

What If? ... An Alternative to Order Of the Phoenix Flight

Chapter 1, Flight

All in all, Harry was relatively satisfied with how his summer was going so far. For one thing, the Dursleys were mostly keeping him at arms' length, which suited him just fine. Vernon, amazingly, had held his tongue when he'd witnessed his nephew kissing his girlfriend, and subsequently been introduced to the Grangers at the train station. It was probably, Harry thought, because they were in a public place, and the Grangers had a quite respectable appearance to them, which had been confirmed when Hermione had managed to work in the fact that her parents were dentists. Even once they were out of sight, and on the way back to Little Whinging, Vernon had contented himself with a fairly mild assortment of insults, primarily centered on Harry's 'unnaturalness' and threats about him doing anything 'inappropriate' with 'that girl'.

What had also contributed to Vernon's restraint was the sight of the Grangers' car when they'd all gone out to the car park. One of the primary ways Harry's uncle judged a man was by the car he drove, and his estimation of Hermione's father went way up when he spotted the Granger family climbing into their Jaguar XJ-6 (of the recently released X300 series). But while Vernon had been impressed by Mr. Granger, Petunia had been thoroughly intimidated by Mrs. Granger. Somehow women can always tell when another woman is classier than they are, and with these two it was no contest. Harry had no idea if it was the way Hermione's mother carried herself, her manner of speaking, or her designer clothing, but whatever it was, she had it and Petunia didn't.

Another bright spot about Harry's holiday was that Hermione had sent him a mobile phone as an advance birthday present, so he'd been able to talk with her every night. For the first time ever in his stay at his aunt and uncle's Harry wasn't completely isolated. Being able to do something so ordinary as a teenager chatting with his girlfriend felt wonderful. But the best part of the summer was that he'd even been able to see her twice – once early on when she'd come to visit, and again a few days ago when she and her parents had come to take him out to dinner for his birthday.

Interestingly, Aunt Petunia had insisted he have something decent to wear for the occasion, so she had bought him new clothing for the first time in his life. Hermione had let him know how great he looked in the dressy slacks and oxford shirt. After, that is, Harry had finished gawking at how great she looked in the halter style sundress she'd worn for the occasion. The reactions of the young couple, the sidelong glances and shy smiles, had been the source of much amusement for the elder Grangers.

The only downside to the first month of the summer holiday had been the lack of news from Ron and Sirius. At least Sirius had explained why – they'd been ordered (presumably by Dumbledore) not to tell him anything in case their owls might be intercepted. Sirius did manage to communicate to Hermione (who of course had passed it on to Harry during one of their nightly chats) that he'd turned over one of the Black family properties to Dumbledore to use as a meeting place for the anti-Voldemort resistance. Ron hadn't even said that much. Harry suspected that he and the rest of the Weasley family might be staying at this property, since most of his letters complained about having to do a lot of cleaning, but that was about all the information he'd been able to glean from his best mate's brief missives.

Ron (or more accurately his mother) *had* sent him a cake for his birthday, which Harry let him know he greatly appreciated. He'd also received several bars of Honeyduke's chocolate from Hermione and Sirius and they had also been helpful in supplementing his meager rations from his relatives.

Fortunately, the communication with Hermione more than made up for the relative silence from Ron and Sirius. Harry had also been following the muggle news, glancing at the paper every morning while he was cleaning up the breakfast dishes, and listening to the evening newscast on the telly from a hidden spot in the hydrangea bushes outside the living room window. But while he'd tried to be alert for reports of mysterious deaths or unexplained natural disasters, there hadn't been anything out of the ordinary. So perhaps there really wasn't any news about what Voldemort was up to, and maybe it wasn't the case that Harry was being kept in the dark about things, although he suspected differently. But, that was no different than any other summer.

One other person who *had* been writing him was Fleur Delacour, his fellow Tri-Wizard champion. When he'd confided in her his thoughts about leaving Britain, she'd promptly offered him her and her family's assistance. She'd assured him that they were all very grateful to him for his concern for her younger sister Gabrielle, and would be pleased to be able to make it up to him if he happened to find himself in France in the near future. She'd also teased him that Hermione might have some competition for his affection, since Gabrielle was now completely smitten with him. Harry inwardly grimaced at this revelation, which brought to mind the behavior of the ten year old Ginny Weasley, but he resolved that it was something he'd just have to tolerate if he ever visited there.

All in all, Hermione was not satisfied with how her summer was going so far. On the bright side, her parents had been agreeable to her suggestion that they leave the country, relieved, in fact when she'd explained the danger they were in. But things had taken longer to get organized than she'd expected. It was August already and they still weren't ready to leave yet.

Another annoyance was that she'd been pressured to join the Weasleys 'for safety reasons'. She had declined, pointing out that if she was unsafe her parents probably were too, and she wasn't about to leave them to fend for themselves. She found the Weasleys' whole attitude toward muggles, a general dismissal of their importance (quaint creatures, but of no account) rather insulting. After Ron's initial invitation she hadn't heard another word from him. Ginny had

written twice, mostly to urge her to reconsider. Fortunately Sirius *had* been in touch with her, providing her with the barest details of the situation, and she grudgingly accepted that he was in a delicate situation and couldn't tell her much more.

Even more irritating than the slow pace and lack of information was that the Daily Prophet had been criticizing Harry. They'd evidently picked up on Minister Fudge's claims that he was unstable, deluded, attention-seeking, and other variations on the same theme. After meeting Harry, her parents were infuriated that the wizarding press could get away with such obvious slander. But the most frustrating thing was that she'd only seen Harry twice all summer. True, that was twice more than she'd seen him in previous summers, but he wasn't her boyfriend then.

That thought invariably brought a smile to her face. She'd had to endure a great deal of ribbing and a general interrogation from her mum and dad on the car ride home after her brazen display at King's Cross. But she'd tolerated it good-naturedly; she was simply too happy to let it get to her. Her parents had eventually picked up on her irrepressibly good mood, and realized that this was not just some frivolous teenage romance. Their bookworm daughter had fallen in love, with the boy they'd been hearing about for four years.

The conversation had turned serious when they'd reached home and Hermione had revealed the dangerous situation she and Harry faced. That discussion had gone long into the night, and picked up again the next morning at breakfast. The Grangers agreed with Hermione's analysis and general thoughts on a course of action, and began to ponder where to go. Fortunately, she was able to persuade them that the wizarding world itself wasn't at fault, and that she should continue her education at another school of magic.

The most obvious alternative was Beauxbatons, but they soon decided that it wasn't necessarily the best choice. For one thing, she and Harry didn't speak French. For another, Madame Maxime was apparently off with Hagrid on a mission to contact the giants, and Fleur had graduated, so they wouldn't really know anyone at the French school of magic. And finally, it was too close to home. If Voldemort came after Harry, he wouldn't be too difficult to track down there. So, while France might be their first stop, it would not be their ultimate destination.

So all in all, Hermione grudgingly had to admit, things weren't going all *that* badly. Progress was being made, and she had been able to spend some time with Harry. The new aspect of their relationship had been going well. And she *had* been able to talk with him every night.

"Hello, Granger residence." Harry immediately recognized Mrs. Granger's voice.

"Hi Mrs. Granger, it's Harry," he blurted out in a rush. "Is Hermione there?"

"Certainly, Harry, I'll call her," Hermione's mother replied. "Is something wrong? You sound ..."

"Yeah, there's been a problem," he admitted. "I'm in a real bind."

“Oh my, is it something we can help with?” she offered. “Oh, here’s Hermione now.”

“Harry? You’re early,” Hermione commented as she took the phone from her mother. “I wasn’t expecting ...”

“Hermione, listen, I don’t have much time,” Harry interrupted. “I was just attacked by two dementors and ...”

“What! Harry, are you all right? What happened?” Hermione broke in, a note of fear in her voice.

“I’m not hurt, but you have to listen, OK?” Harry pleaded. “I drove them off with my Patronus, but then I got an owl from the Underage Magic Office. They said I’m going to be expelled and have my wand snapped.” Overriding the gasp on the other end of the line he quickly continued. “Then I got one from Mr. Weasley saying that Dumbledore said to stay put and not surrender my wand. Then there was another from the Ministry saying I’m not being arrested immediately, but I have to go to a hearing next week. Hermione, with the way the Minister’s been tearing me apart I don’t have much confidence about getting a fair hearing. And I’m not sure Dumbledore will be able to do much about it. Didn’t you say he’s been removed from his Wizengamot position?”

By now, Hermione had collected herself and reigned in her initial feeling of panic. “That’s true,” she confirmed. “He may not even be in the courtroom for the hearing. What do you think you should do?”

“There was one more owl, a few minutes later, from Sirius,” Harry revealed. “At first glance it said pretty much the same thing, but there was another message that appeared after I gave the map password phrase. It said, ‘Time to fly’.”

“So, he’s telling you to leave,” Hermione confirmed. “But where will you go? And how will you get there?” Before Harry could respond, Hermione added, “Wait, just a minute.” After a few seconds she continued. “My Mum’s on the other phone now.” She quickly filled her mother in on the situation, and after a brief discussion, the Granger women decided that Harry could come there, and they would move forward with their plans to leave the country. Meanwhile, Harry was considering his options.

“The Knight Bus could be tracked,” he reasoned. “I could maybe fly to your house, but I don’t know how to get there and I’d have to leave my trunk behind. There’s some stuff in there I’d hate to give up, but if I had to ...”

“What about Hedwig?” Hermione suggested. “If you wrapped a few things up in a package she could bring them. On the other hand, you *could* just shrink ... Wait! She knows how to get here! You could follow her.”

“Good idea,” Harry agreed, glad that the first hurdle had been overcome, then turned to the next. “But if I tried to shrink or even levitate my trunk, it would be another underage magic violation. And another violation so soon after the last one might make them send Aurors here immediately. And any spell, no matter how innocent, sets off their detectors. Remember before second year

when Dobby levitated that pudding ... That's it! Dobby!"

Seconds later an enthusiastic house elf appeared in Harry's room, eager to be of assistance. Hermione immediately caught on to Harry's plan, and suggested that to be on the safe side, Dobby hold off on doing any magic until after Harry had left the house. For his part, Dobby readily agreed to take Harry Potter Sir's trunk to Miss Grangy's house. He even assured them that he could get it from the cupboard under the stairs without disturbing the Dursleys. (Although this last part was added reluctantly. The loyal house elf clearly would have liked to *disturb* Harry's abusive relatives a great deal.) Just as Harry was about to ring off, Hermione reminded him that he should pay Dobby for the task, and he assured her that he would.

Harry quickly packed up his meager belongings, and after making sure Dobby understood his instructions, he paused a minute to look around the bedroom. If things went the way he hoped, this was the last time he'd ever see Number 4 Privet Drive. And frankly, he wouldn't miss it a bit. Even though this had technically been his bedroom for four years, he still felt like an intruder every time he was here. He'd only actually spent about thirty weeks total in this house during that period. The rest of the time his aunt used the small bedroom for storage, grudgingly clearing out a small space for her nephew when he returned each summer. No wonder the place never felt like home.

Harry sighed, and muttered, "Good riddance." Then he picked up his broom and cloak, and after one last check to make sure he had everything, waved goodbye to Dobby and launched himself out the window. Hedwig was right beside him and Harry grinned at his faithful familiar, who had made this journey many times. In just over an hour they landed in Hermione's back yard.

Within ten seconds Hermione was out the door and had her arms around him in a crushing hug. Her mother and father followed along a bit more sedately, shaking their heads in amusement at their daughter's enthusiastic greeting.

"Harry! You're here! Everything went well, then? Oh, you have to tell us all the details. We've been mad with worry!" Over her shoulder Harry saw Mr. Granger turn to his wife and mouth the word 'we ?' He couldn't help letting out a small chuckle, which earned him a glare from his girlfriend, who was dragging him by the hand up to the porch.

Despite the tenuous situation he was still in, Harry couldn't help feel a sense of relief. For the moment, at least, he was safe, but even more, he was among friendly people who cared for him. The contrast between this home and the one he had just left was striking. He glanced around to take in his surroundings as Hermione sat on the porch swing and motioned impatiently for him to join her.

"This is a really nice place you have here," Harry commented as Hermione's parents pulled up a pair of deck chairs to join them. Although it was dark, he could see that the small back garden was homey and inviting, in contrast to the overly manicured lawn and shrubbery of the Dursleys.

"Yes, we'll miss it," Mrs. Granger noted a bit sadly, referring to their imminent departure. "But I'm sure we'll find something just as nice in Australia. The important thing is that we be safe. And

that includes you two,” she added with a nod toward the children.

“Harry!” Hermione hissed in exasperation. “Don’t change the subject!” Harry grinned at her and proceeded to relate, in sufficient detail to satisfy even Hermione, the events of the evening and night so far. Mr. and Mrs. Granger were sickened at the description of the dementors, and the prospect of having one’s soul sucked out. Their daughter wisely refrained from mentioning just how close she and Harry had come to having that happen to them a year previously.

Harry shot a quick, shy smile at Hermione when he described how he’d needed to summon a happy memory to conjure his Patronus, which caused her to blush as she realized what memory he’d likely used. Once he was finished, Hermione leaned back in the swing and bit her lower lip in concentration as she considered one of the details of Harry’s tale.

“You said Mrs. Figg was a squib, and she used to babysit you when you were younger?” she pointed out in a voice of suspicion.

“I thought you might catch that little item,” Harry nodded grimly in confirmation.

“So Dumbledore ...”

“Must have known all about the conditions I was raised under,” Harry agreed with a scowl. “She talked about having her cats keep an eye on me. She even referred to being there under Dumbledore’s orders.”

“I’m going to need some time to think about that,” Hermione frowned. “There are some possible implications there that I don’t like.”

“I agree,” Harry replied. “But we haven’t the time to dwell on it right now.” Hermione nodded and gave him a quick squeeze of reassurance as she snuggled closer to him.

“So, did Dobby make it here all right?” Harry asked, looking around as if he expected the excitable little creature to pop up at any time.

“Yes, he waited half an hour after you left, just like you instructed, and then popped here with your trunk,” Hermione assured him. “Dad’s already loaded it in the boot of Mum’s car, along with mine. We’ll be ready to leave first thing in the morning. Then I wrote up a note for Dobby to take to Sirius, so he would know what we’re planning.”

Harry turned and looked at her curiously. “And just what are we planning? Are we driving to the airport tomorrow?”

Hermione glanced at her mother, and both women smiled. “No, we’re driving to France.”

The Grangers and Harry were up and on the road early the next morning. Mrs. Granger had made reservations on the Eurotunnel Car Transport (more commonly referred to as Le Shuttle) for the

10:00 AM departure, and they had roughly a two hour drive from the Granger home in Oxford to the terminal in Folkestone.

Mr. Granger did not accompany them, as he still had some things to settle before leaving the country. They'd managed to make arrangements with a newly appointed lecturer at Oxford to occupy their house. The young man and his wife had agreed to a five year lease with option to buy, dependent on his receiving tenure at the university, but the contract still needed to be finalized. Mr. Granger was also still in negotiations with the other partners in their dental clinic for them to buy out the Grangers' share. He anticipated that both of these issues would be cleared up by the end of the summer. The plan was that Harry and Hermione would stay in France, with Mrs. Granger making trips back and forth. Once everything was ready they would move on to Australia.

While they were finishing loading up the car, Harry had a moment alone with Hermione's father, and let him know that between himself and Sirius, they had plenty of funds available if his family needed any help. Mr. Granger thanked him, but indicated that they had enough saved up to cover their short term needs until they received the proceeds from the sale of the partnership. He did agree that having Dobby around to help pack up the house would be useful, and Harry assured him that the eager elf would be happy to assist in any way he could.

For the first part of the drive, Hermione sat in the back with Harry, while Crookshanks in his cat carrier occupied the passenger seat. Hedwig had been sent off to France the night before, after a brief rest and a few owl treats, to let the Delacours know they were coming. As they headed toward London, it became apparent that Hermione was in extraordinarily high spirits.

She had been looking forward to this day in eager anticipation all summer, and the combination of her excitement about finally leaving, going away with Harry, and the fear followed by the relief of the happenings of the night before was nearly overwhelming. So she reverted to her normal method of coping with stress, talking nearly nonstop, explaining what was going on in exacting detail. Fortunately, both Harry and her mother were very familiar with this trait, and affectionately indulged her.

She started out by relating everything she knew about the new Channel Tunnel, which had just opened the previous year. Neither she nor her mother had ever been on it, as it had still been under construction during their last trip to France the summer before third year, but she had, as usual, read a great deal about it. She explained, in response to Harry's question of which station in London the train departed from, that the car transport carriage actually loaded in Folkestone and unloaded in Calais, rather than running from London to Paris like the passenger line did. They could choose either to stay in their car during the crossing or get out and walk around. Harry, of course, would have to stay under his invisibility cloak since he didn't have the proper travel documents. After exiting the shuttle in Calais they planned to get some lunch, perhaps do a little shopping and then drive into southern France.

By the time Hermione was past her initial adrenaline rush and calmed down enough that normal conversation became possible, they were on the M25 passing through Surrey. Mrs. Granger took the opportunity to point out to Harry the exit that led to Little Whinging. There was no mistaking the scowl that darkened his face, and Hermione wrapped a comforting arm across his shoulders

and gave him a quick squeeze.

“That’s over and done with now,” she whispered. “Think about how much better things are going to be.” She smiled at him, trying to coax one from him in return, and soon succeeded, her infectious good mood eliciting a cheerful grin.

In addition to Hermione’s irrepressible exuberance, Harry couldn’t help but notice the way she was dressed. That morning she had loudly declared, “Vacation time!” and her mother had echoed the sentiment. Apparently, the Granger women had certain habits and practices that they observed when on vacation, one of which was the style of clothing they wore – bright, colorful, and definitely summery. Hermione was outfitted in a scarlet red tank top, white shorts that set off her tan legs nicely, and white sandals. Her toenails were painted red to match the top. Mrs. Granger was also wearing a tank top and shorts, and her toenails were painted as well, although a more subdued shade of pink. Hermione’s hair was pulled back into a pony tail; her mother’s was also tied back to fall down her shoulders. Her clothing was slightly more conservative than her daughter’s – the shorts a bit longer, with a higher waistline. Harry did not miss the fact that Hermione’s top didn’t quite reach the top of her shorts.

Neither did Hermione miss the fact that Harry was quite aware of, and appreciated her choice of clothing. His attention had been irresistibly drawn to her waist every time she made a movement that bared a small patch of skin around her navel. Feeling mischievous, she now yawned and stretched her arms over her head, wriggling slightly as if to alleviate some stiffness in her body. It had exactly the effect she’d intended, as Harry’s eyes widened and he caught his breath at the sight of a good six inches of bare midriff that was temporarily revealed, showing off a toned tummy and slender waistline. Not to mention the way the tank top was pulled tightly against her bust as she arched her back.

Noticing the sudden silence from the back seat, Mrs. Granger glanced into the rearview mirror and rolled her eyes. “Hermione Jane, stop teasing that poor boy,” she scolded in an amused tone.

“Yes, mother,” Hermione retorted with an unrepentant grin, shooting a glance at her boyfriend out of the corner of her eye. Harry was initially startled by the exchange, but then caught on and a smile of his own crept onto his face.

Of course, Hermione could not resist doing it again a few minutes later. But this time Harry was ready for her and as soon as the rising tank top exposed her waistline again, a loud shriek rang out in the car as he pounced and began tickling her.

