it had been a stunning defeat for the Dark Lord.

But what was his next course of action? He'd completed his last assignment from Dumbledore, but neither side of the conflict would ever trust him now, if anyone were to leave this room alive. Both sides would want him dead. That left only one choice.

*"Avada Kedavra ! Avada Kedavra !"* Carefully, methodically, he cast the killing curse on every body in the room, calling upon the hatred that had fueled his existence for the past twenty years. Hatred of what the Dark Lord had made him do. *"Avada Kedavra !"* Hatred of what Dumbledore had made him do. *"Avada Kedavra !"* Hatred of the fates that had conspired against him, denying him any happiness in his life. *"Avada Kedavra ! Avada Kedavra !"*

Once he'd finished, a thought occurred to him of a way that he could strike another damaging blow against the Dark Lord, and at the same time take a parting shot at the family who had always looked down their noses at him. Striding purposefully through the opulent pureblood mansion, he cast the same charm at four strategic locations. *Fiendfyre !*

Back in the drawing room, he paused to regard the fearsome blaze, its flames seeming to come alive as some ravenous beast, consuming everything in its path. Now he had but one spell left to cast. He placed his wand against his chest.

The Unforgivable Curses, particularly the Killing Curse, required your heart to be filled with hatred to be most effective.

Self-loathing was more than adequate.

*"Avada Kedavra !"*

-oooOOOooo-

Rose looked up at her mother with tears in her eyes. "Oh Mum, that was so horrible! It was nothing like that in the book!"

"No, she had to leave out most of that because it was considered a children's book," Hermione replied, pulling her daughter into a hug. "So she just wrote that Bellatrix tortured me. Although the words don't even come close to describing how awful a *Cruciatius* curse feels." She frowned at the recollection. "The other annoying thing about that chapter was how useless she made Ron appear, having him just standing there not doing anything except screaming my name over and over. Without him, and the sound tactical decisions he made, we wouldn't have made it out of

there alive.”

Rose nodded and then looked up at her mother sadly, the more critical revelation of the evening now on her mind. “So that’s how Daddy lost his memory?” Hermione nodded solemnly.

“I looked it up immediately afterward, of course. It was a modified version of a potion called the *Fidelity Potion*,” she explained. “It was designed to be used for arranged marriages, when one of the participants was in love with someone else. It would erase that love from their minds. Snape modified it somehow so that it wiped out everything Harry loved.” She paused to brush her own tears away. “He fought it off for a while, but eventually we lost him.”

Rose climbed onto her mother’s lap and wrapped her arms around her. “You still really miss him don’t you Mummy?”

“Every single day,” Hermione replied with a sigh. “More than you can imagine.”

“He’ll get better someday, Mummy, I just know he will. You’re the smartest witch in the whole world; you’ll figure out a way to bring him back.”

Hermione tried to blink away the tears filling her eyes again, and hugged her daughter even tighter. “I hope you’re right, sweetheart.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters**

### **End Game**

#### **Final Year, Chapter 15 – End Game**

Rose couldn't wait until the next evening arrived, so that she could finally hear how things turned out. She realized that the tale was nearly finished, but there were also quite a few loose ends to be wrapped up. After dinner she hurried through her chores and then joined her mother, who was already waiting for her on the sofa.

Rather than opening the notebook right away, however, Hermione took some time to provide an overview of the situation that existed at that point. "Now, you have to understand the circumstances we found ourselves in when we returned to Bill and Fleur's cottage. Things were utterly chaotic, and that lasted for most of the month. There were about half a dozen urgent items that needed to be dealt with immediately, but that was just not possible. So Harry had to make some quick decisions about what needed doing first."

"For one thing, I was in no condition to deal with tough decisions, or provide my usual level of analysis. That's not the sort of experience that a woman just gets up from and goes right back to her normal behavior. For the first day or two I just wanted Harry to hold me and comfort me. Luna was pretty much the same, except with Ron. Ginny, on the other hand, was a complete basket case."

"Why was it so much worse for her?" Rose wondered.

"Well, for one thing, she didn't have anyone to provide that level of comfort. In fact, she couldn't even bear to have any males near her. Fleur did the best she could, and Tonks when she was able, but it wasn't the same. Don't forget that she'd also just lost her mother and father, so she had a double blow to recover from," Hermione explained patiently, fervently hoping that Rose would never have to experience the feeling firsthand. "Ordinarily it would have been her mum who she would have turned to for comfort and who would help her recover. The other thing that made it easier for Luna and me is that we were more accustomed to being treated badly, so you might say we were toughened up somewhat from our prior experiences at Hogwarts. We'd schooled ourselves to ignore taunts for years, so it was a bit easier to cope with the initial stages of our ordeals."

"Ginny, on the other hand, was used to having things go her way. She was the youngest child in her family and the only girl, so she was doted on growing up. She also had more friends at school

than Luna or I did, and was quite popular with the boys. So it was more of a shock to her to hear those comments, and be treated like that.”

“But she was possessed by the diary, wouldn’t that experience make her better able to deal with bad things like that?” Rose persisted.

“But she didn’t actually remember very much of that,” Hermione answered. “She had these large empty periods in her memory during the times that she was possessed. She only remembered writing back and forth to Tom, and for the most part he was charming and sympathetic. That’s not to say the experience at the end wasn’t extremely traumatic, but she was unconscious for nearly all of it.” Rose nodded her understanding and Hermione continued with her comments.

“The bottom line is that she stayed pretty isolated for several weeks, and didn’t go back to school right away. In fact, she never made it back before ... well, I’m getting ahead of myself,” Hermione decided. “Let’s get back to the day of the rescue.”

“Fred and George were the first to return to the cottage, with Ginny and Luna, and they couldn’t do anything for her. She curled up into a ball and kept crying, and grew frantic when either of her brothers tried to hold her. So they contacted Madame Pomfrey at Hogwarts and got her to come out. She was in the Order, remember, so she was in on the Fidelius secret. The rest of us got back just as she’d finished putting Ginny to bed with Dreamless Sleep potion. She also helped Luna and me, giving us Calming Draughts, and got us to bed too. Luna insisted that Ron stay with her, and even made him climb into her bed and hold her. Naturally, Harry did the same for me. But he had other things that he had to see to as well, so he only stayed there until I fell asleep.”

“The first thing he wanted to know about, once he was sure I was going to be all right, was Dobby. Madame Pomfrey had to tell him that there wasn’t anything she could do for him. So he snuck back into Hogwarts, and she had Hagrid carry Dobby’s body out onto the grounds from the Hospital Wing. There he and Harry dug a grave and buried him, right next to Dumbledore’s tomb, thereby giving Dobby one of the most highly honored gravesites in Britain. They couldn’t do anything to call attention to it right at that time, but after everything was over Harry insisted on putting up a tombstone, which was unheard of for house elves. He and I talked about the inscription and this is what we came up with.”

**Here Lies Dobby**

**A Free Elf**

**A Hero of the War Against Voldemort**

**Greater Love Hath No One Than This,  
That He Lay Down His Life For His Friends**

Hermione sighed, her mind briefly lost in her memories of the brave little elf. Rose tried to wait patiently for her to resume, but squirmed a bit. Hermione smiled down at her and took up the tale once more.

“Another pressing task was the burial for Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Mr. Lovegood, and their

memorial services. Now, it's difficult to describe just how dramatic an effect what we'd just done had on the rest of the country. To begin with, the attack by Death Eaters on three pureblood homes, coming on top of the revelations about the detention camps the week before, pretty much destroyed the wizarding public's support for the Ministry and its negotiated peace agreement with Voldemort. 'A peace we can all live with' he called it, and now it was clear to everyone that Voldemort's side had no intention of taking those words seriously. Then, one day after the Daily Prophet reported on the attacks with front page stories and huge headlines, came the news that the Weasley family had struck back and rescued their sister and two other captives, and defeated a large number of Death Eaters, *and* destroyed the Malfoy mansion in the process!"

-oooOOOooo-

The story was a reporter's dream and the press couldn't get enough of it. It began with the eldest Weasley, with the glamorous job as cursebreaker for Gringotts, putting his occupational skills to use in breaking through the Malfoy wards. But even more, he was already a heroic figure whose good looks had been marred by a werewolf while he'd been defending the children of Hogwarts the previous spring. Then there was his wife, who fought by his side, the beautiful Beauxbatons Tri-Wizard champion, who had actually *killed* that werewolf, the most feared in Britain. Who had no qualms about expressing her disdain for the British Ministry of Magic, and chiding the chagrined English wizarding population for being taken in by the now exposed farce of a peace agreement. And who was not above using her Veela charm on the male members of the press, who eagerly ate up every word she spoke, with her more pronounced than usual French accent.

Then there were the twins, the normally jovial owners of everyone's favorite joke shop, who had turned their ability to make explosive pranks into the development of explosive devices that had enabled the small band of rescuers to defeat a much larger number of Death Eaters. The reporters also reminded the public of how these same entrepreneurs had been wronged by the Ministry, when they had previously used similar magical explosives to defend their place of business, which caused them to subsequently be branded as criminals. Of course there were also the damsels in distress, the sister and the friend of the family, who had been the reason for the rescue attempt in the first place, and the reading public was relieved to hear that they had been returned safely.

But to top it off, The Boy Who Lived himself had led the rescue attempt! This was probably the most uplifting part of the whole story for ordinary witches and wizards, as the Chosen One, who had disappeared from public view for four months, was now back and fighting You Know Who and his Death Eaters again. (Hermione's name had been kept out of the accounts that had been given to the press. Harry had initially strongly objected, feeling that she deserved to be recognized for her amazing performance in the battle. But she convinced him to go along with it by noting that she didn't like publicity any more than he did, and that while the public would be excited to learn that he'd been involved, no one was going to rally around a muggleborn witch.)

The uproar generated by the initial stories was fueled even further when Luna gave an exclusive interview at the end of the week to Rita Skeeter, and described in lurid detail just how she and Ginny had been treated during their captivity, giving the names of every participant in their torture and degradation. Skeeter ended up in a situation that she had never been in before – having to tone *down* the sensationalistic aspects of a story, rather than embellishing them. The British

wizarding public exploded in indignation at the thought that two *pureblood* witches had been treated in such a fashion! The turnout for the memorial service that Saturday for Arthur, Molly, and Xenophilius was eclipsed only by that for Albus Dumbledore's internment, and the mood was such that if any Death Eaters, or even Voldemort himself, had dared to make an appearance they would have been hexed into oblivion. When a picture showing the haunted face of Ginny Weasley at the funeral, the ordinarily pretty and vivacious girl now huddled up against her sister-in-law shying away from any other human contact, appeared in the next day's *Daily Prophet*, it broke the hearts of every mother and father who saw it.

The government of magical Britain did not survive the weekend. Augusta Longbottom had quite a few old friends and acquaintances in the Wizengamot, and as her home had also been among those attacked, was not shy about expressing her opinion about the competence of the current Minister. The Macmillan and Smith families also brought their influence to bear, and combined with the overwhelming public sentiment, no amount of political maneuvering or closed-door deals/threats could keep Pius Thicknesse in office.

But the chaos that followed was nearly as debilitating for the effort against Voldemort as the pacifist policy had been. Everyone who had supported the old regime was suspect, but it was impossible to tell who had been Voldemort supporters and who had just gone along in order to keep their jobs. The most immediate need was to rebuild the dismantled Auror Corps and to that end Gawain Robards declined the position of Minister of Magic in order to head the DMLE, and Kingsley Shacklebolt was brought back to become Head Auror. Eventually Amos Diggory was selected to be Interim Minister. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Magic and the Aurors would be busy cleaning up their own house, and thereby of little use in the fight against Voldemort for some time to come.

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione paused in her recounting of the political fallout that followed the Weasley attack and rescue, and gave her daughter an appraising look. "Now, from our point of view, which of the things that we had to deal with in the aftermath of that episode was of the most immediate concern?" she challenged.

Rose opened her mouth to answer immediately, then closed it again. It seemed obvious that the most important thing to deal with at that time was the potion that had made her father lose his memory, but the way her mother had asked the question made her think that the most obvious answer might not be the correct one. Her mother often asked questions in that manner as a teaching opportunity. She had emphasized the word *immediate* and while the potion certainly had serious long term consequences, that were still greatly affecting their lives to this day, there wasn't really anything they could have done about it at that time except anguish about it.

"The Horcrux in the vault!" she suddenly realized. Hermione nodded approvingly.

"As soon as Harry came back from burying Dobby he checked on me and then went to talk to Bill and Tonks," she related. "They all decided that they had to move quickly to take advantage of the uncertainty of the situation with Bellatrix's death. If she had willed everything to Narcissa Malfoy,

as seemed likely since her husband and brother-in-law were both dead, then the vault key would be useless once the will was read. And the plan they came up with didn't require my presence, so they didn't need to wait for me to heal before they implemented it. It was really quite clever."

-oooOOOooo-

Diagon Alley was buzzing with the news about the incredible rescue and the destruction of Malfoy Manor as a tall, dark-haired woman strode purposefully into Gringotts. She was the subject of not a few double takes, as she strongly resembled the most feared witch in the country, who was presumed to have been involved in the battle they'd just read about. But she was in fact Bellatrix Lestrange's younger sister Andromeda (or so everyone concluded) and they quickly turned away uncomfortably, not knowing what they should say to her about what had happened.

In fact it was Nymphadora Tonks, morphed to take on her mother's appearance, who stepped up to the goblin teller, and requested to be taken to her sister's vault. After ascertaining that she had Bellatrix's key, the goblin called for one of the runners whose job it was to ferry customers down to the underground vaults, then cautioned the woman that she would not be allowed to remove any of the more valuable items as per the bank's policy. In addition, he discreetly informed her that since there was some question as to whether her sister was still alive, any withdrawal of funds would be subject to recall, if her will left everything to someone else.

"I understand completely," Tonks agreed. "In fact, this is the reason for my visit today. I have recently received information that suggests that my sister may be keeping stolen property in her vault, an ancient heirloom which may in fact belong to another prominent pureblood family. I intend to verify this before the will is read so that restitution may be made in order to avoid embarrassment to our family."

The goblin teller nodded in satisfaction, as this course of action would prevent embarrassment for Gringotts as well. "One more thing, madam. Our sensors are detecting another presence. Is there someone accompanying you?"

"Yes, in fact, I have a bodyguard under an invisibility cloak," she answered calmly. "One cannot be too careful in these present circumstances." The goblin teller nodded and looked up as another goblin, who looked somewhat familiar to Harry, approached.

"Here is Griphook. He will escort you to your destination."

Harry, still under the cloak, and Tonks followed their guide out of the main hall and into the stone passageway that led to the carts. Harry stayed close to provide invisible support for Tonks to lean on, as she was still a bit unsteady, but she had taken Pepper Up potion just before they'd left the cottage and indicated that she was doing all right.

So far everything was going according to plan. Bill had specified which teller they should approach, choosing one who was sympathetic to their cause. Apparently their guide, who he now recalled was the same goblin who'd taken him to his vault on his first visit to Gringotts, was also a supporter of the Chosen One.



The ride was longer than Harry remembered, and he concluded that the Lestrangle family must have one of the higher security vaults deeper in the lower levels of the cavern. Finally the cart stopped and Tonks got out and stood with a confident air before the door while Griphook unlocked it, trying to act like this visit was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Remember not to touch anything,” Griphook whispered as they entered the large storage area and lit their wands. “There is an anti-theft curse in place. Since you are here legally, it should not be active, but it is best not to take chances. What exactly is the item that you seek?”

“A small gold cup with a badger engraved on it,” Harry answered. He had removed the cloak once they were out of sight inside the vault, and the three of them split up to begin searching.

“There it is!” he called out after a short while, shining his wandlight at the top of a shelf against the back wall. “*Accio* cup!” Nothing happened and Griphook shook his head.

“Not possible. Someone will have to climb up and retrieve it. Or ...” he glanced at the wizard and witch and motioned with his hand. Harry immediately caught on.

