

What If? ... Another Goblet Of Fire Alternative The Yule Ball

Chapter 1 – The Yule Ball

(GOF Ch 22 & 23)

Ron and Hermione had gotten into it yet again, this time over Ron's criteria for asking a girl to be his date to the Yule Ball.

“Oh I see,” Hermione said, bristling. “So basically, you’re going to take the best-looking girl who’ll have you, even if she’s completely horrible?”

“Er – yeah, that sounds about right,” said Ron.

“I’m going to bed,” Hermione snapped, and she swept off toward the girls’ staircase without another word.

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Harry found Hermione alone in the common room the next morning. He had been thinking about what she'd said the previous evening, and wanted to ask her more about it.

“Oh, Harry,” she sighed when he brought up the issue, “it just frustrates me that you boys only consider how good-looking a girl is when you think about who you want to ask. There are other things to consider too, after all.”

“Like what?” he asked. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, but then relaxed, deciding that he honestly wanted to know her opinion.

“Other things about her,” she explained. “How well you think you’d hit it off with her. Is she nice? Do you have things in common? Would you enjoy talking with her?” She paused and Harry nodded thoughtfully. “Think about how dreadful it would be if you went with a pretty girl who was so full of herself that she treated everyone around her like dirt.”

“Sort of like a female version of Malfoy, then?” Harry joked. He was aware that some girls thought the slimy Slytherin was good-looking, although he couldn't imagine why any of them would want to actually date such a horrid person.

“Exactly,” Hermione acknowledged as she wrinkled her face up in disgust. “Although you could have used a less odious example.” She smiled at the smirk he gave her and continued. “And this ball isn’t the same as a real date. It’s an event where people need dance partners. You could just go with a friend. I expect that lots of students will do that.”

Harry pondered this information, and how it might affect his decision. Considering the difficulty he was having asking Cho, this might be an easier alternative. As long as the girl he asked wouldn’t read anything into it. Suddenly the answer was obvious.

“Will you go with me, then?” he blurted out.

Hermione’s head jerked back, as she was clearly caught by surprise. “What? I mean ... er ... I thought you wanted to ask Cho?” she stammered.

Now it was Harry’s turn to be surprised. He hadn’t thought anyone knew about his crush on the pretty Chinese Ravenclaw. But then, this was Hermione, who knew him better than anyone else. “I did,” he confessed. “But I don’t think I have the nerve. She’s always surrounded by her friends and I’m worried I’ll be embarrassed. Especially if she turns me down. And like you just said, I’d be a lot more comfortable with you. I get nervous just thinking about talking with her.” He looked up at Hermione and grinned. “Besides, you’ve helped me out with everything else in this tournament, so I figure why not this too?”

Hermione was as flustered as he’d ever seen her, turning a bright shade of red. “Well, I ... I ...” she began, avoiding his eyes by looking down at her lap. “The thing is, I already have a date.”

“Really?” Harry asked in surprise. “Who?”

“I ... I’d rather not say,” she replied hesitantly.

“Why not?” he persisted. This was so unlike his normally confident friend.

She shrugged. “It’s a bit embarrassing. I’m afraid people will talk, and tease me about him, so I was planning on not telling anyone until the ball.”

“Hermione, you can trust me,” Harry vowed. “I promise I won’t tell anyone, or make fun of you.” He couldn’t for the life of him figure out who she would be acting this way about. It wasn’t like she was going out with Malfoy.

“I know you won’t, and I can trust you. Honestly, I’m more worried about Ron’s reaction,” she admitted. “All right, I’ll tell you. I’m going with Viktor Krum.”

Harry sat back, dumbfounded. “Huh? I didn’t think you even knew him. How did you ...?” He stopped and frowned. “Wait a minute, what about everything you just said about going with someone you know, who you have something in common with?”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione apologized, twisting her hands anxiously. “I didn’t know you were going to ask me or I would have turned him down.”

“No, no that’s okay,” Harry assured her. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just ... how? I mean, Viktor Krum?”

Hermione relaxed and calmed down somewhat, and proceeded to tell him how Krum had been spending a lot of time in the library, had noticed that she did too, and had eventually introduced himself. She confided that she suspected that the thing he had liked most about her was that she didn’t act like his fan girls. Harry could readily identify with that, and told her that it was something he liked about her as well. But rather than reassuring her, this made her feel guilty again and once more she apologized to him.

“Look, I’ll go tell Viktor I’ve changed my mind if you want me to,” she offered

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong,” Harry insisted. “You told him you would go with him; don’t back out now. I don’t want you to break your word just for me.” Hermione relaxed again, and they sat together in silence for a while before she noticed Harry’s nervousness begin to return, and realized that he was once more stressing about his own predicament.

“Okay, but I’ll be glad to help you find a date if I can,” she volunteered.

“Well, who do you think I should ask?” he queried, taking her up on her offer. “I suppose after you I know Lavender and Parvati the best. I suppose I could ask Parvati.”

“What about Ginny?” she suggested.

“Ron’s sister? I never thought about her,” Harry responded with a shrug. He paused, scratching his head while he considered her suggestion. “I suppose I could; I at least know her a little.” He thought for a moment about what he knew about the youngest Weasley and then frowned.

“Wouldn’t it be a bit awkward though? She can hardly talk when she’s around me. You know, with the way she ...” He trailed off, not wanting to have to mention the embarrassing crush the young girl had had on him.

“She’s gotten better,” Hermione claimed. “You probably haven’t noticed, but she’s been acting pretty normal around you this year. But I’m sure she’d still really like to go with you.”

“I don’t know, I wouldn’t want to give her the idea I was interested in her,” he pointed out. “I’d feel like I was leading her on.”

“What if I talk to her, and explain the situation?” Hermione offered.

Harry shrugged. “I guess. If you think that’s best.”

“You’d still have to ask her though,” she reminded him. “But I’ll set it up.”

“Okay.”

True to her word, Hermione arranged for Harry and Ginny to meet in an empty classroom the next afternoon. Harry stumbled a bit over his invitation, and Ginny blushed bright red but managed to keep her voice from squeaking as she accepted happily. Hermione, who had stayed right outside the room, rejoined them with a big smile.

Harry's relief was short-lived though, because she then asked him if he knew how to dance. Both girls laughed in amusement as he panicked yet again, but Hermione quickly suggested that the three of them get together to practice in advance, adding that it would be somewhat like their practice sessions before the first task. Harry grouched that as far as he was concerned this whole ball thing was a task in and of itself. This generated more amused laughter, but he accepted her offer gratefully.

Ginny had provided a radio (which she referred to as a wireless) and showed them how to tune it to a station that played classical music. Hermione informed them that the opening dance was likely to be a waltz, and demonstrated the basic box step. Then she arranged Harry and Ginny facing each other and instructed them on hand positions.

Harry immediately found himself uncomfortable with the idea of putting his hand on Ginny's waist. Fortunately Hermione picked up on this right away.

"Would you rather start with me?" she suggested. Harry nodded gratefully and moved over to her, neither of them noticing the hurt look on Ginny's face. But faced with the same prospect with his best friend, Harry discovered he was every bit as nervous about putting his hand on *her* waist. Fortunately, he managed to hide it and focused on moving his feet in the proper sequence.

"I never thought it would be so hard to count to three!" he exclaimed after several minutes of stumbling, during which he'd lost track of the number of times he'd stepped on Hermione's feet.

"That's why you practice," Hermione replied patiently, as she motioned Ginny to take her place while she sat down to rub her sore feet. "Just like the Summoning charm. You didn't get that one the first ten or twenty tries either."

This time, Harry was too busy concentrating on his steps to notice where his hands were, and by the time he did he was able to control his uneasiness. During the next hour the two girls continued to take turns with him and he gradually became comfortable dancing with both of them. By the time they were finished the girls were very pleased with his progress (Ginny doubly so, since it was the first close contact she'd ever had with him).

At the end of the evening Hermione gave Harry a quick hug, and repeated the gesture with Ginny. "Harry, you did great tonight," she congratulated him. "Both of you did. I'm proud of the way you're handling this so maturely. I'm certain that the two of you will be just fine now with the opening dance. And remember, I'll be out on the dance floor right next to you." Ginny smiled happily at the reassurance, but Harry nodded uncertainly so Hermione added, "And I promise I'll dance with you at the ball too."

“I’m sorry, Neville, but I’m already going with someone else.” To Hermione’s surprise Neville had approached her the following day and asked her if he could escort her to the ball. She had originally expected that Ron would probably end up going with her as a last resort, but now she’d had *three* other offers already. “I really appreciate your asking me though.”

“Oh, so you’re going with Harry, then?” Neville surmised.

“No, it’s ... it’s someone else. Why did you think I was going with Harry?” Hermione wondered.

Neville shrugged. “It seemed pretty obvious, as close as the two of you are.”

That response threw Hermione a bit off balance, so she quickly replied, “No, Harry’s going with Ginny Weasley.”

Neville’s face fell. “Oh. I was planning to ask her if you already had a date. Guess I’ll have to think about it some more.”

This exchange did not go unnoticed by some of the other Gryffindors. Dean and Seamus decided that if Hermione already had a date, and Neville was actively pursuing one, they had better get moving. By the end of the day they had tracked down Lavender and Parvati and arranged a double date, Lavender with Seamus and Dean with Parvati. It also didn’t take long for word to reach Ron about Harry and Ginny’s arrangement.

“Harry?” Ron asked in a tone of betrayal once he tracked his friend down, interrupting a quiet discussion between Harry, Hermione, and Ginny about whether they should schedule another dancing practice. “Are you really taking Ginny to the ball?”

Somehow in his relief at having a partner it hadn’t occurred to Harry to worry about Ron’s reaction to his going with his sister. “Erm, yeah ... Is that all right?”

Ron noticed his nervousness and was about to give him a hard time before he caught sight of Ginny. His sister was glaring at him with a clear warning that if he said another word he would regret it immensely. “Ah ... sure, no problem. It’s just that I ... I guess I’m on my own now.”

Ginny, grateful that Ron hadn’t made a scene, took pity on her brother. “I could set you up with one of my friends if you’d like,” she offered.

“Sure, as long as it’s not Loony Lovegood,” Ron agreed eagerly. This, unfortunately, was the wrong thing to say.

“It’s Luna, not Loony,” Ginny snapped at him angrily. “And she’s a very nice girl.” She stalked off quickly to another part of the common room, and Ron was once more on his own.

Seeing that Hermione was glaring at him as well, Ron swallowed hard and muttered, “Right, then,” and quickly made his way out the portrait hole.

At that point Dean and Seamus took the opportunity to approach Harry and tease him about dating a girl with three older brothers in residence in the tower. Harry paled at the implication and stammered that they were just going as friends and Hermione quickly backed him up. Neither of them noticed the disappointed look on Ginny's face on the other side of the room.

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Entering the common room the Friday before the ball Harry was surprised to see Ron sitting ashen-faced in a distant corner, being comforted by Ginny.

“What’s up, Ron?” he asked, joining them.

Ginny quickly explained, while mostly succeeding in stifling a giggle, that Ron had just asked Fleur to the ball, right in the middle of the Entrance Hall, while she was talking to Cedric Diggory and a group of Ravenclaw boys.

“You what!” Harry exclaimed in disbelief.

Ron simply buried his head in his hands and moaned something about not being able to resist.

“Well, she is part veela ,” Harry informed him, trying to make his best mate feel better. **“ It wasn’t your fault. She was probably turning on the old charm** for those other guys and you just happened to get a blast of it.

Ron shot him a look of appreciation before turning glum again. **“But I’m still the only one left who haven’t got anyone – well, except Neville of course.** Did you hear that he asked Hermione the other day?”

“Actually, I did know that,” Harry responded carefully.

“Yeah, she turned him down, though,” Ron laughed. **“Told him she was already going with someone. Ha! As if! She probably just didn’t want to go with Neville.”**

Before either Ginny or Harry could correct Ron's faulty assumption, Hermione herself climbed through the portrait hole and came over to join them.

“There you are. Why aren’t you lot down at dinner yet?” she inquired.

“Ron’s moping because he’s just been turned down by a girl he asked to the ball,” Ginny announced, now back to being annoyed with her brother.

“Thanks a bunch, Ginny,” Ron grumbled.

“All the good-looking ones taken, Ron?” said Hermione loftily. Harry winced. Ron's earlier declaration was about to come back to haunt him.

“Eloise Midgen starting to look quite pretty now, is she?” Hermione continued with her taunt.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find someone *somewhere* who’ll have you.”

Ron’s head jerked up, as though the way she had emphasized her statement had opened his eyes, and he was staring at Hermione **in a whole new light**. Harry immediately realized what was coming, and wondered if Hermione had intended exactly that.

“Hermione, Neville’s right – you *are* a girl,” Ron blurted out.

“Oh, well spotted,” she responded in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Well – you can come with me then!” Ron continued, oblivious to her mounting ire.

“No, I can’t!” snapped Hermione. **“I’m already going with someone else.”**

“No, you’re not!” Ron shot back. “You just said that to get rid of Neville!” Harry winced and backed away slightly, as this statement, which managed to cast aspersions on both Neville and Hermione at the same time, was certain to make her even more furious.

“Oh *did* I?” Hermione hissed, her eyes flashing dangerously. **“Just because it’s taken you three years to notice, Ron, it doesn’t mean no one *else* has spotted I’m a girl!”**

Ron stared at her. Then , making matters even worse, it that was possible, he grinned. “Okay, okay, we know you’re a girl,” he said. “That do? Will you come now?”