Mrs. Granger had expected something like that to happen from the scheming look she’d spotted on Harry’s face, and let the squirming and giggling go on for a minute before breaking in. “All right you two children, behave back there,” she joked. “And Harry, keep those hands where I can see them.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in mortification at the implication of her mother’s words, but Harry could see the twinkle in her eyes in the mirror. With a smirk he whipped out his invisibility cloak and pulled it over himself, then extended his arms out from underneath, leaving a pair of

disembodied hands floating in the air between the seats.

The laughter in the car lasted almost all the way to Folkestone.

The mood of the three travelers turned more serious as Mrs. Granger exited the M20 and pulled into the lane leading to the boarding area. This was no light undertaking; not just another holiday. They were leaving the country of their birth, possibly never to return. Not to mention that they were effectively smuggling an illegal immigrant across a national border. While they were waiting in the queue, Hermione moved up to the front seat, switching with Crookshanks, and Harry curled up silently under his cloak. The officials checked Hermione's and her mother's documentation and waved them into the brightly lit compartment of the car transport.

Less than an hour later they were in France. Harry silently got out of the car during the crossing and stayed back out of the way while the Grangers went through French Customs and Crookshanks' registration was checked to confirm that he was rabies free. Hermione later informed Harry that the Magical Menagerie had provided a certificate that magically updated itself, eliminating the necessity of getting the temperamental cat shots every year.

"Tout est en ordre, Madame, Mademoiselle. Bonnes vacances." The customs official tipped his hat at the two attractive women and stepped back, waving them on. Mrs. Granger drove a short distance and pulled over while Hermione ostensibly got out and retrieved something from the back seat. Harry jogged after them and climbed in before she shut the door, and they were off.

Mrs. Granger next announced the plan for the day. First, shopping – Harry needed an appropriate vacation wardrobe. While the grunge look: taped shoes, worn, baggy T shirt and torn, oversized jeans, might be acceptable attire in certain parts of London, it would simply not do for a Granger vacation in France. For his part, Harry assured her that he had no attachment whatsoever to his hand-me-down clothing. Fortunately, she informed him, pleased with herself that she had read the situation correctly, the pound was currently in a strong position relative to the franc, and there were shops specifically catering to English tourists located at the tunnel exit right there in Calais.

She did agree to Harry's insistence that he pay for his own clothing, and informed him that she thought they could keep the total cost to around a hundred Galleons. Harry was then introduced to the phenomenon that was the Granger shopping expedition. Hermione and her mother prided themselves on their ability to walk into a store, identify what they were interested in, buy it, and get out in a minimum amount of time. And amazingly, they did. Harry was outfitted in lightweight fabrics for the warm August weather in southern France: khaki shorts and linen or cotton slacks, and tank tops and sleeveless T shirts in pastel shades, layered under button down shirts, worn open. At one point Mrs. Granger sent Hermione ahead to scout out the shoes and held Harry back.

"Boxers or briefs," she inquired in a low voice. Harry suddenly realized that they had just entered the underwear section, and gave her an embarrassed nod of gratitude for her discretion.

"Um, just the plain ordinary ones," he mumbled, gesturing to a display. She smiled and sent him after her daughter, suggesting that they choose some sandals or deck shoes in addition to a good quality pair of trainers.

Harry's admiration for the Granger women was higher than ever when Hermione's mum looked at her watch and announced with satisfaction that they'd finished in less than an hour, and it was now time for lunch. With the hour time difference it was not quite 1:00 PM local time, and the three travelers settled into a small bistro and placed their order.

The establishment was designed to give the feeling of an 'authentic' French café with outdoor tables on the sidewalk. After they chose a nice, sunny location, Harry ordered a ham and cheese baguette with some crisps, Hermione selected a brie baguette, while her mother chose quiche and a salad. They topped it off with takeaway chocolate croissants for later in the drive.

While they were waiting for their food, Mrs. Granger informed them that she hoped to be able to make it to Lyon by evening, which was about a six hour drive, or more, depending on how long it took her to adjust to driving on the 'wrong' side of the road. She had in mind a bed and breakfast that they could stay at that night if they hadn't heard from Fleur by then. She apologized to Harry that they'd have to bypass Paris on this trip, but he agreed completely that this seemed the best strategy.

Once back on the highway, they settled in for the long drive and turned to an important topic that they hadn't felt secure enough to discuss before: the dementor attack on Harry. They soon concluded that there were only two possible explanations. Either two dementors had left Azkeban on their own and were roaming the country at large without the wizarding public being aware of the danger, or someone in the Ministry had sent a pair of dementors to Little Whinging. Both scenarios had alarming implications, but Harry and Hermione both felt that the second one was more likely. The big question – was the attack ordered from the top, i.e. the Minister of Magic's office, or was an intermediate level employee acting independently? As they had no evidence either way at this point, after some lengthy discussion they decided to set that question aside for the time being.

It was late in the afternoon and Harry was riding up front with Mrs. Granger while Hermione took a turn in the back seat. Harry had been telling her about the tournament, which interested her in that it sounded so different from his perspective than from her daughter's. He'd gone into considerably more detail about snatching the egg from the dragon, explaining the strategy he'd employed to lure the nesting mother into the air. Hermione pointed out in her defense that she'd spent the entire time terrified that he was about to die at any moment (she had even covered her eyes with her hands at one point), so she hadn't really noticed the subtleties of his approach. When he'd heard that, Harry reached back and took Hermione's hand and said he was sorry she'd been so upset. Beside him, Mrs. Granger couldn't keep a wistful smile off her face at the devotion the two teens felt toward each other.

Now he was telling her about the second task, and she smiled at the indignation in his voice even now, nearly six months later, at the very idea of Hermione being more precious to the Bulgarian quidditch star than she was to him. Hermione leaned forward and fondly rested her hand on his arm as he declared that she'd saved his life by jumping back into the water to rescue him when the effect of the gillyweed had run out. Just as the two of them were describing the controversy on the

dock that followed, Harry suddenly leaned forward and peered out the window.

“Hedwig!” he shouted, pointing to his snowy owl who was flying alongside, keeping pace with the car. Mrs. Granger pulled over to the shoulder of the highway, and Harry opened his window to let the snowy owl perch on the car door.

The message she was carrying was, as they’d hoped, from Fleur, and included directions for them to follow. Fortunately, they were not far off the most direct route to her parent’s house. An hour and several turns later, they were bumping along what could best be described as a country lane, and the next instruction called for them to turn into what looked to Mrs. Granger like a meadow, backed by a woods, with no discernable access for the car. Harry and Hermione, though, insisted that they could see something like a cart path leading into the woods, and they concluded that it must be hidden by muggle repelling charms.

Deciding that she had to trust them, Hermione’s mother steered the car into the meadow, and then into the woods, driving between two trees that she could have sworn were too close together for the car to pass between. A few minutes later they emerged from the other end of the woods to behold the ruins of an old castle (Mrs. Granger) or a beautiful chateau nestled amidst well tended orchards and vineyards (Harry and Hermione).

Both teens could feel themselves pass through a ward boundary, and less than a minute later Fleur herself popped into view. The three occupants of the car got out while the beautiful French witch hurried forward and greeted them all with a hug and a kiss on each cheek.

“ ’Arry, ’Ermione, eet ees so good to see you again. Bienvenue! Welcome to France.” Hermione introduced her mother, who greeted Fleur graciously, but with a doubtful expression on her face.

“Is that ...” she gestured to the rubble before them. “... where you live?” Fleur laughed lightly and then drew her wand and cast a spell on the English woman, allowing her to see the chateau as it really was. Her mouth dropped open in amazement.

On their previous visits to France she and her husband had spotted several beautiful, ancient French castles and one of her dreams was to actually tour through one of them. It now dawned on her that she was actually going to be spending some time living in one. It was all she could do to keep from clapping her hands in delight at the prospect.

Fleur climbed into the back seat with Hermione and directed them the rest of the way up the path to the chateau, revealing some of its history. The Delacour family had lived on these lands for hundreds of years, having been granted them by some long ago French monarch. The family had a long history of being associated with the French court, from which their name derived. Even now, Monsieur Delacour held a prominent position in the French Ministry of Magic. Harry and Hermione shared a glance at the thought of how useful that information might be.

Harry managed to get through his re-introduction to Gabrielle without too much embarrassment. The adoration in her eyes was plain to everyone, but aside from her initial squeal of delight, she managed to greet him with as much poise as a nine-year-old could manage. The remainder of the

evening she contented herself with longing glances, and flushed cheeks whenever Harry turned his attention in her direction.

After a delightful dinner, which included Harry's first experience with drinking wine with a meal, Madame Delacour showed Mrs. Granger around some of the chateau and the gardens while Harry and Hermione talked with Fleur and her father. As they'd hoped, he let them know that he was very interested in Harry's situation, and had some ideas on how to turn it to their advantage.

Harry and the Grangers ended up retiring early, worn out from their long day combined with the stress of the preceding one. The following morning, however, brought one more surprise to the pair of magical teens. When they walked into the dining room for breakfast, there, sitting at the table, was a very familiar man with long black hair.

"Hi kids," Sirius grinned at them. "Did you miss me?"

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What If? ... An Alternative to Order Of the Phoenix Turnabout

Chapter 2, Turnabout

“Sirius!” Harry broke into a run and hurried over to greet his godfather, with Hermione only a few steps behind him. “How did you get here? Is everything ...” Harry glanced anxiously over at his host, his concern obvious. After all, here was an escaped ‘murderer’, the most wanted man in wizarding Britain, in the home of a French Ministry official.

But Monsieur Delacour quickly moved to reassure him. It turned out that Fleur had shared the information she’d learned from Harry with her father, including the story of Sirius’s innocence. Given the high opinion the Delacours had of Harry Potter, it was accepted without question. Indeed, the elder Delacour had just been discussing with Sirius some possible ideas of how to go about clearing his name.

“I told you I had no intention of staying in England any longer than I had to,” Sirius reminded Harry as everyone settled into their seats at the breakfast table. “I left as soon as I got word that you were here safely.” Harry shot a glance of appreciation to Hermione, seated on his other side, as she had been the one who’d insisted that they send Hedwig to Sirius the previous night before they went to bed.

“So, I wrote a note – didn’t want everyone to panic when they found you and I’d both gone missing – grabbed Buckbeak, waited until it was good and dark, and here I am. And it’s none too soon, believe me. That woman was driving me batty.”

“Who?” Harry asked between bites of a pastry.

“Molly Weasley,” Sirius muttered.

“Oh,” Harry mumbled in confusion. He’d quite liked the friendly, though outspoken woman. “She’s always been so nice to me.”

Hermione took his hand and gave it a squeeze. “Harry, she’s always acted like a mother to you, right? And that’s just what you needed, so of course you appreciated it,” she explained. “There’s nothing wrong with that. I suspect that she just can’t stop being a mother, though.” She glanced back to Sirius and he nodded.

“Don’t get me wrong, pup,” he clarified. “I think it’s great that she took you in, treated you like one of her own sons, even. It’s just that she has her opinions about the way things should be, and well, I don’t necessarily agree with her. Hermione’s right, she tries to mother everyone. She pretty much took over running the house. And remember, it was *my* house. But she and the rest of them are welcome to it now.”

Harry pondered this information and realized the truth in his godfather’s assertion, recalling Mrs. Weasley’s disapproval of the twins’ plans for a joke shop, Charlie’s occupation, the length of Bill’s hair, etc. He shrugged and decided to let it go.

After a pause, Sirius, continued, “ That was only part of it, though. I hate that house. I only went back and opened it up so the Order could use it. And I’m frustrated with what they’re doing ... or not doing.”

Of course, no one would let him stop there, so Sirius explained further. Dumbledore had recreated the resistance group that had opposed Voldemort in the last war, called the Order of the Phoenix. But Sirius disagreed with their methods.

They weren’t doing anything to counter the bad press Harry and Dumbledore were getting, he claimed. They were having little success persuading the wizarding public that Voldemort had really returned. They had been instructed to keep Harry and the other students completely in the dark (which Sirius had opposed but Mrs. Weasley had vigorously supported). What they *were* primarily doing was guarding a room in the Department of Mysteries called the Hall of Prophecies. Apparently there was a prophecy in there that was important to Voldemort, so they were trying to keep him from getting it.

When Hermione predictably scoffed at the idea that *any* prophecy could be important, Harry reminded her of Trelawny’s prophecy about the night they rescued Sirius that had come true. And that Dumbledore had commented that it had brought her total of real prophecies up to two. Hermione responded with a huff and Harry grinned, shaking his head gently and giving her arm a squeeze, causing the adults in the room to smile at the obvious affection the two students shared.

Sirius cleared his throat to get them back on track. He and Fleur’s father had been plotting, and now Monsieur Delacour twirled his mustache with a devilish smirk.

“I believe that first we will let the French public know of your plight,” he declared. “Then the French government will announce its support for you. Then more details will come to light, including the horrible injustice of Mr. Black’s incarceration. I suspect that your current Minister won’t survive these revelations. With luck, the new government will prove more vigorous in taking action against You Know Who.”

While such an outcome sounded wonderful to Harry, he was skeptical about how and why the French ministry would be so accommodating. He wasn’t accustomed to wizarding governments being so helpful. But Delacour had a convincing reply.

“There are several reasons for doing this, not all of them entirely altruistic,” he explained. “You

are the Boy Who Lived, and any wizarding government would be inclined to look favorably on your situation for that reason alone. You are now also the Tri-Wizard champion, having triumphed over, among other opponents, France's best." He inclined his head toward Fleur, who blushed slightly at her father's praise. "Believe me, it will make us look good in the eyes of the world to support you."

Harry had grimaced when the French wizard used the hated nickname, but nodded when he finished that he understood this line of reasoning.

"Speaking for our family, we owe you a debt of honor for your actions during the tournament," he continued. "Not to mention the fact that my eldest daughter speaks very highly of your character. It is truly an honor for us to be allowed to assist you." Before Harry could object that he hadn't done anything that great, Delacour concluded, "But what makes me completely certain that our country will stand behind you is that we French never pass up an opportunity to tweak our English cousins across the channel."

Harry grinned as a humorous scene of French soldiers in a castle thumbing their noses at a group of English knights flashed through his mind. A shared smile with Hermione let him know that she was thinking the same thing, as a certain Monty Python movie had been on the telly the previous week.

After breakfast they all moved to the sitting room, where the two students spent the rest of the morning filling the Delacours in on the details of Harry's various encounters with the Ministry of Magic, as well as some of their adventures at Hogwarts. While Fleur was relatively familiar with the events of the past year, and had shared them with her parents, the tales of Harry and Hermione's first three years were new to the French family. For her part, Mrs. Granger several times raised an eyebrow and glanced pointedly at her daughter, as evidently Hermione hadn't been entirely thorough in keeping her parents informed about her life at school.

By the time they were finished, the four adults in the room were shaking their heads with incredulity. Fleur was giving Harry an appreciative look that had Hermione on edge before the part-Veela noticed and shot her a quick smile of reassurance. And Gabrielle, who had slipped into the room after she finished her own breakfast and sat quietly listening throughout the narrative, was beaming at Harry with an expression of pure adoration.

At this point Sirius added a bit more information giving his perspective to the part about third year and their rescue of him, then shared his story of wrongful incarceration. Once he finished, he and Monsieur Delacour retired to their host's study to further discuss strategy. When questioned about this later, Sirius would only reply with a sly smile, "It's quite an advantage to have a reporter in your back pocket."

In any case, it was left to the females of the Delacour family to entertain their other guests for the remainder of the day. They were all quite agreeable to this course of action. Mrs. Granger was fascinated with the French chateau, and Madame Delacour was delighted to share it with her. Harry could think of a lot of things worse than spending time in the company of Hermione and Fleur, as long as Gabrielle wasn't being too much of a nuisance. As far as he was concerned, his

summer had taken a definite turn for the better, and Hermione agreed wholeheartedly.

The rest of the week followed much the same pattern for the teens. Mrs. Granger left the next morning to return to England, promising that she and her husband would come and stay with them on the weekends from now until their preparations were complete. Sirius joined the teens when Monsieur Delacour traveled to his office in Paris to begin laying the groundwork for the series of revelations that would set the wizarding world on its ear.

It turned out that there was a hippogriff colony in the woods not too far from the Delacour estate, so Buckbeak was released to rejoin his own kind, with a final nod of gratitude to Sirius and Harry for his rescue. While Sirius was sorry to part with his faithful companion of the past year, he knew the hippogriff would be far better off in the wild than he'd been locked up in an upper room at Grimmauld Place.

A few days after their arrival, Fleur received the news she'd been hoping for – an owl from Gringotts offering a job. As she excitedly prepared for her trip back to England, Harry noted conversationally that Bill Weasley worked at the goblin-run bank. The look he received back from his French friend indicated that she was already well aware of that fact. Hermione shot Harry a knowing smile as she took his hand and pulled him away so that Fleur could finish her packing, and perhaps fanaticize a bit about a tall, good-looking, red-haired wizard. With breathless hugs all around, she departed the following morning to a chorus of good wishes.

Resigned to the knowledge that Gabrielle was going to tag along nearly everywhere with them, Harry and Hermione resolved to try to enjoy the experience of having a younger sister. Occasionally Sirius would bail them out by inviting the precocious young girl to accompany him on some errand or other, so that the pair could spend some romantic time together in the beautiful French countryside.

By the end of the week Gabrielle would confide in Sirius that she was certain that Harry and Hermione would marry some day, but she asserted with all the solemnity that a nine year old can muster that that she intended to be Harry's mistress when she was old enough. Somehow, the old Marauder managed to keep a straight face, but he took great delight in the teenaged couple's flaming red faces when he shared this tidbit with them in private later.

While they all knew that they would soon be leaving the country, and the adorable little part-Veela would have to set her sights elsewhere, the old Marauder intended to get full teasing value before he let it go. Hermione only hoped that he wouldn't share the embarrassing revelation with her mother, or she'd never hear the end of it.

One thing that surprised Harry was the seeming lack of response from Dumbledore, either to the charges stemming from the dementor attack or to his leaving Britain. The headmaster had only contacted him through Mr. Weasley on the night of the attack, and not been heard from since. Harry had more than half expected to see Fawkes appear in a flash of flames with a demand from Dumbledore that he return immediately.

But for some reason the ancient wizard had been keeping his distance from Harry Potter, for the

entire summer now that he thought about it. And while that might have bothered him under other circumstances, had he been isolated and felt the whole world was against him, it wasn't a problem now that he had Hermione, Sirius, and the Granger and Delacour families supporting him.

The following Monday, a few days before the scheduled date of Harry's hearing at the Ministry of Magic in London, the first headlines appeared in *Le Monde Magique*, the French wizarding newspaper.

(translated from French)

Boy Who Lived Flees Britain!

Harry Potter Threatened with Arrest, Expulsion for Underage Magic Use

French Ministry of Magic to Offer Asylum Accepts Potter's Claim of Self-Defense

The story was immediately picked up by the wizarding press in the rest of Europe, followed soon thereafter by papers in other parts of the world. The following day another headline proclaimed that Harry was being offered a place at Beauxbatons, which was happy to accept Hermione as well. Durmstrang followed a few days later with their own offer to Harry, but despite the urging of their most famous alum, Viktor Krum, would not set aside their anti-muggleborn policy to include Hermione.