“Madam Tonks, can you levitate me up there?” Harry asked, just barely remembering not to call her only by her surname.

“I’m not sure if I’ve got the strength, and I’d hate to drop you while you were at the top. You go ahead and levitate me. Just be sure you don’t peek up my robes while I’m up there,” she added teasingly. Predictably, Harry blushed as he drew his wand. In less than a minute Tonks was back at his side, leaning against him as she caught her breath. Harry checked to make sure the cup was the real thing and then turned to Griphook.

“Master Griphook, I believe that this object carries a deadly curse,” he stated formally. “I request that it be examined, and, if that is indeed the case, destroyed.”

Griphook nodded. “Very well. I will summon a cursebreaker. I believe Mr. Weasley is on duty today.” The goblin actually winked at them as he passed along that information.

After a bit of a wait, another cart delivered Bill to the door of the vault, where Griphook met him and brought him inside. Bill cast some detection charms and quickly announced his decision – the cup did indeed carry a dark and dangerous curse.

“Is it your expert opinion that this object must be destroyed?” Griphook asked. “That its continued existence would be a danger to the customers of this bank?”

“Yes Master Griphook,” Bill responded promptly. “In fact, I am aware of another object carrying this same curse that possessed a young witch and caused her to attempt to murder several individuals.”

“Indeed, that would be an unacceptable risk,” Griphook agreed. “On behalf of Gringotts Bank I concur with your recommendation. Do you have a way that it can be destroyed safely?”

“Master Griphook, if I may?” Harry suggested as he pulled Gryffindor’s sword once more from his rucksack. “I believe that this will do the trick.”

Griphook’s eyes widened as he got a good look at the shining blade. “Mr. Potter, that is a Goblin-forged sword!”

Bill had previously informed Harry of the goblins’ peculiar thoughts on ownership of goblin made artifacts. “Yes it is, but it has bonded to me,” he replied firmly. “Even if someone else would possess it, it will come to me when I call for it.”

Griphook stared at the blade, and how easily Harry wielded it, and how the sword seemed to come alive in his hands. Realizing that Harry’s claim was true, he reluctantly he turned away, keeping his lust for the Goblin-made relic in check so that he wouldn’t do something foolish.

With a flash of reflected wandlight the blade cleaved the cup in two, and the last of Voldemort’s soul repositories was no more. The dark lord was mortal once again.

Or so they thought.

-oooOOOooo-

Rose had been listening in rapt attention to her mother’s version of the ‘raid’ on Gringotts and Hermione smiled down at her. “It was a lot more exciting the way she told it, don’t you think?” Rose blinked and looked up.

“So you never got to ride a dragon?”

Hermione shook her head and shuddered theatrically. “No, and I have absolutely no regrets about missing out on *that* experience. That strikes me as a very good way to end up as a dragon snack. And I’m pretty sure your father would agree with me.”

The reference to Harry turned the conversation in a more serious direction. “So when did you find out about the potion?” Rose asked solemnly.

Hermione sighed. “He waited until after the memorial services to tell me. I can understand why now, since I was in no condition to hear something like that immediately after we got back. But at the time I was furious with him.” She closed her eyes, thinking back to the day she’d received the awful news. “That was probably the worst row we ever had. It’s a good thing we had silencing charms on the tent.”

She sighed again. “And he just stood there and took it. I remember that his shoulders drooped, the way they always did when he felt that he’d disappointed me. That made me stop yelling and start crying, since I could tell that he was hurting just as much as I was. Then he straightened up again and took me in his arms. But when he spoke there was no hesitation at all in his voice.

*‘I didn’t have any choice, Hermione,’ he said. ‘Don’t you see? They would have killed you! There was no doubt in my mind that Snape was deadly serious about that. I was right about him all*

along; he was as evil as they come.’ I didn’t really have any answer to that, so I just nodded my head. I couldn’t stop crying though and he hugged me even harder.”

“Eventually I calmed down enough so he could finish his explanation. *‘At least this way you’re still alive, and maybe you can find an antidote or something. Or maybe it won’t work or it might wear off.’* Well, he was right about that too, of course. I threw myself into that research with a greater passion than for anything I’d ever studied. At least for a while.”

“What do you mean?” Rose asked, wondering what could be more important that it would make her mother set that project aside.

“After I’d spent a solid week thinking of nothing else, Harry brought up something I’d forgotten about in my anxiety about the potion,” Hermione explained. “The other information Snape had given him right before he gave him the potion. He thought it might take my mind off the horror of the potion if we took some time to look at the memories Dumbledore had wanted him to have. But that turned out to be even worse!”

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione was crying as they emerged from the pensieve, while Harry stood in stunned silence. They had just viewed a medley of Snape’s memories of meetings with Dumbledore, ranging from when Harry had first come to Hogwarts up until shortly before the Headmaster’s death. One of them was intriguing because it was Snape’s perspective of one of Dumbledore’s memories that Harry had already seen – the destruction of the ring Horcrux – but it was the last that shocked them to their cores.

*Albus Dumbledore sat behind his desk and calmly explained what he theorized had really happened the night Lily Potter had sacrificed her life and the killing curse had rebounded from her young son. How Voldemort’s soul, weakened by having been split five times already, fragmented yet again, inadvertently, and without the dark lord’s knowledge had latched onto the only other living soul in the room, Harry Potter. How this gave Harry the ability to communicate with snakes, and forged the connection between their minds that neither fully understood. And how, even though every Horcrux might be destroyed, Voldemort could still not be finally defeated as long as Harry Potter lived.*

“So ... so Potter must die?” Snape asked in disbelief. “After all these years, when I was sworn to protect him, he has to die anyway?”

“We have protected him because it was important to teach him, to mold him into the kind of person who will do the right thing when the time comes,” Dumbledore responded with a pained expression. “We have kept him alive so that he can die at the precise moment when his death will assure Voldemort’s destruction for good.”

*Snape just stared for a few long moments, and then burst out into laughter, as Dumbledore frowned at him. “The whole thing was a setup all along? You’ve been raising him like a pig for the slaughter ... no, a sacrificial lamb!” Dumbledore began shaking his head in protest but Snape*

*continued. "Can I at least be the one who kills him when the time is right?"*

*"Now Severus, that is unworthy of you," the aged headmaster sighed. "Besides, it is important that Voldemort himself be the one to cast the killing curse. Due to their connection it may be possible ..."*

*"Oh please, Headmaster, you have used him just as you have used me," Snape interrupted. "You've manipulated him all his life, first housing him with those despicable relatives of his, then throwing him into all those adventures, molding him into the noble Gryffindor who will fall on his sword in a heroic death."*

*Dumbledore looked more pained than ever. "I'm sorry that you feel that way Severus. It may please you to know that Miss Granger shares your opinion. But I assure you ..."*

*Snape had had enough and rose to his feet. "You disgust me," he spat out, and then he turned and stormed from the office.*

Hermione's tears turned into fury and she began pacing back and forth across the tent, castigating the late headmaster. "I knew it! I knew he was just setting you up to be a martyr. That's the reason he never told you anything. That's the reason you never had any training. That's the reason he stuck you at the Dursley's all those years ..."

Meanwhile Harry was just standing there shaking his head. It just didn't seem possible, but at the same time he could almost say he always knew it. After all, *he* was the one with the mental connection to Voldemort, *he* was the one who could see into the dark lord's thoughts, *he* was the one who actually became the evil wizard in his dreams or visions, living out the horrors as though he were performing them himself. It was so obvious now – it was because he had a piece of Tom Riddle's soul dwelling inside him. And ... it followed then that the only way to defeat Voldemort was for him to die.

He shook his head – he wasn't ready to deal with that concept quite yet – and then became aware of Hermione's simmering rage. She was now to the point where she was choosing which curses she was going to use to incinerate Dumbledore's portrait the next time they were in the Headmasters office. Instinctively he tried to calm her down, striding up to her and wrapping his arms around her. She struggled for a bit, but eventually relaxed against him.

"Oh Harry, now what are we going to do?" she cried. "It wasn't enough before, but now this too?" Something about that phrasing caught Harry's attention.

"Wait a minute," he burst out. "If Snape knew I was going to die, why would he need to give me the potion?" He stepped back and ran his hand through his hair while trying to recall the scene in the Malfoy cellar, and exactly what Snape had said, while Hermione held her breath, hoping against hope.

"I think he said, '*if I survive*'," he finally concluded. "What do you think, Hermione? Is there some way I can die but not really die? Or that the soul fragment could die without me dying? Or

maybe – could the Deathly Hallows have something to do with it?”

Hermione’s eyes sparkled through her remaining tears as she threw her arms around Harry’s neck and kissed him passionately. Then she drew away, the familiar glint of determination now replacing the anguish of hopelessness in those same eyes.

“Research!” she declared firmly.

-oooOOOooo-

“If you remember, in the book she wrote that those next few months were a time when Harry was slowly sinking into despair, and almost seemed to be giving up on ever finding another Horcrux, while Ron and I tried to keep him going,” Hermione pointed out. “Well, as you can see now, there certainly was reason for despair, but it wasn’t the same at all. There were times when I felt like giving up, and Harry kept me going, and other times when he got so frustrated with the whole thing and I had to boost his spirits. And while there was always the temptation to sink into depression about the situation, we just determined to keep fighting as long as we could.”

Rose nodded her head that she understood. Her admiration for her mother and father was now greater than ever. Hermione continued, “Believe me, we tried everything – I even brewed Draught of Living Death and gave it to him, to see if that would somehow kill the soul fragment, after which I could revive Harry. It put him into a coma for a week but as soon as he came out of it he could tell that the connection was still active. That was probably the lowest point of that entire time period.”

“How many other people did you tell?” Rose inquired.

“Good question,” her mother responded approvingly. “We didn’t tell anyone about the potion, because there wasn’t really anything that could be done about it and we didn’t want to give them any more to worry about at that time. Besides, he had no symptoms at all – if Snape hadn’t told him what it was there would have been no way of us knowing anything was amiss. Snape managed to tie it to Voldemort’s essence somehow, so that it wouldn’t begin to take effect until the soul fragment left Harry.”

Hermione had to smile at the sight of her daughter biting her lower lip in concentration, as she focused intently on understanding everything she was being told. Rose was so much like she had been at that age, probably even more mature though. Certainly less naive about some things.

“As for the other part, about the soul fragment being in Harry, we told Ron and Remus and Tonks. Remus worked on finding a solution as hard as I did. Tonks, once she recovered enough, took over his task of keeping track of Voldemort’s movements. We’d already decided that we were going to try to ambush him when he came to Hogwarts to get Dumbledore’s wand, so we needed to be aware of his progress on the continent, how close he was getting to finding out about Grindelwald. Now, unfortunately, we had an additional complication in how that confrontation was going to play out. Not to mention the surprising twist regarding the Wand itself.”

“What was that?” Rose asked, before realizing what the unforeseen development might be. “Oh, you mean who the actual master of the Wand was?”

“Right!” Hermione nodded, somewhat surprised, but also proud that her daughter had worked that out quicker than she had at the time, as she leafed through the notebook to find the entry where she’d recorded the discovery.

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – February 2

*Well, this was unexpected. It makes perfect sense now that we think about it, but somehow it never occurred to us. I’m the master of the Wand of Destiny!*

*We were talking about Voldemort’s pursuit of the Wand today, and Harry decided to get it out and see how it would respond to him now that he’d defeated Snape. To his surprise it didn’t feel any different for him than it had before. After he tried a few spells with it he handed it to me to look it over and see if I could figure out what was wrong with it. As soon as I touched it I could feel a surge of energy! It responded to me perfectly! And when I cast some spells with it – oh my! The feeling of power is almost intoxicating. I can better understand now why so many have killed in order to possess this wand.*

*Of course, then we had to sit down and figure out what had happened. Suddenly Harry hit himself on the forehead and groaned loudly, “Why didn’t I think of that before!” You see, we’d all been focusing on Snape since he was the one who killed Dumbledore, but Harry told us that Draco Malfoy actually disarmed Dumbledore on top of the tower that night before Snape arrived. So at that point the mastery of the Wand must have passed to Malfoy, even though he never actually possessed it. The key is that you either kill the previous master or best him in combat while he is using the Wand. So, when I killed Malfoy that made me the new master of the Wand. It wouldn’t have happened if I’d just disarmed him, since he wasn’t using the Wand at the time. Not that I regret killing the bastard.*

*I immediately offered to duel Harry with the Wand, and let him disarm me, so that he’d be the new master as we’d planned. But he said no, that it might be better now if I remain the master. I saw right away what he was saying. If he does indeed need to die at Voldemort’s hand in order to destroy the soul fragment inside him (and I haven’t given up yet on finding a way around that!) then we don’t want him to be the master of the Wand, as that would make Voldemort the new Master. After everything we’ve gone through to prevent that from happening, we certainly don’t want to risk it at the most critical moment in the battle.*

-0x0x0-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – March 10

*We’ve moved our tent into the ForbiddenForest. We’re perfectly safe here, since Harry and I have put several layers of protective enchantments around us. Tonks reported in on the mirror today*

that Voldemort had been to see Gregorovitch, and learned that he had known the location of the wand, and that Grindelwald had apprenticed with him. Now we expect that he's on his way to Nurmengard to visit Grindelwald. The detection rune I left there will let us know when he leaves there. So soon it will be over, one way or the other.

I'm not terribly fond of our plan, but it's the best we've come up with. Harry will intercept Voldemort out near Dumbledore's tomb, and plans to maneuver him into hitting him with a killing curse. We're not sure what will happen next. Given the way Dumbledore was insistent that Voldemort himself had to do it, we think it may be that only the soul fragment will be destroyed. Or there may be some feedback that will kill both of them. But the way he started to say, 'It may be possible ...' leads us to think that Harry might survive somehow.

In addition, Harry remembered that Dumbledore had a strange reaction to hearing that Voldemort had used Harry's blood in his resurrection ritual. We watched his memory of that scene in the pensieve, and he was right – Dumbledore had a look of triumph. It may just be that they are more firmly linked now, and that when Harry dies Voldemort will too. But we prefer to remain optimistic.

Failing that, our fallback is the ring with the Resurrection Stone. We finally got it out of the snitch. It popped open when I used the Wand of Destiny on it. I think that's either because they are related, both being part of the Deathly Hallows, or more likely because it was the Wand that sealed it inside the snitch in the first place. At any rate, if Harry does die, I can bring him back with the Stone. I know the legend says that's dangerous, but if it's the only way I can be with him then I'll take it!

The other part of the plan is that I'll be there with Harry, under the invisibility cloak, holding both the ring and the Wand. Somehow when the three Hallows are together they seem to strengthen each other, since not even the strongest detection spells we know will reveal my presence under the cloak. We've tested this out quite thoroughly, as one might expect.

So once Harry – or I should say the final soul fragment – is destroyed, I'll kill Voldemort if Harry is dead, or I'll incapacitate him and hold him for Harry to kill him if he's still alive.

Another distressing part of our plan is that Ron is insisting on being at Harry's side when he confronts Voldemort. Harry, of course, remembers what happened to Cedric in a similar situation, and doesn't want Ron anywhere near there. It would be truly tragic if Harry somehow survives only to have Ron get killed.

It's been very difficult writing about these thoughts, but I've been putting off recording them long enough. So many nights the past two months we've held each other and cried together. No matter what we wished for, we can't change what's happened; we just have to deal with it. We're both tired of all the grief and heartache and ready for whatever is going to happen, to happen. Like I already wrote – one way or the other it will end soon.

I have another plan of my own for tonight. I just have to persuade Harry. It will definitely be with his knowledge – I'm not going to get pregnant without telling him.

As they got ready for bed that night, Harry could tell that Hermione was anxious about something – more so than usual. Although it might have just been increased anxiety for the upcoming confrontation, this seemed different, almost as if she was shy about some topic she wanted to talk about.