Harry was afraid that Hermione would start hexing him soon, but fortunately she managed to control herself. **“I’ve already told you!” she said very angrily. “I’m going with someone else!” And she stormed off toward the girls’ dormitories.**

“She’s lying,” Ron insisted, watching her go.

Harry was saved from having to reveal his knowledge of Hermione’s situation when Ginny spoke up. **“No, she’s not!”** she hissed at him, shooting him a glare before following after Hermione.

Ron turned to Harry. **“What do you think?”**

Harry stared at him in disgust. **“I believe her. Why would she lie about something like that?”**

Ron shrugged uncomfortably. **“I dunno, maybe because she’s embarrassed not to have anyone to go with.”**

“Ron, you’ve known her for three years,” Harry pointed out heatedly. **“Does that sound like something she’d do?”** Before Ron could answer, he continued. **“Especially since the ball’s in a week and everyone will know if she does or doesn’t?”**

“I guess not,” Ron admitted. **“But who’s she going with then?”**

By now Harry had his answer ready. **“If she doesn’t want to tell us, that’s her business.”** When

Ron stared at him in disbelief Harry added, "I'm going down to dinner," and turned away, leaving his friend standing there speechless.

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The common room looked strange, full of people wearing different colors instead of the usual mass of black. Seamus and Dean met up with Lavender and Parvati; Lavender was wearing dark blue robes that looked good with her blonde hair while **Parvati looked striking in robes of shocking pink** . But when Harry saw Ginny he was temporarily speechless.

Gone was any trace of the shy little girl who'd squealed and run from the room the first time he'd met her. She was dressed in light green robes that clung to her petite figure, revealing slight curves that Harry had never noticed before. The color also nicely set off her pale skin and long red hair, which was done up in formal style. Most of it was wound on the top of her head in braids intertwined with ribbons, the rest falling in soft curls down the back.

"Wow, Ginny, you look amazing!" he gasped as she approached him, taking his arm with a beaming smile, and blushing fiercely at his compliment. She practically floated out of the room and down the corridors, as the evening promised to exceed every dream she'd ever had about her first date with Harry Potter.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry wondered, interrupting her reverie as they followed the other Gryffindors down to the Great Hall. Neville was escorting one of Ginny's friends, while Ron was with a dark haired second year Harry didn't know whose name was Romilda something or other, who seemed rather precocious for her age.

"She left earlier to meet Viktor at the Entrance Hall," Ginny whispered to him, so as not to spoil her friend's surprise.

If Harry had been speechless at the sight of Ginny, when he finally spotted Hermione he was positively stunned. Her hair **was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head** similar to Ginny's hairdo. But the most shocking sight was her gown , **made of a floaty periwinkle-blue material** , with a tightly fitted, thin strapped V-neck top that flowed into a long floor length skirt. Harry swallowed hard as he couldn't take his eyes off her for a brief instant. He'd never seen so much bare skin on his best friend!

There was also something different in the way she carried herself – more confident and lady-like – and her smile, while somewhat nervous, was simply dazzling. Fortunately, Harry managed to find his voice by the time he and Ginny reached the doors where she and Krum were waiting.

"Hi Harry, hi Ginny!" she greeted them excitedly, her secret now out of the bag. All three students were well aware of the shocked looks Hermione was getting from the Hogwarts students who passed by them on their way into the Great Hall, including Ron who was not at all pleased with this revelation. Harry noticed Hermione stiffen and stand up even straighter in seeming defiance of his attitude, but was surprised to see Ron glare in *his* direction as well. He briefly wondered if Ron was having second thoughts about him escorting Ginny, but quickly turned his attention to

McGonagall, who was giving them instructions on how to line up.

Harry had learned in advance that Cedric was taking Cho Chang and that Fleur was being escorted by Roger Davies. This information had been relayed to him by Hermione, who'd heard it from Parvati, who'd heard it from her sister Padma, who was in Ravenclaw along with Cho and Roger. He was at once relieved and upset with this knowledge. Relieved that he'd decided to ask Ginny rather than be embarrassed by Cho turning him down, but upset that the girl of his dreams was going with his rival Hogwarts champion, and he would have to see them together all evening.

The procession of the champions, as well as their seating positions in the Great Hall, had evidently been the subject of delicate negotiations. The result was that Harry and Cedric, representing the host school, would enter first, followed by Viktor and Fleur. After moving them back and forth, McGonagall decided that since Harry and Ginny were much shorter than Cedric and Cho, it worked better for them to be first in line. (While it was never stated aloud, Fleur was placed last because as soon as she entered the hall she would immediately draw everyone's attention away from the other champions.) Harry became uncomfortably aware that Ginny was the only one present who was shorter than himself – Cho and Hermione were about his height, and the heels they were wearing actually made them a bit taller, while Cedric towered over him.

Harry stole glances at Cho and Fleur while they were busy arranging themselves. Cho was wearing white dress robes in a similar style as Hermione's, and looked incredible in them, although to his surprise, not too different than Hermione did. Fleur was positively stunning in robes of silver-grey satin, with a strapless top that was even more revealing than Hermione's or Cho's. Harry had to force himself to look away from the beautiful part Veela, and gave Ginny a small smile of apology as he returned his attention to her. She shot him a grateful smile of her own at his restraint, which was considerably better than most of the other boys in the area.

The champions and their escorts entered the Great Hall one couple at a time, to resounding applause. The top table was set in the center of the room, elevated on a platform for greater visibility. There were eight spaces reserved in the center of the table, four on either side. Beyond these places were the headmasters and judges, with the British representatives at one end and the visitors at the other. Harry was surprised to see Percy Weasley standing up there next to Ludo Bagman where Barty Crouch should have been, and when they reached the table he gestured to Harry to sit next to him.

Harry stiffened slightly and fought off a grimace. Beside him, Ginny picked up on this immediately and stepped forward, taking the chair next to her brother and shooting him a sweet smile. For his part, Harry gave her arm a quick squeeze in appreciation. Cedric took his place next to Dumbledore, which put Cho directly across from Harry. When Krum and Hermione came in next, they took seats on Harry's side of the table, and he was quite happy when Hermione ended up next to him with Viktor between her and Karkaroff. Fleur and Roger Davies filled in the final two spots, with Roger next to Cho and Fleur next to Madame Maxime.

Harry found himself musing that he couldn't possibly have selected a better set of female dining companions. He was across from the girl he'd been crushing on for a year, and a few seats down from the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. And on either side of him were two good friends who,

in addition to being quite pretty in their own right, would give him someone safe to talk with. If it had been Cho and Fleur and two girls he didn't know, he was certain he would have been embarrassingly tongue-tied.

As the dinner conversation played out, Harry was pleasantly surprised to see that Ginny more than held her own. When Percy pompously announced that he'd been promoted to be Crouch's personal assistant, and would be representing him for the remainder of the competition, Ginny impishly inquired if Crouch might have actually intended to promote Weatherby. Throughout the meal her clever wit easily kept her brother in his place.

On his right, Hermione's eyes sparkled with keen interest as she listened to Krum and Fleur talk about how customs differed at their schools, and offered insightful observations of her own. Harry also found that he needed to restrain himself from glancing down too obviously at her low cut top, on the occasions that he turned his attention to the conversation on her side of the table. (He also had this difficulty with Cho and Fleur, but they were seated across the table instead of right next to him. And while he would have expected to have this problem with the other two girls, it was a bit unnerving to find himself ogling his best friend's bits.)

Before he realized it, an hour had passed and it was time to begin the dancing. They all stood up and watched as the tables vanished and the raised platform under the top table morphed into a dance floor, while a popular wizarding band, the Weird Sisters, appeared at one end of the hall. As the four couples took their places on floor, Harry suddenly came to a realization that had been lurking in the back of his mind. Ginny was a very pretty girl, but the other three – including Hermione – were beautiful young women.

Fleur, of course, was in a class by herself, but Hermione definitely had no need to take a back seat to Cho, an eye-opening observation that was being made at that very moment by a large portion of the assembled students. While the Chinese girl had an exotic beauty where Hermione had a more girl-next-door look, they otherwise cut similar figures in their ball gowns. Furthermore, the two year age difference between this pair of fifteen year old witches and the thirteen year old Ginny was quite evident, and clearly revealed with their choices of attire. Ginny looked cute in her dress robes, but they were styled for her still developing figure, particularly with her higher neckline.

Harry mentally filed these observations away in order to focus on the task at hand – making it through the opening dance without stumbling or stepping on Ginny's toes. As he looked down into her sparkling eyes she gave his hand a squeeze of encouragement. He took a deep breath as the music started, and began the three step pattern they'd practiced.

To his relief, the lessons paid off, and he eventually regained the level of comfort with Ginny that he'd attained in the deserted classroom, despite being on display now before the students of three different schools of magic. He even managed a smile for her by the end of the dance, which she returned with delight. As the band completed the opening number and struck up another, they found themselves surrounded by the additional couples that took the floor, and Harry finally relaxed and allowed himself to look around for the first time.

He first caught Hermione's eye, and she smiled and mouthed the words 'Good work!' to him, and

he grinned in return, thankful that she'd once more anticipated what he needed and bailed him out of a tight spot. Ginny then directed his attention to a number of other interesting and unusual dance pairings, and the two of them enjoyed the second dance quite a bit more.

The next song was considerably faster paced, which they hadn't practiced for, and Harry suggested they take a break. Ginny reluctantly agreed, and they made their way over to where Ron was sitting with his date, who brightened up as Harry approached.

"How's it going?" Harry asked as they walked up. Ron made no response except to frown at the space between them, causing Harry to realize that he was holding Ginny's hand. He quickly released it, which in turn generated a glare by Ginny directed at her brother. He ignored it, and turned his attention back to the dance floor, where Hermione and Krum were engaged in an up tempo dance that involved a lot of dips and twirls, and scowled.

Harry shrugged and opened a bottle of butterbeer and handed it to Ginny, then opened another for himself. He was aware that the young dark-eyed Gryffindor accompanying Ron was eyeing him up speculatively, but he was also aware that Ginny had moved to block any advance she might have been planning to make on him. After the efficient way she had shielded him from Percy earlier, he had complete confidence that she would be successful here as well. He quietly reached over and gave her arm a squeeze, and she turned and shot him a knowing smile.

When the song ended, Hermione looked around the hall for a moment before spotting where Harry, Ginny, and Ron were sitting. After exchanging a few words with Krum she came over and sat down next to Harry . **She was a bit pink in the face from the last dance.**

"Hi," Harry and Ginny greeted her. Ron, however remained silent and sullen.

"Hi," she responded cheerily. **"It's hot, isn't it? Viktor's just gone to get some drinks."**

This finally triggered an explosion from Ron. His anger had been simmering all evening, just waiting to erupt, and it did now, spectacularly. By turns sarcastic and vicious, he berated Hermione for her 'betrayal' by coming to the ball with the Durmstrang champion, ending with an accusation that she was first, passing along information on Harry, and second, aiding Krum in figuring out the clue in the golden egg.

By now, both Gryffindors were on their feet and snarling at each other, with Hermione growing more emotional with each denial, and people were starting to stare at them. Her hands were clenched into fists at her sides, but before she could make another heated rebuttal Harry stepped in between them. The tearful look Hermione had just shot him, pleading with him to believe that she would never betray him that way, had moved him to intervene.

"That's crazy Ron, and you know it!" he snapped. "Hermione would never do that! She's my ... biggest supporter! She's been a great help to me." He had been about to say 'best friend' but stopped himself just in time, knowing how Ron would react to that.

"Yeah, that was before she started cozying up to Krum though," Ron persisted, not backing down

an inch. “So maybe she should just go back to her precious *Vicky* and leave us alone.”

Before Harry could stop her, Hermione whirled **and stormed off across the dance floor**. Harry was about to pursue her when Ginny grabbed his arm. “I’ll go,” she told him quietly. He paused a moment, then nodded, and she hurried after the older girl. He then turned back to confront his erstwhile best friend.

“Ron, I don’t know what your problem is, but you need to get over it,” he demanded hotly. **“I haven’t got a problem with Hermione coming with Krum, so don’t drag me into it.”** Ron said nothing, but dropped heavily into his chair and crossed his arms, staring sullenly out at the dance floor.

Harry sighed and ran his hand through his hair in frustration, then noticed Ron’s date gazing at him, her dark eyes wide with admiration. When she saw that she had his attention, she smiled seductively and cocked her head toward the dancers in invitation. Harry merely rolled his eyes and turned away, spotting Krum approaching with two drinks. He quickly moved off to intercept him before he got close enough to set Ron off again.

“Vare is Herm-own-ninny?” the Bulgarian asked with a frown. In response, Harry merely motioned in the direction where the two girls had disappeared.

Finally, they spotted Hermione and Ginny coming out of the restroom, and Harry noticed that his best friend’s eyes were red. Hurrying to her side he took her arm and asked softly, “Are you okay?” She nodded and managed a small smile, but before he could say anything else Krum caught up.

“Herm-own-ninny?” He offered her the drink in his hand and she accepted it while Ginny located four empty chairs. Harry wanted to comfort her more, but she was Krum’s date after all, and he was with Ginny, so they made do with small talk for a few minutes. Then he had an idea.

“Hermione, you promised me a dance, you know,” he reminded her. Hermione’s eyes lit up and she turned to Krum.