On the scheduled day of Harry's hearing, at which he was found guilty due to his failure to appear, France's representative to the International Confederation of Wizards denounced the actions of the British Ministry, calling their treatment of the Triwizard Champion a travesty of justice. He went on to assert that they should be ashamed of themselves for their lack of respect for the boy who saved us all.

Eventually the *Daily Prophet* could ignore the controversy no more. As the innuendoes about 'what was really going on in Britain' piled up in the pages of their competitors abroad, they were forced to break from their own Ministry's line of lies and ridicule or lose all of their credibility as a newspaper.

One week after the first story broke in France, Britain's magical newspaper of record entered the fray, belatedly but with a vengeance, devoting their entire front page to the controversy. Sirius now made full use of his 'arrangement' with Rita Skeeter that he'd made after that night in the hospital wing. For her part, she did what she did best, only this time her target was the British Ministry of Magic.

What is the Ministry Hiding?

Are Potter, Dumbledore Telling the Truth?

In her typically lurid prose, Skeeter painted a picture of an honest boy who'd been terribly wronged by the authorities. Who, though the odds had been stacked against him, had bravely

fought through to victory in the tournament, only to be denounced as an attention-seeking showoff. She presented his and Dumbledore's assertion that You Know Who had been behind his kidnapping at the conclusion of the Third Task, and had even been restored to life, as an open question that demanded further investigation for the safety and well-being of wizarding Britain. And she concluded by insinuating that the Ministry may have sent dementors after Potter to shut him up. Being unable to go after Dumbledore, they picked on the weaker target, only to have it backfire when he showed himself capable of defending himself from the terrifying creatures.

A firestorm of indignation swept through the magical community of the British Isles. Many who had willingly gone along with the paper's previous depiction of Harry as unstable and deluded, now reconsidered. After all, the boy, who was already the most famous teen in Britain, had just won the Tri-Wizard Tournament – why would he need to make something up to get more attention? And why would Dumbledore have gone along with it? What if they'd been telling the truth all along?

Fudge's unfortunate response was to try to arrest Rita Skeeter, but the beetle animagus easily evaded capture. His attempt to shut down the Daily Prophet met with similar failure, as the crowds packing Diagon Alley caught wind of it and physically prevented the Auror team from carrying out its assignment.

As a result, Fudge's days in office were numbered, and his fate was sealed with the next exposé.

Sirius Black Innocent?

Pureblood Wizard Imprisoned Without Trial!

Potter Claims Pettigrew, Not Black, Was Secret Keeper

Again, Skeeter suggested a massive coverup by the Ministry of Magic, claiming that Fudge had suppressed evidence of Black's innocence for more than a year. Already on shaky ground after the first blow, Fudge was soon removed from office by a no confidence vote, which even Lucius Malfoy's gold could not avert.

Dumbledore was promptly reinstated as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, but once again declined the position of Minister. Instead, Amelia Bones, the Head of the DMLE, was elected and she quickly pledged to thoroughly investigate the allegations regarding both Harry Potter and Sirius Black, going so far as to travel to France to make a formal apology to the Boy Who Lived.

-ooOoo-

Amelia Susan Bones was an elderly, no-nonsense witch who through hard work and dedication had moved up through the Auror ranks to become head of the department. Her physical appearance – square jawed, short cropped gray hair, thick eyebrows, with a monocle in one eye – reinforced the impression of someone who was not to be messed with.

But this day she was on a mission that was decidedly outside her comfort zone: To apologize to a teenage boy, Harry Potter, on behalf of the British Ministry of Magic, and persuade him to return home. She hadn't wanted to do this, just as she hadn't really wanted the job of Minister of Magic.

But that idiot Fudge had made such a mess of things that she had no other choice.

Albus Dumbledore had talked her into taking the position. He'd contacted her even before Fudge had resigned to urge her to become a candidate, claiming that they needed a strong, decisive leader at this critical time. She'd finally agreed, but only for the short term. She knew that her Head Auror, Rufus Scrimgeour, was interested in eventually ascending to the top spot and she'd moved him into her former position as Head of DMLE to give him more administrative experience. She and Dumbledore also agreed that he tended to be too easily swayed by public opinion to be considered as Minister at this time.

The first thing she had done upon taking office had been to meet with Dumbledore to discuss the current crises. After confirming that Voldemort had indeed returned, he'd advised her to remove the dementors from Azkaban and to negotiate with the giants. The first item made sense to her, and she was taking it under consideration, but the second seemed to be beyond her jurisdiction. After all, she was the Minister of Magic for Great Britain, and the giant reserve was in Russia. Why didn't he make use of his contacts in the ICW for that mission?

Meeting with Harry Potter to try to smooth things over had been her idea, and Dumbledore had agreed. She'd been surprised, however, that he didn't offer to meet with the boy himself. After all, the two of them were on the same side in the Voldemort debate. But the headmaster had offered no explanation for his reluctance, and she had assumed the responsibility herself.

She was accompanied by two Aurors, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks. Shacklebolt was an obvious choice, since he was in charge of the search for the escaped prisoner, Sirius Black, who was also somehow involved in this mess. Tonks, a rookie who had only recently joined the department, had been suggested by Dumbledore because she was related to Black, her mother being his cousin. She had her suspicions that Dumbledore had other reasons for having her bring these two particular Aurors, but could find no fault with his recommendation.

The three of them first traveled to Paris to meet with Monsieur Delacour, a high-ranking official in the French Ministry, and then flooded from his office to his home, where Potter was supposedly staying. Emerging from the green flames into the entry hall of what appeared to be a large mansion, Bones paused to take stock of the situation. The atmosphere was certainly not friendly, at best neutral, bordering on hostile. She surreptitiously placed her hand on her wand as the two Aurors moved to flank her.

Her suspicions were confirmed with the first request from her host. "Welcome to Chateau Delacour," he stated with a broad sweep of his arm. "For the safety of our guests, I must request that you leave your wands here before proceeding further."

"What! Surely you don't expect ..." she began to sputter. Delacour cut her off by raising his hands in a placating gesture.

"If you prefer, I will accept a wizarding oath that you will take no action against anyone on these premises." She glared at him for a moment, then glanced to her two associates. Both shrugged, indicating that it was her call. Reluctantly she gave her oath, with Shacklebolt and Tonks doing

likewise. Only then were the three visitors led through the door into the sitting room.

There, they encountered the object of their quest, Harry Potter, seated at one side of a table, flanked on his left by a bushy-haired girl that she assumed from the information in her briefing papers was his companion, Hermione Granger, and on his right by a strikingly beautiful blonde whom she recognized as the Beauxbatons Tri-Wizard champion, Fleur Delacour. On Granger's left were two adults that she guessed were her parents, and on Delacour's right was a woman who from her appearance was presumably her mother. As Monsieur Delacour made the introductions and took a position next to his wife, her assumptions were confirmed. In addition to these people, a house elf stood respectfully against the wall at one end of the room, and a large black dog sat at the opposite end.

Minister Bones took a seat across from Harry and was joined on either side by her two Aurors. She was not at all pleased with the adversarial nature of the seating arrangement, and attempted to ease the tension.

“Mr. Potter, on behalf of the Ministry of Magic, I wish to apologize for our actions of these past two months, in particular the notifications you were sent regarding your use of underage magic. I would also like to assure you that all charges have been dropped, and your conviction removed from your record. You are welcome to return to Britain and resume your education at Hogwarts.”

Harry had spent a lot of time with Sirius and Hermione discussing how he would respond. Sirius had eventually persuaded them that it would be to their advantage to keep the Ministry representatives off balance. They already had an advantage that the new Minister was unaware of – Shackbolt and Tonks were both members of the Order of the Phoenix, and thus were ‘on their side’.

“Why?” Harry replied calmly. This monosyllabic response had the desired effect.

“I beg your pardon?” Minister Bones inquired, leaning forward uncertainly.

“Why are the charges being dropped?” he demanded. “Has the law changed since my conviction? Am I being given special treatment because of who I am? Or is the law selectively enforced depending on the whim of the current Minister of Magic?” Hermione reached under the table to grip his hand, and he calmed a bit.

“Or have you decided that what I did was not a crime? If so, why was I charged in the first place? My friend here researched the law and discovered rather quickly that underaged magic is permitted in situations of self-defense. And the only muggle present was my cousin, who already knows about magic. And yet I was informed that I'd violated the International Statute of Secrecy and Aurors were on their way to my house to snap my wand. Did your department do any investigation to determine the facts in the case?”

Amelia Bones felt her face heating up, from a mixture of irritation at Potter's attitude and shame at some of the truth in his allegations. But he wasn't finished yet.

“And why would I want to return to a country where there’s a madman running around who wants to kill me? Whose existence is denied by a government who has no idea what they’re doing? Why would I want to return to a country where justice is based on how famous you are or how much money you have?”

“Now see here, Mr. Potter!” the Minister shot back. “I will not stand for accusations of that sort! You are attacking the integrity of my government!” Amazingly, the boy across from her did not flinch. Belatedly, she recalled that he had faced a number of very unpleasant situations in the past few years, and stood up to creatures far more terrifying than an angry Minister of Magic.

Hermione slid a parchment over in front of Harry, and he glanced at it before continuing. “Accusations, Minister? Here are some facts. During my second year at Hogwarts, the Chamber of Secrets was opened. Minister Fudge came to the school and arrested Hagrid and sent him off to Azkaban, not because he had any evidence against him, but because ‘he had to be seen doing something’. He just so happened to be accompanied by Lucius Malfoy. When it was all over, Professor Dumbledore and I discovered that it was actually Malfoy himself who was responsible for the Chamber being opened.”

“Before my third year, I accidentally blew up my aunt. When Minister Fudge found me at the Leaky Cauldron, he said I wouldn’t be punished because of ‘circumstances’. In other words, because I was Harry Potter. But at the end of third year, after I’d met Sirius and found out he was innocent, Fudge wouldn’t even listen to a word Hermione and I were saying. He was going to have Sirius kissed right there on the spot without making any attempt to learn the truth.”

Bones looked like she wanted to say something at this point, but the row of stony faces opposite her gave her pause. Harry took a breath and went on. “Now, this past year began with a bunch of Death Eaters starting a riot at the Quidditch World Cup, somehow getting away scot-free while a dozen Ministry officials shot stunners at me instead. It continued with a competition in which I was forced by the Ministry to compete, despite not even entering, by a senior Ministry official who turned out to be under the *Imperius* all year! And it ended with me having to fight my way through a crowd of Death Eaters, probably some of the same ones from the World Cup, to escape from Voldemort after being used in some dark ritual to bring him back.”

Harry shook off another attempt by Hermione to calm him down and rose to his feet. “And what did Fudge do when he heard about it? Whined about how it can’t be true! And when I identified half a dozen of those Death Eaters, *by name*? He stood there and told me, in front of a whole roomful of witnesses mind you, that they had all been cleared because they were from very old families and had made DONATIONS to excellent causes! And instead of doing anything at all to investigate what I told him, he spent the next month slandering me in the press. To top it off, I get two dementors, who are supposed to be under the control of the Ministry, trying to kill me! Now you tell me, Minister Bones,” he shouted. “Just exactly why I should have ANY confidence in the integrity of your precious Ministry of Magic!”

Harry slammed back into his seat and angrily folded his arms across his chest, his fiery gaze daring her to repudiate his words. Almost in unison, Hermione and Fleur each reached out a soothing hand, Fleur resting hers on his arm while Hermione rubbed his shoulder. To her credit,

Bones managed to keep her cool, remaining silent for a time, hoping to keep the situation from getting completely out of control while she formulated her response.

She took a moment to observe the others sitting at the table. Everyone on Harry's side presented a unified front, each of their faces showing varying degrees of anger. Even the house elf had an irritated expression, which she'd never seen on a house elf before, and the dog looked like it was ready to attack at any second. But the most disturbing revelation was that both of her Aurors were nodding in sympathy with Potter's claims, and she suddenly realized that she had no support in this room whatsoever.

She had done her homework before coming to this meeting, trying to learn as much about Potter's situation as she could, although he had just revealed several items that had not been part of the information she'd been given. As these items seemed to come as no surprise to anyone else in the room, she was placed at a considerable disadvantage. She *hated* being the least informed person in a meeting.

Trying to regain her footing, she cleared her throat. "Mr. Potter, if these statements are correct I can understand your reluctance ... I was not aware of some of these incidents. That is, the records on your activities that I have reviewed ..."

"Oh yes, let's not forget my 'prior record'," Harry broke in. "For my supposed first offense I was accused of magic I didn't even do – it was a house elf." He gestured to the elf standing against the wall, who began nodding his head vigorously. "That got me a warning letter and I was locked up for a week. But the next year when I actually did something and blew up my aunt I got let off with a pat on the head."

Bones could only shake her head in helpless confusion. *Locked up? Potter had never been incarcerated. House elf?* She finally found her voice. "You had a house elf in your muggle home? How ...?"

"Dobby wasn't my house elf, he belonged to Malfoy at the time," Harry replied. But this did nothing to reduce her confusion, but instead increased it.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she admitted, slumping back in her chair in surrender.

"Madame, may I suggest that a pensieve might be of use?" Monsieur Delacour inquired in a soothing voice. There was also a patronizing note in his offer that suggested that the Frenchman was enjoying the discomfort of his English counterpart.

"You have a pensieve?" Bones asked, turning to where he was seated. As soon as these words left her mouth she inwardly winced at the look on his face. His expression clearly indicated that of course he was important enough to have access to a pensieve and that she had insulted him by even hinting otherwise.

Completely defeated, she dropped her head in a slight bow. "Of course. Yes, I very much appreciate your offer."

Bones was not very surprised to learn that Delacour already had a pensieve at the manor, and as it was none of her business she didn't ask where or from whom he had obtained it. She also quickly discovered that with Delacour's assistance Harry's memories had already been removed and bottled, and that Granger had efficiently labeled and catalogued them. She further assumed, correctly, that they had previously been viewed by everyone on Potter's side of the table. Harry, Hermione, and Fleur took turns guiding the Minister and the two Aurors through them, sharing the task of playing tour guide.

After some thought, Bones decided that it would be less confusing to take the memories in chronological order, even though the most important memories were likely the most recent. Accordingly, she surprised them by first requesting Harry's confrontation with Quirrell in his first year. She emerged shaking her head in disbelief that three first year students had made their way through a series of obstacles that were presumably intended to deter an experienced wizard. She then listened intently as Harry explained why his mere touch had been so damaging to the former defense professor, and filed that information away for later contemplation.

The next memory she wanted to see was Harry's encounter with Dobby at Privet Drive prior to his second year. Although her primary reason was to be able to clear the incident from his record, she did not miss the implication behind the fact that Lucius Malfoy's house elf had advance knowledge of the opening of the Chamber. Hermione, her guide for this memory, made sure to point it out anyway.

Next, Harry had to relive with her the battle with the basilisk and the specter of young Tom Riddle, because Hermione and Fleur were still unable to watch the basilisk attack Harry without being severely shaken. Hermione returned to review the scene afterward in Dumbledore's office in which Dobby was freed and Malfoy all but admitted his guilt.

After a break for a bite to eat, Fleur took her first turn as guide with the memory of Harry blowing up his aunt, and Fudge's reaction at the Leaky Cauldron. While they were in the pensieve Harry, Hermione, and Sirius discussed the revelations that would come up next. They knew that they had to reveal Sirius's illegal animagus form, but did they want to divulge Hermione's use of the time turner?

Harry and Hermione both decided to go along for the memory of the night they discovered Pettigrew. They began at Hagrid's, finding Scabbers in the cupboard, and continued into the Shrieking Shack, finishing with Harry and Hermione passing out by the lake as the dementors swarmed over them. Bones emerged from this memory and promptly turned to Shackbolt and Tonks.

"Auror Shackbolt, please inform Director Scrimgeour that as of this moment the search for Sirius Black is officially discontinued. We shall schedule a press conference to announce that he is being cleared of all charges. His name is to be replaced on our wanted list with that of Peter Pettigrew." She paused and shot him a keen look. "I suspect that your pursuit of Black for the past year has not consumed much effort on your part?" Shackbolt shook his head.

"No ma'am. I believe I made better use of my time, but I am willing to accept whatever

disciplinary action is coming to me,” he stated. Bones paused for several seconds, then nodded and turned back to the rest of the group.

“Having taken care of that item of business, I think an introduction is in order,” she declared, staring at the large black dog. “Then perhaps we can all get better acquainted over some tea.”

Sirius transformed back into himself, and the next hour or so was spent with him explaining to Minister Bones more about how he came to be incarcerated without a trial, his escape, and his part of the drama at Hogwarts that year. Tonks and Shackbolt took the opportunity to introduce themselves to Harry. Both of them had been slated to be part of a group of Order members who planned to pick Harry up from Privet Drive and take him to their headquarters prior to his trial at the Ministry. Obviously, those plans had been scrapped when they learned that Harry had not only already left his relatives’ house, but was no longer even in the country.

“You and Sirius caused quite a stir with that one,” Tonks informed him with a grin. “Never seen Molly in such a state. She blamed Sirius for corrupting you, but Ron and Ginny thought that you and Hermione were already scheming about something like this before you’d even left school. Harry and Hermione shared a glance. They needed to write to Ron, Ginny, and Neville as soon as they could to let them know that was going on. Tonks continued, “The most interesting thing was the way Dumbledore took it in stride. I swear, nothing fazes that man. At the next meeting of the Order he only talked about how we might turn this new development to our advantage.”

Before Harry could ask any more about how things were going back home, Bones and Sirius ended their discussion. The new Minister then turned to Harry and Hermione and informed them that she had already been made aware of their use of the time turner to rescue Sirius and Buckbeak, and that no charges would be forthcoming on those actions either.

“The only part of the sequence of events that is still not clear to me,” she added. “Is who summoned the patronus that saved you three from the dementors by the lake? I thought it might have been Professor Snape, but ...”

“It was Harry!” Hermione corrected her at once. “He and I were at on the other side of the lake with Buckbeak. He wanted to find out who it was, and realized just in time that it was himself.”

“But ... that must have been an extremely powerful patronus!” Bones objected. “To repel all those dementors.” Hermione simply beamed at Harry with pride, which was echoed in the faces of Sirius and her parents. Fleur and the other Delacours also smiled at the modest teen who merely shrugged. Realizing that it was the truth, Bones could only stare.

“Professor Lupin taught me that year because the dementors affected me so badly,” he explained reluctantly. “They make me remember the night my mum and dad died.” A sober quiet descended on the room, and Hermione moved next to Harry and put her arms around him in a comforting hug.

After a respectful interval Bones broke the silence. “So I suppose you did not have too much difficulty handling just two dementors a fortnight ago.”

Harry shook his head. “No ma’am, but we are concerned about where they came from.” He nodded to Hermione and she went through their analysis and most probable conclusion that someone in the Ministry had sent them to Little Whinging deliberately. Bones was reluctantly forced to agree with their reasoning, and vowed that tracking down the culprit would be a top priority.

At this point they were ready to tackle the memories of the tournament and its aftermath. After a quick consultation with Sirius and Fleur, Harry and Hermione decided to add two more. First, Hermione shared her memory of September 1, when the imposter Moody made his first public appearance.

When she, Bones, Shacklebolt, and Tonks emerged from the pensieve, Bones was shaking her head. “He was quite the actor, I’ll give him that. I worked with that man for thirty years and I could see that something was off, but nothing I could put my finger on. I’m not surprised that no one else caught on. What’s next?”