As they settled into bed, Harry put his arm around her and she pressed her body up against his side, both of them relishing the skin to skin contact. “What’s on your mind?” he asked as he pressed an encouraging kiss to her shoulder.

Hermione pulled back a little to look at him as her fingers nervously traced up and down his arm. A tentative smile crept onto her face. “You know me pretty well,” she remarked apprehensively. Harry just smiled back in acknowledgement, silently urging her to continue.

“I want to have a baby.” As soon as she’d blurted it out, she held her breath waiting for his reaction. His smile changed to a puzzled frown.

“Well, so do I, but what makes you bring that up right now?” he wondered.

“I mean I want to cancel the contraceptive charm, right here, tonight,” she explained, her words tumbling out in a nervous rush. “I want to get pregnant right now. I don’t want to take the chance that you’ll ... you’ll ...” Tears filled her eyes as she couldn’t bring herself to say it aloud.

Harry tightened his arm around her and pulled her back into his side, stroking her hair gently with his other hand as her head came to rest on his chest.

“So if I don’t make it, or if, well, something else happens so that I’m not with you any more, you’ll at least have our child to ... sort of to remember me by,” he reasoned slowly.

“Not just to remember you, it means a part of you would still be with me, a part of each of us, together in a new life,” she clarified nervously, worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

“I agree,” Harry declared more firmly. He felt Hermione’s body relax against his as she let loose the breath she was holding and her tension eased. “I think the thing that’s bothered me most is that you’ll be so sad and lonely. Having a baby to love and cherish and raise – it will give you something, not to replace me exactly, but ...”

“Yes, that’s precisely it!” Hermione agreed. “Oh Harry, I’m so glad you understand.” She punctuated her declaration with the tightest hug she could manage.

“So, what do we need to do?” Harry asked, before realizing almost immediately how obvious the answer to his question was and blushing slightly. “I mean ...”

“Don’t worry, I know what you mean,” Hermione smiled as she sat up and reached for their wands. “First, we have to reverse the contraception ritual, and then we have to do another that will ensure that I’ll get pregnant. She spread her legs wide and her smile grew as a glance down at



Harry revealed his rising excitement with the process. Baring herself to him once more, she had him remove the rune in her pubic region while she spoke an incantation. Then she hesitated a moment and blushed a bit herself.

“You have to actually put your wand inside me a bit for the next part,” she stated as calmly as she could.

“Yeah, we’ve done this enough that I have a pretty good idea of where my wand goes, Hermione,” he teased.

As expected, she turned even redder. “Not that wand, you prat,” she pretended to scold, as the corners of her mouth turned up. Your magic wand.”

“Well, I do seem to recall several times when you said it was like magic,” he commented with a leer. Hermone just shook her head and huffed, even as her smile grew. She was well aware that he was trying to ease the tension, and she loved him for it.

“Very well, Mr. Potter,” she announced, adopting a prim, proper, lecturing style, betrayed only by the grin on her face. “You will insert the tip of your holly and phoenix feather wand into my vagina and cast the spell that I am about to teach you while I inscribe a rune on my abdomen, directly over my uterus. Is that clear enough?”

“Sounds good to me,” Harry grinned back. “What’s the spell?”

Upon completion of this delicate procedure, both of them were even more aroused, and beginning to breathe heavily.

“Harry,” she gasped. “I think it’s time for you to get that other wand inside me where it belongs.”

“Right,” was as much as he could manage as he maneuvered himself closer to her. Then he paused. “Any particular position?”

“Just make love to me Harry,” she moaned.

“My pleasure.”

Some time later they lay cuddled in each other’s arms, temporarily blocking out the rest of the world in their contentment. An idea had come to Harry over the last few minutes and now he voiced his thoughts.

“Hermione?”

“Hmmm?”

“I want to get married,” he revealed.

Hermione raised her head and looked at him. “Well, of course, so do I.”

“I mean right now,” he explained. “Today. Well, actually tomorrow I suppose. But as soon as possible. I want to make sure this baby is mine, you know, legally and everything.”

Hermione leaned back and snuggled up against him again. “Oh Harry, I love you so much. You’re right of course. But there’s no way we can have a marriage ceremony on such short notice.” She thought for a moment. “But I suppose we could do the bonding part at least.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Harry agreed. “Mr. Delacour told us any wizard could perform the bonding.”

“Ron?”

“Yep.”

Hermione closed her eyes and smiled. There would at least be a couple of happy memories of this episode in their lives. “Good plan,” she confirmed.

Harry wasn’t finished. “Hermione?”

“Yes, love?” she responded, not opening her eyes.

“Remember the movie we saw, *Titanic* ?” Hermione nodded against his chest. She had actually thought about that more than once – the parallels to their situation. “If I ... if I don’t make it, I want you to live your life like Rose did. I’m not saying you shouldn’t mourn for me but please don’t just waste away in mourning. You have so much talent – you should do all the things you can. Live life to the fullest. Change the world for the better. And raise our child to be the same incredible kind of person you are.” Harry could feel her warm tears trickling down his chest, and tightened his hold on his lover. “Promise me that, please?”

Hermione nodded again, and somehow managed to find her voice. “I promise.”

Harry awoke to find Hermione sitting up in the bed next to him writing in her journal. As she was still completely nude, and the covers had slid down to her waist, he lay still and enjoyed the view until she noticed that he was awake. She shot him a smile that was almost literally glowing.

“Good morning Mrs. Potter,” he announced with a grin. A shiver shot down Hermione’s spine as she nearly melted with delight. Harry sat up and pulled her onto his lap for a long kiss.

Feeling a certain part of his body pressed against her thigh, Hermione broke the kiss with a sly smile. “Ready for another go at it this morning?”

Harry pretended to frown. “You mean last night wasn’t enough? We have to do it again?”

Hermione played along. “Well, it’s supposed to work the first time, but it never hurts to be thorough, does it? I think we should approach this just as seriously as any assignment. You know how I like to be as complete as possible about everything.”

Harry snorted. This was the girl who wasn’t satisfied unless she got better than 100 percent on her exams, after all. “So what were you thinking?”

Hermione’s smile grew. “Oh, I think every morning and every night at the least, don’t you?”

Harry chuckled as he began to stroke a particularly sensitive, and rather intimate, place on her body, eliciting a moan. “Sounds good to me.”

Ron looked up as Harry and Hermione emerged from their room to join him in the living area of the tent, surprised that they were so late getting up. He was never the first one ready in the morning. Then he noticed the beaming smile on Hermione’s face, which was rather unusual these days, and that it was reflected in Harry’s expression as well.

“What are you two so happy about?”

Hermione was practically bouncing up and down on her toes. “We’re going to get married!”

Ron looked puzzled. “Well, yeah, I already knew that. You told me last summer. Plus, that ring you’re wearing is a bit of a clue.”

“Actually, we decided to do the bonding ceremony today,” Harry added. “And we want you to perform the bonding for us.”

“Bloody hell!” was the predictable response from their best friend. “Why now of all times?”

Hermione shot a dazzling smile at Harry and then turned to Ron. “Because I’m going to have a baby.”

“BLOODY HELL!!!”

-oooOOOooo-

Rose clapped her hands with delight at finally hearing the part of the story she’d been looking forward to, and Hermione smiled at her.

“That must have been quite a shock for Ron,” the young girl observed with a grin.

“Oh my yes,” her mother replied. “He walked around in a fog for most of the day, with the odd ‘Bloody hell’ popping out every now and then.”

A thoughtful look passed across Rose’s face. “That part Daddy mentioned about the movie. Was

that where my name came from?”

Hermione nodded. “Partly. We wanted a flower name in honor of his mother Lily, and Rose seemed the obvious choice.”

Rose continued. “And what you promised – it’s been kind of tough since he isn’t really gone, but we’ve done pretty well in keeping it, don’t you think? We’ve been lots of places and done lots of things.”

Hermione hugged her daughter to herself. “Things never go exactly how you’d like them to, but you have to make the best of the situation you find yourself in. I haven’t made much of a mark on the world yet, but there’s still time for that. Raising you has been my first priority, that and trying to find a cure for your father.”

“And you will, someday,” Rose assured her. “And you’ve been the absolute best mum ever. And Daddy’s been a good dad too, as much as he can.”

Hermione needed to wipe the tears from her eyes once again. “OK, enough self-congratulations. Do you want to hear how it finally ended?” Rose nodded eagerly and they settled back against the sofa while Hermione opened the notebook once more.

-oooOOOooo-

Harry and Hermione walked along the shoreline of the lake, staying near the great white tomb of Albus Dumbledore. Under the invisibility cloak, his arm around her shoulder, hers around his waist, they said little, but communicated much. Today was going to be the day.

That morning the detection rune they’d left at Nurmengard Prison had triggered, and a short time later Harry had received a surge of emotion through his scar connection – a feeling of triumph and glee. Voldemort had discovered Grindelwald’s secret and was no doubt now on his way to Hogwarts.

A few hours later Tonks communicated with them on the mirror, confirming that the current dark lord had killed the previous one, along with several prison guards. She was now also on her way back to Britain, but would likely not arrive in time for the confrontation.

A confirmation of sorts was received when Magorian, the leader of the centaur herd in the Forbidden Forest, sought him out at the edge of the woods and noted that Mars was now shining as brightly as they’d ever seen it. Harry acknowledged that he believed that this would be the pivotal night of the war. Magorian pledged to defend the forest, but would commit to no more beyond that. Harry expressed his appreciation for whatever aid they were willing to provide.

As the shadows lengthened and the afternoon crept on toward evening, it was apparent that Voldemort would wait for the cover of darkness, which they expected. The fact that it was Friday the 13th, and a full moon, was not lost on them either. Remus would not be available, but Voldemort’s werewolf allies would.

The issue of Ron's participation in the battle was resolved when Hermione pointed out that he knew too much. Since they were tricking Voldemort, they couldn't take the chance that he'd use Legilimency to discover the plot. If he were to learn that Hermione was nearby, with the Elder Wand, it would be disastrous. Obliviating Ron of that information, as he'd first suggested, wouldn't work either as then he might be tempted to throw himself in front of a killing curse aimed at Harry. If this happened he'd be giving up his life for nothing, and it would be completely counterproductive, since the idea was that Harry had to be hit with the killing curse in order to destroy the last soul fragment.

So Ron was instead stationed at the top of the quidditch stadium with a pair of omnioculars and a broomstick. It would be his task to keep watch, not only for Voldemort's arrival but for any allies he might bring along. And, as far as he was concerned, to do whatever he could to prevent the interference of the latter. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that, as Harry was convinced that this was something Voldemort would want to do alone.

After he'd retrieved the Wand, however, anything could happen. Accordingly, Hedwig would be sent off to Shacklebolt at the Ministry as soon as Voldemort arrived, so that he could bring reinforcements to deal with whatever followup attack the dark lord was planning. McGonagall and Flitwick had also been notified, and were ready to take whatever measures were necessary to protect their students.

Once darkness fell, Harry and Hermione stopped walking and settled down between the tomb and the lake and just held each other. Harry's stomach was tied up in knots, moreso than it had been prior to any quidditch match he'd ever played in. How did one prepare to die? Hermione's head was buried in his chest, and she was unable to hold back her tears. She was trying to console herself with thoughts of all the happy times they'd had together, but it wasn't working. If she lost him she knew the hole in her heart could never be filled.

An alarm sounded as Voldemort flew over the gates. The lovers shared a kiss that both desperately hoped would not be their last, and Harry slipped out from under the invisibility cloak. As he disillusioned himself, Hermione adjusted his memory, so that he would remember their last kiss as having occurred as he left her in the tent to go into battle alone. Then he walked around the white structure that glistened in the moonlight and waited for his foe, while she quietly moved off to her own position, completely invisible and undetectable.

The grounds of Hogwarts were deserted, as the dark lord had known they would be. It was the dinner hour, and everyone was in the Great Hall, including Hagrid. He fully intended to be in and out quickly, retrieving the coveted wand before anyone inside the castle could react to his presence. After all, the standard initial response to an intruder alarm was to lock down the castle and secure the students, and then investigate, which he knew well from his time as Head Boy. He had great plans for this place, after his final victory, and the first would be to destroy the gleaming sepulchre before him, to symbolize his ultimate triumph over the defenders of the light. But for now, he only needed to open the tomb and retrieve his prize.

But as he approached the final resting place of his long-time nemesis, he could sense that he was not alone. The air between him and the white monument shimmered as a disillusionment charm

was dropped, and he could not believe his good fortune. There, standing before him, evidently in an attempt to thwart him once again, was none other than Harry Potter.

“Good evening Tom,” Harry spoke with more confidence than he felt. “I’m afraid I can’t allow you to go any farther.”

“Potter,” the dark lord hissed in annoyance. “Do you really think you can stop me?” He stretched out his senses to see if any additional foes awaited, but could detect no other magical presence. “By yourself? You may be brave, but you are also very, very foolish.” Finding Potter here waiting for him was unexpected, but he was prepared this time. Both wizards drew their wands.

“*Crucio !*” The evil one wanted to see the despised Boy Who Lived suffer for his arrogance, and for all the times he’d thwarted him. Killing him quickly was not satisfying enough. But Harry did not try to block his first strike, or shield, instead diving to the ground so that the spell impacted on the white marble behind him. Rather, he launched a counterstrike of his own, sending a bone-breaking hex at his surprised opponent.

Voldemort reacted quickly, blocking the unexpected attack, and the two bitter enemies began trading spells. Red, blue, yellow, and silver flashes flew back and forth, and the experience of the older man quickly asserted itself, as his spells were just a bit quicker, and considerably more powerful. A particular nasty flame curse had Harry backed up against the wall, putting everything into a shield charm, but a followup blasting hex shattered it, dropping him to his knees.

Now the dark lord knew victory was imminent and he raised his yew and phoenix feather wand once more. “*Crucio !*” But Harry wasn’t finished yet. The pause had been enough for him to ready the final part of his strategy and he cast his specialty, a powerful nonverbal disarming hex, intercepting the unforgivable as it emerged from the brother wand to his own. *Expelliarmus !*

Once more the wands linked, once more the golden cage formed, once more the phoenix song sounded. But this time neither of the combatants was surprised. For his part, Harry had agreed to a suggestion from Hermione that the linkage of the wands might somehow enhance the possibility of his survival. The other idea was to draw out the conflict, but with as little injury to Harry as could be managed, possibly weakening Voldemort, and also pushing him into deciding on a quick end to the battle.

Voldemort, on the other hand, had decided on a different strategy, accepting the prospect of the brother wands joining again. For while it took his preferred wand out of play, it also negated Potter’s primary advantage – the dominance that the holly wand had established on that fateful night in the graveyard. Darting his left hand into his robes, he withdrew a recent acquisition – another phoenix feather wand, a prized creation of the famed wandcrafter Gregorovitch, obtained just before he’d killed him. But before he could cast a spell with it, Harry had a second wand of his own out and ready to go, this one Hermione’s, with which he was nearly as proficient as his own.

The dark lord’s irritation grew, as did his impatience. Potter had clearly been practicing during the time he’d been hiding, although the boy was still no match for his own prodigious skills. But when

Harry was able to shield against his initial disarming attempt and block some of his followup curses, he decided that time was running short. He needed to end this and get the wand he'd come for.

Harry knew that the time had come by the expression on his opponent's face, and mentally prepared himself for whatever his fate might be.

*“Avada Kedavra !”*

Darkness.

Light.

Harry blinked as he gradually became aware of his surroundings. *OK, this was different. So is this what it's like to be dead?* At least he wasn't in any pain. Slowly things began to come into focus and the unending light started to resolve into a white room. He was lying down on his back, looking up at the ceiling. He sat up and immediately noticed that he was naked. And that it didn't seem to bother him, certainly not like it had that time in ...

The room suddenly changed and he was in a sauna. Not just any sauna but the one in the Lovegood home. By himself. Only this time with no towel.