“I did,” she informed him quickly. “You don’t mind, do you?” The scowl Krum directed at Harry made it clear that he very much *did* mind, but he politely refrained from voicing his objection.

The song the band was playing had a simple beat, so that Harry didn’t need to focus on his footwork, and as soon as they stepped onto the floor he took the opportunity to set things straight. He didn’t want her whole night to be ruined by a few bone-headed comments from Ron.

“You know I don’t agree with anything that Ron said, right?” he asked. Hermione gave him a grateful smile and nodded. “I really don’t have a problem with you coming with Krum.” He paused for a beat, then added, “Only that I wish I’d asked you before he did.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, but her smile remained. “I do,” he insisted. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you before, but you look amazing tonight! You nearly took my breath away.”

Hermione's cheeks turned pink and she dropped her eyes demurely. Seeing how well his attempt to cheer her up was going, Harry continued. "Really, when I first got here, if I didn't know you were going with Viktor, I'd have wondered who the pretty girl standing next to him was."

She beamed at him. "You really think I'm pretty?" she asked with some surprise.

"Absolutely," he confirmed. The two of them locked eyes briefly, then Hermione looked away as her blush deepened. Without either of them realizing it the song ended and another began, and they continued dancing.

"Are you enjoying the ball?" Hermione inquired.

"A lot better than I thought I would," he admitted. "Ginny's a lot of fun." She smiled and gave him a knowing look, as if to remind him that it was her idea for him to ask the young redhead. "But you know, I'd still rather be with you," he added with a grin.

Hermione sighed dramatically, realizing he wasn't going to give in on this one, and changed tactics. "So, are you going to give Ginny a goodnight kiss?" she asked with a sly grin.

Harry's head shot back in consternation. "I hadn't thought about it," he managed to choke out.

"Well, you should," she told him. "Think about what you're going to do, I mean," she laughed as she saw a look of panic come over his face. "I can assure you that it's something that's on all the girls' minds."

Harry stalled by turning the tables. "What about you? Do you think Krum's going to kiss you?" He found that the thought made him uneasy.

"Personally, I don't think it's appropriate for a first date with someone you don't know very well," she stated confidently. "And I'm not worried about it, because Viktor's a real gentleman and has always treated me very respectfully."

"I wouldn't blame him if he tried," Harry teased. "With the way you look tonight I can see how he'd be tempted." Hermione's eyes went wide, causing him to worry that he'd offended her. "You really do look incredible, you know," he added hastily.

Before she could respond Krum interrupted them to reclaim his date. Harry thought he detected a look of regret in Hermione's eyes as he guided her away, and discovered that he felt similarly. But nothing was to be gained by standing there with a lost look on his face, so he decided he'd better find Ginny. Spotting her standing at the edge of the dance floor looking around for him, he quickly made his way over to her.

Harry spent the rest of the evening with Ginny, dancing a few times, but mostly strolling around the hall, stopping often to chat with his classmates. He found that he enjoyed her company, and his fears that he would have a miserable time at this event proved groundless. Certainly he was doing better than Ron, who sulked the entire time and glared at the dance floor frequently. At some point

his date must have given up on him (perhaps when she discovered that being escorted by Ron wasn't going to get her a dance with Harry) and left him for better prospects elsewhere. Harry tried to draw him into a conversation once, but after a few short responses Ginny pulled him away.

It occurred to him that Ginny was largely responsible for the ball being bearable for him. Had he been with another girl he might have been like Ron, ignoring his date and glaring at Cho and Cedric, but Ginny didn't give him time to dwell on them. The animated little redhead was not someone he could easily ignore. It was hard to be grumpy when Ginny was so happy. More than once she excitedly revealed to him that it was the best night of her life.

There were also some interesting encounters out on the grounds. One involved an ominous overheard conversation between Snape and Karkaroff; the other resulted in the revelation that Hagrid and Maxime were half-giants, although the Beauxbatons headmistress denied it vigorously.

The four hours passed much more quickly than he had expected them to, and before Harry knew it midnight arrived. The students began to drift out of the Great Hall, the visitors heading to the Entrance Hall to return to their lodgings, the Hogwarts students making their way back to their common rooms. As he and Ginny began to ascend the staircase he heard someone calling his name, and turned to see Cedric beckoning to him.

Harry had to fight back his jealousy with the Hufflepuff champion, and studiously avoided looking at Cho, who hung back to enable the two boys to converse privately. Ginny gave him a nod to indicate she'd wait for him at the top of the stairs and he walked over to see what Cedric wanted.

A few minutes later he rejoined her, shaking his head at Cedric's cryptic advice, not certain of his competitor's motives or how exactly this information was supposed to help him. For now, though, he recalled Hermione's earlier advice and pondered how he should conclude his evening with Ginny.

As they approached the common room he determined from the nervous smiles Ginny was shooting his way that she was indeed hoping for a kiss. She obviously hadn't given up her crush on him, and he now realized that she probably never would. While Ginny was nice, and he'd enjoyed spending time with her, he didn't feel he was ready for anything serious with her. But given the image she had built up of them in her mind, she would take any indication of affection from him as a sign that he did want to start a relationship with her. It wouldn't surprise him if she was already dreaming about their wedding.

With that in mind, he decided that a little letdown now was better than a later heartbreak. Outside the Gryffindor common room he stopped and turned toward her. As her eyes went wide and she held her breath in anticipation he quickly mumbled that he'd had a great time and thanked her for going to the ball with him. Then he leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

From the slump of her shoulders he could tell that she was disappointed, but she managed to hide it for the most part. She smiled back at him and thanked him for asking her. After a brief awkward moment, they turned to the portrait of the Fat Lady.

Dating Ginny wasn't completely out of the question, Harry mused, but he worried about what would happen if it didn't work out. How would he be able to break up with her without hurting a lot of people close to him? If he'd dated Cho, that wouldn't be a problem. They could go their own ways without any consequences. And after all, Ginny was only 13, and he was 14. There might be potential for something down the road, but he couldn't possibly make that commitment now. Perhaps things would be different if this were happening two or three years in the future.

They climbed into the common room to find Ron and Hermione having a blazing row. Harry stopped to listen for a few seconds, and it quickly became clear that Ron hadn't given up on his accusations about Hermione's date with Krum. Before Harry could intervene Ginny interrupted them.

"Look Ron, if you don't like it you should have asked her yourself in the first place instead of waiting until the last minute!" she shouted. Harry was suddenly reminded of the way Mrs. Weasley lit into her sons. Ron, already in a bad mood, wasn't willing to take any more scolding though, particularly from his sister.

"Why would I want to go to a ball with an annoying know-it-all?" he shouted back at her. Hermione reacted as though she'd been slapped, and this prompted Harry to action.

"Ron, that was out of line," he hissed as he stepped forward to confront his roommate. "Now apologize."

Unfortunately, Ron was already too far gone to stop now, and he turned his ire on Harry. "Oh sure, take her side!" he yelled. "What's gotten into you lately? You always used to back me up in stuff like this." Not expecting this counterattack, Harry was momentarily silent. Ron was right. He *had* usually taken Ron's side in the past. And now that he thought about it, it wasn't something he was particularly proud of, given how loyally Hermione had supported him.

But Ron wasn't done yet, and at Harry's hesitation continued to shoot off his mouth. At that point things turned ugly. "Where do you come off lecturing me?" he demanded hotly of Harry. "You have everything, fame, money, the tournament ... and now you have two girls who'll drop their knickers for you! Why not try for more?" He gestured toward some of the Gryffindor girls who were standing there watching the fireworks. "You can probably get as many as you want!" Harry stepped back in shock at this outrageous claim.

Ginny, now furious with her brother, stepped into the opening and slapped him on the face. Harry instinctively moved toward Hermione, who had brought her hands up to her face in horror at Ron's declaration, in a subconscious attempt to shield her from the fray as Ginny and Ron continued shouting at each other. In the blink of an eye the screaming, red-faced siblings had their wands out.

At this point some of the older students stepped in and pulled them apart. Two boys dragged Ron up to the boys dorm' while a group of girls escorted Ginny up the girls' staircase, even as she shouted one final insult in her brother's direction. Suddenly it was quiet in the common room. Harry turned to find a sea of curious faces, but a stern look from him set them to hurriedly

dispersing.

Once they were alone, Harry pulled Hermione into a hug. “Are you going to be all right?” he asked tenderly. She nodded against his shoulder. After a minute he pulled back and looked her in the eye.

“I would,” he stated quietly.

“What?” she responded uncertainly.

“I’d want to go to a ball with an annoying know-it-all,” he asserted with a smile. This prompted a return smile from Hermione and she thanked him for sticking up for her while drying her tears. Harry guided her over to their favorite sofa in front of the fire and sat down.

Once she’d calmed down, Hermione explained that Ron had evidently been set off by Viktor gallantly kissing her hand while bidding her goodnight. Harry commiserated with her, then asked again if she was okay. She smiled at him for his concern and declared that except for the last part, the night had been a wonderful experience. She listened attentively when he related to her his solution to the question of how to say goodnight to Ginny, and managed to keep her thoughts to herself about how displeased the young redhead would be with that outcome.

Enjoying the chance to have some private time with her, Harry took the opportunity to tell her about his conversation with Cedric, and his curious advice to take a bath with the egg. Hermione frowned thoughtfully for a moment, then her eyes brightened.

“He’s telling you to open the egg underwater!” she announced triumphantly. “There must be something unique about the clue in that environment. Perhaps it sounds different.”

“That might be it,” he agreed, deciding not to share his suspicion that Cedric was merely trying to make him look foolish. Hermione was not likely to be sympathetic to his jealousy about Cho.

“So he said you should use the prefects’ bath?” she continued enthusiastically. “That’s a good idea, as it will ensure our privacy. I’ll come and listen to it with you.”

“Hermione!” Harry sputtered, aghast at the suggestion. “You can’t do that! It’s a bath! We’d both be naked!” He couldn’t help glancing down at her chest, where the V-neck top of her gown continued to offer tantalizing evidence of what lay beneath.

Hermione blushed furiously when she realized what he’d thought she’d implied, and it was several seconds before she managed to respond. “I didn’t mean that!” she nearly shrieked. “Just because it’s a bath doesn’t mean we have to take all our clothes off! We would wear swimsuits, of course!”

Harry regained enough control of his runaway imagination to consider that alternative. “I don’t even *have* a swimsuit,” he pointed out. “Do you? I mean, here, at Hogwarts?”

Hermione admitted that in her efforts to be prepared for any eventuality, she had in fact packed swimwear in her trunk, although she’d never used it. After pondering this possibility for a while,

Harry eventually decided that he would still do it by himself. He determined that he would still be uncomfortable with her in that situation.

Although he didn't share this with Hermione, Harry had become a victim of a common mental process – something occurs to you that you'd never thought of before, and suddenly you can't stop thinking about it. In this case, he'd never really paid much attention to Hermione's figure, but now that he'd seen her in this dress that showed off a bit of cleavage on her, he couldn't get it out of his mind. Oh, he'd been aware that she'd been developing over the past two years, but now it was abundantly clear that his female best friend had very nice looking breasts. His brain insisted on conjuring up an image of her in a bikini top.

To her credit, Hermione recognized how uncomfortable the idea was making him, and so didn't press the issue, turning instead to speculating on what might be revealed by the proposed immersion of the recalcitrant egg.

When they finally called it a night and went up to their dorms, Harry found that Ron was still awake. "Where've you been?" the tall redhead demanded somewhat belligerently.

"Calming Hermione down," Harry snapped, not in the mood for any more of Ron's attitude.

Fortunately, Ron picked up on this, and backed off. "I really made a mess of things," he admitted as Harry finished putting on his pajamas. "You know I didn't really mean what I said, right?"

Harry gave him a sharp look as he climbed into his bed and pulled up the covers. "Hermione's the one you need to apologize to," he stated in a tone that left no room for argument. In response, Ron grunted some sort of acknowledgment and they both fell silent.

While Ron quickly fell asleep, Harry remained awake, pondering the events of the past four hours. He had made some very confusing discoveries about girls that night. Ginny, far from being shy and withdrawn, was bright, witty, attractive, and fun to be with. Hermione, while he already knew that he admired her intelligence, bravery, and loyalty, and enjoyed her company, he now found physically desirable as well. Cho, on the other hand, made his pulse race, but hadn't been very interesting to talk with. Fleur? Well, no surprises there. She was way out of his league. Overall though, he had a lot to think about.

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What If? ... Another Goblet Of Fire Alternative

The Second Task

Chapter 2 – The Second Task

(GOF Ch 25 & 26)

The morning following the Yule Ball, Ron approached Harry and Hermione in the common room, looking sheepish.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, not looking either of them in the eye. “I didn’t mean what I said last night.” Harry was about to say something conciliatory, but when he glanced over at Hermione he could see she wasn’t buying it.

“Didn’t mean what, exactly?” she demanded coldly. “That you think I betrayed Harry by going to the ball with Viktor? Or that you’re revolted at the thought of going out with me?” Ron had started to shake his head, but was now staring at his shoes and beginning to turn red. “Or,” she continued, heating up now, “that you think your sister and I are having sex with Harry?”

By this point Ron was glowing bright crimson, and Harry was feeling his own face warm up at her last query. After a few false starts, opening and closing his mouth without any sound coming out, Ron finally managed a response “All of it.”