Fleur then guided the three visitors through her memory of the night of October 31, when the names of the champions came out of the goblet. This time, the focus was on the actions of Crouch, and they watched him carefully as a perplexed Harry Potter joined Fleur and her two fellow champions in the anteroom. While she was embarrassed for the way she’d reacted at the time, they felt that being removed from most of the activity, her viewpoint would give them a better perspective on the actions of the Director of International Magical Cooperation.

Curiously, he did not participate in the conversation at all, standing back in the shadows. It was only when he was questioned directly that he finally spoke. “We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of fire are bound to compete in the tournament.” Then he fell silent again as the controversy resumed. Later, when he was asked to give the instructions to the champions, he seemed to have been in something of a daze. When he finished giving his instructions, Dumbledore was looking at him with some concern, and inquired if he wished to stay the night. Crouch turned him down, and rather brusquely declined even stopping for a drink before returning to his office.

This time Bones was nodding as she exited the pensieve memory. “In hindsight, I can see the indications that he was under an *Imperius*,” she agreed. Even Dumbledore could see he wasn’t quite right, and he doesn’t work with him every day. I don’t understand why young Weasley never noticed anything.”

Harry managed to refrain from pointing out that it might have been from having his head so far up his arse, although he and Hermione shared a knowing smirk. Then he took a deep breath, for it was now time for him to take the visitors through his memories of the night of the Third Task.

Having given the matter some thought while the visitors from the Ministry were in the pensieve with Hermione and Fleur, he told them that he wanted to show them three memories, but not necessarily in the order they happened. He would save the biggest one for last.

First, they viewed his encounter with the imposter Moody in the Defense Professor’s office, where Barty, Jr. revealed the details of the plot. Next, he took them through the confrontation with Fudge

in the hospital wing, where the former Minister adamantly denied the possibility that Voldemort had returned to life. Finally, he revealed the scene in the graveyard at Riddle Manor, from the time Cedric was killed to his escape with the Cup portkey.

As soon as they came out of this memory, Bones and Shackbolt immediately grabbed some parchment and quills and began writing furiously. As soon as they finished, they compared notes.

“I have thirty one,” Bones announced, “But there were two I didn’t recognize.”

“Thirty two for me,” Shackbolt replied. “Only twenty I could identify, though. Did you count Pettigrew?” Bones pressed her lips together and nodded while adding this name to her list. Meanwhile Shackbolt was looking back and forth, copying names from her list to his.

“I think the tall one was Rowle,” Shackbolt suggested. “I ran across his file in Sweden a few years ago. And you only wrote down one of the Carrows. Amycus was lurking behind his sister.”

“Good, that’s all of them, then,” Bones concluded with satisfaction. “Add these to the ones in Azkaban, plus the ones known to have been killed, and I think we’ve accounted for nearly the whole lot.”

She turned to Harry and the others in the room. “Our best estimates are that Voldemort had no more than fifty Death Eaters, even at the height of his power,” she explained. “You’ve given us a golden opportunity here. Fortunately, I don’t think it’s too late. If we waited a while longer, gave him time to build up his ranks ... well, no use worrying about that now. If we move quickly, we can take them all into custody before they realize we’re on to them.”

Harry and Hermione were stunned. Here was a Minister of Magic taking decisive action against their enemies, entirely on the basis of Harry’s word. It was something that was completely outside their experience. Bones paused when she noticed their discomfort.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Potter,” she added, softening her voice. “I didn’t mean to overlook or diminish what you went through that night. It was one of the most courageous actions I’ve ever witnessed.” Harry shook his head, attempting to deflect her praise, but it was echoed by everyone else present, while Hermione wrapped her arm around him from one side and Sirius did the same on the other.

When the acclamation had quieted down, Hermione spoke up. “But Minister Bones, can you really do that? How can you arrest them based just on Harry’s evidence?” Having recently reviewed the memory from third year, she recalled Dumbledore’s comment about the word of two underage wizards not being very convincing. “Don’t some of them, like Mr. Malfoy, have quite a lot of political influence?”

Bones adjusted her monocle and peered at her. “That is a fair question, Miss Granger,” she responded. “That’s why the timing is so important. Right now, Harry Potter’s mistreatment by the Ministry is the hottest story going. The wizarding public is feeling guilty as well, because they bought into the slander. He and Dumbledore are heroes again. I daresay he’s at the peak of his popularity. People will be willing to believe what he has to say, at least for a while. And from a

political standpoint, it's extremely advantageous in gaining the public's support if you can announce a problem and at the same time announce the measures you're taking to address it."

Taking another look at the list in her hands, Bones frowned. "Kingsley, how many Aurors do we have that we can assign to this and trust that they will keep it under wraps until we have them all in custody? If there's even the slightest hint of what we're up to the whole thing will fall apart. It could turn into a disaster if they were ready for us and fought back, or attacked somewhere else while we were raiding an empty house."

Shacklebolt did the mental arithmetic and shook his head. "If you're talking absolute, unquestioned loyalty, probably a little more than half our force. I don't think we could even muster up two Aurors per arrest."

Bones fretted, "But it needs to be simultaneous, or the later ones could get warned off."

Monsieur Delacour stepped forward. "Madame, if I may? As you know, my role in our Ministry is Senior Advisor to the Minister on Matters of Security. Ever since my daughter came home and informed me of Dumbledore's announcement of Voldemort's return at their leaving feast, my government has been making preparations. We have three companies of Aurors trained and ready for just such an operation. If you are interested in a cooperative arrangement between our two governments, I believe we can lend you some support."

Bones breathed a sigh of relief and quickly accepted his offer. Delacour promised to arrange a meeting between the two ministers as quickly as possible. At that point everyone was glad to retire to the dining room for a late dinner. When the meal had concluded with a toast to a new era of Anglo-French cooperation, the Delacours invited their visitors to stay the night.

With heartfelt appreciation, Bones regretfully declined, explaining that she was still buried in work relating to the governmental transition process. Tonks then asked for a moment to speak with her cousin before they left, and Bones allowed her to stay behind for a brief period while she and Shacklebolt returned to the Ministry building in London.

Instead of the heartwarming family reunion Minister Bones might have expected to occur after she left, the pink-haired Auror quickly pulled Harry and Sirius together for a private word.

"Harry, I've learned something important that I think you need to hear," she whispered in a solemn voice that belied her flamboyant appearance. "You know that prophecy at the Ministry that the Order has been guarding?" Harry shot a surprised look at Sirius, then turned back to Tonks and nodded.

"It's about you."

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What If? ... An Alternative to Order Of the Phoenix Taking the Initiative

Chapter 3, Taking the Initiative

“It’s about you.”

After a moment of stunned silence at Tonks’s revelation, Harry immediately waved Hermione over to join the conversation. But after a few moments thought while Tonks filled her in, he was no longer surprised. “It’s about me and Voldemort, isn’t it?” Tonks winced at his use of the feared name, but nodded.

“How did you figure that out so fast?” she wondered. Harry merely shrugged. It seemed that everything in his life always came down to that; why should this be any different?

“More importantly, how did you find this out?” Sirius wanted to know.

“I’ve been beginning to have a strange feeling about all this,” the pink-haired Auror confided. Part of it’s the way Dumbledore responded to you taking a runner like that. It’s like he doesn’t mind that you’re out of the way. We all thought he’d be insisting that we go and fetch you back. But instead he seems to want to keep his distance from you. Have the two of you had a falling out?”

“Not that I know of,” Harry replied in bewilderment.

“Anyway, the other thing was when Sturgis Podmore disappeared for a few days when it was supposed to be his turn on guard duty,” Tonks continued. “I got to thinking about what exactly we were supposed to do if someone turned up. I mean, Kingsley and I can defend ourselves, but what about someone like Sturgis or Molly Weasley? If some Death Eaters actually showed up they’d be in big trouble. So I thought, if one of us could get killed over this prophecy, I wanted to find out more about it.” She paused and looked around nervously, seeking approval. Harry, Hermione, and Sirius all promptly nodded that her reasoning made sense.

“So, yesterday I slipped into the Hall of Prophecies itself to look around a bit,” she revealed.

“I thought only Unspeakables could get in there,” Sirius pointed out.

Tonks grinned at her cousin. “Well, I wasn’t exactly myself at the time, was I?” And to Harry and Hermione’s astonishment she began to change right before their eyes. A moment later they were looking at a sallow skinned wizard with a mournful face.

“You’re a metamorphmagus!” Hermione cried excitedly. “I’ve read about them. But they’re supposed to be really rare.”

“Yep, not many of us around,” Tonks replied cheerily. “Broderick Bode, at your service.” She paused a moment and her heart shaped face and spiky pink hair returned. “Now, as I was saying. I snooped around a bit and found the prophecy. It’s labeled, ‘S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D. Dark Lord and (?) Harry Potter’.”

Harry frowned. “What do the letters mean?”

“Those are the initials of the Seer who gave the prophecy and the recipient,” Tonks explained. “They’re followed by the Unspeakables’ analysis of who the prophecy refers to.”

Hermione had been mouthing the letters over and over, trying to work out who they referred to. “Oh no, it couldn’t be!” she groaned. The other three turned to her. “S. P. T. – Sybill P. Trelawny. But I don’t believe it. She’s a total fraud!” She looked at Harry. “Granted, she was right about Pettigrew ...” Suddenly Hermione fell silent and went pale. “Harry! Remember what you said? Dumbledore told you that was her *second* correct prophecy! What if ...?”

Sirius broke in. “That would make sense, given the second set of initials.” Now everyone turned their attention to him. “There aren’t many wizards I know of that have three middle names.” Blank looks on the faces of his listeners indicated that none of the others had caught on yet. Then Tonks began to chuckle.

“Wotcher, Harry,” she grinned, poking him in the arm. “Haven’t you ever seen Dumbledore’s Chocolate Frog card?”

Harry shook his head slowly, trying to remember what the card said, while Hermione closed her eyes and wrinkled up her forehead in concentration, mentally leafing through *Hogwarts, A History*.

“Albus Percival Wulfric ... something ... Dumbledore,” she announced a moment later.

“Brian,” Harry filled in. “I remember thinking it was weird that he had one normal name.”

Sirius brought them back on track. “That means Dumbledore knows the prophecy, whatever it says. And is determined to keep it from Voldemort.” He frowned and turned to Harry. “And he’s never said anything to you about it?”

“No,” Harry replied with some irritation. “Now that I know it exists, things make more sense. He’s told me several times when I asked him why Voldemort was so interested in me that it was something he couldn’t tell me about until I was older.”

“I still don’t like the smell of this,” Sirius declared. “He knows something important about you and Voldemort and he’s keeping you in the dark about it. Not only that, but he appears to be distancing himself from you.” The other three murmured their agreement with his analysis. “It

almost looks like he's setting you up."

"He's been setting me up every year," Harry responded heavily, in a low voice tinged with resignation. Hermione gasped, but the horrified look she gave him indicated that she had come to the same conclusion. The two of them took a few minutes to explain to Tonks what had happened to Harry in each of his first four years at Hogwarts. Too many things had occurred at just the right time and place for it all to have been a coincidence.

"I think," Sirius decided after they'd finished. "That we need to get our hands on that prophecy."

Harry and Hermione's time in France wasn't all plotting and strategizing. She wanted to take the opportunity to explore the country with him, not knowing when they'd get a chance like this again. Through the use of the Delacours' floo connection, they'd visited the magical sections of Paris, Lyon, and Marseille, accompanied everywhere by a large friendly black dog. Madame Delacour and Gabrielle even escorted them to Beauxbatons for a day.

It was necessary to disguise their identities, of course, but they learned that Veela are masters of glamour charms. Madame Delacour turned Harry's hair a sandy blonde color and even managed to make it lie flat. She also gave him bangs to cover his scar. Hermione, who'd always envied girls with straight hair, received long flowing golden blond locks reminiscent of Lavender Brown's. Harry scored major boyfriend points when he observed that it looked pretty, but that he preferred her normal hair.

With her parents flying in for the weekends, they used this time to do sightseeing in the muggle portions of the country. They spent the first weekend in Paris, and planned to return there if time permitted at the end of the month. The second weekend was spent driving up the valley from Lyon to Dijon and the Bourgogne region, where Hermione and her parents had visited the summer before third year, touring cathedrals and other historic sites. This weekend, the day after the stressful meeting with Minister Bones, they determined that a relaxing day at the beach was in order, and headed south to the French Riviera.

Everything went fine until Mr. Granger saw Hermione's swimsuit when she removed her coverup at the beach. As far as he could tell, her bikini consisted of a few small triangles of light blue fabric held together with bits of string. This was not the little girl he remembered from their last visit to France two years ago!

That thirteen-year-old girl had just graduated from one-piece suits to a conservative two-piece. This young lady, now nearly sixteen, was something else entirely. But before he could make a scene, he was headed off by his wife, who whispered in his ear, "Count your blessings – it could be worse!" and gestured to the other women on the beach. Glancing around, he could see her point, as some of them were wearing an entirely different kind of one-piece suit – bikini bottoms without a top. Grudgingly, he sat down on a beach chair and picked up a book, but he made certain that the two teenagers never left his sight the entire day.

Harry, who'd been finishing setting up the umbrellas, didn't even notice Hermione's father's reaction. When he turned and got his first look at her his mouth suddenly went dry. He couldn't take his eyes off her even if he'd wanted to. While he'd been eagerly looking forward to seeing her in a bikini ever since they'd first discussed the idea of spending the day at the beach, this suit exceeded all his expectations!

For her part, Hermione just smiled, very pleased with herself. She even managed to keep her blush to a minimum. She stretched out on the beach blanket, picked up a book, and propped herself up on her elbows. Patting the space next to her, she beckoned him to join her. Harry didn't need to be asked twice. He whipped off his shirt and practically dove onto the blanket beside her.

It was a truly memorable day, just what they needed to take their minds off things. Fleur had taught them a sunscreen charm before she left to return to England, so they didn't have to worry about sun exposure. And although Harry did notice the topless girls, Hermione was quite pleased that other than a bright red blush and a few glances he didn't dwell on them, nor even hint that she should follow their lead. The young couple alternated taking brief dips in the cold water, short naps, pleasant hand-in-hand strolls along the beach, and long stretches of time lying on the blanket simply being with each other. Harry was content just watching her read her book, wondering how he managed to get this lucky.

For a brief moment, life was perfect.

-ooOoo-

Wednesday, August 25, Azkaban Island

"So, that's the last of them, then?" the DMLE official asked the captain of the guards at the wizarding prison.

"Yes, and good riddance," the captain responded with a shudder as the black hooded nightmares drifted onto the boat. "Those things always gave me the creeps." The official nodded in agreement. There hadn't exactly been a lot of volunteers for this assignment at DMLE headquarters.

"Where are you taking them?" the captain wondered.

"That's classified information," came the reply. The other wizard nodded his understanding.

"Are we getting any replacements?" This was an obvious follow-up question.

"The Minister contracted for a troop of security goblins from Gringotts," the official revealed. "They'll be coming in a few hours." The captain scowled. He didn't particularly care for goblins either, but he supposed they were better than dementors.

"We'll put them right to work."

Thursday, August 26, Ministry of Magic

Delores Umbridge nervously smoothed out her robes as she waited to be called in to the office of the Minister of Magic. As the Senior Undersecretary to Minister Fudge she'd been in a state of limbo since the change in administrations, while Minister Bones settled into office. She'd not had much of a relationship with the new Minister while she'd been head of the DMLE, but she hoped to rectify that. She'd worked hard, stepping on quite a few toes and doing a fair amount of backstabbing to get to her position as Fudge's second in command, and had no intention of giving it up.

"The Minister will see you now," the secretary announced with barely hidden distaste.

Inside the office, Umbridge plastered a sweet smile on her face and in a high-pitched voice simpered, "Hello Minister, I'm so happy that we can finally have this opportunity for a little chat."

But Amelia Bones wasted no time with pleasantries, coming right to the point. "Madame Umbridge, you are under arrest." The toad-like woman's eyes bulged out, but before she could choke out a reply, Bones continued. "For attempted murder and unlawful diversion of a restricted Ministry resource."

"What!" Umbridge shrieked. "You surely don't believe those lies in the *Prophet*!"

"I have all the evidence I need, including testimony from the captain of the guard at Azkaban and two others," Bones snapped. "I cannot believe you thought you could get away with this!"

"Potter had it coming!" Umbridge screamed as she felt her arms being pulled behind her back in a set of magical restraints. "Somebody had to act. He was directly challenging the authority of the Minister! Everyone was bleating about silencing him, wringing their hands, but no one had the nerve to do anything about it. If he hadn't gotten lucky somehow ..."

Her words were cut off with a silencing spell and Bones waved her away. As soon as the Aurors had removed the unctuous woman from her sight she sat down and permitted herself a small smile of satisfaction. *Now, on to the next task.*

Friday, August 27, Ministry of Magic

At 8:00 AM sharp, Archibald Avery entered his office to find Gawain Robards waiting for him. Robards looked up and gave him a nod of greeting.

"Bones wants to see you in her office," he informed the mid-level bureaucrat. "Some sort of 'get acquainted with the troops thing'." Avery nodded and followed the Auror captain to the lift, not stopping to wonder why such a high ranking official was playing errand boy. Once inside the lift he turned to face the doors and everything went dark.

Quickly pocketing his wand after casting the nonverbal stunning spell, Robards pulled a flattened old tin can from his pocket, attached it to his prisoner with a sticking charm and activated it. Stopping the elevator at level two, he got off and hurried to Auror Headquarters to report in and receive his next assignment.

8:01, Ministry of Magic

As Clayton Yaxley approached his office on level six he encountered Rufus Scrimgeour standing in the hallway. An uneasy feeling struck him and he tensed slightly as the Head Auror turned in his direction. When he was told Minister Bones wanted to see him he didn't even wait to hear the reason, drawing his wand and firing off a curse. But Scrimgeour was ready and blocked it, and the two men circled warily, Yaxley calculating his best chance of getting out of the building and warning his master. He never had time to come up with any sort of plan, though, because the next spell came from behind him, as Scrimgeour's backup moved up silently from around the corner. A few seconds later the portkey had been attached and activated, and the hallway was clear. The entire encounter had taken less than twenty seconds.

8:02, Malfoy Manor

Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks waited with an affected air of nonchalance for someone to answer the door at the Malfoy residence. Shacklebolt had claimed this assignment for himself, as it was considered to be one of the most critical, and Tonks had persuaded him to select her as his partner. Finally the door opened to reveal an extremely irritated Lucius Malfoy in a dressing gown.

"What is the meaning of this, calling at such an inappropriate hour?" he demanded.

"I apologize for the timing, but I have a few urgent questions for you dealing with Sirius Black. Since your wife is related to him ..." Shacklebolt was cut off before he could finish his cover story.

"Make an appointment!" snarled Malfoy. The two Aurors had subtly moved apart so that it was difficult for Malfoy to keep a close watch on both of them. Shacklebolt raised his open hands in a placating gesture and began an apology, but Malfoy noticed that Tonks still had her hand on her wand.

Preoccupied with this threat, he didn't see the silent stunning spell that emerged from the wand of the disillusioned French Auror stationed several steps behind his British partners until it was too late. A second later Tonks had added a petrifying jinx of her own, while Shacklebolt slapped a portkey on him and activated it.