*Hmm. Were his surroundings controlled by his thoughts? How about a warm, sunny meadow?* The scene shifted again, and he was sitting in a field of tall grass under a blue sky. He got up and looked around.

*OK. Some people would be nice.*

No change.

So, he could control his surroundings but couldn't add people. *How about a quidditch pitch?* He found himself in the middle of an empty stadium with three goals at each end. But still no people. *A broom would be useful.* Instantly, a brand new Firebolt was in his hand. He mounted the broom and took a few laps around the pitch. He noticed that flying a broom naked felt ... different.

But flying around in an empty stadium, while enjoyable, was somewhat unfulfilling. It seemed like there was something else he was supposed to be doing.

*Voldemort !*

He suddenly found himself back in the plain white room, only this time he wasn't alone. Seated on a bench against one wall was a boy, roughly his age or perhaps a bit younger, wearing Hogwarts robes. He was staring straight ahead and gave no evidence that he was aware of Harry's presence.

His expression was absolutely blank. No fear, no anxiety, no curiosity. No smile, no frown, no puzzlement. Nothing. As Harry looked closer he recognized the familiar face. It was the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle.

Hearing someone approaching behind him Harry spun around to encounter one of the last people he would have expected. Sibyll Trelawny. She was wearing those hideous oversize glasses with the magnifying lenses, her typical gauzy shawl – and nothing else. *OK, I really didn't need to see that!*

As soon as that thought was completed she was draped in a plain white robe, apparently in response to his thoughts. Now he realized that he was still naked as well, and wished that he had one of those robes too. And immediately, he did.

His former professor took no notice of the state of their dress, either before or after, but greeted him in exactly the same odd voice she'd used in class. "Good day Mr. Potter. How nice of you to join us." It occurred to Harry that she might be a product of his mind, and that her appearance, voice, and mannerisms were no more and no less than he expected them to be.

"Erm ... hello," he responded awkwardly. Is this ... am I ... ah, is this heaven?" Even as he voiced these words it occurred to him that it most likely wasn't – Tom Riddle was here after all. But it didn't really seem like hell either, at least not yet.

"Not exactly," she intoned in that ominous breathy voice. "I am here to greet you and obtain your decision on whether you wish to go on or go back."

"Go back? You mean ... I've got a choice?" he asked in surprise. Trelawny nodded.

Harry looked around, wondering if there was anyone else he could talk to about this decision he had to make. His mother and father would be here, and Sirius ... but not Hermione. Even though he longed to finally meet his parents he realized immediately that he would rather be with her. But ... because of Snape's potion, would he even know her if he went back?

"Uh, not to be rude or anything, but, well, why are *you* here?" Harry asked haltingly. "I mean, I would have expected to see my mum or dad, or maybe Sirius, or Dumbledore." Trelawny was shaking her head.

"Your Greeter must be someone you know, but with whom you had no emotional attachment. It's also preferable that it be one who died recently. Xenophilius Lovegood was the other possibility." She shrugged as if to say she didn't really care one way or the other.

"So, can you tell me what will happen if I go back?" he inquired.

"If you return you shall need to slay Tom Riddle," she intoned in that fake prophecy voice she so often used. "Beyond that I cannot say – your decisions will affect future events."

"What if I stay?" Harry couldn't resist asking the obvious followup.



The batty professor waved her arm and the wall next to them cleared, seeming to become a giant viewing screen. The scene was initially filled with mist, but it soon dissipated to reveal a giant red steam engine – the Hogwarts Express. Into the picture walked a young girl holding the hand of a woman with curly brown hair, and he choked back a cry as he realized first that it was Hermione, and then that the girl must be their daughter.

The pair embraced in a lingering farewell, and the girl boarded the train, waving goodbye to her mother. The view shifted and zoomed in on Hermione's face. Harry recognized several emotions – pride, sadness, longing ... and above all loneliness. And he realized that it was because he was missing from their lives.

His decision made, Harry turned away from the wall and spotted Tom Riddle still sitting in the exact same position, still staring blankly straight ahead. He shot an inquiring look at Trelawny and she nodded, as if she already knew his question without it being asked.

“He is in that form because it was the last time in his life that his soul was whole,” she explained. “We do not deal with fragments of souls here.”

“Does he have a choice too?” Harry wondered.

“He made his decision the instant he arrived,” Trelawny revealed. “He fears death above all else. Now he sits in limbo awaiting your decision. Since your souls were linked when you arrived, you must return together.” She cocked her head at him thoughtfully. “I do not think he realizes what awaits him upon his return.”

Her explanation immediately raised a question in Harry's mind. “So, are we still linked? I mean, the part of him that was in me, is it gone?”

His host adopted a faraway look and intoned once more, “You are free.”

Hermione had been watching in agony as the tableau by the tomb played out before her. Several times she had to force herself not to intervene, to spare Harry from the excruciating pain of the now familiar *Cruciatius*, or another equally devastating injury. Her pride in him reached new heights as he unwaveringly took on his opponent and accepted his fate, and she too recognized the moment when it arrived. She bit her lip to keep from screaming when the dreaded words were spoken. *Avada Kedavra* !

Her feet were moving her forward before the green streak had even connected. The invisibility cloak opened slightly and the Wand of Destiny was raised and ready. But the emerald beam dissipated as soon as it impacted on her beloved, a diffuse glow washed over him, and then his scar blazed bright white. Simultaneously a scream issued forth and the green glow gathered back together and burst from his wand, traveling back toward his foe along the connecting thread in a kind of magical feedback. The golden cage of light disintegrated in a blinding flash. Once she could see again she spotted two figures sprawled out on the ground – both combatants had fallen.

She quickly closed the gap and crouched down by Harry, feeling for a pulse with one hand while aiming her wand at Voldemort, not taking her eyes off their deadly enemy. Her heart caught in her throat as she initially detected nothing. But ... even though her physical senses told her he was dead, somehow she could *feel* that he was not. She was now the Master of Death, and this magic was telling her that despite all evidence to the contrary, neither of these unmoving forms had completely departed this world.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of Ron streaking toward them on his broom. Pulling up and jumping off as soon he reached her, he ran forward with his wand out.

“Is it over? Did you kill him yet?” he gasped, trying to catch his breath as he dropped to his knees at the side of his best mate. “What about Harry? Is he ...?”

Hermione withdrew her hand from its futile quest for a pulse and moved it to Ron’s shoulder in a calming gesture. “No, not yet,” she replied in a low voice.

Seeing that her wand was still leveled at Voldemort’s prone figure, albeit shakily, Ron looked up at her in puzzlement. “Why not? What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t think either of them is dead, but I do think they’re linked somehow,” she explained haltingly. “I’m afraid that if I kill Voldemort it might also kill Harry.”

“So what do we do now?” Ron wondered.

“We wait.” Rising to her feet, she thought for a moment, then cast *Petrificus Totalus* on the dark lord’s body, and tied him up for good measure. She then systematically summoned any spare wands, portkeys, or other magical items that he might have hidden on him, taking care not to touch anything that emerged. The wands she shrink-wrapped with some conjured plastic and banished back to their tent in the ForbiddenForest. The other two unknown items she sealed in a jar and had Ron toss them into a shallow part of the lake near the shoreline, where they could be retrieved later. Then she sat down by Harry again.

Crossing her legs, she pulled his head onto her lap and took his hand, pressing it between hers. It was cold as ice. A tear emerged from her eye, and slowly tracked down her cheek. “Come back to me, Harry,” she whispered. “Please come back.”

Ron shifted uneasily, not wanting to intrude on what was becoming an intensely personal moment. Sensing this, Hermione had an idea. “Ron, I have a feeling that this isn’t over yet. He might have planned an attack once he retrieved the Wand. Maybe you should get back up into the air and keep an eye on things.” Ron quickly agreed, mounted his broom and sped away. Hermione returned to her vigil.

She had no idea how much time had passed, but suddenly Hermione sensed that something was changing. Her eyes widened as she literally felt the life return to Harry’s body, and at the same

time his hand began to grow warm in her grasp. Raising it to her lips, she began pressing relieved kisses onto it, while waiting anxiously. Finally he moaned, and it was the most joyful sound she'd ever heard.

“Harry! Oh Harry, you're back!” she nearly squealed. Harry's eyes fluttered open and as soon as he'd managed to focus on her face, he smiled as her heart practically tore itself out of her ribcage. Then he remembered what he had to do and quickly glanced around. There, lying on the ground ten feet away, was the person he had to kill.

Harry sat up and Hermione jumped to her feet to help him stand, as he was rather woozy. Seeing the questioning look in his eyes, she quickly reversed the memory charm so he'd remember why she was there beside him. He blinked once and nodded to her and then turned his gaze back to Voldemort.

Taking in the dark lord's appearance more fully, he noticed the thoroughness with which his wife (wife!) had incapacitated their enemy. Next, looking into those glowing red eyes he saw nothing but hatred – no doubt, no second thoughts, no remorse. Turning back to Hermione, they shared a look and both knew what must be done.

Hermione kept her wand trained on their fallen foe while Harry summoned the Sword of Gryffindor from his rucksack. Deciding that she really didn't want to have to look into those hate-filled eyes any longer, she silently shot a stunning spell at Voldemort, and his body went limp. Harry walked up and paused, his mind filling with thoughts of all the pain that this detestable being had caused him during his life, but was now about to be avenged once and for all.

Hermione moved up beside him and took his hand in hers, sharing with him her strength for the deed he was about to perform. He glanced over at her and then shifted so that her right hand joined his on the hilt of the historic blade. Another idea came to him and he called for Ron to join them. Then, together, the three of them raised the sword, and together plunged it into the chest of the evil creature lying at their feet.

A wave of magic nearly knocked them down, but they stood their ground, holding the gleaming blade in place while it completed its task. A red glow surrounded the magically constructed body that was but an ugly mimic of flesh and blood, and soon died out as the wave of magic subsided.

It was finally over. Voldemort's reign had come to an end, on the grounds of Hogwarts where had begun some fifty years before. Harry Potter, this time with the help of his best friends, had defeated the dark lord one last time.

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione opened her eyes. She had closed them while recounting the scene when she had sat by Harry, holding his head in her lap, willing him to come back to her. She could still vividly picture that scene and what had followed, including the emotions she had felt, without the need of any notes, even now, nearly twelve years later.

A long exhalation beside her revealed that her daughter had been holding her breath, anxious to hear that the evil wizard she'd only read about in books had truly been defeated. A sheepish smile crossed the young girl's face, she being somewhat chagrined that she'd worried for her mother and father's fate, even though she knew that they'd survived the battle.

Rose, of course, had questions. "Didn't Voldemort know that even if he did steal the Wand from Dumbledore's tomb it still wouldn't work for him, since he hadn't defeated the previous owner?"

Hermione nodded approvingly of her daughter's insight. "Arrogance was always Voldemort's biggest weakness. There were some things that he thought were beneath him, so he didn't bother learning about them. We think that once he learned that there was an all-powerful wand, he just assumed that it would be a natural match for him, since he was also all-powerful. He simply didn't bother himself to learn of the details of the legend of the Deathly Hallows. Also, Ollivander was clever enough to reveal the existence of the Wand while leaving out that important detail."

Rose accepted that explanation with a slight nod, and then asked, "So was that the end of it? I thought there was a big battle?"

Hermione sighed and shook her head sadly. "There was, and it was terrible. So many people died, and all for nothing, really, since Voldemort had already been defeated. It was very difficult for us especially, since we were so elated at the thought that it was finally over, only to have to turn around and start fighting again."

"So what happened?" Rose asked anxiously.

"He must have had the attack prearranged," Hermione replied. "Just a few minutes after we'd killed him, and hugged each other like crazy in relief and excitement, there was a massive crack as the gates of Hogwarts were destroyed. A whole army of giants, trolls, vampires, werewolves, and his remaining Death Eaters apparated or portkeyed in at Hogsmeade Station. Then the giants tore right through the gates, even though they were supposed to be protected by powerful wards. You see, the strength of the wards at Hogwarts is tied to the magical power of the Headmaster, and it turns out that Umbridge was a rather mediocre witch, so they were severely weakened."

Seeing that Rose understood that point, Hermione continued. "Well, Ron went back up on his broom to gain us critical surveillance information, while Harry and I got back under the invisibility cloak. We knew, even with the Wand of Destiny, that the two of us were no match for an entire army. So we moved around as best we could, trying to take out the Death Eaters who were leading the assault as Ron pointed them out to us. However, that just took too long, and we could see that the castle was going to be overwhelmed. So I had the idea that we should try to show them that Voldemort had already been defeated."

"Harry levitated his body into the air over Dumbledore's tomb and lit a bright fire under him so everyone could see him. I put an unbreakable shield charm around him with the Wand so that no one could get him down or even get at him. Of course, that distracted the Death Eaters and vampires quite a bit. The vampires, who were only in the battle for their own personal gain, had no interest in fighting for the losing side, and immediately deserted. Many of the werewolves, who

were only fighting out of fear of Voldemort, tried to escape into the woods. The centaurs got most of them.” Hermione shook her head, saddened at the unnecessary loss of life for these poor souls, most of whom had been decent people suffering from a horrible affliction, and could have been treated if only the Ministry of Magic had not condemned them as dark creatures.

“And the students – that was the saddest part,” Hermione sniffed. “The teachers tried to sneak them out of the castle through the secret tunnels into Hogsmeade, but some Death Eaters were there waiting for them, and opened fire as soon as they emerged. A dozen or more of the youngest students were killed in the first few minutes and scores of them were injured. As soon as they heard what was happening, Neville and Susan led the DA racing down the tunnels to protect them. They saved as many as they could, and secured the other ends of the tunnels, but that just meant that the rest were still trapped in the castle.

“How did it finally end?” Rose asked quickly, seeing how distressed her mother was becoming.

“Gawain Robards and Kingsley Shacklebolt showed up with as many Aurors as they could spare, along with the remaining Order members, and that began to turn the tide,” she revealed. But they came in from Hogsmeade, and had to fight their way toward the castle. By that time the giants had already inflicted horrible damage. The way they fight is just brutal. Remember, when they have defeated an opponent they tear his head off. That’s what happened to Grawp when he tried to fight back. Harry and I were just barely able to get Hagrid away from them after they knocked him out, before they could kill him too.”

She snorted in disgust, which surprised Rose, considering what her mother had just revealed about Hagrid. Then she found out why. “The same thing happened to Umbridge, only worse,” Hermione went on. “She came out at the top of the Astronomy Tower and began screaming at them ordering them to leave in the name of the Ministry of Magic, and generally telling them what foul creatures they were. A group of them went over to the base of the tower with these enormous, tree-sized clubs, and began pounding on it. They literally crumbled the tower beneath her. As soon as they got their hands on her, they tore her to pieces.”

Rose shuddered in revulsion at the thought, but upon reflection conceded that it was a fitting end for the loathsome, toad-like witch. But Hermione had more to tell.

“Right after that, and while the Aurors were still some ways from the castle, the remaining giants and trolls succeeded in battering down the castle doors. It was what we’d feared the most, and it looked like there would be no way to avoid a bloodbath. In seconds they had devastated the Entrance Hall and were about to storm into the Great Hall. The staff was trying to defend the staircases leading out of the Entrance Hall toward the dormitories, but were about to be overwhelmed when every house elf in the castle appeared.”

The young girl’s eyes went wide; she had not expected this turn of events. She had learned earlier in the story that house elves would defend their homes to the death. By breaking into the castle the enemy had triggered this fanatical defense. Seeing the look of understanding that came over her daughter’s face, Hermione nodded and continued.

“Remember, giants are immune to virtually all spells, which is why they were so hard to stop. But the house elves collectively levitated the very slabs of stone from the floor they were standing on, and sent them all flying into the lake. They took out every giant that was inside the castle, and every troll too for that matter.”

“Then what happened to them?” Rose asked quickly.