Hermione pressed on, feeling that Ron had gotten away with this sort of thing too often. “In my experience people usually mean what they say,” she insisted. “Or there’s at least some basis for it.” Ron was clearly uneasy with the direction this conversation was going, and began shifting back and forth from one foot to the other. “The same thing happened last year,” Hermione reminded him. “It seems to me that there must be something fundamental about me that annoys you. Maybe you just manage to suppress it most of the time because you want my help with homework.”

“That’s not true!” Ron protested weakly.

In her agitated state Hermione now rounded on Harry. “And I suppose you’re going to take his side?” she challenged.

Harry looked at her, a bit taken aback. “I didn’t last night,” he reminded her.

Hermione immediately softened and smiled at him. “No, you didn’t,” she agreed

“I guess I’m in the same position you were in last month when you were trying to get us to make up,” Harry reasoned carefully. “I’m not taking his side, I’m trying to help my friends work things out between them.”

“Yeah, and that worked out so well,” Hermione shot back sarcastically, but managed a smile for his making the effort.

“Well, you were working with two pretty stubborn gits,” he admitted with a grin.

“Like you are right now?” Hermione responded with a sigh. “All right, for your sake I’ll try to be civil. But I really don’t want to have to put up with this anymore.” They both turned to Ron, who nodded with a mixture of remorse and relief.

“Okay, let’s go get some lunch,” Harry suggested, realizing this was the best he could expect for now. So having settled on this uneasy truce, the trio headed for the portrait hole.

Hermione wanted to go home for the final week of the holiday to be able to spend at least some of it with her parents, so she left that afternoon, catching the Knight Bus from Hogsmeade. For his part, Harry decided to take this opportunity to visit the prefect’s bath and open the egg. It turned into more of an adventure than he’d expected.

Once he discovered that a song was involved, he knew that Hermione would want to know the exact wording, so he climbed out of the bath to search for a quill. Unfortunately he hadn’t brought one with him (who takes a quill into the bath?) so he had to put his bathrobe back on, run back to his dorm, and return to the bath. It took several dunkings before he got it all completely down, and having to deal with wet parchment in addition to fending off a voyeuristic Moaning Myrtle, it was long past curfew when he finished. On top of everything else, on his way back to the common room he had an unpleasant encounter with Filch, Snape, and Moody and it cost him the Marauder’s Map when Moody decided to ‘borrow’ it. By the time he finally returned to his room he was annoyed and grumpy, to say the least.

In Hermione’s absence, Ron ended up bearing the brunt of his ire. Given how badly he’d irritated Harry the previous day, though, he took it without complaint, and attempted to focus Harry on interpreting the clue.

*Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took.
But past an hour - the prospect's black
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"*

“So, what do you think they’ll take that you have to recover?” Ron wondered.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t actually own that much stuff that I care about. I’d say what I’d miss the most are the invisibility cloak and my Firebolt. Since not that many people know about the cloak – Dumbledore does, but I imagine he’d want to keep it secret – I’m guessing it would be the Firebolt.”

When Hermione returned she was quite excited to hear of Harry’s new discovery. She agreed with his conclusion about needing to retrieve a treasured object from the merpeople in the lake, and immediately set about finding a charm that would allow him to breathe underwater.

Before the day was out he also noticed something else – Hermione’s attitude toward Ron had not thawed a bit while she’d been away, if anything she was even more distant. When he asked her about this in the library she was perfectly upfront with him about her feelings and shared with him what she was thinking.

Her week at home had allowed her to sort some things out, she told him, and one of her conclusions had been that she was no longer going to tolerate Ron’s insults. Part of this resolve had come from talking with her mother, who had wondered why she was even friends with someone who would treat her so badly. When Harry pointed out that Ron had his good points too, she acknowledged this, and admitted that her mother had formed her opinion after listening to her complain for several days.

Hermione also mentioned that her parents, particularly her father, were uncomfortable with her dating Viktor. They cited the fact that he was three years older, a professional athlete, and had fan girls chasing after him – her father used the term ‘groupies’, a reference to the overly enthusiastic females who hung around footballers. She had assured her parents that her date with the world famous seeker had been a one time thing. (Her mother had expressed surprise that she hadn’t gone to the ball with Harry, but she didn’t tell *him* that.)

But as far as Ron was concerned, she made it clear to Harry that she didn’t want to put him in the position of having to choose between his best friends. She understood that he’d want to spend time with Ron, and she’d tolerate his presence when the three of them were together even if she would no longer make an effort to be nice to him until there were clear signs that his behavior had improved.

Another change in the group dynamic that Harry soon became aware of was that Hermione began drawing in other students, such as Neville, but particularly Ginny. Whether it was a way to buffer herself from Ron, or whether she was still playing matchmaker, he wasn’t sure. It was also possible that Ginny considered her date with him to be an invitation to assume a greater role in his life. He didn’t mind too much, since he enjoyed her company, as long as she didn’t take it the wrong way.

Within a week Hermione discovered something called a Bubble-Head charm, which enclosed the

user in a protective bubble of breathable air. It seemed perfectly suited to the task, but it had a major drawback. It was a NEWT level charm, and difficult to master. It took Hermione the better part of a day to get even a faint bubble to form, and it quickly collapsed. Harry couldn't manage it at all.

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It was in mid-January, on their way back from a Hogsmeade visit, that a sequence of events occurred that led to a breakthrough. As they passed by the Durmstrang ship moored in the lake, they spotted Krum on the deck in swimming trunks, and while they watched he dove into the water.

"I wonder what spell he's using," Hermione mused aloud. "It didn't look like he cast a Bubble-Head."

"Forget the spell!" Ron blurted out. "He just dove into the lake in the middle of winter. It's ice cold! If Harry has to do that he'll freeze!"

Hermione overlooked the fact that Ron had once again dismissed one of her comments. "That's right," she agreed, turning to Harry. "You'll need a wetsuit or something. And you said you don't even have a swimsuit." Harry nodded his agreement, somewhat dismayed. In the rush to find a way to breathe underwater, he hadn't even thought about how cold the water was going to be, or what he'd wear.

Hermione picked up on his apprehension. "Well, that's fixed easily enough," she assured him. "We can order you something and have it shipped here. If necessary, I can give Mum your size and she can pick up what you need and send it back with Hedwig."

"What's a wet suit?" Ginny asked as they entered the castle.

"It's what scuba divers wear to keep them from getting cold when they're underwater a long time," Hermione answered. "In really cold water they use something else called a drysuit, but I think it would be too bulky to be practical for Harry. If we add a warming charm, the wetsuit should be good enough."

"You mean muggles have invented a way to breathe underwater?" Ron asked in amazement. "Why doesn't Harry use that?"

"They use a big tank of air called an aqualung," Harry explained. "But we wouldn't be allowed to take something like that into the lake with us. It's just supposed to be us and our wands."

"Couldn't you summon one like you did the Firebolt?" Ron persisted. Harry shook his head.

"Too complicated to use," he replied glumly. "By the time I figured out how it worked, the hour would be over. Besides, muggles spend hours and hours training to learn how to use them safely. I'll just have to keep working on the Bubble-Head charm."

“But it didn’t look like Viktor was using one,” Hermione reminded them as they climbed through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room. “I wonder what his plan is.”

“Why don’t you just ask him?” Ron shot back in a thinly-veiled jibe. “After all ...” Responding quickly, Harry immediately steered Hermione to a nearly empty corner in the back of the room while Ginny shut her brother up with a glare and dragged him over to the fireplace, her hand curled threateningly around her wand.

“Sorry,” Harry murmured to Hermione as he let go of her and settled into an armchair next to Neville. Hermione shook him off.

“Not a problem,” she responded as she took a seat of her own. “Thanks for breaking us apart before anything happened. It’s best if I ignore him.” After taking a few deep breaths to calm herself down, she looked over at him. “Do you want to practice some more?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Harry agreed. He drew out his wand and began attempting to cast the spell.

“What are you working on?” Neville inquired. “That doesn’t look like anything we’re learning in Charms.”

“It’s the Bubble-Head charm,” Hermione answered promptly. She leaned toward Neville and lowered her voice. “Harry needs to be able to breathe underwater for the Second Task.”

Neville cocked his head curiously. “Does it have to be a charm?”

Hermione stared at him for a moment, then frowned and shook her head. “No, I suppose it doesn’t. I don’t know why I didn’t consider the possibility, but there could be a potion he could take. Transfiguration is another option, of course, but we won’t take up human transfiguration until sixth year.”

Neville shook his head. “Actually, I was thinking of a magical plant,” he revealed. “I’ve been reading this book Professor Moody gave me, and there’s an underwater plant called gillyweed that grows in the Mediteranean. It’s supposed to allow you to breathe underwater. You grow gills and ...” To Neville’s shock he was cut off when Hermione leapt at him and gave him a massive hug.

“Neville, that’s perfect!” she squealed, drawing curious looks from the other students present. A few of them raised their eyebrows at the sight of Hermione hugging Neville, but before any rumors could get started Harry nudged her aside and threw his own arm around his roommate’s shoulders.

“Yeah, that’s great,” he enthused. “Where can we get some?”

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By the middle of February Harry was feeling pretty good about his preparations. Hermione had persuaded him that a thin wetsuit called a diveskin would be best for coverage and flexibility. It had long sleeves and long legs, but was light enough that it wouldn’t hinder his normal activities.

By having Harry add a warming charm they solved the temperature problem. Hermione had also ordered a swimsuit for him to wear under it. She ignored his protests at how tight it was, pointing out that it was the only way it would fit under the diveskin. From the smirk on her face as she made this argument, he suspected that she had an ulterior motive in having him own such brief swimwear, but neither of them was ready to admit this aloud.

The gillyweed was more difficult to obtain. In the end, Hedwig had to make a trip all the way to the Mediterranean coast; fortunately she returned a week before the task was due to take place. Hermione speculated that Fleur might be planning to use the magical plant as well. Since Beauxbatons was located in the south of France, she was likely to be aware of it as well.

Harry had even had time to test everything out in the prefects' bath the weekend before the task, experimenting with dosages of the gillyweed. By the eve of the event, he was ready. Hermione persuaded him to work on the Bubble-Head charm some more, just in case he needed it as a backup. She'd managed to produce a bubble that would last several minutes, but his always collapsed within seconds of their formation. So the two of them settled once more into their chairs in the corner of the common room, to see if he could get it to last longer. At nine pm she was called to McGonagall's office, and she told him to keep at it until she returned.

Focusing intently on his task, Harry cast the charm. The bubble formed, then dissolved. Again. And again. Then it failed completely. Another two successes. He began to keep score, trying to see how many successes he could get in a row without a miss. He didn't count any bubbles that didn't last for more than a second. On and he strove, not noticing the room gradually empty out as the students retired to their dorms.

"Harry, wake up! You're going to miss breakfast!" Harry's eyes shot open to see Neville leaning over him, shaking him by the shoulders, and realized that he had fallen asleep in the common room.

"What? Oh, thanks Neville. What time is it? Where's Hermione?" Harry sat up, straightening his glasses, and as his mind started functioning, he wondered why Hermione had let him fall asleep in the chair.

"It's nine o'clock," Neville responded anxiously. "The Second Task starts in half an hour." Now Harry was really concerned. What had happened to Hermione? There was no way she'd have let him oversleep like this.

"Hey Lavender," he called out to his blonde classmate. "Have you seen Hermione this morning?"

Lavender broke away from the girls she was talking with and walked over to him. "No, I haven't," she replied. "She must have come up last night after Parvati and I were asleep, and left again this morning before we woke up."

"But that doesn't make sense," Harry protested. "Why wouldn't she ..." He broke off as an awful

thought struck him, twisting his stomach into knots. “Oh no!” Without another word he jumped up and ran across the room, dove out the portrait hole, and raced down to the Great Hall. Just as he was about to push through the doors he ran into Cedric coming out, looking grim.

“Cedric! Hermione’s missing!” he gasped.

To his dismay, the Hufflepuff champion only nodded. “So is Cho.”

“Then they’re ...” Harry stammered, not wanting it to be true.

“...what we have to rescue from the lake,” Cedric confirmed in a low tone as he pulled Harry to a private corner.

“I thought it would be my Firebolt,” Harry moaned.

“Yeah, me too,” Cedric agreed. “I figured either my broomstick or the watch I got from my dad for my seventeenth birthday. But I guess we were wrong.”

“But how can they do that!” Harry cried, beginning to panic. “How can they put a real, live person in danger like that? We’ve got to get them out of there!” He looked like he was about to take off for the lake then and there before Cedric pulled him back and shook him by the arms.

“Harry! Calm down!” the older boy instructed. “Have you got a plan?” Harry nodded quickly, remembering the strategy he and Hermione had worked out. *Hermione!* “Then don’t panic, stick to your plan, and she’ll be all right,” Cedric continued. “Understand?” Harry took a deep breath and nodded again, turning once more toward the large double doors of the castle entrance.

“Don’t you need to change first?” Cedric reminded him. Looking down at himself, Harry realized he was still wearing the clothes from yesterday that he’d slept in all night and nodded sheepishly, then turned and sprinted back up to Gryffindor tower.

“Right, the plan,” he mumbled aloud as he ascended the stairs. “Her first instruction was to get a good night’s sleep and eat a good breakfast. So much for that part.”