As soon as the Malfoy patriarch disappeared, Shacklebolt and Tonks stepped into the entry hall,

still on alert. Mad Eye Moody had been reactivated for this operation, and had visited each of the target sites during the previous night. Apparating from one to the next under his invisibility cloak, he'd scanned them all with his magical eye to determine the threat at each location. His report that only the Malfoy family was currently present at the manor had come as a great comfort to the assault team.

A minute later Narcissa Malfoy burst into the entry hall, followed closely by her son, only to be brought up short by the sight of two wands in their faces.

“Good morning, Aunt Narcissa, Cousin Draco,” Tonks announced with an obviously fake smile. “We’re going to need to borrow Uncle Lucius for a while. Oh, and by the way, please roll up your left sleeves.” Her face hardened and the matching grim expression of her partner let the two Malfoys know they meant business.

“How dare you!” Narcissa sputtered. But with a casual wave of Tonks’s wand the sleeve of her dressing gown ripped away at the elbow, revealing pale skin without a blemish in sight.

“Oh my, how clumsy of me,” Tonks declared airily. “I’m so sorry. I just don’t know where I get it from – do you know, was my mother this uncoordinated when she was younger?” While the pink-haired Auror was going on like this, Shackbolt strode up to a shocked Draco and forcibly pulled up his sleeve. Nodding in satisfaction at the absence of a Dark Mark on the boy’s arm as well, he stepped back.

Ignoring Narcissa’s sputtering indignation, Tonks and Shackbolt now cast a pair of spells each, silencing and petrifying their reluctant hosts. As they turned to rejoin their still disillusioned French colleague outside, Tonks had one more snarky comment.

“It’s such a pity that you’re not feeling up to receiving visitors this morning. I suppose we should come back again some time when you aren’t so indisposed. But I’m certain that you’ll be back on your feet by the end of the day. Bye now.”

As soon as they were away from the mansion, Shackbolt summoned his patronus. To the ghostly white form of a lynx, he spoke a brief message before sending it off to the Ministry. *Primary target secured, proceeding to secondary target .*

8:10, Ministry of Magic

When Scrimgeour entered her office and nodded, Amelia Bones permitted herself a brief sigh of relief. All of the Death Eaters in the employ of the Ministry were now accounted for except for Macnair, who was still out of the country. According to the log sheet, he was somewhere in Eastern Europe. Her first action upon arriving at her office at 7:00 that morning had been to request assistance from the other European Ministries in tracking him down. The communication had been brief. *Detain for questioning. Approach with extreme caution.*

When Shackbolt's lynx delivered its message confirming the capture of Lucius Malfoy two minutes later, Bones even managed a quick smile. So far, so good!

8:15, Goyle residence

Tonks and Shack knocked briskly on the door of the shabby looking house a mile or so from the nearest town. They were answered by a tired looking, heavyset woman who reported with some annoyance that her husband was still in bed.

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am, but we need to speak with him concerning one of our investigations," Shackbolt announced. Without waiting for a response he pushed past her and moved quickly to the bedroom. Keeping to the plan, Tonks lagged behind to keep an eye on the woman and her children, who had now wandered into the front room, curious to know what was happening.

At the back of the house Shackbolt burst into the bedroom without knocking, and Greg Goyle, Sr. was stunned before he could fully awaken. Another portkey, and another Death Eater was in custody.

"Waddya think yer doin?!" Shackbolt spun to see a large teenaged youth in the doorway. Before he could incant a spell, the younger Goyle charged in and tackled him to the bed. But a bright red streak of light from Tonks's wand had the Slytherin teen unconscious before he could even land a blow. Shackbolt rolled out from under him and came up, wand in hand, alert for any other interference while Tonks petrified his assailant and checked his arm.

Back in the front room, they found the mother and her other children huddled together in fright under the wand of their French partner. Reluctantly, they stunned the whole lot of them. This operation was just too sensitive to risk any word getting out before they wrapped it up. Even so, this was far better treatment than their opponents gave to any innocent bystanders they encountered on one of *their* raids.

After sending another messenger patronus, the three Aurors apparated to their next destination. Their final assignment was to serve as backup for the major raid of the day.

8:20, Knockturn Alley

Tonks, Kingsley, and the unseen French Auror arrived in Knockturn Alley to the sound of heavy spellfire. A mixed team of Aurors was storming a rundown rooming house. Following their orders, the newcomers moved to secure the area to head off any intervention by the numerous lowlifes who frequented the disreputable district.

Five minutes later the other Aurors emerged with three prisoners, all clearly bearing a Dark Mark.

It was later revealed that two other Death Eaters had been killed inside. Five Aurors had been injured, only one critically, and no deaths had been inflicted on the light side. Discovering that the Auror in command had been portkeyed to St. Mungo's, Shacklebolt, as the next most senior Auror present, smoothly assumed charge of the scene. The three prisoners were identified and portkeyed away to join their comrades, and after one final sweep of the area, Shacklebolt congratulated the remaining Aurors and ordered them back to the Ministry.

By 8:30 AM Operation First Strike had concluded. In a half hour's time the balance of power between light and dark in wizarding Britain had shifted dramatically

Back on the second level of the Ministry of Magic, cheers filled the Auror ready room when the final teams returned from their assignments. French and British Aurors alike slapped each other on the back in congratulations and words of appreciation were exchanged. Celebratory butterbeers were passed around (anything harder was strictly forbidden while on duty) as the rank and file warriors eagerly awaited news from their superiors on the final tally for the morning's activities.

Upstairs in the Minister's office a command center had been set up, with updates magically appearing on a large display screen as each report came in. Only here, where they had access to the big picture, did the full scope of the situation appear. While no one wanted to celebrate prematurely, the excitement mounted with each passing minute.

At 9:00 a floo call announced that Swedish Aurors had captured Thorfin Rowle.

Finally, the anxiously awaited report came in from Russia.

Walden Macnair had successfully completed the first half of his mission, and was now nearing his second objective. He had located the hiding place of the traitor Karkaroff and administered the ultimate penalty for disloyalty to the dark lord. The body would likely not be discovered for months, if not years. Negotiating with the giants would be a different challenge, though.

He flashed his British Ministry of Magic diplomatic credentials to the Russian border inspector and assumed an imperious, bored attitude useful for dealing with low level government employees. He frowned when the inspector did not immediately wave him on his way, but rather paused to scrutinize the document. He eased his wand into readiness.

"Excuse me, sir, could you step over here please?" the inspector inquired, motioning him toward a closed door. Macnair wasn't having any of it.

"*Avada Kedrava!*" Without waiting to see the young inspector fall, Macnair spun around intending to flee, only to be cut down in a hail of curses. The hired killer had performed his last execution.

10:00, Ministry of Magic

When the results went up on the big screen – Macnair: killed resisting arrest – shouts of triumph erupted from the Minister’s crisis team. The excitement did not abate when the details came through. The young inspector had dropped to the ground as soon as Macnair’s wand came up, and the killing curse had flashed harmlessly over his head. Minister Bones assured her Russian counterpart that she bore no ill will over the fate of her employee, and apologized in turn that his people had been placed in harm’s way. She accepted with delight his assurances that his Aurors would keep a close eye on the giant camp in the Ural Mountains.

The new Minister of Magic broke out in a genuine smile for the first time since she had taken office, as she closed the floo connection and stood to address her subordinates – her most trusted department heads, and especially her closest advisors. These were ones who’d labored long hours for the past week to perfect this audacious plan, the bold preemptive strike from which they were now about to reap the rewards – and no small amount of criticism. Scrimgeour, Robards, Moody, Shackbolt. And Delacour, her liaison with the French Ministry.

The final totals now glowed in fiery characters on the screen above them.

Of the 34 Known Death Eaters (not counting the 10 already incarcerated at Azkaban):

25 captured

5 killed

2 – Pettigrew and Gibbon – still at large, whereabouts unknown

1 – Snape – at Hogwarts, vouched for by Dumbledore

1 – Karkaroff – unaccounted for but not considered a threat

Stripped of all but two of his supporters, Voldemort was still a formidable foe, but for the first time since his rise to power, now no longer seemed invincible.

Bones spoke a few brief words of congratulations, appreciation, and praise. But her concluding lines set the tone for the coming months.

“Today was a great victory for our side, but the war isn’t over yet. Our work has just begun, starting with tomorrow’s public announcement, where we’ll face another battle of critical importance in its own right – to convince the British wizarding public that our actions today were justified. And that might be as difficult a task as the one we just finished. So let’s get to work!”

12:00, A Secure Location in France

Lucius Malfoy slowly regained his senses to find himself in a dark room, by all appearances a dungeon, deep underground. As his realization of the situation became clear, his rage and indignation grew white hot.

“What is the meaning of this outrage!” he screamed, once he’d located the door to his cell. “I demand to be released at once! I swear to you, someone will pay for this!”

After a frustrating silence, a distant voice answered. “Shut your mouzz, Eenglish swine!”

Temporarily taken aback at this response, Malfoy paused a moment before responding. “Who are you?”

“Zatees none of your concern, Eenglishman.”

“You can’t talk to me that way!” Malfoy shouted back in frustration. “Do you know who I am?”

From between the bars a flash of light threw him back against the opposite wall. Fighting to retain consciousness, he barely heard the answer to his last question.

“You are nuzzing more zan a fool ’oo ’as found ’ees way eento my care. Bonnes vacances.”

In twenty-four similar cells, far below the surface of Paris, twenty-four other prisoners shook their heads in similar confusion, unaware that the Bastille was more than just a famous French historical landmark.

And to their horror, a blackened skull and snake permanently etched into each of their left arms soon began to burn. They were being summoned. But none of them were in any position to respond.

A few minutes later and 250 miles to the south and east, Harry Potter clamped his hand to his forehead and doubled over in pain, as his scar exploded in agony. The next thing he knew he was lying on the sofa, his head on Hermione’s lap, while Gabrielle and Madame Delacour looked on anxiously. Seeing the blood trickling from his scar, the French witch quickly conjured a damp cloth and passed it to Hermione. Whether it was the refreshing coolness and gentle touch of Hermione’s ministrations, or the loving concern they represented, Harry’s pain soon began to ebb. His eyes sought out hers, and his fervent gaze conveyed his gratitude even before he spoke.

“Thanks,” he whispered. “I think he’s really furious this time.”

“I was hoping he wouldn’t be able to affect you this far away,” Hermione commented discouragedly.

“I think this is a special case,” Harry guessed. “I doubt if he’s ever felt this kind of rage. He just nearly *Crucioed* Pettigrew and some other Death Eater into insanity. Madame Bones’s plan must have been pretty successful.”

“I’m sure we’ll hear all about it tomorrow, if not sooner,” Hermione concluded soothingly. “It’s probably best if you take it easy the rest of the day. We have a lot planned for tomorrow.”

“Maybe we could conjure rafts and float in that pond Gabrielle showed us the other day,” Harry suggested with a hopeful grin. Hermione smiled down at him and ruffled his hair playfully. She knew very well that he’d been eager to see her in that bikini again ever since their outing to the beach on Sunday. And truth be told, she enjoyed his reaction to seeing her in it.

“I suppose we can,” she sighed, feigning reluctance, but betraying it with a grin. “But I think this time you’ll have to rub sunscreen onto my back. By hand.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

What If? ... An Alternative to Order Of the Phoenix Prophecy?

Chapter 4, Prophecy?

Saturday, August 28, Diagon Alley

As an employee, Fleur had the use of a Gringotts portkey, so they arrived in the Alley just outside the towering, snowy white bank. But even with this short exposure they could feel the electricity in the air – the crowds were buzzing with the rumors about the arrests the day before. Everyone was eagerly awaiting the announcement from the Ministry of Magic that was to occur in a few hours, and scheduled to be carried live over the Wizarding Wireless Network.

No one paid much attention to Fleur and her three blonde companions as they entered the bank. The French witch broke away and headed toward her own office as the others got in the short queue for one of the tellers. It being early Saturday morning, there were not many customers present.

When they reached the goblin teller, Tonks quickly flashed her Auror badge and requested confidentiality. The bored goblin glanced at it, then pressed a button under the counter and nodded at them to proceed – a localized silencing charm would ensure that they wouldn't be overheard. At this point Harry identified himself and showed his vault key.

Given his disguise, Harry wasn't surprised at the suspicious look that the teller shot him. But since he had the key, and was accompanied by an Auror, the goblin let it pass, and called for Griphook to take the party down to the vault.

"Hi, Griphook," Harry greeted the new goblin. This was met with a startled expression indicating that the goblin was clearly not expecting such a familiar form of address. Assuming that his disguise prevented him being recognized, Harry continued. "I'm Harry Potter. We met four years ago when I first came to Gringotts."

Griphook shot him another odd look and shrugged. "Welcome back to Gringotts, Mr. Potter." On his right, Tonks also wore a look of amazement. Customers at the wizarding bank simply did not engage in idle conversation with the goblins.

As they exited one of the doors leading out of the hall, Harry turned to Hermione. "Do you like roller coasters?"

Now it was Hermione's turn to be puzzled at Harry's words. "No, not really."

Harry grinned and gave her hand a squeeze. "Better hang on tight then."

Several minutes later Hermione was quite pale as Harry helped her out of the cart, keeping a good grip on her arm as her legs wobbled a bit. "Don't worry, Hagrid was even worse," Harry whispered to cheer her up. And I don't think it's quite as bad on the way back up."

Hermione struggled to regain her composure, not helped by the thought of having to endure that ride again. She shot Harry a stern look and declared, "Fine. On the way back I am going to sit on your lap, I am going to shut my eyes, you are going to wrap your arms around me and hold me as tightly as you can, and you are going to be whispering 'I love you' into my ear all the way up. Got it?" Harry grinned and nodded, then led her over to the small door in the wall that was to his vault, which Griphook had already unlocked.

Hermione's jaw dropped at the sight of the heaping piles of gold, silver, and bronze. "Harry, there must be thousands of Galleons in here!" She now realized why Fleur had given them special goblin made bags to carry it all in.

"27,419 Galleons, 13,654 Sickles, and 2,873 Knuts," Griphook informed them. "How much do you wish to withdraw?"

"All of it," Harry answered, looking down doubtfully at the small bag in his hand. It didn't take him long, though, to discover the usefulness of the bottomless, weightless goblin money container. In less than ten minutes he, Hermione, and Tonks had emptied the vault of all its coins. Seeing this, Griphook asked if he wished to close this vault, and Harry agreed.

Tonks looked around at the empty compartment with a frown of puzzlement. "Does Harry have another vault?" she asked, turning to their goblin guide. But Griphook was suddenly unable to meet Harry's eyes.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he declared. "Why should he have more than one vault?"

"Most of the old families have a lot of other things in their vaults – jewels, antiques, artifacts, magical items, old books – that sort of stuff," she explained to the two teens. "There's nothing in here but coins. There must be another one, the Potter family vault."

"I am not authorized to release any information on the contents of any of our other vaults," Griphook stated firmly.

Tonks glared at him for his less than helpful attitude, then gave up and shrugged. "Sirius would know," she decided. "Maybe you can't access it until you're of age."

Hermione definitely had a better time of it on the ride back to the surface, and was in a much

better mood when they re-entered the Gringotts main hall. There Tonks led them to the bank's floo connection, explaining how to use the Auror access point to the Ministry of Magic. She went through first to check things out, then returned to announce that the way was clear. Most of the Aurors were already on duty by now. She disappeared again and the two teens took a handful each of floo powder.

"Ministry Auror Entrance!" Hermione shouted as she vanished into the green flames.

"Ministry Auror Entrance!" Harry repeated as he followed behind her. He stumbled to his knees briefly before jumping back up to his feet while Tonks steadied Hermione, and took a look around.

They were in a nondescript, tucked out of the way corner at one end of a long multi-story atrium. Along each side of the hall a row of fireplaces provided floo access for the general public. In the center stood a fountain containing five golden statues in the middle of a circular pool. Opposite their current location a set of golden gates led to a smaller hall. Most of the people passing beyond this point appeared to be Ministry employees heading toward a bank of lifts.

"This is where we split up," Tonks informed Harry and Hermione. "Harry, get out your invisibility cloak and be ready to put it on when I tell you. Hermione, just stay here, blend in with the crowd, and listen to the Minister's announcement. It should be pretty entertaining. You might want to pay close attention to the crowd's reaction."

"I want to come along with you," Hermione protested. "We can both fit under Harry's cloak; we've done it before." Tonks shook her head.

"Too risky. You're much more likely to bump into something or someone that way," she pointed out. "The important thing is to get in and get out as quickly as we can."

Hermione nodded with disappointed resignation and backed away. Tonks pulled Harry through the stream of witches and wizards toward the gate, flashed her Auror badge to the security guard on duty, and they quickly disappeared from view. Hermione then made her way to the center of the atrium, found a seat at the edge of the fountain, and paused to examine the five large statues shooting water into the air.

She scowled at the blatant implications in the positioning of the statues – the noble wizard standing proudly in the center, as though the wizarding world revolved around him. The beautiful witch, at his side but a step lower, clearly not his equal, a combination of helpmate and eye-candy. And in obviously subservient roles, a centaur, a goblin, and a house elf, awaiting their master's instructions. By the time she regained control of her rage and indignation, running through in her mind an assortment of hexes she'd like to lay on whoever commissioned and designed this monstrosity, she realized that the Atrium had filled and the Minister was about to begin her address to the wizarding public.

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Harry and Tonks made their way through the gates, working against the flow of wizards and

witches coming up to the Atrium for the big announcement. Once they reached the lifts, they had to wait for one to empty out, but once they were in, the two of them had it all to themselves, as they were the only ones in the building going away from the Atrium instead of toward it. When the doors opened on level nine, however, only one occupant emerged, by all appearances the Unspeakable named Bode.

“I just saw Bode going the other way into the Atrium,” Tonks whispered to the boy beside her under the invisibility cloak. “So we should be okay. This way, through the black door.” The door opened automatically and they found themselves in a large circular room with a dozen identical doors. To Harry’s surprise, the wall began to rotate. When it stopped he wondered how they were going to figure out which door to use.

“Show me the Time Room,” Tonks called out. One of the doors opened and she strode towards it. “Took me quite a few tries to work that out,” she confided in a low voice to the empty space at her side.

She hurried them through the Time Room, and Harry didn’t get much chance to look at the amazing variety of time pieces, all ticking away. He thought he saw a cabinet full of hourglasses, and briefly wondered if this was where Hermione’s time turner had come from.

At the end of a long aisle was yet another door. Tonks pushed through that one as well and stopped just inside the next chamber. It was much larger than any of the others they’d come through, high ceilinged and lined with rows and rows of shelves, each one filled with small dusty glass spheres.

“We’re here,” Tonks informed him quietly. “The Hall of Prophecy.”

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Minister Bones stepped up to the podium, and in a magically amplified voice, calmly stated that she had several announcements to make and asked everyone to hold their questions until she’d finished.

“First, I wish to inform you that Delores Umbridge, former Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, has been arrested for attempted murder of Harry Potter.” The outcry from the throng packing the Atrium was explosive, and it was half a minute before the Minister was able to continue. “Madame Umbridge directed two dementors to attack Mr. Potter near his home. We are fortunate that he escaped injury by defending himself with the use of a Patronus charm.” This time the murmuring from the crowd, while not as loud, was equally excited at such a display of magical prowess by the young teen. “She has admitted her guilt, and her sentence will be determined at a special session of the Wizengamot scheduled for this afternoon.”