“It turns out that giants can’t swim,” Hermione answered with a shake of her head. “They don’t even float. I never thought about it before then, but it’s simple physics really. They’re so heavy, they just sank.” She looked back down at her startled daughter and shrugged. “All of a sudden the battle was effectively over. Once the giants were all gone the rest of them surrendered.”

Rose just sat there in amazement while Hermione wrapped her arm around her and pulled her into her side. Recounting this part of the story had drained her emotions, but there was still an important part left to tell. But she would wait until Rose was ready.

It didn’t take too long for the inquisitive girl to follow up. “Did any of your other friends die?”

Hermione let out a long sigh and shook her head, still thankful all these years later that they hadn’t lost anyone else. “No one we were really close to. Seamus and Lavender were badly injured defending the tunnels in Hogsmeade. They were in the hospital for several weeks. In fact, they became rather close as a result and ended up married.” That revelation got a smile out of her – the biggest womanizer and the biggest flirt of their year ending up together.

“Parvati and Padma, Justin, Dean, and Colin were never there that year, of course, and Ginny hadn’t ever gone back. The only other Gryffindor of our year was Neville, and he made it through all right, as did Susan, Ernie, and Hannah. And Luna.” She paused to catch her breath and collect her thoughts. “Among the professors, McGonagall was hurt the worst. She and Flitwick were the main ones defending the stairs in the Entrance Hall. She retired after the next year.”

Rose sat on the sofa for several minutes, absorbing and analyzing everything she’d been told. Then she realized something that she’d previously overlooked.

“Mum?” she asked in a small voice. “Do you still have all three of the Deathly Hallows?” Hermione gazed back at her for a moment, then nodded with a grim, resigned expression. “So you’re the Master of Death? You must be the most powerful witch in the world!”

Hermione looked anything but powerful as she lowered her head and shrugged. “But what good does it do me if I can’t be with the man I love?” She looked back up, her eyes now filled with tears. “For all the magical power I have, I still can’t bring him back. I feel so helpless. I’d give it all up in an instant if I could just hold him again.”

She brought her hands up to her face, weeping openly. Rose climbed onto her mother’s lap and threw her arms around her neck, hugging her close, letting Hermione’s tears flow onto her own shoulder as they both cried together.

It was a good five minutes before the two of them regained their composure. Rose remained on Hermione's lap, turning around to rest up against her as her mother wrapped her in a comforting hug.

"How long did it take?" Rose finally asked.

Hermione knew what she was asking. "Everything was fine for a while. There were lots of celebrations, and Harry, Ron and I were awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class. We all stayed at Hogwarts, camping out on the grounds, and helped rebuild the castle. But by the time summer arrived Harry started forgetting things. During the summer we began dropping out of the public eye, cultivating a reputation of being reclusive. The public was so grateful that they were willing to go along with pretty much whatever Harry and I wanted, and if we wanted to be hermits, so be it. By the end of the summer we'd dropped out of magical society completely, living as muggles. At that point Harry had forgotten pretty much everyone but Ron and me. It was particularly hard on Remus."

"So you didn't take him to St. Mungo's, like Neville's parents?" Rose asked by way of clarification.

"No, no, we couldn't risk anyone finding out," Hermione responded quickly. "For one thing, he'd be in danger from the remaining Voldemort sympathizers. But perhaps more importantly, the wizarding public wouldn't have taken it well if they'd found out. They needed him to be a hero. So we've kept it a closely guarded secret all these years."

Hermione sighed, fingering the binding of the notebook they had just finished going through. "And this really answers one of your first questions all those months ago when we first read the story. Why did she change the ending so much? Do you understand now?"

Rose hesitated, then nodded uncertainly. "I think so."

"It would never do you see," Hermione continued somewhat bitterly, "for the sidekick to end up all powerful while the hero became almost completely incapacitated, a virtual invalid. No, that wouldn't sell at all. The hero has to get the pretty girl and live happily ever after. *'All was well'*, after all."

Rose didn't respond verbally, but reached back up and hugged her mother as tightly as she could. After a minute Hermione pulled away and settled down to finish her explanation. "There was one more reason why he couldn't be in St. Mungo's," she noted. "You see, Harry loved magic."

The young girl didn't immediately understand what her mother meant, but then it hit her, and her hand flew up to her mouth. "You mean ...?"

Hermione nodded. "Your father has no memory whatsoever of magic. That's why he lives in a completely muggle house and why you've been instructed never to mention magic around him." Rose nodded in understanding. The times she'd slipped up had generated a puzzled look on her father's face, followed by a blank stare. It was quite disconcerting, and she'd tried hard not to let

it happen any more.

Once she saw that her daughter understood, Hermione concluded her tale. “Eventually I was the only one he knew. There were certain things that helped (she left this deliberately vague, not feeling the need to explain that making love always provided a temporary respite from Harry’s inexorable memory loss) but we both knew that it was only a matter of time. By this point the royalties from the sales of the first book had started to become substantial, so we bought these two houses and made some modifications to the one he lives in. I used to read to him from these journals every night, and he was always delighted when it would jog his memory and he could recall something that we’d done together. But by the next morning it was always gone again.”

“Oh, just like that movie, *The Notebook*,” Rose commented excitedly.

Hermione nodded, then gave Rose a squeeze and a melancholy smile. “He was determined to hold on until you were born. I’d joined the Unspeakables by then on a consulting basis so I had access to their knowledge of obscure spells and potions, and the ones who knew about his condition were amazed at how long he lasted. The day of your birth was when the last trace finally disappeared. He was so excited when he first held you. But as soon as he carried you into my room I could see in his eyes that he had no idea who I was.”

Hermione paused to brush a few more tears away. “It was a heartbreakingly difficult adjustment. He knew he had partial amnesia – it didn’t affect his intelligence after all – and that he had these huge gaping holes in his memory. He knew he had a daughter and that she therefore had a mother, but every time he saw me after that I was a complete stranger. You became a lifeline for him, the only thing he still had in his life that he loved.”

“And he never forgot me because I came along after the potion took effect?” Rose suggested.

“That’s right,” Hermione confirmed. “Those first few months and years were very depressing times, and without you to hold us together I don’t know what we would have done. We’d already arranged for someone to stay with him round the clock because we weren’t really sure how he’d react to the situation. Over the years we’ve settled into the routine we have now, and well, you know the rest.”

There really wasn’t anything more to say. Mother and daughter sat cuddled together as the house darkened, Rose musing over everything she’d learned about how things had been, and Hermione yearning for what might have been. At long last Rose yawned, and Hermione broke them apart in order to get up from the sofa and head off to bed. Seeing the look in her mother’s eye, Rose made a quick decision.

“Mum, would it be OK if I slept in your bed tonight? I don’t really feel like being by myself right now.”

Hermione smiled down at her thoughtful daughter and hugged her yet again. “I think that’s a very nice idea.”



Harry Potter was in a good mood as he got out of bed. This was his favorite day of the week. It was Saturday, and it meant that he got to spend the entire day with his daughter. It wasn't the only day of the week that he saw her, since she lived just down the road and she always stopped by to see him for a bit after school each day. But he eagerly looked forward to the weekends when they were able to spend so much more time together.

As he went through his morning routine, and greeted the friendly nurse who checked him over each day, putting him through some mental exercises, he reflected on his life. All in all, it was a pretty good life. Certainly much better than he'd had growing up.

He remembered vividly his life with his aunt and uncle, and all the hardships they'd put him through because they resented being stuck with him after his mother and father died. Even after he'd gone off to boarding school, which he recalled only bits and pieces of, things hadn't been much better. For some reason all the students there had resented him, some even going so far as outright hating him. He wasn't really sure why that was, but he knew it must have something to do with the part of his life he couldn't remember.

It was very frustrating, not being to remember so much of his early life, but over the years he'd managed to adjust. He had a nice place to live, and kept himself busy with his reading and various hobbies. Money was never an issue, and his 'keepers', as he jokingly called them, were all pleasant and friendly. They occasionally took him and Rose on outings, and he worked at keeping himself informed about what was happening in the world. Throughout it all, though, was always the nagging feeling that he was missing something.

He knew intellectually what it was, of course, but that didn't really help. No matter how hard he tried he just couldn't break through, and his efforts inevitably led to frustration. The nurses, who rotated during the week, were all very kind and encouraging, and always told him that anything was possible.

But the light of his life was his daughter Rose, and he wasn't going to dwell on frustrating thoughts this day; he wanted to focus on enjoying their time together. He'd just finished up his breakfast and cleaned up the kitchen when the doorbell rang, right on schedule.

As soon as the door opened a curly haired girl jumped into his arms. "Daddy!" she shouted happily as he whirled her around.

"How's my girl?" he asked happily. While she assured him that she was just fine, thank you, he turned to the woman who'd accompanied her. "Hello, Miss ...?" he greeted her politely.

"Hermione," she informed him in a controlled voice.

"Hermione, that's a pretty name," he replied, not noticing the slight tightening of her mouth.

"Thank you," she responded in the seemingly scripted performance. They went through this every

time she brought Rose over.

“So, Lily Rose,” he asked, turning back to his daughter. “What do you want to do today?”

Rose responded by putting her hands on her hips and pretending to scowl. “Daddy, why do you keep calling me that?”

Harry grinned. “Because you look like a Lily Rose, of course. It’s a special kind of Rose.”

Rose was having none of it. “Oh honestly, Daddy. There’s no such thing as a Lily Rose.”

Harry cocked his head. Something about her stance, her words, or her insistence that such a thing didn’t exist seemed oddly familiar, recalling a snatch of a memory of a similar bossy eleven year old girl. But then it was gone and he shook it off, turning to their other visitor for support.

“What do you think, um ...?”

“Hermione,” she prompted.

“Right, Hermione. You know, that’s a pretty name. Just like Lily Rose here.” He grinned at his daughter and she stuck her tongue out at him.

“Now, that’s not very polite thing to do,” he scolded with a smile as he jokingly shook his finger at her. “What will our guest think?” He turned back to Hermione and frowned. “Um, I don’t think I introduced myself. “I’m Harry.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Hermione,” she managed to say with a smile.

“That’s a pretty name.”

Rose rolled her eyes and jumped forward. This could go on all day if she let it. She grabbed his arm and began to tug him away. “Let’s go Dad, I want to tell you about a project I’ve been working on at school. Bye Mum.”

Harry let himself be guided from the room, turning to wave at the mystery woman as they left. “Bye, uh ...”

“Hermione,” she filled in automatically.

“Bye Hermione. You know ...”

“Come on, Daaad,” Rose interrupted, dragging him away before he could compliment her mother once more on her name.

Hermione raised her hand in a sad farewell.

“Bye Harry,” she replied softly. Then she added the phrase that they’d always used to close their

letters to each other, way back when, and that she'd whispered hundreds of times over the past eleven years.

"I miss you."

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## **Notebooks and Letters**

### **Rosie's Plan**

#### **Final Year, Chapter 15 – Rosie's Plan**

Rose Potter was a girl on a mission. After hearing the entire story, she was determined to find a way to get her parents back together. The relationship they'd had, and the degree to which they'd loved each other, made her heart ache. She knew that her mother had searched relentlessly for a cure, but perhaps there was something else she could try.

Ever since she'd received her Hogwarts letter, an idea had been forming in the back of her mind, and now was the time to try to make it happen. But it had to be presented just right.

The next Saturday she hurried her father away into another room as soon as they'd arrived, only letting her mother introduce herself to him twice. Meanwhile, Hermione stayed a few minutes to talk with Harry's nurse.

"Daddy," Rose began after they'd chatted a bit about their activities of the week, and how they wanted to spend the day. "I've been thinking about boyfriends."

Harry's head snapped back and his eyes widened. "You're too young for a boyfriend," he blurted out immediately.

Rose lifted her chin and cocked her head. "I'm eleven years old and I'm going off to boarding school in the fall. In two years I'll be a teenager. Maybe not right now, but pretty soon ..."

Harry just shook his head. How was his little girl growing up so fast?

"When do you think you had your first girlfriend?" the young girl asked with an impish grin.

Harry shrugged. "I have no idea. I don't even know how many girlfriends I had."

"What about dating?" Rose persisted. "Or maybe even kissing a girl?" She had this romantic notion of how he might be cured by 'true love's kiss', and wanted to set some groundwork.

"No, not really," Harry mused, trying to navigate the large empty spaces in his memory. "Although ..."

"Yes?" Rose asked eagerly.

“I think I remember my first kiss,” Harry offered. “At least I suppose it was. It was pretty embarrassing.”

“Go on,” his daughter urged.

“Well,” he continued, rubbing his temples in concentration. “She had long black hair ... oriental, Chinese, I think ... Cho was her name ... Oh!” His face reddened as the image became clearer. “I don’t think I can tell you the rest.”

Rose suddenly figured out what incident her father was recalling and gasped. Harry heard her and immediately panicked about what his daughter might think had happened. “No, no, it wasn’t ... I mean, she, erm, did something uh, inappropriate, and I ran out of the room.”

Rose giggled at her father’s discomfort. “What did she do, take off all of her clothes?”

Harry just stared at the young girl who was much too mature for her age, then realized that she must already know the story. But if that were the case ...

“Oh my, was ... was that your mother?” he stammered. “But ... no, it couldn’t be. You don’t look anything like her.” Rose quickly reassured him that Cho was most certainly not her mother, and after a while the two were able to joke about the incident.

Meanwhile, in an adjoining room, behind a one-way mirror, Hermione’s shoulders slumped as she turned away from the picture and shut off the sound feed. “Oh, Susan, it’s just not fair!” she protested. “That he remembers kissing Cho but not me!”

Susan hugged her friend and commiserated with her. “You know why, Hermione. It’s because he never loved her, not a bit.”

“I know,” Hermione sniffed. “It’s just so hard. Sometimes I don’t know how much longer I can take it.”

“Hermione, you’re the strongest person I know,” Susan replied encouragingly. “It’s just amazing to see how you’ve handled it all these years. And everything you’ve done, all the potions and mental exercises you’ve come up with for us to try with him have been incredible. And you know what the experts you’ve been working with tell us. It could happen. Something could trigger it, and he could break free. We just have to keep trying and have faith.”

“I know, Susan, I know,” Hermione sighed. “It’s just that ... every time I see him and introduce myself again I’m hoping that this will be the time, that something inside him will click and he’ll recognize me. But each time I look into his eyes there’s no hint that he has any idea who I am. And now, with Rose going off to Hogwarts in the fall there won’t be any regular opportunities to come into contact with him. I’m just not sure what we’ll do then.”

Susan hugged her again. “We’ll work something out. You’ll see.”

In the next room, Rose had also directed the conversation with her father in another, though

related, direction.

“Dad, I’m worried about Mum,” she confessed. “You know I’m leaving for boarding school in the fall, and I think she’ll be really lonely when I’m gone.”

Harry put an arm around her and hugged her to himself. “I expect you’re right. I’ll really miss you too. Are you sure you have to go?”

Rose nodded. She couldn’t explain just why she had to leave, since her father didn’t know about magic, or Hogwarts. It was something he’d have to accept without understanding, but he was well aware that there were many things in his life like that, and was used to it by now.

She took a deep breath and continued. “I want Mum to have another baby.”

Harry’s eyes widened again and his jaw dropped. It took him several seconds to respond to this bombshell. “You mean she ... with ... who? No ... no, that’s not what you’re saying. You want me ... you think I should ...?”

Amazingly, Rose followed this ramble perfectly. “Exactly. Then you’d both have another child to care for and I’d have a baby brother or sister. It would be perfect.”

“But ... but I don’t even know your mother!” Harry pointed out. “Obviously, I don’t even know what she looks like,” he added, referring to their earlier conversation.

“You see her every week, Dad,” Rose countered, while managing to refrain from rolling her eyes. “She’s the woman who brings me over here.”

Harry frowned, trying to recall the woman in question. He knew that an adult had accompanied his daughter on her visits, but anything else about her escaped his memory. “So, it’s always the same person, then?” he asked.