Up in his dorm room he quickly donned his swimsuit and diveskin, tucked his wand into the pocket Hermione had added to one sleeve, grabbed the gillyweed they’d carefully measured out the day before and stuffed it into another pocket, threw his winter cloak over himself, and hurried back out again. He briefly wondered where Ron was but didn’t dwell on it, as he was too worried about Hermione. Flying past several clusters of students still walking down to the lake, he arrived at the starting point with only five minutes to spare.

Pausing to catch his breath, he looked around at his fellow competitors. Cedric gave him a nod, his face set in determination. Krum merely glanced his way briefly then returned his gaze to the lake. The professional quidditch player, who was undoubtedly used to competitions like this, had his game face on. By contrast, Fleur was pale, even more so than she’d been before the first task, and was trembling slightly. Harry took several deep breaths and tried to focus his thoughts on the task

at hand. He needed to find Hermione at the bottom of the lake in under an hour. He could do it. He *had* to do it!

Harry barely heard the instructions from Bagman as he announced the conditions of the second task ‘... *an hour to recover what was taken from them ...*’. At the starting whistle all four champions dropped their cloaks. Harry quickly began stuffing his gillyweed into his mouth and chewing on it while wading into the water. To his left he noted that Cedric was wearing what resembled old-fashioned men’s swimwear from the 1920’s, with tank top and mid-thigh trunks. Krum wore similar trunks but was bare-chested. Fleur, farther down the line, was in a more modern, rather revealing one-piece suit that had the male half of the crowd leaning forward in their seats. Apparently she was going for an alluring look at the expense of warmth.

Krum pulled out his wand and dove in first, casting a spell as he broke the surface of the water, but Harry couldn’t see what it did. Cedric, as expected, cast a Bubble-Head charm and followed. Fleur was also chewing gillyweed, while casting a warming charm on herself. She caught Harry looking at her and nodded to him before diving in. Harry finished chewing and swallowed, feeling the gill transformation begin. He submerged right behind her, but quickly lost sight of the beautiful French champion in the murky water.

Approaching the mervillage Harry was glad for the ‘home pitch advantage’ that he was experiencing in this task. He’d been able to deal with the grindylow threat from having been taught about them in third year Defense Against the Dark Arts, and the giant squid had recognized him from the times he’d tossed food scraps into the lake and given him a free pass. Even better, Moaning Myrtle had appeared along the way and offered directions.

Finally, as the songs of the watching merpeople taunted him about running out of time and losing his best friend forever, he spied a line of figures floating just off the bottom of the lake, tied to a statue. Cursing the poor visibility, he strained to make them out. The first was a small girl with long silvery blonde hair. The second ... Hermione!

Kicking hard, he sped toward her with his wand out, only to have his path blocked by a fierce looking merman holding a spear. Apparently there was one more obstacle to be overcome.

Expelliarmus ! No sound emerged as he mouthed the words, but the beam of light flashed from his holly wand nevertheless and the surprised merman’s spear sailed from his hands. But to Harry’s consternation three more took his place. Backing up in frustration, Harry took a moment to size up the situation. Just how many was he expected to fight off? As he looked on he could see Cho Chang on Hermione’s other side and a red-haired figure beyond her.

Expelliarmus ! *Stupefy* ! *Stupefy* ! Three more spells streaked toward his opponents, and they were dispatched as well, but once again they were reinforced. Frustrated, Harry began to circle around trying to put Hermione between him and his guards, thinking he might be able to cut her loose and summon her to himself before they could react. From his new vantage point he could now make out the fourth hostage – Ron.

Ron? He rubbed his eyes and looked again. What was Ron doing here? Harry ran the words of the clue back through his mind. ‘... what you’ll sorely miss’. Hermione and Ron were his best friends, and it was certainly true that his friends were what he valued most in his life. Was he supposed to retrieve both of them? Then what about Krum? Was his hostage elsewhere in the village? Fighting back the nagging feeling that he was missing something, he kicked his feet and maneuvered closer to Ron. This time the mermen made no move to stop him.

Suddenly out of the gloom Cedric appeared, his head distorted by an enormous bubble, and he headed straight toward Cho. Straight and completely unhindered! A *Diffindo* cut her loose and he grabbed hold of her arm. After giving Harry a wave of encouragement he kicked off the bottom and began to rise to the surface.

Thoroughly irritated now, Harry shot his own *Diffindo* at the ropes holding Ron down, cutting him free, then turned back to Hermione. Once again the mermen moved to block him, and he began to consider using some more powerful hexes. He wondered what these ugly half fish creatures would think about having their statue blown up with a *Reducto* curse. Another flurry of stunning spells created an opening, and he slipped in another cutting hex to sever Hermione’s bonds. Now, if he could only get her away from the remaining mermen guards and get out of here!

Without warning something massive crashed into him from behind, knocking him off balance, and he looked up to see a creature with the head of a shark moving straight for Hermione. Reacting on instinct, he immediately fired a Banishing charm at it, knocking it away from her and slamming it into the statue. The creature, which Harry now recognized as a human with a shark’s head, gathered itself and turned to glare at him (inasmuch as a shark can glare) while the protective screen of armed merman closed ranks between them, with Hermione on the other side.

After staring for a few more seconds, the creature turned away from Harry, took hold of Hermione’s limp form, and started swimming upwards. By now Harry had recognized the swimming trunks and realized that this was Krum, who had performed a partial self-transfiguration.

Then the further realization finally struck him about the reason for the mermen’s interference – Hermione was Krum’s hostage, not his. He slumped back against the statue in shock, his mind screaming its refusal to accept this heresy. How could anyone in their right mind think that Hermione was more important to Viktor Krum than she was to Harry Potter? It was inconceivable. But there it was, the proof even now ascending out of view toward the surface. Now he needed to regroup his thoughts and finish the task.

Harry retrieved Ron, who had drifted off a little ways during his battle with the mermen, and then turned back to look at the other hostage. From her appearance this was likely Fleur’s little sister. But where was Fleur? What would happen to this girl if the French champion failed to arrive in time? Harry glanced at his watch, and groaned. It had stopped. *I’ll have to remember to get a waterproof watch the next time I do this*, he thought with a mirthless chuckle. He reluctantly decided to wait just a little bit longer.

Up on the dock, Hermione had been quickly wrapped in a blanket, her soggy robes and outer clothing removed. As soon as Madame Pomfrey released her she hurried to the edge to peer anxiously into the water. As time passed and there was no sign of Harry and Ron, she grew more and more nervous. At the same time she was growing more and more annoyed with Viktor's attention.

Upon reaching McGonagall's office the previous night she had been informed that she and Ron were to be hostages for their champions. By the time she worked out that Ron was for Harry and she evidently was for Viktor, she didn't have a chance to object before Dumbledore cast the spell to put her into an enchanted sleep. The next thing she knew she was in the lake and Viktor was pushing her out of the water onto the dock. Already put out not only that the professors had chosen Ron instead of her as Harry's hostage, but even more so that she'd been selected for a guy she hardly knew, she now steadfastly ignored his attempts to ask her something.

Looking up into the stands, she caught Neville's eye, and her fellow Gryffindor put up one finger, then five. Harry had been in the water for an hour and five minutes. When they'd calculated the amount of gillyweed he would use, they'd allowed for a ten minute margin of error. Shaking her head in her mounting concern, she moved over to where Cedric was standing and asked him if he'd seen Harry down at the bottom of the lake.

"Actually, he got there first," the older boy informed her. "When I arrived he was fighting against a half dozen armed mermen trying to get to you. For a while I was worried that I'd have to fight them too, but they didn't try to keep me from Cho."

"Wait, he was fighting to get to me?" she interrupted. Cedric nodded.

"He thought you were his hostage," he replied. "So did I. We figured it out this morning when you and Cho were missing. Or at least we thought we did. I guess it was actually Weasley, huh?" Hermione nodded irritably, still peeved at the selections. "Harry was amazing, though," Cedric continued, "the way he was knocking out those guys right and left. I wonder why he's not back yet."

Hermione felt a warm glow well up inside her at the thought of Harry fighting through a host of armed warriors to rescue her, but pushed it away as another realization struck her. Fleur was back without her hostage. And Harry was still down at the bottom of the lake, even though he'd undoubtedly already freed Ron.

Harry Bloody Potter and his infuriatingly noble saving-people-thing!

Harry decided that he couldn't wait any longer. Taking the mermen guards by surprise, he quickly shot a cutting hex at the little girl's bonds and grabbed her arm before they could react. Reaching out to Ron with his other hand, he began kicking for the surface. He soon discovered that his passengers, with their heavy waterlogged robes, were slowing him down dramatically, so he stopped for a second to vanish the burdensome garments, reasoning that they were under some

protective spell and wouldn't be affected by the cold. This left Ron in his shirt and trousers, but to his dismay the little girl was only wearing underwear beneath her robes. Averting his eyes in embarrassment, he resumed his journey upward.

Then his luck ran out. He felt the reverse transformation begin as his gills started fading away and the webbing between his fingers and toes disappeared. Thinking quickly he shot Banishing spells at Ron and the little girl, sending them rocketing toward the surface. Unfortunately he didn't know any charms that would do the same thing to himself. While kicking as hard as he could he pointed his wand at his head and spoke the Bubble-Head incantation.

A small bubble formed and he took a deep gulp of air to fill his lungs and exhaled, but as soon as he did the bubble collapsed. Still kicking furiously, he tried the charm again. This time it failed.

Standing helplessly beside Cedric at the edge of the dock, still wrapped in her blanket, Hermione turned once more toward Neville. This time he held up one finger followed by ten. Harry's time had run out.

"Cedric, cast a Bubble-Head charm on me, I'm going down after him," she demanded. She would have done it herself, but her wand had been taken from her when she'd been put into the enchanted sleep.

"What! You can't do that!" he protested. Suddenly there was a disturbance in the water as Ron and a little girl popped to the surface. While several hands reached out to pull them up to the dock, Hermione quickly scanned the water for any sign of Harry. Nothing.

"DO IT NOW!" she screamed at Cedric. Startled, and realizing that a furious Hermione Granger was something he didn't want to deal with, Cedric complied. As soon as the bubble formed around her head, Hermione dropped her blanket and dove into the frigid water.

When she'd been taken up to McGonagall's office the previous night, she'd been dressed as she normally was during the winter. Under her robes she wore a skirt and jumper, and layered beneath those she also wore tights and a camisole over her underwear for extra warmth in the cold, drafty castle. Pomfrey had removed the skirt and jumper when she came out of the lake, leaving her in the tights and camisole. Now, as soon as she hit the water she instantly regretted not also asking Cedric for a warming charm, because the frigid chill shot right through to her bones. But she forced it out of her mind in her desperation to find Harry, and swam downward as hard as she could. (Later, after it was all over, it would occur to her to wonder how it was even possible for her, and Cedric earlier, to dive below the surface with large air bubbles around their heads. The extra buoyancy should have prevented it. After some fretting, she would ultimately conclude that somehow magic had triumphed over physics.)

After what seemed like an eternity, she spotted Harry below her, his mouth shut tightly trying to keep himself from inhaling any water. His wand was pointed at his head and his legs were still kicking weakly, but without much energy. Putting on an extra burst of speed she caught him and

immediately pressed her mouth to his.

Harry was certain that he was a goner. After all the times he'd nearly died at Hogwarts, it seemed ironic that he would end up drowning in the lake. As his vision began to go dark around the edges when his brain started to shut down for lack of oxygen, he found that his thoughts were of regret. Regret that he wouldn't see Sirius or his friends again. And oddly enough, he felt regret that he'd let Hermione down after all she'd gone through to help him prepare for this task.

Suddenly someone grabbed him, and he felt a pair of lips on his, forcing his own apart. Startled, he relaxed his effort to keep them sealed and air was forced into his mouth, and he gratefully inhaled the life-giving substance. After a long, sweet, deep breath his mind cleared enough to realize that it was Hermione's mouth locked onto his. When she pulled away to take another breath, he discovered that both of their heads were enclosed in a single bubble of air and he was able to breath freely on his own.

Without consciously realizing it, he'd wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close up against his body, and now that he was regaining his senses he could feel that she was cold. Without another thought he aimed his wand at her and cast a warming spell. Neither of them had yet to say anything – her face was now pressed up against his, cheek to cheek – but she communicated her thanks with a squeeze, which he returned. As he became more aware of what was happening, he noticed what she was wearing – he could feel her body quite clearly through the tights and especially the wet camisole – and he pulled her even closer. And it struck him that this felt very nice. Now completely entwined, they broke the surface

Immediately, those waiting on the dock sprang into action. Cedric pulled Harry out while Krum grabbed Hermione and hauled her up next to him. He took the opportunity to look her up and down, noting with pleasure how her wet camisole and tights clung to her, revealing every curve. In particular her nipples, being both cold and wet, were rock hard and in prominent display. But she ignored this completely and clutched hard at Harry. When someone tried to wrap blankets around them, neither would let go of the other and they ended up wrapped in the same blanket.

Hermione was nearly hysterical now that the danger was past, sobbing into Harry's shoulder and babbling incoherently. She relented enough to allow someone to give them another blanket, so that they each had their own, but as soon as it was secured she wrapped herself around him once more, which he accepted without hesitation. As he held her in his arms he leaned in close and whispered fervently, "Thank you."

"I thought I was going to lose you," she sniffed. "I couldn't bear that thought and I ... I didn't know what else to do!" Harry gave her a squeeze to show he understood, and pressed a soft kiss on the top of her head. Hermione shivered, not entirely from the cold. Boldly, she reached up and tugged down the zipper at his throat, opening the diveskin part way, and laid her head against his chest.