“Second, on a related note,” Bones continued, “all charges against Mr. Potter in connection with this attack, for performing underage magic, have of course been dropped, with the Ministry’s full apologies.” The murmuring continued, but took on a tone indicating general agreement with the outcome, mixed in with some grumbling about the lack of intelligence displayed by the idiots in charge.

“Third,” Bones announced, taking up a new parchment. “Based on new evidence, including pensieve memories and Veritaserum testimony, Sirius Black has been cleared of all charges relating to the attack on James and Lily Potter on October 31, 1981, as well as the deaths of Peter Pettigrew and twelve muggles the following day. We can confirm the recent report in the Daily Prophet – Pettigrew was not killed. He was in fact the one responsible for the explosion resulting in the muggle deaths, as well as those of the Potters. Pettigrew is still alive, and is himself a Death Eater. He is now at the top of the Ministry’s Most Wanted list.”

She once again had to pause to let the angry muttering die down before concluding. “I will be recommending to the Wizengamot this afternoon that compensation be offered to Mr. Black in the amount of five thousand Galleons per year of his incarceration. Mr. Black will be available to reporters for questions at the conclusion of these announcements.”

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“The rows are numbered, see?” Tonks whispered as she and Harry walked into the dimly lit room. “Your prophecy is in Row 97.” Harry peered at the number beneath the glowing candle at the end of one of the rows and nodded. He began counting as they worked their way up toward the higher numbers.

“Down this way,” Tonks gestured when they reached number 97. A short way down the row she stopped. “Up there,” she pointed. “See? It’s got your name on it. That means only you can touch it. Well, you or You-Know-Who.”

Harry stretched his hand out from under the invisibility cloak, and reaching up, closed his fingers around the dusty globe. He was surprised that it felt warm. He slowly lifted it off the shelf and brought it down to eye level, not certain how fragile it was. Just as Tonks had said a week ago, it had a row of initials, followed by the words ‘Dark Lord’, his name, and a question mark.

“Okay, got it,” he reported as he disappeared under the cloak once more.

“Keep it hidden until we get out of here,” Tonks instructed. “You can listen to it when you get back to France. We need to get back upstairs before the Minister’s speech ends.”

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“And now my final announcement this morning,” Bones concluded. “As most of you have read, at the conclusion of the Tri-Wizard Tournament at Hogwarts in June, Harry Potter was kidnapped by the use of a portkey. I regret to inform you that he was used in a dark ritual to restore to life the criminal wizard calling himself Lord Voldemort.” Screams of terror rippled across the Atrium at the sound of that most feared name, and continued at the realization that the horrors of a decade and a half ago might return. These were echoed in the homes of thousands of witches and wizards across Britain who were listening on the wizarding wireless. Minister Bones waved her hands for quiet, but it was some time before she was able to continue.

“I wish to share with you some of the details of this event. Mr. Potter’s co-champion, Cedric

Diggory, was murdered on the dark lord's orders immediately upon his and Mr. Potter's arrival at the site. The Ministry extends our deep condolences to the Diggory family on their loss." Bones paused respectfully, then took a deep breath, about to reveal her bombshell. "During the ritual ceremony, the dark lord called to himself all of his *loyal* followers. With their assistance, he attempted to kill Mr. Potter. Miraculously, Mr. Potter managed to escape and return with Mr. Diggory's body to Hogwarts, where he immediately informed Minister Fudge of what had occurred. The Minister chose not to believe him."

There was a steady low rumble emanating from the throng of listeners at this revelation. The initial shock had died down, and begun to turn into indignation. But there was also a dawning realization that their new Minister was very different from her predecessor, and they began to hope that things might go better this time.

"I have interviewed Mr. Potter extensively, and have concluded that he and Headmaster Dumbledore have been telling the truth all along," Bones declared, with a nod to Dumbledore who was seated nearby. "The wizarding world owes them both a debt of gratitude for continuing to persevere in spite of the doubt and ridicule they received, as well as our heartfelt apologies. And on the basis of Mr. Potter's testimony I have ordered the arrest and detention of every Death Eater who participated in the dark lord's ritual and attempted murder of Mr. Potter."

A stunned silence greeted this final revelation, as her listeners began to connect this statement with the rumors that had swept the country the day before, and Bones continued in a matter-of-fact tone, as though she were announcing quidditch scores.

"Yesterday morning those orders were skillfully executed by our Auror force, with some assistance from our neighbors on the continent. Of the thirty-two suspected Death Eaters targeted, twenty-five were captured and five were killed resisting arrest. Only two were unable to be located. The names of the prisoners will be distributed at the conclusion of these remarks, and the names of the deceased will be revealed pending notification of their next of kin. I am ashamed to say that three of these suspects were Ministry employees, and several others were prominent citizens. Many of them had been charged in a similar fashion after the dark lord's previous defeat, but were released without trial. That will not happen this time."

The majority of her listeners reacted favorably to this declaration, and Minister Bones permitted herself an inward sigh of relief. Just a few more comments and she could wrap this up.

"In anticipation of some questions you may have I'd like to add the following. Mr. Potter will not be available to answer any questions, as he is in considerable danger at this time, and is currently residing in an undisclosed location. Mr. Black, who is acting as his guardian, may be willing to speak on his behalf. Also, many of the dark lord's followers have claimed in the past that they were forced into doing his bidding by the use of the *Imperius* curse. That defense will not work this time. Our evidence conclusively shows that every one of them came willingly to join him when they were summoned. There was no opportunity between the time of his restoration and the time they joined him for this curse to be cast. And we have verified that every one of them has an active Dark Mark. Finally, all of these suspects are being confined in a secure location. In contrast with what was done to Sirius Black, they *will* receive trials, once they have been thoroughly

questioned. These trials will by necessity not be public affairs, but each will be conducted before no fewer than eleven randomly selected Wizengamot members, and will be attended by a member of the press.”

As Minister Bones concluded her statement, Hermione felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to find Tonks, back to her normal pink-haired self. “Time to go, before the rush,” the Auror informed her in a low voice. Hermione quickly followed her over to the outgoing floo bank where Harry was waiting for her. “You two will need to use the public floo, but no one’s about to leave just yet, so you should be fine,” Tonks told them. “I’m on duty for crowd control, although it looks like the Minister was pretty convincing. Head back to Gringotts and Fleur will take you from there. If I don’t see you again before you leave, it’s been a real pleasure getting to know the two of you. Good luck.”

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Back in France, Harry and Hermione decided to wait for Sirius to return before doing anything with the prophecy orb. Mr. and Mrs. Granger had once again come for the weekend, so the two teens took turns telling them and their hosts about their adventures of the morning.

The Grangers grinned at hearing of Hermione’s discomfort with the cart ride down to the vaults in Gringotts, having experienced her reluctance with amusement parks in the past. Both were intrigued by the idea of vaults full of treasure buried in caverns deep beneath London. Mrs. Granger was quite tickled by her daughter’s method of making the ride more bearable on the way back up.

Hermione wished again that she could have accompanied Harry down to fetch the prophecy, for the chance to have seen the Time Room if nothing else. She had the feeling she could have happily spent hours, if not days, exploring the mysteries of level nine. Then it was her turn to report on Minister Bones’s announcement. Mr. Granger wondered at the legality of arresting people and locking them away with no contact from anyone until their trial. Harry answered that from what he’d seen in Dumbledore’s memories of Death Eater trials, that was standard practice in the wizarding world. Apparently there were no wizarding barristers either, as the accused followers of Voldemort had been chained to chairs at their trials with no defense counsel or representation of any sort.

When Sirius and Monsieur Delacour finally returned from the press conference that had followed Minister Bones’s announcements, Harry and Hermione had to repeat their stories. Then, during dinner, the two older wizards filled everyone in on what had happened after the teens had left the Ministry.

Sirius had shocked everyone there when he announced that even though he’d been exonerated, he had no intention of returning to Britain and taking up his place in wizarding society, or participating in the wizarding world in any way. He declared that his number one priority was seeing to the well-being of his godson, and he was going to devote all of his energy to this task. He’d declined to answer any questions about where they were going to live.

The only thing he'd done after having his rights as head of the Black family confirmed was to reinstate Andromeda (Black) Tonks to the family, along with her daughter Nymphadora. Andromeda had been cast out when she'd married a muggleborn wizard, Ted Tonks. Sirius confided to the group around the table that his only concern now was to outlive Draco Malfoy, the son of another cousin, Narcissa (Black) Malfoy. He hoped that Tonks might eventually have a male offspring to whom he could then pass on the head of house responsibilities.

Monsieur Delacour next gave his impressions of how the political situation would play out. He suspected that most of the population's greatest concern was being safe in their homes, and removing those suspected of being Voldemort's supporters greatly eased that fear. These ordinary witches and wizards would support what Minister Bones had done. Her problems would come from the Wizengamot, which was composed of the elite, who were mostly purebloods, which tended to be more sympathetic to some of the dark lord's aims. But the skillful way she had framed the issue, leaving no room for uncertainty about the guilt of the Death Eaters taken into custody, would make it difficult for them to openly oppose her.

Finally, after dinner Sirius, Harry, Hermione, and her parents gathered privately to examine the prophecy. Not surprisingly, Hermione was full of questions. How did one open it to listen to it? The Unspeakables must have heard it in order to label it. Could it be listened to without opening it? How did it get there in the first place? Did Dumbledore come to the Department of Mysteries and report hearing a prophecy, submitting a pensive memory to be stored there? Why? If he was so concerned about Voldemort learning the contents, why not just keep it to himself?

Hermione had been pacing back and forth, gesticulating wildly as she snapped out these queries in rapid fire succession, and she now came to a halt and frowned, gnawing on her lower lip in concentration. Mr. and Mrs. Granger and Harry knew her well enough to patiently sit back and ride out the flurry, but Sirius just stood there open-mouthed.

"Lily," he breathed softly. Harry turned and cocked his head questioningly. "Lily used to do that," Sirius explained. "Both the pacing and the hand waving. Eventually we learned to stand back and stay out of her way when she was like that."

Hermione shot him a glare, then returned her attention to the issue at hand. "Taking the last question first, he most likely didn't have that option," she decided. "Nothing else makes sense. But if only Harry or Voldemort could take it from the shelf, the Unspeakables must have some other way of listening to them. What happens if you just hold it and concentrate on it?" she asked Harry. He shrugged and picked the glass ball up, focusing his thoughts on the glowing light within.

"Nothing," he reported. Next he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the sphere. "What spell do you think I ought to try?"

"I think you ought to just chuck it against the wall and smash it to bits," a familiar voice suggested with a laugh. Everyone spun to see their favorite pink-haired Auror enter the room. "Sorry I'm late, I just got off duty," she added cheerily. "I didn't miss anything yet, did I?"

Harry grinned. “Nope. So, just break it open, then?” The direct approach always appealed to him.

Hermione wasn't so sure. “But that pretty much limits us to a single hearing, doesn't it? I mean, I doubt if it will reassemble itself afterward.”

Sirius had picked up on Harry and Tonks's eagerness. “Only one way to find out, right?”

“Wait.” Hermione tried to slow things down. “Do you know how the prophecy gets in the sphere in the first place?”

“Sure,” Tonks grinned. “Magic.” Hermione's parents, who'd been standing back and merely observing so far, let loose with a burst of laughter at this, but Hermione huffed and shot Tonks an annoyed look, demanding something more specific.

“There is a device in the Department of Mysteries that detects whenever a prophecy is made anywhere in the country,” she revealed. “It gathers it into that glowing light and the spun glass orb forms around it. The date and initials are etched into the glass automatically. The Unspeakables add any other information they can figure out. Yes, they have some way to read it, but I don't know what it is,” she added, heading off the question Hermione was about to ask. “Once they label it with the names of the individuals who are the subject of the prophecy and put it on the shelf, no one else can touch it.” She looked around and saw everyone nodding except Hermione.

“But how is that possible?” she complained. “How could there be a device that can somehow hear everything that's being said everywhere in the country?”

Tonks shrugged. “It's not that uncommon. “The underage magic detector works the same way, except with magical spells.” Harry scowled at this reference, having had some unpleasant experiences with this particular magical device. “Not to mention the Taboo,” Tonks added as an afterthought.

“What's that?” Harry asked while Hermione was still struggling to come to grips with the concept.

“The Ministry can designate a word that, when anyone says it, sets off an alarm and gives the Aurors the exact location where it was said,” Tonks answered. Harry blinked in surprise.

“Well, why don't they use that to capture Death Eaters, then?” he demanded hotly. “Put it on the Unforgivables or something.”

“They have,” Tonks shot back. “Do you think we're stupid? But you can only do it on one word, and the one they decided on was ...” she looked around and then mouthed, *Morsmordre*. “It's an incantation only Death Eaters used and they only cast it when they successfully carried out a mission. The only problem was that they didn't often hang around long after they cast it. From what I've been told, though, Aurors nabbed a fair number of them that way in the last war.”

Realization suddenly dawned on Harry. That was why they had suddenly been surrounded by twenty Ministry wizards shooting stunning spells at them within a few seconds of the Dark Mark

being cast at the Quidditch World Cup. He turned to Hermione who had evidently realized the same thing.

“Oh,” was her only response as she finally gave up trying to make sense of it. After a moment’s more thought she added, “And these things cover the entire country?”

“Pretty much the entire world, for prophecies,” Tonks corrected. “Never know when some seer on the other side of the world will make a prophecy about something happening here. And in the case of Hogwarts, the underage magic detector is nullified by some sort of enchantment. Good thing, or it would be going off constantly. And I’m not sure about the Taboo.”

“So, somewhere in the Hall of Prophecies, probably on the most recent shelf, is one that says ‘S.B.T to H.J.P – Dark Lord and (?), with the ?eventually being changed to Peter Pettigrew’,” Hermione summed up.

“Can we get back to *this* prophecy?” Sirius asked impatiently. “Harry, just smash the thing and everyone listen closely.”

Harry glanced around the room, wanting to choose a spot where he wouldn’t do any damage to the furnishings. A tap on the shoulder made him turn around to see Hermione offering him a hammer she’d just conjured. Harry grinned and placed the glass sphere on the floor, raised up the hammer, and shattered it into dozens of fragments.

Instantly a pearly-white figure with hugely magnified eyes rose into the air, and a harsh, grating voice sounded.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. ...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...”

Harry blinked several times as the ghostly figure faded. Then he noticed Hermione and her mother, leaning over the table with pen and paper, scribbling furiously, mimicking the actions of Bones and Shackbolt one week earlier. No one interrupted them as they transcribed the words of the seer, the other individuals in the room pondering to themselves what they’d heard. When the two Granger women finished, they examined what they’d written, checking back and forth between their scraps of paper.

“No Mum, it was ‘either’ the first time and ‘neither’ the second time,” Hermione corrected, pointing to the line in question. “Other than that, I think we have it pretty closely. We can always borrow a pensieve again to double check.”

“That was certainly an odd turn of phrase,” Mrs. Granger commented with a disapproving shake of her head. “Like it was being intentionally difficult to follow.”

“I think prophecies must be like that,” Hermione replied. “The meaning’s only clear after the fact.”

“Seems pretty obvious to me,” Harry commented morosely. “Either I kill him or he kills me.”

“But hardly anything in there is straightforward, Harry,” Hermione pointed out. “It’s not even obviously about you. Phrases like ‘those who have thrice defied him’, ‘mark him as his equal’, and ‘power the Dark Lord knows not’ can have many interpretations. Even the words ‘vanquish’ and ‘approaches’ are ambiguous.”

“‘Born as the seventh month dies’ certainly refers to me, though,” Harry countered. “Me or ... Neville! I bet it could have also been him,” he blurted out, recalling something Dumbledore had told him earlier that year. “That’s why his parents went into hiding, too. That’s why there was a question mark there. My name must have been added later, after Voldemort attacked me.”

Sirius nodded. “The Longbottoms were the other family that went into hiding,” he informed them. Frank was an Auror, and like James, he had faced Voldemort three times and survived. “Neville was born a few days before you.”

“But it’s only obvious in hindsight,” Hermione argued. “Even that’s ambiguous. It doesn’t say July, it says ‘seventh month’. Heck, that could have even been referring to *my* birthday.”

Harry, Sirius, and Tonks looked at her strangely, while her parents chuckled, seeing where she was going. “How do you figure that?” Tonks asked.

“What month of the year has the number seven in its name?” Hermione challenged.

“Well, your birthday is in September ... oh, I get it,” Harry responded, nodding as her point became clear to him. “And what about the other part?”

“The moon is always considered to be waxing or waning,” Hermione continued in her ‘explanation’ voice. Growing or dying. Months were originally based on the lunar cycle. On any date after the fifteenth the month would be dying.”

“That’s quite a stretch,” Sirius pointed out.

“True, but I was just making a point,” Hermione admitted. “That prophecies are worded in such a way that multiple interpretations are possible, and it’s only after whatever it’s referring to has happened that you can look back and see what it meant. For example, what does ‘mark him as his equal mean?’”

“I assume it refers to my scar,” Harry answered, as everyone else nodded.

“But no one would have guessed that beforehand,” Hermione concluded, to general agreement all around. “Now, let’s assume for the sake of discussion that it *does* refer to Harry, and the mark *is* his scar, and that Harry has *some* power that isn’t obvious at the moment,” she paused and shot an apologetic look at her boyfriend. “Sorry about the way that came out.”

“No, you’re right,” Harry grinned, waving her apology off. “It’s not obvious to me at all. The only secret weapon that I have that I can think of is my invisibility cloak, and somehow I doubt that I’m going to sneak up on him.”

Hermione smiled, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze. “Well, we shouldn’t rule anything out.” Then she continued with her analysis, frowning in consternation. “What I really can’t fathom is that last line. ‘Neither can live while the other survives’. Given that you’re both alive right now, and have been for the past two months, how can that be possible? Taking that literally, you should have died in the graveyard before he came out of the cauldron.”

Harry shuddered at the memory, then put his arm around Hermione and hugged her against his side, knowing that any second she would realize what she’d just said.

“Oh,” she stammered, a look of horror filling her face. “I didn’t mean ...”

“Don’t worry, we understood what you meant,” Harry reassured her. “That part has me stumped, too.” Looking around, he saw Sirius, Tonks and Mr. Granger nod in agreement. It certainly seemed to present a dilemma. Perhaps it was some technicality regarding the word ‘live’. But then he spotted Hermione’s mother nodding her head with a satisfied look on her face that he recognized, having seen it on Hermione whenever she solved a vexing problem.

“I think,” Mrs. Granger declared. “That you’re all overlooking the simplest interpretation, the one which requires the fewest assumptions.

“Occam’s Razor?” Hermione queried. Harry, Sirius, and Tonks gave her a blank look.

Her mother nodded. “Is there any part of that prophecy,” she suggested, “that wasn’t fulfilled on the night ... when was it, October 31st? ... the night your house was attacked, Harry?”

Everyone stared at her. Could it be that they were discussing a prophecy – a prophecy that the Order of the Phoenix had spent hundreds of hours guarding and worrying over, a prophecy that Voldemort was supposed to be desperate to get his hands on – a prophecy that had already come to pass fourteen years ago and was no longer active?

“... vanquish the Dark Lord ...” Hermione was muttering while mentally checking the key components of the fateful phrases. “... mark him as his equal ... power the Dark Lord knows not ... well, he certainly didn’t expect that his killing curse would bounce off of you and hit him, did he? ... neither can live while the other survives ... if it refers specifically to that encounter, he was determined to kill you, so if he lived you would have ended up dead, but when you survived, he – well he certainly wasn’t among the living afterward.”