“Yes, Dad, and you always ask her name and she always tells you,” Rose replied, deciding not to go into detail about the whole ‘pretty name’ bit.

“See, I can’t even remember her name.” Harry slumped back dejectedly. He wanted so much to solve this mystery, not only for Rose’s sake, but also her mother’s, not to mention his own.

“Look,” Rose responded, trying another approach. “Can you remember the names of your helpers?”

“You mean like Nurse Bones?” he asked. “Sure.” Rose’s eyes widened. *Bones! Could it be?*

Harry misinterpreted her reaction. “Yeah, I think it’s pretty funny, too. Nurse Bones. I’ve told her she should have been an orthopedic surgeon instead of a nurse. That would be even more ironic.”

“So,” Rose wondered, thinking fast, “How much do you know about her?”

Harry shrugged. “Not much. She and the other nurses keep things pretty professional. She’s not married, and she hired on here shortly after she left school. The early years are kinda fuzzy for me, you know.”

Rose’s mind was running in overdrive. This might be another angle she could try; if her father could establish a new relationship with someone he’d known before, it might also work with her mother. “Well, how about if you just think of my mother as ‘Rose’s mum’?”

Harry cocked his head and gave her a quizzical look. “I suppose it’s worth a try.”

That afternoon as Harry and Rose returned to the front room where Hermione and Susan waited for them Harry caught Rose’s eye and she gave a slight nod. Harry took a deep breath, and noted that his pulse rate had sped up. “Hi Nurse Bones,” he greeted his ‘keeper’, “Hi Rosie’s mum.”

Hermione could only stand open-mouthed as Rose chimed in briskly. “Hi Mum. Nurse Bones, can I talk with you for a bit?” Susan nodded in surprise and allowed herself to be led away.

As soon as they were alone, Rose blurted out, “Are you Susan Bones, who was with Mum and Dad at school?”

Susan blinked several times, still not quite sure what had just happened. This was quite possibly the bossiest little girl she’d ever met. That thought generated a chuckle. Actually, it was a probably a tie between the girl and her mother. She looked down into Rose’s intent gaze and smiled.

“Yes, I am. I assumed you already knew that, but I guess I was wrong,” she answered.

“So, are all of Dad’s other nurses magical too?” Rose wondered.

“Yes, we all are,” Susan confirmed. “Your mum decided that she needed someone watching him all the time, especially in the beginning as he adjusted. We were worried that he might become suicidal, and being magical we could easily stop him, or heal him if anything happened, even less serious stuff. There were times, I’m sure, when he wanted to bang his head on the wall in frustration.”

“That’s really nice of all of you to do that for all these years,” Rose commented.

Susan waved it off. “It’s the least we could do for your mum and dad after all they did for us. And with the rotation it’s not really that bad – only one day a week. And if there’s something else going on that we really want to do, well, you know that your mum has an in with the Department of Mysteries, right?” Rose contemplated what the significance of that might be for a few seconds, then grinned, recalling where the Ministry of Magic stored timeturners.

Then another thought hit her. This was certainly a loyal group of friends, even so. “Are all of you Hufflepuffs? Are there any others I might have heard of?”

Susan laughed. “You’re as clever as your mum. Nearly all of us are. Let’s see – I’m the only one

from your parents' and my year, so you probably haven't. Hannah Abbott was part of the group in the early years, before she left to get married. She married Ernie Macmillan in case you didn't know. We think he's in line to be Minister of Magic someday. Oh, there's also Sally-Anne Dubois, who used to be Sally-Anne Perks. She transferred to Beauxbatons after second year, but your mum met her there again later on."

Rose confirmed that she had indeed heard about Sally from her mum, and also realized another consequence of this arrangement, which followed logically from her father's earlier comment about their professionalism. There was no way her dad could have developed any romantic feelings for any of his nurses, which might have been a possibility otherwise. They were all completely loyal to her mother, and would have made certain that nothing of the sort ever happened.

This line of thought eventually led to another question. "But what about Neville? Didn't you and he get married?"

Susan's head jerked back in surprise. "Why no, not at all. Why would you ...?" She paused for a moment then smiled. "Oh, you mean because he and I dated for two years at Hogwarts. No, it's not really that common to marry the first person you date when you're a teenager. Your parents are the exception. Even Hannah and Ernie got together a few years after graduation." She noticed a worried expression on Rose's face, and realized what the problem was.

"Don't worry about me," she reassured the girl. "I haven't given up marriage to be here. I'm only thirty years old – there's plenty of time for me. Witches and wizards live a long time, you know." Rose smiled and nodded, somewhat relieved, and Susan continued on to share a few other interesting items from the wizarding world.

Back in the front room, the scene was rather awkward as the estranged couple attempted to make small talk. "I ..." Harry began nervously as Hermione tried to gather her wits about her. "Erm ... Rose wants us to ... well, she wants me to get to know you better." Hermione managed a nod, wondering why Harry had turned bright red with that last statement. "And since I don't seem to be able to remember your name, we decided that I should call you Rosie's mum. Is that all right?" Harry asked anxiously.

Hermione couldn't help but smile at the earnest look on her husband's face – he was as concerned about others' feelings as ever. "No, that's fine," she replied softly, as if she might scare him away by acting too eager. "I'd like very much for you to get to know me better."

"So, uh, when's your birthday?" Harry asked, mentally chiding himself for sounding so lame.

"September 19th," she answered with a bigger smile, trying to put him at ease. "And I already know yours, and Rosie's of course – July 31st and December 22nd." She'd often thought that it was significant that the day he'd lost his last memory of her had been the first day of winter.

"OK," he said, nodding while trying to think of something else to ask. "Do you have any other kids?" he blurted out.



Hermione's eyes widened, and began to tear up slightly before she clamped down on her emotions. He hadn't meant anything negative about the question, after all. He had no way of knowing if she'd been married either before or after she'd been with him. "No, no, just Rose. There's never been anyone else in my life," she assured him, realizing that her statement could be taken two ways, referring both to Rose and to him.

"None for me either," Harry responded quickly. "At least, not that I know of." He managed a small grin and she smiled back fondly, thinking about how much she missed seeing that grin on his face.

"No, you don't," she confirmed.

"What do you do? I mean, for a living," Harry asked next.

Hermione decided it wasn't the time to tell him how wealthy they were. "Oh, besides spending a lot of time with Rose I'm, well, a researcher. I work for the government." She thought a moment, and then decided to explain a bit more. "I spend a lot of time trying to find a cure for you."

"I'm sorry." The apology was automatic for Harry. He knew that he could scarcely imagine what this unknown woman must have gone through for him. "I must be a terrible burden on you."

"Oh no, don't feel that way," she protested, reaching out automatically to take his hand. It felt so natural, comforting him like this, even if she hadn't done it for more than ten years. "It's something I have to do – you see, learning things is what I do, it's what I enjoy."

"Well, if you're anywhere near as clever as Rose I imagine you're quite good at it," Harry declared, smiling as she blushed slightly at his compliment. After a brief pause he continued. "You've done an incredible job of raising her, you know."

"Don't sell yourself short Harry, you've been a big help," Hermione stated firmly as she gave his hand a squeeze. "She lives for these weekends."

"I'm really sorry I haven't been there for you," Harry said softly, his own eyes tearing up slightly.

"I know," Hermione replied simply. She dearly wanted to add, '*and I love you so much*' but held herself back.

Harry coughed to break up the uncomfortable moment that they suddenly found themselves in, and cast about for another subject.

"What about any hobbies?" he inquired. "Do you like to read?" At that, her eyes lit up and he knew he'd hit the jackpot.

When Rose and Susan returned to the room neither Harry nor Hermione could believe they'd been talking with each other for more than half an hour. As Hermione got up to join her daughter and head for the door she told him she'd send over that book she'd been describing.

“Bye Daddy!” Rose called out happily, ecstatic that her plan seemed to be working.

“Bye Rosie. Bye Rosie’s mum,” Harry returned, grinning at the look of surprise in the woman’s pretty brown eyes. “See you next week.”

Three different people anxiously awaited Rose’s visit with her father the following Saturday, all of them wondering if Harry would remember the woman who accompanied her this time. For his part, Harry decided that if he didn’t recognize her, he’d glance at his daughter, hoping she’d give him an indication so he wouldn’t make a fool out of himself. It turned out not to be necessary, as he did in fact recall the brown-eyed curly-haired woman who entered the room with Rose, noting that he could see a definite resemblance between the two of them. Putting aside the question of why he’d never noticed that before, he smiled and welcomed them, even as the young girl jumped into his arms.

“Hi sweetie,” he greeted her with a hug before turning his attention to the nervously smiling woman. “Hi Rosie’s mum.” Both of the females’ smiles broadened considerably at this encouraging sign.

“So, Rosie, are you ready to boldly go where no man has gone before?” Harry asked with a grin. She immediately nodded eagerly and took his hand, heading for the family room and the telly. Before they left, though, she turned back.

“How about if Mum and Nurse Bones join us?” she suggested.

“Sure,” Harry agreed. “Come on back.” He and Rose disappeared through the door.

Hermione pulled Susan aside before they followed. “What’s this all about?” she asked.

“Harry has a collection of old episodes of a muggle show called *Star Trek*,” she revealed. “He and Rose like to watch them, and he just got another one this week.”

“Which *Star Trek*?” Hermione asked. Susan’s puzzled expression prompted her to elaborate.

“There was the original *Star Trek*, then one called *The Next Generation*, then another called *Star Trek Voyager*. I think there was at least one other one too.”

“Oh. Well, the ones they watch have a heroic captain, a guy with pointy ears who’s always really serious, and another guy who’s Scottish,” Susan responded. “He’s Rose’s favorite.”

Hermione smiled. “That’s the original then. Let’s join them and see what happens.”

They all enjoyed the classic *Star Trek* shows so much that they watched several of them. Afterwards, Harry and Rose began to mimic the themes that seemed to occur in nearly every episode.

“Mr. Scott, I need a damage report!” Harry demanded.

“I dunna think the shields can take another hit like that one, Cap’n,” Rose responded immediately.

“I need all the power you can give me Scotty!”

“Aye, Cap’n. We’re doin the best we can, but the dilithium crystals are just too unstable. If we push the engines too hard they could blow sky-high!”

Rose and Harry laughed together, then she turned to the two women who were watching with amusement. “You two can play too! Mummy, you can be Mr. Spock and Nurse Bones can be Dr. McCoy.” She found this uproariously funny and fell into a giggling fit.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, which Harry noticed, responding with a smile and a nod of satisfaction. Keeping a straight face, Hermione raised her hand, separating her middle two fingers. “Live long and prosper,” she intoned in a deep voice, causing his smile to widen.

“Mr. Scott, I need those engines now. Prepare to jump to warp speed!” he snapped at Rose.

Hermione leaned over and whispered something to Susan, who gave her an odd look, then shrugged. “Are you mad, Jim?” she shouted at Harry. “You’ll get us all killed!”

Rose clapped her hands with delight, then shouted, “Look out, the Klingons are firing again!”

She and Harry made loud explosion noises, then staggered back and forth, grabbing Susan and Hermione in a convincing portrayal of a starship bridge rocking from the blast of enemy fire.

“The shields are down, Cap’n!” Rose called out.

Hermione moved close to Harry and leaned in, murmuring a suggestion into his ear. Harry’s eyes widened and he shot her an amazed look of admiration.

“Excellent, Mr. Spock,” he stated authoritatively. “Mr. Scott, cut the engines and divert all power from the shields to the phasers.” While he was saying this, Hermione whispered more instructions to Susan.

“Are you insane!” Susan shouted to Hermione. “Have you got any brains at all between those pointy ears of yours?”

Hermione merely arched her eyebrows again and answered calmly. “Indeed, my good doctor. I believe it is best to remain unemotional in situations such as this and attempt to analyze the situation logically. The Klingons will likely move in closer to investigate, and this may put them off their guard.”

Harry nodded approvingly. “Mr. Chekov, prepare to fire on my command,” he instructed. Rose quickly changed characters and sat down in front of him.

“Ready, Captain!” she informed her father, now affecting a Russian accent.

“Harry peered intently at the imaginary viewscreen in front of him. “Steady ... steady ...” he instructed. “Fire!”

“Direct hit!” Rose cried out. “We got him!”

“Well done, my captain,” Hermione congratulated Harry with a grin.

“All thanks to you, Mr. Spock,” he returned with a grin of his own.

She shrugged modestly. “It was only logical.”

“Perfect!” Rose shouted happily, hugging first her dad and then her mum. “But we still have to do the final scene,” she informed them with a gleam in her eye. “Where Captain Kirk kisses the pretty girl.”

Harry had been looking at Hermione admiringly, but this declaration turned his attention back to his daughter. “I see,” he smiled. “I suppose you’ll have to play the part of the pretty girl, then.”

“No, no,” Rose insisted with a sly smile. “I think it should be Mum.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide and her heart started beating rapidly. She tried to protest but Rose was having none of it. Harry’s embarrassed objections similarly were turned aside.

“I suppose we’d best do it then,” he suggested, swallowing hard. “She’s pretty stubborn when she gets an idea in her mind like this.”

“Don’t I know it,” she agreed with a nervous laugh. Harry stepped forward and put his hands on her shoulders, as her arms automatically wrapped around his waist. She closed her eyes as he lowered his head to hers.

He’d intended it to be just a friendly peck, but his body had other ideas, and didn’t let him pull away as quickly as he’d planned. Hermione’s tight grip wasn’t helping either, and the feel of her soft lips on his eliminated the last of his resistance. For her part, Hermione’s mind was overwhelmed by how much she’d yearned for this over the past decade, and she found herself responding like a drowning man to a life preserver.

Rose just stood there with her hands clasped together, her eyes shining with hope, while Susan also held her breath in anticipation.

But it was not to be. Harry finally realized what he was doing and pulled back in alarm. “I’m ... I’m sorry!” he gasped. “I don’t know what came over me! Please forgive me. That was completely inappropriate.”

Hermione was still in a bit of a daze, but could hear the panic in his voice. “No, no ... it’s all right. You don’t have to apologize.”

“But I hardly know you!” he protested. “I shouldn’t have ...”

Hermione cut him off. “Harry! It’s OK! I ... I enjoyed it. Really.” Harry didn’t look convinced, but this managed to calm him down. There had been ... something ... that tickled in the back of his mind but it seemed to have subsided now. He glanced away, still embarrassed, and took a few deep breaths. Then he turned back with a shy smile.

“I guess we both just got a bit carried away,” he suggested. By now Hermione had managed to get her own runaway emotions back under control and she agreed with a nod and a smile. Reaching out a hand to his, she inclined her head toward the television.

“So, what else to you have to watch?”

Harry took her hand and allowed himself to be led over to the sofa, but arranged it so Rose was sitting between them. For her part, his daughter was trying hard not to let her dejection show, as what she was hoping for hadn’t happened.

“Well, Rosie’s mum, what would you like to see?” Harry asked.

Hermione grinned. “How about *Masterpiece Theater* ?”

At the end of the visit, Rose suggested that if the weather was nice the following weekend, the four of them could go for a picnic in the park. She was disappointed that ‘true love’s kiss’ hadn’t awakened her father’s memories of her mother, but they were still making progress. There was no reason why he couldn’t still get to know her better, and, if everything went as it should, fall in love with her all over again.

The weather cooperated, and they had a nice walk down to the park, with Rose holding both of her parents’ hands, delighted to have the family together for an outing for the first time in her life. Both Harry and Hermione had fretted throughout the intervening week about how things would go, and both had put that nervous energy into making preparations. As a result, they were both dressed a bit more nicely than one would ordinarily be for a picnic, and they had more than enough food, drinks and snacks on hand.

It only took a short while to settle down once they arrived at the park. Rose dragged them over to the playground and Harry pushed both her and her mother on the swings, which gave them the opportunity to relax around each other. The two adults stood side by side they watched their daughter play on the other rides, and soon fell into comfortable conversation.