All four champions were clustered together now. Cedric was hovering protectively over Harry and Hermione, wanting to be certain they were going to be okay. Fleur, who had been in a panic fearing that her sister would be lost at the bottom of the lake, had seized her as soon as she

emerged and had yet to release her, but looked up at Harry with shining eyes.

“Merci! Merci!” she said breathlessly. “You saved ’er.” Krum was still standing next to Hermione, looking put out at being ignored. Seeing that she had finally calmed down, he tried to pull her off of Harry but she pushed him away again.

This last effort reminded Harry of what he’d discovered at the bottom of the lake. “Are you in love with Viktor?” he asked hesitantly.

“No!” she shot back quickly. “Not at all.”

“Then why were you the one he’d miss the most?” he complained, still upset about having to watch helplessly as the Bulgarian swam away with her.

“I have no idea,” she assured him. “Other than the ball, I’ve only talked with him in the library.”

Fleur, having regained her composure, approached Harry, bent down, and kissed him twice on each cheek. As his face turned beet red, Hermione began to scowl but then relaxed, realizing how upset the French champion had been about her sister and how grateful she was now. And besides, Harry still hadn’t let go of her, nor had she relaxed her grip on him.

As things began to settle down, the group of champions and their hostages turned their attention to the judges, who were engaged in an intense discussion. The crux of it was whether Harry should be disqualified because he had received assistance at the end from Hermione. At this point Harry lost his cool.

All of the emotion of the day – the horror of learning Hermione had been taken, the frustration at the bottom of the lake, the terror of running out of air before reaching the surface, and the relief when Hermione had appeared and literally given him the breath of life – finally bubbled over as his temper erupted.

“I wouldn’t have needed any assistance if I hadn’t had to fight off half the mermaid village to get to the hostages,” he blurted out loudly as he closed the distance to the judges’ stand. “They let the others just swim right up without doing anything!”

Dumbledore turned from where he’d been conferring with Bagman and peered over his glasses at his student. “The mermen guards were merely seeing that you took the correct hostage. They would have prevented you from interfering with the others.”

“How was I supposed to know that Hermione wasn’t my hostage?” Harry shouted back. “It should be obvious to anyone who knows us that she’s someone I’d sorely miss!”

“Mr. Weasley was selected because he is your best friend,” Dumbledore returned with the patience of a teacher correcting a student. “You should have ...”

“Hermione’s been my best friend this year!” Harry disagreed hotly. “Ron wouldn’t even talk to me last term. And how would anyone figure her for Krum? They only went on one date. If we were

supposed to rescue our Yule Ball dates why wasn't Ginny down there instead of Ron? Davies wasn't there either."

"Nevertheless, when considering all four hostages, you should have realized that Mr. Weasley couldn't be there for anyone other than you," Dumbledore persisted. "Each of the other hostages had an obvious connection to one of the other champions."

"Well, why couldn't Krum rescue Ron?" Harry retorted sarcastically. "He's a quidditch star and Ron's the world's biggest quidditch fan. He'd probably miss his fans, wouldn't he?" This got a loud laugh from the watching students in the stands. The crowd was certainly enjoying this confrontation much more than staring at an empty lake for an hour.

At this point Hermione managed to pull Harry away from the judges. He went without protest - he'd made his point and needed to calm down. But he couldn't resist grumbling loudly that the champions were risking their lives in this tournament, and now their friends' lives were in danger as well, so they at least deserved competent organizers. And anyone who thought that Krum would miss Hermione more than he would was completely mental.

Ron, who hadn't said anything up to this point for fear of antagonizing his friend further, now spoke up. "Harry, why did you bring up the girl?" he wondered. "You didn't take that song thing seriously, did you? Dumbledore wouldn't have let any of us drown."

Harry stared at him blankly for a moment, then looked to Hermione, who nodded uncomfortably. "Dumbledore assured us when he put us into the enchanted sleep that we'd be quite safe, and would awaken when we were back above water," she explained.

Harry then turned to Cedric and Fleur inquiringly. Cedric shrugged while Fleur nodded and confirmed that she'd been fooled too, which was why she had been so frantic before Harry had returned with her sister, and why she was so grateful to him. She added that as far as she was concerned, the fact that Gabrielle wasn't actually in danger didn't make him any less of a hero.

"But why would the song have said that then, if it wasn't true?" Harry complained.

"Perhaps it was to make the task more difficult by making it more stressful," Hermione suggested. "It might be that they thought it would be more challenging that way."

Cedric had been silently observing this exchange, and now came to a decision. Striding back to the judges stand he announced loudly that as far as he was concerned, Harry had won the event. Fleur was right behind him, echoing his sentiment. When everyone turned to Krum, though, he merely scowled and looked away.

Despite Cedric's noble gesture, however, not all the judges agreed. Although Dumbledore proclaimed that Harry's actions in wanting to return all the hostages safely showed moral fiber, his scores ranged from 0 to 10, for a total of 37 points. Cedric received 45, Krum 40, and Fleur 25, leaving Harry now third in the overall standings.

Harry didn't care – he had done what he thought was right, and the people whose opinions mattered most to him agreed. Cedric and Fleur insisted on walking back to the castle with him in a show of solidarity. It made for an interesting sight, with Gabrielle clinging timidly to Fleur, Cho latching onto Cedric with pride, Hermione still holding tight to Harry, Ron right behind him, and Krum following several paces back, still hoping to have a word alone with Hermione. But the loud cheering of three of the Hogwarts houses, joined by the students of Beauxbatons, left no doubt about how the bulk of the onlookers felt about the day's events.

When at last they came to Gryffindor tower, Harry and Hermione finally let go of each other in order to go up to their respective rooms to change their clothes. As they parted they caught each other's eyes and an understanding passed between them. Both of them realized that things had changed that day – statements had been made, emotions had been unleashed, long repressed feelings released. They didn't need to talk about it, not yet anyway. They just knew. And that was enough for now.

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Unfortunately, they would not be allowed the opportunity to explore their relationship at their own pace. There had been too many witnesses to their display, especially the unseen Rita Skeeter, whose lurid exposé in the pages of *Witch Weekly* of their 'love triangle' with Viktor Krum had caused Hermione to become the recipient of the ire of witches across the country, including Molly Weasley. And they both knew that any move at all on their parts that even hinted of their being a couple would make things even worse.

It was in a deserted classroom two weeks later that they met and came to a decision. They both openly shared their feelings about how much they meant to each other, and acknowledged that they had become much more than friends. But each was reluctant to go any further, Harry because he didn't want Hermione to get hurt, and Hermione because she didn't want Harry distracted in his preparation for the final task.

With a heartfelt hug they both agreed that things were just too crazy right then to get into a serious relationship; after the tournament was over they would see what might develop. But for now, to the rest of the world they'd continue to be best friends.

"Just as long as you know that I'm not going to stop doing things that show you affection, Harry Potter," Hermione teased as they made their way, arm in arm, back to their dorm.

Harry stopped and turned to her with a look of mock horror. "Hermione, I would never give up your hugs," he vowed solemnly. But try as he might, he couldn't resist a grin. Hermione, of course, couldn't resist giving him one of those selfsame hugs.

"Good, as long as we're in agreement, then," she declared firmly with a smile. And as she did their gazes locked – green eyes with brown. It didn't matter what they called it. They were together. This just felt right.

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What If? ... Another Goblet Of Fire Alternative The Third Task And Its Aftermath

Chapter 3 – The Third Task and Its Aftermath

GOF Ch 31, 35, 36, & 37

Hermione was frustrated – she hadn't been able to talk to Harry since breakfast. Immediately after the meal had ended, he and the other champions had been escorted away, she later learned, to spend the day with their families. In Harry's case it had been Mrs. Weasley and her oldest son Bill who had come to offer their support.

While this was a very nice gesture on their part, it had prevented her from spending any time alone with him. Although she was able to sit next to him during lunch and dinner, the atmosphere at the mealtimes had been strained, since Mrs. Weasley wasn't feeling too friendly toward her right now. This was a result of Rita Skeeter's articles about her relationship with the Boy Who Lived and her alleged toying with his affections. And while she now knew what the nasty reporter's secret was, and was working on a plan to deal with her, at the moment she was more concerned with Harry's imminent participation in the final task. At this point all she could do to communicate her feelings to him was to squeeze his hand under the table, and even this gesture was marred by the Weasley matron casting suspicious glances at her from her seat opposite them.

Finally Dumbledore got up and announced that it was time for the champions to gather for their final instructions. Harry stood, along with the rest of the group seated around him, and his friends began to wish him luck. Bill shook his hand while Mrs. Weasley hugged him hard, then Ginny followed with a hug of her own. Ron and Neville slapped him on the back before he turned to Hermione.

They shared a look that said more than any words they could think of at the moment, and then Harry opened his arms and Hermione flew into them.

"You'll do fine," she whispered while he hugged her harder than he ever had. "And no matter what, remember that I'm so proud of you."

She felt a tug on the back of her robes and reluctantly released him. Ginny gave her an apologetic shrug as she backed away, and Hermione quickly turned so no one could see her wipe at the moisture in her eyes. Then they all joined the stream of students exiting the Great Hall and heading toward the quidditch stadium. At the door she turned back, hoping for one last glimpse of Harry, but he had already disappeared.

It was by far the longest night of her life. The first task, although nerve-wracking for her, had been over relatively quickly. Besides that one, she realized, the Triwizard Tournament wasn't much of a spectator sport. She'd been in an enchanted sleep for the second task, but knew it must have been rather boring for the onlookers, watching the champions enter the water and then having to wait an hour for them to emerge. But the third task was sheer torture.

The champions had run into the maze at intervals, and then all that the watching crowd was aware of were a few shouts that drifted up from the tall hedges occasionally, or the roar of some nameless beast. Twice red sparks shot into the air, and they saw first Fleur, then Viktor being removed from the treacherous battleground. And while this increased Harry's chances of winning the tournament, it also underscored just how dangerous this task was. At this point Hermione was more concerned with Harry making it out alive than whether he or Cedric would claim the prize.

After another long wait Hermione noticed Mad-Eye Moody, who had been staring intently at the maze with his magical eye towards where the center would be, abruptly straighten up with a gleeful look of triumph on his face. Something had obviously just happened inside the maze. The old ex-Auror had been surreptitiously helping Harry during the tournament. Did this mean that Harry had just reached the Cup? Had Harry won?!

But the excitement she'd felt at this speculation soon faded as nothing else happened. In fact, all sound had ceased coming from the inside of the maze, almost as though it was now deserted. And still the wait went on.

A feeling of dread gradually crept over her. This was not right. Something had gone terribly, terribly wrong. She could see the same suspicion slowly growing amongst the other spectators. By now Hermione had gone quite pale, and her hands, which had been twisting nervously in her lap for the past hour, now clenched together so tightly that her knuckles had turned white. Ron, sitting on her right between her and his mother, didn't notice. But Ginny, on her other side, did. And she could see that Hermione's emotions were far more pronounced than any of Harry's other friends. The girl looked as though she were about to pass out.

Ginny nudged her elbow and Hermione jumped, startled out of her trance. She turned to her younger friend, eyes questioning. Ginny leaned close to whisper in her ear. "You're in love with him," she stated simply, part question, part deduction.

Hermione stared at her a moment, then nodded, wiping more tears from her eyes. Ginny said nothing, but laced her hand into Hermione's arm and squeezed, offering comfort, not judgment, and Hermione managed to relax slightly. But only a little bit – Harry was still facing some unknown danger and she was terrified that whatever sinister purpose had put him into this tournament was now being fulfilled.

Turning their attention back to the maze below, the friends noticed that Karkaroff had evidently gone missing, as the two other headmasters had gathered at the entrance along with the rest of the officials and the group was engaged in an animated, and increasingly heated, discussion.

“I’m going down there,” Hermione announced, unable to take the uncertainty any longer. Before Mrs. Weasley could object, Ron was on his feet to join her, with Neville and Ginny right behind.

Just as the group reached the bottom of the stands, there was a sudden flash of color in front of the maze. Harry had reappeared! But in the brief glimpse Hermione got before the professors and tournament officials converged around him she could see that he was seriously hurt. And he was holding the unmoving form of Cedric Diggory.

A throng of people appeared from nowhere, shouting and screaming, everyone trying to get to the spot where the two Hogwarts champions lay. Harry’s friends tried to fight their way through to reach him, but to no avail. Hermione, immensely frustrated at being too short to see anything, yelled to Ron to tell her what was going on, but he couldn’t hear her over the din.

After an eternity, they reached Dumbledore, who was trying unsuccessfully to restore order. “Where’s Harry!” Hermione screamed. Despite all the voices clamoring for his attention, the headmaster recognized this one, and the note of panic it contained. An expression of alarm flashed across his face as he only now realized that Harry was no longer present.

“I thought I saw Moody with him a minute ago, but then I lost them again,” Ron blurted out breathlessly. This only deepened Dumbledore’s alarm, and the students were momentarily taken aback. They had never seen the normally unflappable ancient wizard so shaken up. In a flash he called Snape and McGonagall to his side, and moving more quickly than they thought possible, hurried toward the castle.