A giant smile broke out on her face, which was gradually echoed on everyone else’s, and she threw her arms around her mother and hugged her as hard as she could. “You’re right, Mum!” she screamed. “We don’t have to worry about it any more! It’s already happened!”

Hermione released her mother and turned to her boyfriend. “Oh Harry!” she cried, wrapping her

arms around him even more forcefully than she had her mother, tears filling her eyes. Sirius moved forward and wrapped them both up, some moisture appearing in his eyes as well. Tonks, looking for someone to hug, settled on Mrs. Granger, and pulled Mr. Granger in to join them. At length everyone had hugged everyone else and things settled down, with Hermione and Harry each still keeping an arm wrapped around the other.

“Is that possible?” Sirius asked his cousin. “That the prophecy would still be on the shelf even after it’s been fulfilled?” Tonks thought a minute, then nodded.

“Think how many prophecies there were in that room,” she pointed out. “There were more than a hundred rows of shelves, each one holding ... what do you reckon, Harry ... several hundred prophecies each?”

“At least,” he agreed, with a thoughtful nod, trying to work out the math.”

“Forty or fifty thousand, then,” Hermione prompted immediately.

“Every prophecy that’s ever been made, going all the way back to the founding of the Ministry,” Tonks continued. “Probably even longer than that, given that there’re likely only a handful of prophecies made in any given year. Once they go on those shelves they stay there, unless someone like Harry comes to get them.”

“Then what’s the point of collecting them?” Hermione wondered.

Tonks shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe originally they wanted to have them available if anyone wanted to check up on one. Nobody really understands why the Unspeakables do anything they do.”

“I think this calls for a celebration,” Mr. Granger announced, noting how utterly delighted his daughter was at the way things turned out. If he and his wife hadn’t been in the room he suspected there might be some passionate snogging going on. He made a mental note to make sure the teens ended up in their own bedrooms that night. “What do you say to going out for dinner in Paris tomorrow?”

Everyone agreed that was an excellent suggestion, and they would include the Delacours as a way of thanking them for being such wonderful hosts.

They had a fabulous time in Paris the next day, culminating in an elegant dinner in one of the city’s renowned dining establishments. Everyone was feeling quite content when they returned to Chateau Delacour. But there, waiting for them in the entry hall was a large bird with brilliant red and gold plumage. Fawkes had arrived with a message from Dumbledore.

With a sigh of inevitability, Harry unrolled the parchment.

Harry – Now that you are aware of the contents of the prophecy, I believe that we need to discuss

it. Would tomorrow morning be convenient for you?

Albus Dumbledore

Realizing that with Fawkes's capability of transporting him there instantly there was no point in putting the headmaster off, Harry, Sirius, and Hermione agreed that the next day was as good a time as any to have it out with him. Harry quickly scrawled 'Okay' on the parchment and handed it back to the phoenix. Fawkes regarded Harry briefly, then gave a short trill that seemed to be saying, 'don't worry, things will turn out alright'. Snatching the parchment out of Harry's hand, the fiery bird disappeared in a flash of flame.

August 30

If Albus Dumbledore thought he would be in control of the conversation, he was sorely mistaken. It got off to a bad start when Harry promptly refused his request to speak privately, insisting on including Sirius, Hermione, and her parents in the discussion.

For her part, Hermione had worked up a full set of questions and accusations, and the revelations of the past week had considerably reduced her reluctance to challenge authority figures. But her parents were even more confrontational. Not having been raised with the wizarding world's near godlike reverence for the powerful wizard, they had no qualms about challenging his decisions. They recognized his type – the leader who asserts his authority and keeps everyone around him under his control by restricting access to critical information.

Any protestation on his part that he knew what he was doing, any suggestion that there were things he knew, of which the rest of them were unaware, that justified his actions, and especially any claim that he had Harry's best interests at heart were torn to shreds by the combined Granger assault. Once the heavy guns had softened the target, Harry finally spoke up with a dagger-like strike to the heart of the matter.

"You knew all along, Headmaster Dumbledore, what was going on; why he was interested in me, and you never told me a thing. Despite me asking you more than once, despite several chances, you only kept me in the dark."

"And let's have none of this nonsense about not wanting to burden him," Sirius added. "He already knew Voldemort wanted to kill him."

"Just how many times have you nearly been killed at Hogwarts, Harry?" Mr. Granger asked with a scowl. Harry reflexively glanced toward Hermione, and she nodded her encouragement.

Harry scratched the back of his head. "Let's see, in first year three, no four times. First with Hermione and the troll, next in the first quidditch match, later in the Forest during that detention, and then at the end with Quirrell. Second year, erm, when we crashed the car into the Whomping Willow, in the Forest with the spiders, and in the Chamber, so that's three for that year. Third year

... gee, I guess it was only twice that year, the quidditch match where I fell off my broom and then at the end with the dementors by the lake. Must've been an off year, I guess." He shot a weak grin at Hermione, who could only shake her head and roll her eyes.

The three adults in the room were glaring at Dumbledore, who was unable to look anyone in the eye. "That's enough, Harry," Mr. Granger said gently. "We all know what happened this year. Now, Headmaster Dumbledore," he demanded, his voice turning hard. "Is this by any stretch of the word a *normal* experience for a student at your school? And don't think I didn't notice how many of those deadly situations my daughter was involved in too! Please don't sit there and tell me you have any objection to Mr. Black's decision to remove his godson from your school and take him someplace safer! I assure you my wife and I will certainly follow his lead with our daughter!

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Order of Merlin recipient, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, rarely found himself at a loss for words, but on this occasion he did. Finally he slumped back in his chair, the customary twinkle absent from his eyes.

"No, that is not my intention, Mr. Granger," he agreed. "Under the circumstances I suppose that course of action would be for the best. I only wished to help Harry understand the prophecy and what it means for his future."

"It doesn't mean *anything* for his future!" Mrs. Granger snapped. "It refers entirely to an event that occurred nearly fourteen years ago! It's in the past, over and done with! Why you've made such a big deal of it now is beyond me."

Dumbledore sat stunned while Hermione's mother offered her interpretation of the prophecy, point by point. When she finished he shook his head while trying to find a hole in her reasoning, but could not.

"I must admit that this is a possible explanation," he finally decided. "Perhaps I have been misled by other considerations."

"Perhaps you should share with us any additional information you're holding back," Mr. Granger retorted sharply. "Such as the circumstances in which you received it and how this led to the deaths of Harry's parents."

Dumbledore nodded and related the tale of how Trelawny had gone into a trance during her job interview and a Death Eater had overheard part of her prophecy, causing Voldemort to go after Harry to eliminate the perceived threat. He continued with his feeling that now that the dark lord had been stymied by Harry yet again, he was keenly interested in learning the rest of it.

"So, let him hear it," Sirius suggested. "Better yet, have Snape leak it to him, along with our interpretation. There's nothing in it that can hurt us. It's certainly not worth an Order member getting arrested or even dying for!"

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore conceded. Sensing that the atmosphere in the room was not likely to get any friendlier than it was currently, he stood to take his leave. “In any case, Harry, Miss Granger, I wish you success in the new path you have chosen. I shall continue to work to weaken Lord Voldemort,” he pledged. “The new Minister’s decisive actions have given us an excellent opportunity. But it remains my belief that Harry will have to face him eventually. Despite what you may wish, the two of you are inextricably linked.” With those cryptic words he made his exit.

“What do you suppose he meant by that?” Harry wondered as Hermione and Sirius came up to stand beside him.

“Well, obviously your scar, but ...” Hermione offered.

“But I get the feeling that there’s something he’s not telling us about it,” Sirius completed the thought. “I think we might need to have someone take a look at that. Perhaps someone with more expertise in those sorts of things.”

September 1

“Harry?” Hermione called out as she entered Harry’s room. “What’s keeping you? Everyone else is down at breakfast.” There she found the object of her search standing there, looking out his window. Gazing out over the vineyards, the meadow, and the woods. Gazing off to the northwest, toward an unseen island where a scarlet train would soon be taking students to the far off highlands of Scotland.

Hermione sat down on the bed and tugged Harry down next to her. “I understand,” she said simply, leaning her head against his shoulder. Harry stretched his arm across her back and pulled her tight.

“I know,” he acknowledged. No more words needed to be spoken between the pair. After a few minutes of quiet contemplation Hermione stood and pulled him to his feet.

“Come downstairs,” she urged. “Mum and Dad arrived late last night. Everything’s ready to go. It’s time to start our new life.”

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What If? ... An Alternative to Order Of the Phoenix Polynesian Paradise

Chapter 5, Polynesian Paradise

While all their friends from Hogwarts getting ready to head to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, Harry and Hermione were dropping off her mother and father at the airport in Lyon. From there the elder Grangers would catch a short flight to Paris, and then a much longer one to Tahiti, for a total travel time of just over 24 hours. Once they were checked in, Sirius shrank their car, pocketed it, and apparated the two teens back to Chateau Delacour. Then the three of them would floo to Monsieur Delacour's office at the French Ministry, from where they would travel to their destination by portkey, in a fraction of the time it took the Grangers. Delacour had kindly arranged for them to have access to the official portkeys used by French Ministry personnel to travel to different French overseas possessions.

After the confrontation with Dumbledore, Hermione's parents had returned to England to do their final packing and turn their house over to its new tenants. The next day they spent the morning bidding farewell to their neighbors and colleagues, leaving a forwarding address that was actually a maildrop in South Africa, and made one more drive through the Channel Tunnel into France.

As they'd hoped, the Grangers had been aided significantly by magic in their preparations. Mr. Granger had rented a storage locker and Dobby had moved into it all of the possessions that they wanted to keep. If the man in charge of the storage lockers had looked inside this particular one, he might have been surprised to see it used for doll furniture and accessories, including a perfect replica of a Jaguar XJ-6. That, however, was never an issue, since Dobby popped in and out without bothering to use the door. Eventually, when the Grangers settled down in Australia, Dobby would fetch the things they needed in similar fashion.

Before they left for Paris, Harry and Hermione sat down and wrote letters to Ron, Ginny, and Neville revealing the broad outline of their plan to leave Britain, but without going into any detail. They apologized for leaving at such short notice, without saying goodbye, and told them how much they valued their friendship, and would miss it dearly. Harry added his heartfelt thanks for all they'd done for him, Ginny and Neville particularly during the past year. By the time they sent Hedwig winging away with the rolled up parchments, tears were streaming down Hermione's face as Harry held her tightly to his side.

Meanwhile, Sirius had one last mission for Rita Skeeter. In a few days there would be yet another blockbuster headline in the Daily Prophet – *Boy Who Lived's Defeat of Dark Lord Foretold by*

Prophecy! – with the accompanying story relating the amazing prediction of the events of that famous Halloween night fifteen years previous.

The two wizards and one witch had plenty of time to get their papers in order at the French magical governor's office in Papeete and pick out a hotel before meeting the incoming flight from Paris. They stood back and grinned while pretty girls with long, flowing black hair put colorful leis around the necks of Hermione's parents when they emerged, tired but smiling broadly, from the Air Tahiti jet into the brilliant tropical sunshine.

Despite the tiring journey, Mrs. Granger perked up considerably on the drive to the hotel, exclaiming excitedly along with her daughter at the dazzlingly colored flowers and other amazing vegetation, none of which they'd ever encountered back in England. By the time they arrived at Le Méridien, where they would all stay for a couple of days to allow them to adjust to the time change and new climate, she had gained her second wind. While Sirius and her husband checked them into the hotel, she dragged the kids into the gift shop. She'd already fallen in love with the colorful pareos that seemed to be the national uniform of the island group, and had to have one first thing.

Harry just stayed back out of the way while Hermione and her mother scanned the racks, nodding and smiling agreeably when his girlfriend turned to ask his opinion. With his encouragement, Hermione eventually selected one with wavy shades of blue that brought to mind a multihued tropical lagoon, accented with bright red hibiscus flowers, while her mother picked out a green one with yellow bird of paradise blossoms. He'd long since decided that blue was his favorite color on Hermione, and this colorful swatch of fabric only reinforced this feeling.

At the checkout counter the clerk spent several minutes showing the two English women some of the various ways of wearing the versatile garment, and how and where to tie it for each style. Mrs. Granger shot a sly glance out of the corner of her eye at her daughter before voicing a seemingly innocent question.

"I've been reading some history of Tahiti," she mentioned casually. "Is it true that these are worn by both men and women?" The clerk, appreciating having an informed customer, smiled and agreed, but noted that the ones for men tended to be shorter. "And isn't it also true," Mrs. Granger continued, "that they were traditionally worn without a top by both sexes?"

The girl behind the counter, who was dressed in one of the colorful garments herself, worn as a strapless, knee length wrap, laughed and nodded. That was true, she admitted, as many paintings of the old days attested. But now, alas, the bare-breasted women were seen only on the beaches. A few local women (she herself being one of them) still took advantage of the opportunity, but it was mostly tourists. But if madame was of a mind to join them, she should feel free.

"You know, I've been thinking about that ever since our last trip to France, Hermione," her mother declared. "And this seems like a good opportunity. Perhaps you should think about it too." Hermione turned positively scarlet at this suggestion, and fiercely avoided looking anywhere near

Harry. For his part, Harry was stunned speechless. The funniest reaction, though, was that of Mr. Granger, who'd just walked up as his wife broached the topic. His expression went from an enthusiastic grin to a horrified scowl faster than anyone would have thought possible, between the first part of his wife's suggestion and the second.

Sirius, right behind him, couldn't help chuckling, not only at the humorous transformation, but at the cleverly set up prank the man's wife had just played on her husband and daughter. He also was amused at the five different reactions by the members of his traveling party to the desirability of each of the two parts of the statement.

With an inward evil smirk, the Marauder decided to stir the pot even more. "As it happens," he informed his companions as he led them to the pair of suites he and the kids had selected. "On my island there's not much more than my house and a small village. And the local islanders there still dress the traditional way, so you'd be free to wear your pareos any way you'd like." The two adults turned disbelieving eyes toward him while Harry and Hermione made certain not to catch each other's eye. "As for swimsuits," he shrugged. "Anything you're comfortable with. It's a big enough island." That information set wheels turning in the minds of all four of his listeners, all traveling in different directions.

"You never told us," Mrs. Granger noted, reopening the conversation once everyone had recovered their balance, "just how an English wizard came to own an island in French Polynesia."

"Sirius grinned. "I'll tell you over lunch ... or dinner ... or whatever it's time for here."

The Grangers were quite pleased with their accommodations. Hermione had initially been excited by the rooms in the bungalows perched out over the water on stilts, but had relented when Sirius pointed out the advantage, and relatively lower cost, of the two suites. These would give them more space and privacy, and since they'd only be here a short while before taking a boat to BlackIsland, were more than adequate.

The other reason was the tip they'd been given about this particular hotel by the local wizarding officials. It was where many of the magical vacationers to the island stayed, and some of the rooms had 'enhanced' features. Sirius had selected one of these suites for Harry and himself, while the Grangers would be lodged in more standard accommodations.

Since it was dark by the time they'd settled in, the group decided to have room service sent up to Sirius and Harry's suite. There, once Hermione's parents had been suitably impressed at the way the food magically appeared, Sirius regaled them with the tale of how one of his Black ancestors had 'bought' an island.

"It happened more than two hundred years ago," he began. "Dorian Black was a second son, which back then meant he wouldn't inherit the family fortune or title, so needed to make his own way in the world." The Grangers all nodded, being familiar with their English history. Second and third sons customarily went into the military or the clergy, but with a wizard family the clergy was obviously not an option.

“Dorian?” Harry joked. “Does *anyone* in your family have a normal name?” Sirius shot him a mock glare.

“That’s right, Dorian,” he continued. “I must say he was one of my favorite ancestors. I saw a picture of him once ... well, it was an old picture and had started to fade so you’d really have to call it ...”

“Sirius Black, don’t you dare say it!” Hermione shrieked, raising her wand threateningly.

“ ... a picture of Dorian Gray,” Sirius smirked. The elder Grangers groaned but Hermione carried through with her threat and flicked her wand, snapping out a silencing spell before rolling her eyes and shaking her head at the lame pun. But Harry couldn’t help but chuckle, both at the joke and at Sirius being silenced by a teenaged girl.

Sirius took a few seconds to get over his shock, but then pulled out his own wand and canceled the silencing jinx. “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted,” he scowled playfully at Hermione, “since it was a wizarding portrait, it really could change. Our family maintained that it was the actual inspiration for the book. How and where Oscar Wilde saw it I have no idea.” At this explanation, Hermione looked properly chagrined, and Harry smiled and gave her a quick hug.

“At any rate, when James Cook returned from his first voyage in 1773, there was a lot of excitement about the islands he’d discovered,” Sirius went on. “So Dorian signed on for the next two.”

“The Voyages of Discovery!” Hermione broke in eagerly. Harry also nodded in recognition, as every English school child was familiar with this reference.

“Right, so you all probably know more about them than I do,” Sirius acknowledged. “But the short of it is that at the end of the last one he jumped ship – apparated ship would probably be more accurate – and found himself on a nice cozy little tropical island, in this out of the way corner of the Pacific that eventually became French Polynesia.”

“And just how did he come to own it?” Hermione’s mother inquired, just as her daughter was about to voice the same question.

“He bought it from the local tribe for three pigs,” Sirius responded nonchalantly.

“What!” Hermione snapped in indignation. “He practically stole their land from those poor natives!”

“Not really,” Sirius corrected her firmly. “First of all, pigs were highly prized. It was the most valuable unit of currency they had. And they negotiated the price. The tribal elders originally asked for five and he offered one. They compromised on three.”

“Where did he get three pigs, if he’d just apparated there from a sailing ship?” Hermione asked suspiciously.

Sirius grinned. “Magic. Remember how one of your early Transfiguration lessons was to turn a pincushion into a porcupine? By NEWTs you can change an ottoman into a pig.”

“Are you serious?” Hermione demanded. But almost immediately a pained expression flashed across her face as his grin broadened. “No! Don’t answer that!”

“Why, yes I am,” he smirked in triumph. “I’m pleased to meet you. You must be Hermione.” This time the groans were even louder, and it was Harry who pulled out his wand to threaten his godfather, while Hermione considered banging her head against the table top.

The unreformed Marauder promised not to use that one again anytime soon. Hermione abandoned that line of inquiry, convinced she wasn’t going to get a straight answer, or at least one that made her feel any better about the transaction. But her host wasn’t finished yet.

“But you’re forgetting the most important thing,” he insisted.

“What’s that?” Harry asked, when Hermione was too wary to rise to the bait of yet another possible pun.

“The concept of owning land is foreign to a society like that,” Sirius declared, all humor now put aside. “They have a much more intimate relationship with nature. You can no more own the land than the sea or the sky. From their point of view, what they were selling him was the opportunity to dwell among them peacefully. They probably thought they got the better of that deal, since he didn’t take up that much space or resources. And no Blacks have lived here for more than a hundred years until I showed up last year. But descendants of those islanders are still there – they’re the villagers I told you about earlier. They welcomed me back like a long lost member of the family.”

While his listeners were digesting this information he dropped one final bombshell. “And by the way, they have magic users in their community, and the magicals and muggles coexist just fine. In fact, they cooperated with him in making the entire island unplotable and hidden with notice-me-not charms like Hogwarts has, so they no longer had to worry about being raided by other islands. The Blacks are legendary heroes as far as they’re concerned.”