Harry was fascinated by this woman, who was both warm and caring as well as intelligent and witty. After they finished eating neither of them even noticed when Susan took Rose for a walk, engrossed as they were with each other. On the walk back home Rosemanuevered it so that Harry walked in the middle, and he shyly took Hermione’s hand as she blushed, but did nothing to discourage him. By the time they reached his house and said their goodbyes Rose was over the moon. She also noticed that her mother had a smile on her face that just wouldn’t quit.

Rose's plan continued to develop on the next week's visit. This time she requested that they all watch a movie together. Somehow it turned out that the sofa in front of the telly was big enough for all four of them to squeeze into together, and the clever young girl promptly claimed the end seat, insisting that her father sit beside her. That left Hermione next to Harry and Susan on the opposite end, just as she'd intended. The movie – *Titanic* .

As their daughter had hoped, by the end of the film Harry's arm was across Hermione's shoulders while her head was leaned up against him. When the lights came back up as the credits rolled, she was unsuccessfully fighting back her tears.

Harry struggled with what to say to the weeping woman nestled up against him. He rather liked the position they were in, and she also showed no inclination to move, even though the movie was over. "So, you're one of those girls who cry at sad movies, then?" he asked half teasingly, half sympathetically.

"No, just this one," Hermione sniffed as she wiped her face with a tissue he quickly produced. "It ... it has special memories for me. Perhaps we should try a comedy next time." She sent her daughter an '*I'll deal with you when we get home* ' look, but Rose was entirely unrepentant, as she began making suggestions for what they'd do the following week. Every one of the four people in the room was by now well aware that these weekends were becoming nothing less than dating opportunities for the adult Potters, even though none of them would admit this out loud.

On their fourth weekend together, after an outing to the British Museum, Rose decided it was time to move on to the next phase, proposing that they all go to the beach during the upcoming Easter holidays.

"I think April's a bit too early for a beach trip," Harry laughed. "Unless you fancy being bundled up in a heavy jumper while you walk along the sand."

"We could go to the beach near my friend Tori's house in Cornwall," Rose suggested eagerly. "It's warm all the time there."

"Hmm, I didn't think even Cornwall was warm enough for swimming this time of year," Harry mused. He missed the look that Hermione shot at Rose to shut her up. "Where exactly is this beach?"

"Oh, it's a private beach near their house, and there are some unusually warm currents nearby," Hermione replied, quickly coming up with a plausible cover story. "It's a closely guarded secret in their family."

"OK," Harry responded thoughtfully. He was becoming more enthusiastic about the whole idea of spending more than a day with his daughter and her charming and enchanting mother. "But I like the idea in general. Why don't I ring up a travel agent and see if we can put something together?"

Any reservations Hermione had about the idea were washed away by the enthusiasm pouring from her daughter. Besides, she was pretty excited herself by the prospect of going on a holiday with

Harry. She could scarcely believe what had happened to them in the span of a month.

Hermione was positively stunned that things had moved so far so quickly. Harry had sent word home with Rose a few days later that he'd made reservations for four at a two bedroom villa in the Canary Islands for a 5 day 4 night trip starting the day after Easter. It had been the best deal still available on short notice, and they'd be staying at the south end of the island of Lanzarote, where there were several relatively uncrowded beaches. The villa included kitchen facilities and a living/dining room, with two beds in each bedroom. Harry's plan was that he and Rose would share one bedroom while Rose's mum and whichever nurse accompanied them would share the other. After some discussion, it was decided that Susan wasn't very comfortable with the exclusively muggle environment, so Sally-Anne Dubois (nee Perks), who was muggleborn, would join them on the trip.

At the moment Hermione was trying to decide what to pack, with her daughter's enthusiastic assistance. Frustrated with her mother's overly conservative choices, Rose had called in Sally-Anne to back her up. She knew that the former Hufflepuff had attended Beauxbatons for five years, and had moved to France with her family for a few years as well, and so was rather more open-minded about revealing clothing.

"Mum, you *have* to take these!" Rose insisted, holding two bikinis in her hand, one bright red and one pale blue. Hermione immediately recognized the two swimsuits she'd worn during her time in France with Harry prior to sixth year, and wondered how her daughter had found them. She hadn't given them a thought for years.

"Honestly, Rose, I can't wear those!" Hermione protested. "They probably don't even fit anymore." But the young girl was insistent and she finally relented and agreed to try one on. It was even more bare than she remembered. She only just managed to get the side strings of the bottom tied, as they had to stretch across an additional inch of flesh on each side, and the top didn't cover her as well as it had previously. But Rose insisted that her father would love it.

Hermione snorted at that idea, but had to agree. He'd nearly drooled over it back then, and with even more of her on display now he'd likely be even worse this time. "Rose, a suit like this is fine for a sixteen year old, but I'm thirty now," she tried to explain.

Rose would not be deterred. "Mum, you've told me more than once how you admire women who don't let society force them into a mold. You've even pointed out older women on the beaches we've been to in France and commented on how great it was that they continued to wear what they wanted to." Hermione scowled. She hated it when her daughter used her own arguments against her! She turned to Sally-Anne for support, but the other witch just shrugged.

"I wear suits like that," she confessed. "And remember where we're going. You'll see a lot less than that worn on the beaches in the Canary Islands. Half of the women will probably be topless, and most of those are over thirty." Eventually Hermione gave in, and even let Rose talk her into buying a few new sundresses with bare backs and low cut tops.

Just as Hermione had feared (or hoped?), once on the beach Harry couldn't take his eyes off her. Seeing this, Rose shared a smirk with Sally-Anne and asked cheekily, "Hey Dad, how do you like Mum's red bikini?"

"Crimson," he found himself correcting. He had no idea why he'd said that; it just came to him. He also didn't understand the look that came into Hermione's eyes upon hearing it, or why Rose was practically jumping up and down with excitement. For his part, Harry felt his chest constricting, almost like something was clawing at his insides. He knew very well what it was – desire. Over the past few weeks he'd come to admire this woman's breadth of knowledge, her cleverness, her caring personality, her sense of humor. Now this admiration extended to her body. He found himself clenching his hands and realized he wanted nothing more than to touch her, run his hands over those soft curves. And it also seemed evident from the way she was blushing that she'd worn such a skimpy suit precisely in order to generate such a reaction in him. He also realized that he needed to lie down before his appreciation of her physical assets became too apparent.

"Mum, Dad, we're going to head down to the water now," Rose announced. "Don't forget to put sunscreen on each other."

Hermione lay down on her stomach next to Harry and gave him a shy look before reaching behind her and untying her bikini strings. Harry swallowed hard and sat up, reaching for the sunscreen. Now it was Hermione's turn to hide her physical reaction, as she felt his strong hands caress her back, something that had happened only in her dreams for so many years. She closed her eyes and was unable to stifle a moan as waves of pleasure shot up and down her body, especially when he moved down to the back of her legs just below the bottom of her suit. *Come on Hermione, control yourself*, she mentally berated. *You can't have an orgasm right here on the beach!*

Her moans did nothing for Harry's self control either. He was very glad that her eyes were closed, and that his daughter was off splashing in the water. He playfully gave her bum a slap, signifying that he was finished, and was rewarded by a squeak of indignation. Then he stretched out beside her while she returned the favor.

When she returned to her prone position they simply lay there, staring into each other's eyes, neither daring to say anything about what they were feeling. But the looks in their eyes told them everything they needed to know.

The five days passed all too quickly, as far as Harry and Hermione were concerned. For Hermione, after eleven years of him not even knowing who she was, to be able to spend all this time in his company was sheer bliss. And the looks he gave her reawakened long buried physical sensations that kept her feeling tingly for hours at a time. For Harry, it seemed as though he'd discovered the woman of his dreams. In an incredibly short time he'd traveled from admiring her, to becoming enamoured with her, to being completely smitten by her.

By the end of the holiday, Harry was seriously considering suggesting that Rose and her mum



swap rooms, he was that strongly attracted to this amazing woman. But he held back, feeling that the rather obvious reason for this request would embarrass his daughter, plus he didn't want to put her mother on the spot if she didn't feel the same way. But he determined to bring up the possibility with her in private, and got his chance when Rose and Sally-Anne urged the two of them to spend an evening by themselves.

Once again, Harry's throat tightened up at the sight of her in a royal blue halter dress, and they spent a good part of their time together gazing at each other in amazement at what was happening to them. After dinner he took her out to the porch of their villa where they sat on the porch swing, looking out at the moon shining over the ocean.

He stretched out his arm and she immediately snuggled into him and rested her head on his shoulder, remembering all the times that they used to sit in this exact position. Sensing his nervousness, she turned her head up to look into his eyes and gave him a comforting smile.

"Uh ... I was wondering ..." he began timidly. "Do you know ... I mean are you aware of Rosie's plan?" Hermione's answering blush, which filled her face and crept down her torso, confirmed her knowledge even before she managed an embarrassed nod.

"Oh, I know what she's hoping for, but it's silly," she proclaimed when she could find her voice. "Just a daydream from a little girl's romantic imagination."

"Well, I don't know about that," Harry replied in a low voice. "It doesn't seem like such a bad idea from where I'm sitting." Hermione's eyes widened and then she quickly glanced away, her heart pounding so hard she thought she might pass out. "I mean it," he insisted, giving her shoulder a squeeze and hugging her to himself a bit more closely. "I'm unbelievably attracted to you. I'm really falling for you, Rosie's mum."

Hermione didn't say anything for a long while, but reached out and took his other hand in hers while trying to sort out her racing thoughts. Eventually she was able to respond.

"Do you really mean it?"

"I don't see why not," Harry answered. "I mean, sure, I'm still getting to know you, but I reckon we must be compatible, since we had Rosie together. That is, assuming you still feel the same way about me," he finished with a worried questioning tone in his voice.

"Oh yes, of course I do," she reassured him quickly, squeezing his hand tightly to emphasize her earnestness. "That's never changed."

"All right then," Harry smiled broadly. "Let's do it." Hermione couldn't hold her emotions in any longer and buried her face into his chest, tears flowing from her eyes, as Harry softly stroked her bare back and shoulders.

After several minutes he had another thought. "But I want to get married first."

Hermione raised her head from his chest and looked at him, amusement glistening through her tears, then laughed. “That’s the same thing you said when I told you I wanted a baby the last time,” she told him happily. “We *are* married.”

“Well, yeah, I guess that makes sense,” he allowed. “So what was the wedding like?”

Hermione had to think for a moment about how to answer that, since he wouldn’t understand about magical vows. “Well, it was actually just a civil ceremony. We were in a war.”

“Against Voldemort,” Harry filled in. All of the bad parts of his memories were still intact after all, although to his mind Voldemort was the name of a vicious terrorist who had targeted him and his loved ones.

“Right,” Hermione confirmed. “And we weren’t sure you’d survive, and I wanted a baby if I couldn’t have you.” This brought on more tears, and Harry hugged her tightly.

“Well, we should have a real ceremony now, then,” he suggested. “We could say we’re renewing our vows if anyone asks why we’re going through it when we’re already married.” Hermione nodded, a beaming smile on her face once again.

“I also think we should live together this time,” Harry declared.

“Oh Harry, I love you,” Hermione cried, attacking his lips with a passionate kiss.

“I love you too, Rosie’s mum,” he declared fervently when they broke apart. Something inside him made him shudder as a result of their kiss and these words. He tried to get hold of it, but once more it evaded his grasp. He gave up and focused again on the warm woman in his arms.

After a bit Hermione grinned up at him. “There’s one more thing we have to decide tonight. Who gets to tell Rose?”

Harry chuckled. “That girl is going to be so excited she’ll be able to fly home without an airplane.”

The next few weeks passed by in a blur as they scurried about making all the arrangements. Harry and Hermione each separately confided to Rose during this time that they were worried that the whole thing was a dream and that they would wake up at any moment. Rose, of course, was on cloud nine.

One of the things to be decided was which house they would live in. For the time being they stayed in their separate houses, while spending most of their days together. Harry pointed out that if he moved in with them only one person would need to move. Hermione was concerned that with his partial amnesia Harry would have more trouble adapting to change, and so he should stay in familiar surroundings. Rose noted that she would be going off to school in a few months, so that it didn’t matter that much to her. She also declared that her mother and father ought to have a couple

of weeks by themselves without her around. Given that, Hermione decided that she'd move in with Harry right after the ceremony, and they'd sort out the rest later.

Hermione managed to book the small chapel in the church that she and Rose attended for the afternoon of Saturday, May 1. They didn't need much space, since it would just be the three of them, the minister, and the seven nurses in attendance. They planned to have Rose participate in the ceremony, which positively delighted the young girl.

On Rose's suggestion, Hermione had a dress made in the same style and color as her Yule Ball gown, periwinkle blue in color with spaghetti straps, a satiny underdress and a sheer overlay. Rose would have a preteen girl's version of the dress using the same material, and Harry would wear a snappy looking navy blue suit.

On the day of the ceremony Hermione was shocked to see her parents walk into the chapel while she was getting ready!

"Mum! Dad! What are you doing here?" she gasped.

"You should know that your daughter can be very persuasive," Emma answered with tears in her eyes. "Somewhat like another young girl I remember. We received a rather strongly worded letter from her, pointing out a few things she thought we should know and, well, here we are." Suddenly both women were hugging each other while Dan wrapped his arm around his granddaughter, waiting his turn.

During the tearful reunion both of the Grangers repeatedly told their daughter how sorry they were about the way the situation had developed and how impressed they were with how she'd handled the misfortune in her life. They also acknowledged that they understood that Harry wouldn't remember them, but were eager to get to know him again. When Rose took them out to introduce them to her father, he greeted them politely; as far as he was concerned they were just two more people from his past that he didn't remember, and he wasn't at all aware of the strain in their relationship with Hermione.

Finally the ceremony began, and they each held one of Rose's hands while facing each other. To hide the fact that Harry didn't know Hermione's name, both of them referred to their daughter in their vows.

"I take you Rose's mum, to be my wedded wife. To have and to hold from this day forward. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. To love and to cherish till death do us part."

As Harry spoke these words and looked into his wife's shining eyes, he reflected on how true she had been to their literal meaning – better or worse, in sickness and in health – and that it was time for him to live up to his part of the bargain. As they concluded the vows and he drew her into a kiss, he felt once more the pressure in his chest, but it was accompanied for a brief moment by an additional pressure in his head, as though something was trying to break out. Putting the sensation down to nervous excitement, he wrapped his arm around his re-affirmed wife and joined their

happy guests.

After a celebratory meal, Hermione's parents assured her that they would see to their granddaughter so that she and Harry could focus on themselves for the next few days. Hermione good-naturedly informed the smiling nurses that their services would no longer be required, as she would be assuming their duties in the future, and the happy couple departed for the luxury suite they'd booked at a local hotel.

The pair of lovers approached each other with the nervousness typical of newlyweds, and in fact as far as Harry was concerned it was his first time. Shy smiles were exchanged as they disrobed, but soon passion took over.

Hermione's body responded fiercely to Harry's touch, which had been denied to her for so long, and waves of desire coursed through her. Even though he had no memory of her, his hands unerringly found her most sensitive spots. By the time he entered her she was ready to explode, and her climax hit almost instantly.

"Someone was pretty eager," Harry teased once Hermione had opened her eyes again.

"Oh Harry, you have no idea how long I've been waiting for this," she gasped as she wrapped her legs around his to draw him in as tightly as possible. "Now it's your turn."

Harry didn't last much longer. But as his arousal grew, the pressure in his chest and in his head swelled anew, even greater than before. But his thoughts were only on the deep brown eyes before him, radiating her love for him. As he approached his peak, he blurted out, "I love you Rosie's mum!"

"It's Hermione!" she gasped as she felt him swell within her.

"I love you Hermione!" he cried out, just at the moment of his release.

It was like a dam breaking, both physical and mental, as somewhere deep inside a long buried part of him burst free. A flood of emotions welled up inside him, so intense that tears filled his eyes and he began sobbing.