The intrepid students attempted to follow, but the crowd that seemed to magically part to let the headmaster pass closed up again behind him, and they promptly fell behind. By the time they reached the castle itself, the group of professors was nowhere in sight. Assuming that Harry would have been taken to the Hospital Wing, based on his apparent injuries, they decided to head there.

Once again, they were frustrated, as there was no sign of him and Madame Pomfrey was as much in the dark as they were. Seeing no other alternatives, they sat down to wait. Again, the minutes ticked past and Hermione felt her already tenuous grasp on her composure slipping away with them. Finally the door opened and they all leapt to their feet in eager anticipation, only to slump back down when Bill and Molly Weasley entered. Immediately the Weasley matriarch began demanding the same answers of the school nurse that were no more forthcoming for her than they had been for the students.

Hermione could stand it no more. While Mrs. Weasley berated the frazzled healer, she jumped up again and darted out of the door. With no other course of action presenting itself, she determined to go to Moody’s office on the chance that the Defense professor had taken Harry there.

This time she was in luck. As she made the final turn in the corridor outside the Defense classroom, she spotted Dumbledore and Harry emerging from the door. Her feet flying, she raced the final distance and caught him up in a fierce hug, her tears flowing once more.

Dumbledore, who had wisely stepped aside rather than be bowled over by Hermione’s single-

mindful assault, waited a few moments, only taking care to ensure that the pair of students didn't topple over from the collision. After a decent interval he cleared his throat and asked the girl to wait for them in the hospital wing, as they still had some business to take care of in his office. He was only a bit surprised when she flat out refused to leave Harry's side, but was somewhat taken aback by the forcefulness of her refusal. The once determinedly rule-abiding young girl didn't even hesitate for an instant in defying her headmaster.

When he saw that Harry had no intention of releasing his hold on her either, the ancient wizard relented and allowed her to accompany them to their next destination. To his relief, she refrained from pestering either Harry or himself with questions, being content for now to know that he was alive and had returned from wherever he'd been relatively unharmed. And he had to admit that Harry seemed to be benefiting from her presence. Once they arrived in his office and met Sirius (with Hermione squeezing in next to Harry in his chair so she wouldn't have to let go of him), and he'd persuaded Harry to tell them what had happened, the advantage of having her along became even more apparent. For Harry's inclination to comfort her during the more traumatic parts of his tale actually helped him get through it without breaking down. By focusing his concern on the girl in his arms rather than himself, his own despair was actually more manageable.

At long last the small party reached the Hospital wing, Harry being supported between Dumbledore and Hermione, with Sirius trailing protectively in his animagus form. As they came through the door the clamor instantly ceased, as everyone beheld Harry's broken state, but immediately started back up again. While Dumbledore raised his hands to forestall his anxiously waiting supporters, particularly Mrs. Weasley who had already started toward Harry before being intercepted by the headmaster, Hermione led him gently to the bed in the corner that he always used.

Throughout it all, she'd not once let go of him. She fully realized how close she had come to losing him, and she was not holding back her feelings for him any longer. Even while Mrs. Weasley and the others gave him hugs, she still kept her arms around him, only releasing him with great reluctance when Madame Pomfrey took him behind the screen to change into pajamas. As soon as he emerged and climbed wearily into bed she was right beside him again, seemingly permanently attached to his arm, and settled into a chair at the head of his bed. She tuned out the conversation while Dumbledore gave a greatly abbreviated explanation of the night's events and pleaded with them not to question Harry about it, and allow him to rest. Hermione was well aware that the last thing he needed from her was an interrogation. At this point the best things she could offer him were her support, comfort, and affection, and she had all those items for him in an unending supply.

Harry soon drifted off to sleep, one hand still interlaced with Hermione's, while her other hand tenderly stroked his face or ran lightly through his hair, offering soothing calm. Unfortunately, her efforts were soon interrupted when Cornelius Fudge came storming into the infirmary. Despite Pomfrey's strenuous objections, Harry underwent yet another painful ordeal, having to witness the Minister of Magic flatly refuse to believe his story, and deny the possibility that the dark lord could have returned. By the time the blustering politician was finished, Harry was all worked up again and Hermione was fighting an overwhelming urge to hex the idiot.

Along with Ginny's help, Hermione worked once more to soothe him while the focus in the room changed, and the adults began plotting what was no less than a subversive movement to counter the magical government's course of action over the coming months. Hermione paid only sparing attention; her priority right now was on getting Harry healthy again, both physically and emotionally. But as the discussion progressed, she realized that he, and by extension herself and their other friends, would be in more danger than they had ever been, and that their safety would soon become a primary concern. Subconsciously, she moved even closer to Harry, wanting more than anything to crawl into the bed with him and take him into her arms.

One by one the adults departed, Bill to the ministry to fill in his father on the situation with Fudge, McGonagall to fetch Hagrid and Madame Maxime, Pomfrey to see to Winky, Mrs. Weasley to contact Remus and others whose names Hermione didn't recognize, and Dumbledore to resume his official duties. By now only Sirius and the students remained and Harry was fading fast. At this point Hermione managed to convince him to take the rest of his Dreamless Sleep potion and Ginny and Neville decided to return to Gryffindor tower.

As Hermione settled back in her chair by Harry's bedside, her eye caught sight of a peculiarly colored insect on the window ledge, and her breath caught as she realized what, or rather who, it was. As casually as she could manage she stood up and approached Ron, maneuvering so that he was between her and the window.

"Ron," she started as though a thought had just occurred to her. "Could you go back to the common room and bring back a book for me?" As the befuddled redhead looked at her in puzzlement she carefully drew her wand. "I think I left it on the table in the corner ... *Stupefy!*"

A beam of red light shot from her wand and nailed the insect, which flipped onto its back, motionless. "What the Bloody ...?" Ron began, but Hermione was already past him and at the window. Sirius, realizing that she wouldn't have shot off a stunning spell for no reason, was at her side as she carefully levitated the immobilized bug into the empty goblet of Dreamless Sleep potion Harry had just taken.

"What is it?" Sirius asked, as she conjured up a lid to seal up her captive.

"This," Hermione declared with satisfaction, holding up the goblet for him and Ron to see. "Is an animagus who's been *bugging* us for months. Also known as Rita Skeeter, reporter for the Daily Prophet."

Ron moved closer for a better look while muttering his disbelief, but Sirius gasped as the realization hit him. "And she just overheard everything! All of Dumbledore's plans, Snape's mission ... and she knows about me." Hermione nodded grimly.

"We can't allow her to keep any of that information," she responded determinedly. "Do you know how to do an *Obliviation*?"

Sirius cast an admiring glance at her. This girl had continued to impress him more and more ever since he'd met her a year ago in the Shrieking Shack, and then been rescued by her and his godson

on a hippogriff. While she gave every appearance of being a level-headed, proper young lady who was deeply respectful of authority, under certain circumstances she could be as devious and disregarding of the rules as any Marauder. And those certain circumstances were always centered on the messy-haired young man sleeping beside them in the hospital bed.

“Don’t worry,” he replied with a gleam in his eye. “I’ll take care of her.”

A sound at the door alerted them that Madame Pomfrey was returning, and Sirius quickly transformed back into a dog. Hermione immediately moved back to Harry’s side, resting her hand on his arm as she took up her vigil once more.

“Are you two still here?” the hospital matron asked in surprise at seeing Ron and Hermione. “Back to your dorms with you now, it’s getting late.” At this instruction Hermione’s eyes grew wide and she moved closer to Harry, her fingers tightening around his upper arm.

“Please, Madame Pomfrey, can’t I stay?” she pleaded. “He needs me ... I mean I need to ... I just want to be here with him, just to make sure he’s ...”

“Nonsense, dear, he’ll be perfectly fine here by himself,” the healer smiled. “This is a hospital wing after all. He’s spent plenty of nights here before this, as you well know.”

“But what if he wakes up?” Hermione persisted with a note of desperation in her voice. “I’ll need to be here for him then.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s just not possible,” Pomfrey stated firmly, but with a sympathetic note. “You know the rules as well as anyone. Only patients are allowed to stay the night in the infirmary.”

Ron followed this exchange with growing interest. He was aware that Hermione had been on the edge of hysteria ever since Harry reappeared, and was now coming close to breaking down. While he may have been a complete idiot as far as girls were concerned, even he could see how close Harry and Hermione had grown in the past few months. They were together nearly constantly, and Harry, who in the past had always shied away from physical contact with people, now was perfectly at ease with Hermione touching him. Ever since the second task she regularly took his arm or gave him quick hugs, but more surprisingly he often put his arm around her when he was feeling particularly grateful, or even for no discernable reason. And for the past hour Hermione had been clamped onto him as though her life depended on it. But, Ron was not at all prepared for what she said next.

“Ron,” she spoke suddenly, turning to him with her voice quivering, and tears welling up in her eyes. But there was a fierce determination on her face.

“Break my arm.”

“What!” Ron stared at her in stunned disbelief.

“Miss Granger!” Madame Pomfrey gasped, totally aghast at what she’d just heard.

“If that’s what it takes for me to be able to stay here with him,” Hermione sobbed. “Then ...”

“I cannot permit you to go through with this,” the nurse interrupted sternly. “You may return in the morning. I assure you he will survive without you until that time.”

Ron’s mind was working furiously. It was obvious that Hermione’s feelings for his best mate were far stronger than he’d realized. He wondered if Harry knew. But the immediate problem was how to get out of this impasse without Hermione completely losing it. The three of them had often done things and been places they weren’t supposed to over the years but ... Then he had it. He reached out to grab Hermione’s arm and spun her around to face him.

“Cloak!” he whispered to her. Her glistening eyes stared at him for several moments before the light of understanding sparked in them. She nodded and turned back to the still disconcerted school nurse.

“I’m sorry. I’ll go now,” she stated meekly. Pomfrey blinked in surprise at the abrupt turnaround, wondering what Ron had said to convince her. “But I’ll be back first thing tomorrow.”

The two Gryffindors quietly made their way back to the common room, neither comfortable with discussing aloud any of the things that had been revealed that night. Hermione hurried up to her room to change into her pajamas and don her dressing gown while Ron went to the fourth year boys dorm to retrieve Harry’s invisibility cloak, shaking his head in astonishment over what Hermione was about to do. Meeting once more before the portrait hole, Hermione accepted the cloak from him without looking him in the eye.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

Ron nodded. “Good luck.”

A short time later Hermione re-entered the now quiet and darkened infirmary. The large black dog at the foot of Harry’s bed was instantly alert and raised his head, sniffing carefully before recognizing the scent of the young witch who was so important to his charge. Quietly, Hermione crept back to Harry’s bed, removed the cloak and her dressing gown, gave a wave of acknowledgement to Sirius, and climbed in beside her beloved, wrapping him in her arms. If any nightmares awakened him this night, she would be there to soothe him back to sleep.

Once she was settled in, the black dog transformed back into Sirius, who walked over and stood looking down at the slumbering couple for several minutes, smiling wistfully. At least one good thing had happened to his godson this year. Reaching down for the discarded cloak, which he recalled so fondly with regard to his and James’s escapades during their school years, he arranged it expertly around Hermione. Taking a step back, he nodded to himself; this would hide her from any casual glance that Pomfrey might take in this direction during her nightly rounds. Satisfied with his work, he changed back into his animagus form and took up his faithful watch once more.

“Hermione.” Sirius gently shook the bushy-haired girl’s shoulder. “You need to get up now.” Hermione’s eyes fluttered open and she blinked several times as she became aware of her surroundings. She found herself snuggled up to Harry’s side with her arm draped protectively across his chest, while one of his arms was curled around her waist. She couldn’t suppress a yawn as she turned to focus on Sirius’s smiling face.

“Rough night,” he commented as she carefully disentangled her and Harry’s arms and legs and rolled away. “It’s good that you were here.” Hermione nodded, feeling vindicated in her decision to sneak back to the hospital wing to be with Harry. Several times during the night he’d started trembling and writhing around in the bed. Each time she’d been able to calm him down by holding him close to her and kissing his forehead, discovering that her kisses directly on his scar had the most soothing effect. Eventually he’d stop shaking and settle down once more, only to start up again an hour or two later.

While she rolled out of the bed and donned her dressing gown, Sirius quietly explained that this was a nasty side effect of *Cruciatius* exposure. She scowled, but before she could complain about Pomfrey not doing anything to help Harry through it, Sirius, anticipating her reaction, reminded her that the healer hadn’t been informed that he’d been subjected to the vile torture curse. Then the former Marauder suggested that she return to her dorm, make it look like she’d spent the night there, get dressed, and return. When he added with a smirk that she probably ought to do something with her hair, which looked an absolute fright, she shot him a dirty look, but had to agree after catching a glimpse of herself in a mirror.

As instructed, Hermione made her way quietly back to Gryffindor tower under the invisibility cloak with a silencing spell on her feet. She stayed that way until she was behind the hangings of her bed, then took off the cloak and removed the charm before she climbed back out and began to gather her toiletries for the bathroom. When she returned to the room to put on fresh clothing, she made sure to make enough noise to wake her roommates.

“What time is it,” Lavender grumbled without opening her eyes.

“Don’t worry, it’s still early,” Hermione responded promptly. “Go back to sleep.”

“What are you doing up?” Parvati mumbled, still half asleep.

“I’m going to go see how Harry is,” came the soft reply. “I’ll stop back before breakfast and fill you in,” she added, forestalling any more queries. Having successfully closed off the conversation, she hurried out the door and down the stairs.

“She is so in love with that boy,” Lavender murmured to her best friend. “Do you think she even realizes it?”

“I’m pretty sure she does,” Parvati replied, stifling a yawn. “What I’m wondering is if Harry knows.” As neither of them felt like pondering the mind of a teenage boy that early in the morning, they set the question aside and went back to sleep.

Half an hour after she'd left, Hermione was back at the hospital wing. Opening the door, she was surprised to find it exactly the same as she'd left it, completely still. She'd expected that Madame Pomfrey would be up by this time. Sirius promptly relieved her curiosity.

"I thought Poppy deserved a bit of a lie in this morning," he grinned. "She'll be sleeping for another ten or fifteen minutes. I wanted a chance to talk to you privately." Hermione grinned back, wondering exactly how he'd managed to 'charm' the hospital matron into oversleeping. She settled into her seat at Harry's side, taking his hand in hers and nodded to the Marauder to continue.

"You realize, I'm sure, that what happened last night changes things dramatically around here," he began solemnly, all traces of humor gone. "Not only Voldemort's return and but also Fudge's reaction to it. Britain is now a much more dangerous place. Especially for Harry." He paused and Hermione nodded again. She'd been thinking those exact thoughts while she showered and dressed earlier.

"I have to think Harry is going to be his number one target, after he escaped like that," Sirius continued. "Voldemort will be furious. It's even worse that it happened in front of his Death Eaters, since it made him look bad. And I'm afraid that makes you and everyone else close to Harry targets too."

"I'm aware of that," Hermione acknowledged with a bit of an edge to her voice. "But I'm not leaving him! And I'm sure the rest of his friends – Ron, Neville, Ginny – would feel the same way."

Sirius gave her a grim smile. "I thought as much. But what I'm really suggesting is that Harry leave the country, and I wanted to know how you felt about that."

Hermione was taken slightly aback, and the expression on her face showed it. She'd thought Sirius was trying to warn her about how dangerous Harry's life was about to become, not come up with a way to make it *less* dangerous. Up until now whenever a dangerous situation confronted Harry he'd met it head on, and the adults in his life hadn't done much about it.

Sirius noted her confusion. "Just to be clear, I would go with him," he explained. "I only came back here because he was in this tournament. Believe me, I don't have any reason to stay in this country after the way it treated me. But I can see how important you are to Harry and ..."

"Oh, I fully understand what you're saying," Hermione broke in. "I was just surprised you'd suggest it. It's always seemed that Harry's been expected to stand up and fight whatever evil arises. He and I have actually had discussions along those lines before, especially last year after what happened with you. We've become more and more disenchanted with conditions in this country, particularly with our wizarding government."

"So you wouldn't be opposed to the idea?" Sirius asked.

"Not at all," she stated fervently. "And I'd go with him. I'd do anything for Harry."

Sirius raised an eyebrow and cocked his head in the direction of the sleeping boy in the bed beside them, causing Hermione to turn bright red at the implication of what she'd just said, considering where she'd spent the night. Sirius grinned at her discomfort. This was one of the most mature, sophisticated, thoughtful young ladies he'd ever met. But she was still only fifteen, and he knew all girls that age could easily be flustered by a little sexual innuendo.

"After what I saw last night there's not a doubt in my mind," he assured her, moving closer and giving her a quick one-armed hug to let her know he'd only been teasing her. "But what about your schooling? And what would your parents have to say about it?"

Hermione shrugged. "There are other wizarding schools in the world, right? And my parents have always supported me, if I show them I've thought something out and can give them good reasons for it. Besides, they've been talking about leaving the country themselves, once I've graduated. They've had this idea about moving to Australia for several years now."

"Good," Sirius declared. "I just wanted to be sure where things stood before I suggested this to Harry. Now, one more thing before Harry wakes up – does he know how you feel about him?"

Hermione blushed again and looked over at Harry, unable to keep a smile of affection from her face. "I think so," she answered softly. "We haven't said it in so many words but ... it's hard to explain, but we have an understanding. Sometimes we'll share a look and, well, we just know."

"If I may make a suggestion," Sirius commented with a knowing smile. "Boys that age can be remarkably dense about this sort of thing. Tell him. Spell it out in the most obvious way possible."

Hermione nodded that she understood. "All right. I will."

"So, do you know the spell to wake someone up?" Sirius inquired, turning to the task at hand.

"I know the counter to the sleeping spell," Hermione replied. "Does that also work with a sleeping potion?"

"It's not normally used that way, but James and I discovered back in school that it would," Sirius revealed. "It's not ideal, but it gets the job done. He'll need to get back to sleep afterward, but we only have a short time available before Poppy wakes up."

In hindsight, Harry's response to their plan should have been entirely predictable. After waking, and welcoming a good morning hug from Hermione (with a bit of an effort Sirius managed to refrain from any teasing, instead becoming temporarily interested in the view from the window – there would be opportunities later to give his godson a hard time about sleeping with a girl before he was even fifteen), he was quickly informed of the other two's discussion.

"No way! I can't leave Hermione ... and erm, everyone else here," he objected, flushing slightly at his inadvertent revelation. "How could I run off and leave all my friends to be attacked?"

"For one thing, I'm going with you," Hermione broke in before he could get too wound up.

“Oh ... well, that’s ... that’s good,” he decided, being partly swayed by the realization that Hermione, at least, would be safer. “But ...”

“Look, Voldemort’s going to attack, and probably kill people,” Sirius cut in. “That’s what he does. It will happen whether you’re here or not. But since there’s a good chance that you’ll be his number one target, staying here will automatically endanger anyone who’s around you. Will the Weasleys be attacked? Maybe. But won’t they be more likely to be attacked if you’re at the Burrow than if you’re not?”

Harry reluctantly admitted that Sirius had a point, and the three of them eventually concluded that there was no advantage to Harry remaining in Britain. After that the discussion turned to the obstacles involved in getting him out. They knew that Dumbledore would insist on Harry returning to Privet Drive, though he’d never revealed just why this was so important.

At this point Sirius shared with the two students that there was something about the way the headmaster responded to Harry’s account of Voldemort’s resurrection that made him uneasy. He seemed to accept what happened too readily, almost as though he was expecting it. Harry pointed out that while Dumbledore always congratulated him on how he handled his yearly life-threatening situations, he hadn’t exactly ever done anything to prevent them.

Sirius then confirmed that Dumbledore was expecting him to join in the fight against Voldemort, but that his first priority was Harry. Hermione promptly echoed that sentiment, which generated another pair of blushes by the teens. Sirius continued that he needed to look into the Black family assets – money, properties, etc. When Harry expressed surprise that his godfather was that wealthy, Sirius reminded him that he’d bought a Firebolt the previous year, and confided that it hadn’t even put a dent in his available funds.

“You know, that tropical island you hid out on last summer sounds pretty good,” Harry joked. Hermione suddenly found her thoughts drifting to what it might be like to be on a beach with Harry. Particularly if he were wearing that tight swimsuit she’d bought him. A glance at the expression on his face suggested that he might be having similar thoughts, and the two shared a shy smile. She promptly decided that she needed to buy some new bikinis – and they would be skimpier than anything she’d owned in the past.

“That’s not actually a bad idea,” Sirius admitted, not seeing the unspoken interchange between the two teens. “It’s in French Polynesia, which means it’s completely out of British jurisdiction.”

Before they could continue with that thought, Sirius checked the time and decided to cut off the discussion, as Pomfrey would be coming in soon. After promising to stay in touch, and extracting a promise from Harry to be careful, he transformed back into Padfoot. Then he curled up at the foot of the bed once more, while Hermione scooted closer to Harry and began to tell him about how she thought she’d done on her exams.

The remaining few days until the end of term passed by in a blur, with only a few things standing

out. The first was Ron's awkwardness around Harry and Hermione, from knowing she'd spent that night in the Hospital Wing. He would alternate staring at them with looking away in obvious discomfort when either of them caught his eye. That lasted until Hermione dragged him into an empty classroom and pointed out with a touch of exasperation that Harry had been asleep the entire night, as Ron himself knew, since he'd been there when Harry had taken the dreamless sleep potion. (She didn't see any reason that he needed to know the details of how she'd cuddled up to Harry all night in order to soothe his post- *Cruciatus* tremors.)

The second noteworthy item was related to the first, since she'd also needed to inform Harry of her nocturnal visit. To her relief, after some embarrassment on his part (which included a fair amount of trepidation regarding what Sirius would have to say on the subject), he'd eventually understood her need to be certain that he was okay. Inwardly, she wanted to think that he would feel the same way about her, if their roles were reversed.

To her delight, he then admitted to having thought about doing exactly that, sneaking into the infirmary to see her back in second year when she'd been petrified, but he'd been afraid Ron would think he was mental. He claimed that meant that she was braver than he was, which gave her a nice tingle inside. This grew into a glowing thrill that reddened her cheeks when he followed it up by teasing that the next time she crawled into bed with him he hoped to be awake enough to enjoy it.

But mostly the close knit group of Gryffindor friends kept to themselves. Most of the other students avoided Harry, a not entirely surprising reaction considering his mysterious involvement in the death of one of the most popular students in the castle. Notable exceptions to this were Harry's quidditch teammates, who rallied to his side in a show of support. Fred and George were particularly quick to indicate their displeasure to any student they overheard raising a question about what had 'really happened', but Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were also very public about their confidence in Harry.

Finally it was time to leave, both for the Hogwarts students and the visiting delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. On their way out of the Entrance Hall, Harry and Hermione were intercepted by the two remaining Triwizard champions. Hermione politely accepted Viktor's suggestion that they keep in touch, seeing no point in alienating a boy who, after all, had thought enough of her to invite her to be his date to the ball. She did keep an eye on Fleur and Harry, though, noticing the part-Veela's enthusiastic farewell and his slightly dazed reaction to her hug. She did have to admit that he was better than Ron, who looked about to pass out, even though he only received a smile and a handshake when Fleur turned her attention to him.

"Anything I should be concerned about?" she wondered in a teasing tone as they walked out to the waiting carriages.

"You mean besides the fact that she said how much she admired me and pledged to help me any way she could against Voldemort?" Harry smirked, returning her teasing tone and taking her hand in his.

"She really said Voldemort?" Hermione asked, impressed despite her urge to be jealous of the

beautiful French champion.

“Yeah, I have to admit that my opinion of her has changed considerably since I first met her,” Harry reflected. “She said she’s going to try to stay in Britain. I think she could be a valuable ally.” He squeezed Hermione’s hand in reassurance, then turned the tables. “And what about your little farewell with Krum?” he challenged, still in a lighthearted banter.

“You mean besides his asking me to marry him?” she responded lightly. This brought Harry to an abrupt halt, his mouth dropping open as he stared at her, only to grimace as she broke into a big grin, realizing that she’d put one over on him. “No,” she laughed. “I think he’s finally given up on me. He only asked if I’d write to him occasionally. I thought that was a reasonable request.” Harry shrugged his assent.

“You know, he took me aside that night Crouch went missing specifically to ask about you and me,” Harry revealed, turning serious. “I told him we were very close. I don’t think he was satisfied with that answer.” Hermione moved closer to him, taking his arm and pressing up against it.

“Would you believe Fleur sought me out a few weeks ago and asked me the same thing?” she revealed in turn. She laughed again at the look of shock on Harry’s face and continued. “I told her we were *very* good friends. I think she got the message.”

“And what message was that?” Harry wanted to know.

“The same message you gave to Viktor, of course,” she replied, her eyes sparkling with delight. Harry responded with a grin and helped her into the carriage, where he put his arm around her and she leaned happily against his side. Ginny smiled wistfully at this display of affection while Neville and Ron pretended to ignore it.

Things stayed much the same all the way back to King’s Cross, save for an unpleasant exchange with Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle that left the overly confident Slytherins hexed into unconsciousness when Fred and George ambushed them from behind. Hermione waited patiently while Harry spoke privately to the twins before getting off the train. Her suspicions about what he was doing were confirmed when he rejoined her and she spotted them tucking away a large bag that strongly resembled Harry’s Triwizard winnings, while wearing a pair of dazed expressions.

Harry caught her knowing smile and shrugged. “Won’t really need that with what we’re going to be doing, right?” She shook her head and wrapped her arm around him again as they passed through the barrier to the muggle side of the station.

Harry’s mood took a decided turn for the worse when he spotted his aunt and uncle waiting impatiently for him, and Hermione resolved to do something that would dramatically change his outlook, and make a definitive statement about her intentions. She stepped back to wait while his other friends said their farewells, noticing at the same time that her parents were approaching. Neville shook Harry’s hand and wished him a good summer, and Ginny gave him a quick hug and hurried over to join her mother.

“See you, Harry,” said Ron, clapping him on the back.

“Bye, Harry!” said Hermione, and gathering up her courage she did something she had never done before, and kissed him . On the lips. A hard, passionate kiss.

It took less than a second for him to kiss her back, and time seemed to stand still in the busy waiting room. Finally they broke apart, both flushed from the display they’d put on, but quite pleased with themselves.

“I love you, you know,” she whispered to him.

“I know. And I ... I love you too,” he gasped, looking surprised with himself that he’d managed to actually say the words. Hermione beamed at him, then turned him to face her parents, her arm locked with his.

“Mum, Dad,” she announced with a mischievous smile, not caring that she was in for quite an interrogation on the drive home. “I think you’ve met my boyfriend, Harry Potter.”

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