Hermione felt a wave of magic course through him and into her, and instantly sensed his distress. As he stopped moving and collapsed onto her she hugged him even more closely. "Harry! What is it? What happened? Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes and stared at her in sheer wonder. "Hermione! I remember you!"

Sept 1, 2010

The mother, father, and eleven year old daughter made their way through Kings Cross station and up to the wall between Platforms 9 and 10, the daughter bubbling with excitement, the mother

beaming with pride, and the father wide-eyed with amazement. The daughter gleefully pushed the luggage cart with her trunk through the barrier with the two adults following more carefully, the husband holding the hand of his four-months-pregnant-and-just-starting-to-show wife. On the other side the young girl ran off to find her friends Tori and Teddy, while the mother greeted familiar faces and the father hung back out of sight, aided by a notice-me-not compulsion charm cast by the most powerful wand in existence.

After the breathtaking, dramatic discovery on their ‘wedding’ night, Harry and Hermione had held each other closely and talked for hours before finally falling asleep. The next morning they had made love again, this time slowly and tenderly, before eventually getting up and calling Rose to tell her the exciting news.

It turned out though, that Harry’s memories did not return all at once, instead popping up gradually, just as he had originally lost them. Some even came and went several times before becoming permanently fixed in his mind. Initially, the only parts he remembered were of Hermione, bits and pieces of special moments out of context, and they had worked for the past four months to sort them out into a comprehensible whole. Most of the background detail was still missing, as in a dream, and included many unknown characters with blank faces. It had only been since his birthday that he’d even been aware of the existence of magic. Today was to be his first foray into the wizarding world in twelve years, and they were being cautious about keeping him from being overwhelmed.

The crowds were heavier than usual, as this was the first class of the post-war baby boom. An astonishing number of wizarding children had been born in Britain in December, 1998 and early 1999, including Rose Potter, Victoire Weasley, and Theodore Lupin. The overall scene was one of pandemonium, with excited children everywhere one looked trying to haul their trunks onto the train, which had even added two extra cars to accommodate the suddenly expanded student body.

Eventually the couple joined up with the Lupins and Weasleys. They had been previously alerted to the situation and so didn’t make a big scene about the return of the savior of the wizarding world, but concentrated on saying their goodbyes and getting the kids on board the train. Once the Hogwarts Express had pulled out of the station and the platform cleared, the six adults lingered behind for introductions.

The first to step up was a tall, red-haired man whose good looks were slightly marred by a scar on his face. “Hi, I’m Bill Weasley,” he announced. “It’s so good to see you again.” Harry shook his hand and frowned in concentration, trying to weave some loose strands of memory together.

“The red hair is familiar somehow,” he mused as Hermione squeezed his other hand encouragingly. “There are a lot of you, right?”

“You could say that,” Bill chuckled pleasantly. “I come from a big family. My youngest brother was your best friend.”

Harry thought hard. “Yeah. Tall like you. Name starts with R ...” Bill was about to help him out by providing his brother’s name when he caught Hermione’s slight shake of her head. They had

discovered that Harry remembered things better when he recalled them himself, rather than being prompted. “Ron, right?” Harry finally determined, clearly pleased with himself. Bill nodded and smiled. “Big chess fan.” Another squeeze from Hermione and broad smiles from the others confirmed that he was on the right track. Harry closed his eyes.

“There was also a pair of twins, I think. Always joking around and finishing each others’ sentences. Liked to play pranks.”

“Very good,” Bill responded. “They’re still like that. Terrible influence on the kids.” The two other mothers nodded vigorously in agreement. “They even turned it into a business – started a joke shop. In fact, you’re a part owner.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Really?” He turned to Hermione. “I own a joke shop and you didn’t tell me?” Hermione just rolled her eyes while the others laughed.

“Honestly, Harry, I didn’t think that was one of the more important details.” Seeing his mock pout she reached up and smacked him on the shoulder in feigned exasperation. “Oh all right, we’ll move that up on our list of places to take you to.” Harry grinned at this and she smiled in return. “I’m sure Rose snuck a whole pile of their pranks into her trunk while I wasn’t looking.”

“Oh, you mean those packages with WWW stamped on the outside?” Harry asked innocently. Hermione folded her arms and huffed while the other four adults roared with laughter. Once they’d calmed down he turned back to Bill.

“There was also a sister, right? Real pretty?” Bill nodded again while Harry tried to put a name to her face. “Jen ... Gina ... Ginny!” Hermione wrapped her arm around his waist for a quick hug. He was doing so well! “We all were on some sort of team together. An athletic activity, but there was something strange about it.”

“Quidditch,” Bill confirmed.

Harry turned to Hermione and grinned. “OK, there’s a word that’s going to take me several tries to remember,” he joked good-naturedly. “So, what’s it like?”

“Well, for one thing it’s played on brooms,” Bill explained.

“You’re kidding!” Harry exclaimed. “You mean you witches really do fly on brooms?” he asked Hermione.

“Not just witches but wizards too,” she replied. “Do you remember anything else about it?”

Harry scrunched up his face again. “Something with catching and throwing a ball, I think,” he decided. “But there were different kinds of balls.”

“Right!” Bill confirmed again.

“And I played too, didn’t I?” Harry asked. When everyone nodded he asked what he thought was

an obvious followup. “Was I any good?” This generated more laughter and Hermione hugged him again and leaned up close to his ear.

“You were the best in the school,” she whispered with pride. Harry turned to look down into her smiling face, making another connection.

“And you came to every one of my games and cheered me on,” he recalled. Her smile broadened and she nodded happily.

“Ron and Ginny both play professionally,” Bill added. “Well, Ron’s a coach now but Ginny still plays. We’ll take you to one of her games sometime.” Harry eagerly agreed, then asked more about Ron.

“He and Luna are back together again,” the woman next to Bill announced, to Hermione as well as to Harry. Hermione grinned. Ron and Luna had had an on-again off-again relationship for the past dozen years. A couple of times the subject of marriage had come up and Ron had gotten cold feet and backed off. Then when Ron was ready to get serious Luna would disappear for months on an expedition to search for some magical creature or other. It was generally agreed by the Weasley family and friends that this would go on until Luna decided that she wanted a baby, and then Ron would suddenly find himself married with a child on the way and wonder what had happened. Perhaps this would be the time.

Ginny, on the other hand, had dated a number of men over the years but never got serious with any of them. The closest had been Viktor Krum, before she broke it off deciding that his ideas on relationships were just too out of date. Hermione personally thought that her problem was that she was looking for another Harry Potter, and none of the guys she met ever measured up to that impossible standard.

“Luna?” Harry asked, interrupting this train of thought. “Did I know her?” Hermione assured him that he did, so he closed his eyes and concentrated once again. “Blonde hair,” he finally decided, opening his eyes to look at Fleur. “Long and straight like yours, but not as light.” Fleur’s nod confirmed this analysis. Harry cocked his head to the side. “Kind of on the spacey side?” Another round of laughter affirmed that Luna still matched that description.

Now that he was looking at Fleur, Harry focused on anything he could remember about her. It seemed hard to imagine that he could forget such a beautiful woman. Then a stray thought floated into his head and he snatched at it. “We were in a competition together.” Fleur nodded enthusiastically as Harry tried to make another connection. “Something about fighting dragons.”

Fleur beamed at him. “Yes, and you were the best,” she claimed. “You beat yours by flying on your broomstick.” Harry nodded, starting to recall small glimpses of the sensation of flight, and turned to Hermione again.

“Do we still have my broomstick?” Hermione’s answering smile told him that it was still packed away somewhere in the house. “Maybe you could teach me to fly again.” The laughter this time, along with a few comments, indicated that the idea of his wife teaching him anything about flying

was hilarious.

Hermione stomped her foot and feigned indignation. “I’m not that bad!” This protest generated even more mirth.

“According to what I heard, the first time you touched a broomstick at Hogwarts you were an expert,” Bill declared. “The most natural flyer any of my brothers had ever seen. I always thought they were having us on, but the story goes that you went into a fifty foot power dive and pulled up a foot off the ground without giving it a second thought.”

“It’s true!” Hermione confirmed. “I was there. You gave me such a fright – scared me out of my wits!” Harry wrapped his arm around her and pulled her to himself, comforting her and apologizing for that long ago distress. Hermione leaned her head against his chest and smiled, then looked up and promised to take him flying as soon as they got home.

Once everyone had settled down again, Harry turned to the other couple who’d been patiently awaiting his attention – Teddy’s parents. They were both older than he was, the man considerably so, judging by his gray hair and lined face. He’d apparently had a hard life. The woman grinned at him and suddenly her hair turned purple!

“Wotcher Harry!” she exclaimed. That triggered another memory flash.

“I do remember you,” he announced excitedly. “Tonks, right? I can’t remember your first name, but I do remember that you don’t like it. Nympho something or other.” Bill snorted at this and Tonks’s hair changed from purple to bright red, her face matching it in color, as laughter rang out once more.

After a half-hearted attempt at a glare, Tonks gave up and joined the laughter, and assured Harry that that her first name was one memory he could leave buried, as far as she was concerned. After a few ribald jokes and the threat of a hexing for Bill, things quieted down as Harry studied the face of the older man.

“Hello Harry,” he said softly. “I was a good friend of your parents. It’s so wonderful to see you again after all these years.”

“Moony,” Harry almost whispered. And then suddenly the two of them were embracing in a tight hug, crying freely, and everyone joined in the happy tears. Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry from behind, letting her emotions out fully for the first time in months. This had been the big test that they’d been pointing toward, and Harry had passed with flying colors. She knew now that they would beat this evil curse, and her husband would eventually be able to recall everything that he needed to.

They would raise this new child together, and perhaps one or two more besides. The future was limitless. Yes they had lost all those years, but they had possibly another hundred years or more to look forward to, and they would live them side by side, relishing every minute.



The long, dark, bitter winter was over. Spring had finally come.

-oooOOOooo-

## **Epilogue – Twelve Years Later**

Rose Weasley hurried through the station toward the platforms, hoping she wasn't going to be late. Somehow things always took longer when you had a baby to deal with. She smiled at the beautiful red-haired, green-eyed infant in the baby carrier strapped to her chest and her precious daughter gazed contentedly back at her.

It was the first time she'd been to Kings Cross since her own last year at Hogwarts five years previously. It had been a wonderful seven years, as she and her best friends Tori and Ted had become a new incarnation of the famous Gryffindor trio, this time with the genders reversed. The threesome had gained well-deserved reputations for both academic brilliance and mischief making in equal measure (her father had bequeathed her the Marauder's Map prior to her third year), and she and Ted had also played on their house quidditch team, developing into passable chasers by their seventh year.

As had also happened with the previous trio, two of them had paired up, in this case Ted and Tori, who had been inseparable even before they'd entered Hogwarts. But Rose didn't begrudge them their romantic relationship one bit – when the time came that she was ready to think about boys that way she had fallen for Tori's younger brother Arthur. The fact that he was a year younger than her hadn't bothered her in the least – after all her mother had been ten months older than her father and they'd got on all right. Over their years at Hogwarts he had gone from being an annoying younger brother to an engaging and likable guy (and handsome!), and her affection for him had steadily grown. He'd finally got up the nerve to ask her out in his fourth year (her fifth) and by the time she graduated they were in love.

She and Arthur had married two years after graduation and now had a darling little girl who had inherited one grandfather's red hair and the other's green eyes, making her the spitting image of her great-grandmother Lily. Accordingly she had been christened Lily Rose, the very name that Harry had used to tease Rose herself with back when she was a young girl.

Those dark days were long gone now, though, and her parents were living the life they'd dreamed of. Three more children had graced their home, and it was the first of those children, her brother Jamie, whose first trip on the Hogwarts Express Rose was hastening to witness. As she pushed through the barrier she searched through the throng of excited children and worried parents until she spotted them. Her father was kneeling down speaking earnestly to his son, most likely reassuring him that he and his mother would be proud of him no matter which house he was sorted into, while his nine year old brother Danny was no doubt teasing him that he'd make a perfect Slytherin.

Her sister Emily spotted her first, and came running over. "Rosie, you made it!" she shouted. "And you brought Lily! Can I hold her?"

“Of course I came,” Rose smiled while her mother came up and gave her a hug. “I wouldn’t miss Jamie’s first trip on the Express, would I?” She carefully removed her daughter from the baby carrier and handed her to the eager seven-year-old, noting that her mother cast a discreet sticking charm along with a stabilizing charm to make certain that her daughter could manage with her adorable granddaughter.

“Rose, how have you been?” Hermione asked with a smile. “Is the little one letting you get enough sleep?”

Rose grinned back at her mother. “Not too bad, she’s sleeping six hours a night now. How are you coping with sending Jamie off to Hogwarts?”

Hermione shrugged. “We’re managing. It’s not as hard as it was twelve years ago with you, that’s for sure. Of course there was a lot more stress in our lives at the time.”

Rose gave her mother a one-armed hug as they walked back toward her father and brothers. “How’s Dad taking it?”

“Oh, he’s as excited as Jamie is,” Hermione smiled fondly. I swear there’s still a little boy in him that hasn’t grown up. He’s convinced that Jamie will be the second youngest seeker in the past century. And I’m not sure he isn’t right. Watching that boy on a broom scares me almost as much as watching your father did. But I know that Harry would never let him fall.”

Rose laughed. “Now you know why I never tried out for seeker. Too much of a legacy to live up to. It was bad enough having a mother who was the most brilliant witch of the age,” she teased.

Hermione tried to brush it off, but both women knew it was true. Hermione had become the most admired witch of her generation. It started when Harry made his return to the wizarding world and the story broke about what the two of them had gone through for eleven years, then was boosted when Hermione made her mark in the field of spell design. She specialized in creating spells and magical objects to accomplish the things that modern muggle technology could do. Her communication devices, beginning with mass-produced versions of the mirrors they’d used to keep in touch during their travels and continuing with magical versions of fax, text messaging, and computers had revolutionized wizarding society. Owl post and floo calls had become obsolete.

Harry’s prestige as the conqueror of the dark lord, as well as his status as the head of two old line families, the Blacks and the Potters, combined with the fanatical loyalty of the former DA members, had broken down any barriers that might have existed because of her muggleborn status. The collective guilt of the British wizarding population over the imprisonment of muggleborns during that last year of the war hadn’t hurt either.

Harry had been content to stay in the background, lending his support whenever necessary while being a stay at home dad. He’d also been in demand as a private defense instructor as a result of the glowing testimonials from the DA, who were still remembered for their amazing victory over the invading Death Eaters at Hogwarts in the spring of 1997. It was an ongoing debate in wizarding circles over which Potter was more powerful, but when they spoke, people listened.

They had no intention of following Dumbledore's footsteps, having experienced his manipulations first hand, even though the wizarding population had expected Harry to do so. Instead, they made their opinions publicly known only on issues that they felt strongly about, foremost being equal treatment for everyone without regard to blood status.

The two of them had also championed the rights of other magical beings, leading to some significant changes in the relationships of wizards with goblins, centaurs, and house elves. The Fountain of Magical Brethren in the Ministry of Magic was a long way from becoming reality, but things were moving in the right direction. After all, Harry and Hermione were only in their early 40's. They still had most of their lives ahead of them.

Rose stopped to give her brother Danny a hug before repeating the gesture with Jamie, and taking him aside to offer some sisterly advice. She had been a combination older sister and young aunt to them while they were growing up, being so much older, and they looked up to her with a respect bordering on reverence. She had made Head Girl in her last year, and it was agreed among all three of the younger Potters that they would strive mightily to match her example.

Harry and Hermione just stood there contentedly watching their four children and new grandchild. They had been so blessed in their lives, first to have found love with each other, then to have regained it once it had been taken from them, to have had an amazing daughter to hold them together during the lonely times, and finally to top it off with three more wonderful children. Their lives were so full of love they could scarcely believe their good fortune.

Indeed, all was well.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-