Hermione immediately perked up at the thought of an opportunity to learn about another magical culture, and decided that Dorian Black hadn’t been such a swindler after all. She would have liked to pump Sirius for more information, but a loud yawn from her father made them all realize that it was time for bed.

The next morning Harry was pleasantly surprised to find Hermione wearing her new pareo tied around her hips in a fetching manner, complete with a matching bikini top. She proudly informed him that she’d transfigured her plain blue bikini to match the pattern of the vividly colored fabric, and done the same for her mother. As soon as they finished breakfast the teens headed outside to bask in the tropical sunshine. The hotel had a large, sand-filled sunning area around a lagoon sized sandy-bottomed pool, where most of the guests gathered, as well as a few small sections of sandy beach on the ocean.

It turned out that there were some vacationing French witches who attended Beauxbatons in the suite next to Harry and Sirius. Their term started two weeks later than Hogwarts, and this was an end of summer holiday for them. Seeing the way they eyed up Harry, Hermione was reluctant to accept their invitation to join them, but could see no polite way out of it. Unfortunately, from her perspective, they promptly removed their bikini tops as soon as they'd settled into their chairs. To his credit, Harry made a valiant attempt to keep his staring down to a minimum.

Despite her mother's suggestion, Hermione wasn't comfortable with the idea of joining in, but she did lie on her stomach and untie her top, insisting that Harry thoroughly apply suntan lotion to her back and the backs of her upper legs, which gave them both a bit of a thrill. They quickly decided that this method had some distinct advantages over using a spell to achieve the same results.

As soon as they realized that the English-speaking witch was not going to follow their lead, the other two girls considerably maneuvered their lounge chairs so that Hermione was between them and Harry, which she appreciated. She was also intrigued by their complete lack of tan lines, even though they'd only been in Tahiti for a day, and soon her curiosity compelled her to ask them how they managed it.

It turned out that they knew a spell for evening out skin tone. Originally developed to remove scars and blemishes, it was a type of transfiguration where the color and texture of a patch of healthy skin was copied to an adjacent area of the body. Hermione, of course, was immediately interested in learning this new skill.

Turning her body so she was facing her new acquaintances, and putting her back to her boyfriend, she held the now unsupported triangles of her bikini top to her breasts while the straps hung free. In addition to the thin strips of pale skin going up to her neck, she cautiously slid her hands down to bare a portion of the other patches of white flesh on her torso, as much as she dared. Focusing intently on the wand movement and incantation the French witch was using helped her try to ignore just how close she was to exposing herself to half the guests of the resort.

For his part, Harry was trying to act as if the view of his girlfriend's back, devoid of any covering whatsoever, wasn't causing his mind to extrapolate around to her front. He was not at all helped in this effort by the uncovered chests of the witches assisting her, directly in his line of sight just past her shoulder, nor by the comments they were making about the subject of their efforts. After some thought he decided that there was nothing wrong with just lying back and enjoying the show.

Once the project was accomplished to her satisfaction, Hermione quickly rolled back onto her stomach and shot a shy smile at Harry, who grinned and gave her a thumbs-up. He leaned close and whispered that he was certainly looking forward to seeing the results of their handiwork, which turned her face a cute shade of pink. She got a return blush from him when she whispered back that she had learned a way to tie her pareo that would accomplish exactly that, and she'd show him later.

Their French companions informed Hermione that the best results of this new charm would be obtained by performing it in her room, after she'd finished sunning for the day, while she was removing her suit. With her typical thoroughness and dedication to a task, she would continue

these applications every day for the next month, gradually reducing the area of the untanned bits as her courage and self-confidence grew. By the time their group left BlackIsland for Australia, she would have the perfect all-over tan.

Hermione had had the foresight that morning to reapply the glamour charms the Delacours had taught them, so the other two witches didn't recognize Harry, but to be on the safe side, they told them they were from New Zealand. This disappointed the girls somewhat, as they'd hoped, when they heard the young couple speaking English, that they might have some gossip about the Boy Who Lived. They were both excited about the rumor that he would be attending Beauxbatons and were eagerly planning on how they might catch his eye. Not realizing, of course, that with all of their enthusiastic bouncing around during this conversation, they were doing a bang up job of catching it right there on the beach.

After lunch Hermione's parents finally appeared, still having trouble adjusting to the time change, since they weren't able to use the potions the other three had access to. Once she looked around and took in the lay of the land, Mrs. Granger decided that the two of them would check out the beach. When they returned later that afternoon, Hermione noted that her mother was looking very pleased with herself, while her father had a rather dazed expression on his face. She also noted that although her mother's hair was wet, her bathing suit top was completely dry. She promptly made a mental note to herself that if she and Harry decided to take a walk on the beach, they would always head in the opposite direction that her parents took!

Initially she thought that Harry hadn't noticed, but later discovered otherwise when they were laying their suits out on the balcony to dry. While watching Hermione spread out the two pieces of her bikini he joked that her mother seemed to have figured out how to cut the number things that needed drying in half.

That afternoon Hermione made another trip to the gift shop, this time picking out a bright red pareo with white flowers. (By the time they left the resort she and her mother would own more than a dozen between them.) She wore it that evening, as promised, in the same style shop girl wore hers, tied across the bust line leaving her shoulders completely bare. Harry definitely approved, but when Mr. Granger noticed the absence of tan lines on his daughter, his eyes widened, then he shot a glare at the young wizard accompanying her. Fortunately, Harry was engaged in conversation with Sirius at the time, and didn't realize that he was being considered for some painful dental surgery. Hermione did observe this by-play, and quickly informed her mother (in her father's hearing) about the new spell she'd learned, and pointed out how useful it was for outfits such as the one she was wearing. But when she asked teasingly if her mother was interested it having Hermione use it on her, she declined, commenting with a conspiratorial wink that she didn't need it.

-ooOoo-

If Harry and the Grangers had thought Tahiti was beautiful, they were positively enthralled by Black Island. It embodied every person's fantasy of what a tropical paradise would look like. Lush green jungle. Glistening white sand. Crystal clear lagoons with rushing waterfalls tumbling down from volcanic peaks. A barrier reef that allowed only the gentlest waves to lap onto the broad

beaches. And water the most brilliant shades of blue, green, and turquoise.

As their magically assisted boat smoothly moved through the break in the reef and approached the shoreline, Hermione turned to Sirius. “How can you possibly call a place this beautiful Black Island?” she complained. “That makes it sound like a dark, pirate infested nightmare.”

“Misdirection,” he grinned as he steered the craft into place at the pier, which appeared seemingly from nowhere. “Keeps people away.”

They soon had their luggage unloaded, and as Sirius levitated it toward the beach he informed the teens that they were free to do any magic they wanted to here – there were no monitoring devices for more than a thousand miles in any direction. Harry smiled as he saw Hermione’s eyes light up, and he knew that their studies would not be neglected on this holiday. Mr. and Mrs. Granger were also delighted with that news, since they would now be able to see what sorts of magic their daughter could perform.

Once they reached land, they discovered that their lodging was hidden from view a short distance into the jungle. There, they found a native style bungalow, constructed from palm tree trunks and bamboo branches, complete with a thatched roof of palm leaves. Once inside, however, the true magical nature of the cottage was revealed. Just like the tents they remembered from the Quidditch World Cup, the modest outside gave no hint to the luxuries inside!

The dwelling was fully furnished, with hardwood walls and floors, laid out in the style of a tropical plantation manor house, and with every conceivable magical amenity. It had three floors, one level above and one below the one they entered on. The ground floor contained the kitchen, dining room, and a large open living space with a fireplace and a screened in deck. The lower level was primarily recreational, including a practice room for spell casting and even a potions lab. The upper level was the sleeping area, with large rooms spread out along a balcony that overlooked the great room below. Hermione was surprised that there were four bedrooms.

“Up until a week ago there were only two,” Sirius grinned. “The master suite and a smaller one for the ... ah, mistress of the house.” Hermione scowled at this implication and Sirius hastened on. “I apparated here while you four were relaxing on the beach and adjusting to the climate. The house can be magically expanded to accommodate however many you like. So if the family grows in the future ...” he paused to shoot a wink at Harry, causing both teens to blush bright red, “... no problem.”

Once everyone had picked out a room and settled in, Sirius gathered them all again in the great room. “Okay, here’s how it works,” he began. “We have plenty of running water, from a spring up the hill a little bit. For food, first there is a large variety of fruit, including quite a few you’ve probably never heard of, but they’re all delicious. I guarantee you the pineapple is out of this world. It tastes like nothing you’ve had back home. Two of the mainstays of the island diet are breadfruit and coconuts. If you want milk, it will be coconut milk. The only other local beverage is an alcoholic concoction the villagers make – the best way I can think to describe it is a sort of spiced rum.” Mr. Granger licked his lips and nodded his approval.

“As far as meat, we’re pretty much limited to pigs and fish. We eat whatever we catch, pick, or gather. Or trade for. That includes bacon, sausage, ham, and roasted pork, barbecued ribs, and so forth. You haven’t really experienced all a pig has to offer until you’ve been to a tropical luau.” All four of his listeners grinned, and Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand. This was beginning to sound like quite an adventure – like Robinson Crusoe with magic.

“I suggest we devote a part of each day to food gathering. There’s an outrigger canoe and nets for fishing, as well as snorkeling gear and spears. Inside the barrier reef it’s too shallow for large fish like sharks, so swimming is safe during the day. At night some predators come out to feed – eels, small sharks, barracuda and so forth, so stay out of the water then. There are no large animals on the island other than wild pigs, which aren’t too aggressive unless they’re defending their young, but I don’t think any of us really want to hunt anyway. On land we can confine ourselves to picking fruits and digging up vegetables. There are plenty of smaller animals, including reptiles like snakes, frogs, lizards, you name it. Also insects, but fortunately, no mosquitoes. Since there are so few warm blooded animals native to the island, stinging insects are pretty rare. Lots and lots of birds, too.” He glanced around to nods of agreement.

“We do have some advantages. The house is warded to keep out any unwanted critters, and the main paths are magically maintained – otherwise they’d be overgrown in a matter of weeks. We don’t need to send Harry climbing up a tree for bananas or coconuts – a cutting hex and a levitation charm will do the trick nicely.” Harry crossed his arms and pretended to pout at the idea that he wouldn’t get to do any climbing, and the others laughed while Hermione draped an arm around him consolingly.

“Now, having said all that,” Sirius added. “We do have Dobby available. As you know, he’s going to stay at Hogwarts but come to visit every couple of weeks to bring us news, messages, or anything else we need. So if we get desperate for something from back home we can get it.”

“Like chocolate,” Hermione suggested with an impish smirk at her parents followed by a sly smile to Harry. Sweets had been severely restricted at her house, but she knew how fond Harry was of the confection. Her mother reacted as she’d expected, with a huff and a stern look of disapproval.

“Actually, cocoa should grow pretty well here, and I think I’ve seen some sugar cane somewhere on the island,” Sirius pointed out. “If you can find a recipe, we might be able to make our own.” This elicited grins from the teens and a groan from Mrs. Granger.

“As for the island itself,” he continued, I’m not exactly sure how big it is. One of the things we can do while we’re here if you like is to map it out. The bay we’re on faces north and is about a mile long. It’s the second longest beach on the island – the village is about a third of the way around the island to the east and occupies the biggest beach. The rest of the shoreline is just one empty beach after another, maybe as many as a dozen in all, with rocky outcroppings dividing them. If you walk to the village following the beach paths it’s about three or four miles. If you take the trail through the jungle it’s something like a mile to a mile and a half. In a day or two I’ll take you there and introduce you around. They’re very friendly. Keep in mind that they have no currency, so we need to trade for whatever we want to buy, but they’ll probably hold a welcoming feast the first time they meet you.”

“What kinds of things do we have available to trade?” Hermione asked eagerly.

“They’ll always take fish, so if we catch more than we need that’s one possibility,” Sirius replied. “Depending on how artistic you are we could carve useful things – utensils, cups, bowls, trays, you name it – out of palm trees or bamboo. But if we get desperate, or want something valuable, there’s a stash of gems here that we can make necklaces or pins or earrings out of. Jewelry is always popular and the only precious stones the islanders have are pearls.” Everyone seemed satisfied with that idea, and after some discussion, the small group vowed to try to be self-sufficient to the largest extent possible. And as Sirius reminded them, there was always the option for him to apparate back to Tahiti if they needed to buy something.

Over the weeks that followed, Harry and Hermione eagerly explored the island. Hand in hand they walked along the beaches, and into the jungle following old paths or forging new ones. At Harry’s urging they learned to handle the canoe, and paddled all along the shore inside the reef peering over the sides to scout out high concentrations of fish. He greatly appreciated the view from behind as Hermione knelt in the front of the small craft and leaned forward, digging her paddle through the water. Hermione also taught Harry to snorkel, and within a few days he’d mastered the fishing spear. They made a good team, as she swam ahead scouting out the locations where the fish were hiding, and he used his quickness and reflexes to snag them. Soon the two of them were bringing back enough fish to keep everyone adequately fed.

Hermione also proved adept at mentally cataloguing the spots in the jungle where they could find the nicest fruits. The first pineapples they found easily lived up to Sirius’s praises. And for the coconut palms they teamed up again, with Harry firing cutting hexes with pinpoint accuracy, and Hermione levitating them to a rocky area and dropping them with just enough force to crack them open but not smash them apart.

Their first trip to the village was what Hermione had been looking forward to the most. She was amazed at the simple, but contented lifestyle the natives lived, almost as much as she was by their mode of dress. Seeing an entire population bare-chested as if it were the most natural thing in the world, which in fact it was for them, was something that had to be experienced to be believed. In time she discovered, without embarrassing herself too much, that Polynesians simply had a different definition of modesty than she was accustomed to.

In this village at least, any woman past the age of puberty never revealed her legs to any man other than her husband. Bare thighs were as much a taboo here as bare breasts were back home. And conversely, a topless woman here attracted no more attention than a woman wearing shorts did in her culture. The full length pareo was ubiquitous, and soon the visitors began to note subtleties in the way it was worn. A brief flash of leg as a girl walked past a boy was the equivalent of a brief glimpse of cleavage would be to a westerner. The whole concept really gave one something to think about, and led to some interesting discussions between Hermione and her mother.

It didn’t take long for them to adopt the island lifestyle. After the first few days, all the shirts,

shorts, and skirts were packed away, and the trousers and dresses had never made an appearance in the first place. Hermione and her mother had planned ahead and brought a half dozen swimsuits apiece, and made sure that Mr. Granger and Harry had at least three each.

Both Hermione and her mother wore pareos every day, either with bikini tops or matching scarves. These latter were cleverly fashioned by cutting a six inch strip from the edge of a pareo, and worn as a bandeau style top, tied either in the front or the back. When Harry asked why she didn't just conjure a top instead, Hermione reminded him that conjuration wasn't permanent. While it wouldn't be a disaster if one of her altered bikinis suddenly reverted to its original color, she wasn't keen on the idea of having her top suddenly disappear. Harry wisely refrained from commenting on the desirability of that scenario from his point of view when he saw the stern look she was giving him.

The men held out a bit longer, but eventually began to wear the colorful wraps as well, especially once they traded at the village for some with more masculine designs. For the most part they stuck with shorter ones that extended from their waists to their knees. But like the local islanders, their torsos were always bare.

One day on their second week on the island, Mr. and Mrs. Granger disappeared to one of the beaches in the opposite direction of the village for the entire afternoon. They came back in very good moods, both looking rather disheveled, and kept shooting each other knowing smiles during dinner. After a half hour of this Harry innocently suggested that they'd seemed to enjoy the new beach, and that perhaps he and Hermione should go check it out the next day. Hermione's father promptly lost his good mood and forcefully discouraged the suggestion in no uncertain terms. Sirius burst out laughing, while Mrs. Granger was highly amused by it all.

While no one ever pressed the question of exactly what the Grangers did there all day, from that time on Sirius occasionally made tongue in cheek references to the 'nude beach'. And the adult Grangers continued to live out the fantasy of every couple who ever contemplated a completely deserted tropical beach.

The day after Hermione's sixteenth birthday, Hedwig arrived with letters from Ginny and Ron. Harry had told her to stay at Hogwarts for a while, so that their friends would be able to fill them in on the beginning of the new school year. Hermione tore open her letter from Ginny and eagerly began to devour it while Harry tended to his owl and thanked her for making the long journey. After noting aloud that Remus Lupin had returned as DADA professor, Hermione scanned through the rest of the missive for highlights.

"What do you know, Ginny has a boyfriend," she announced with a smile. "She's dating Michael Corner."

"Who's Michael Corner," Harry asked with a frown, trying to place the name.

"He's a Ravenclaw in our year," Hermione responded, rolling her eyes. "Honestly, Harry, you

should have made more effort to get to know your classmates.”

“Sorry,” Harry replied with a chastened look. “I’ll try to do better at our new school.” He frowned again. “Isn’t Ginny a bit young to be dating?”

Hermione laughed. “I’m certain that Ron probably thinks so. At least he would if he knew about it. I wouldn’t be surprised if she hasn’t gotten around to telling him yet.” Then she shot Harry a sly grin. “And besides, technically she’s already had a date. You *did* take her to the Yule Ball, you know.”

Harry’s head shot up in surprise. “Hey, that didn’t count! It wasn’t a real date, remember? It was just as friends.”

“Well, I know that and you know that,” Hermione teased. “But twenty years from now when Ginny tells her children about her first date, who do you think it will be with?” Harry groaned and just shook his head. “And, when her daughter asks her if Harry Potter kissed her ...?’ she persisted with a smirk.

Harry attempted to turn the tables. “So, what will you tell our kids about *your* first date?” he challenged. Hermione didn’t respond, but only stared at him. “You know, Krum?” he prompted. “Will you tell them he kissed you?” Hermione was still silent and Harry began to worry that he’d pushed the joke too far. “What’s wrong?”

Hermione finally came out of her daze. “You said ‘our’ kids,” she murmured.

Harry wrinkled his forehead in puzzlement. “Don’t you think we’ll have kids some day?”

“That’s not the point!” Hermione shot back. “You said ‘*our*’!”

Harry was starting to get upset. “What, you’re planning to have children with some other ...”

“No!” Hermione broke in before he could finish the sentence. “But there’s a pretty important assumption there that you left out! You seem to be presuming that we’re going to get married!”

Harry now realized what he’d said that set her off. “Erm ... yeah, I guess I sorta thought we would,” he mumbled. “Haven’t you thought about the possibility of us getting married? I mean, you know, someday?”

“Of course I have,” Hermione admitted, her cheeks turning pink. “Every girl does.” She snorted. “Probably half the girls in Britain have dreamed about marrying you.”

“You know what I mean,” Harry complained.

“Yes, I do,” Hermione assured him, her voice softening as she took his hand. “And I have thought about it, a lot. But it’s a girl rule that even though you think about getting married to the guy you like, you aren’t allowed to presume anything, at least until he brings it up.”

“Oh,” Harry grinned sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. “Well, I guess I just did. And I have been thinking about it. You know, someday.” Hermione’s tender kiss let him know that no further explanation was needed.

After a pleasant interlude, they returned to their letters, Harry finally opening the parchment from Ron. “Hey, Ron made keeper!” he told her excitedly.

“Yes, Ginny mentioned that,” Hermione allowed absently.

Harry scowled at her. “And you didn’t think to tell me?”

Hermione shrugged. “I thought it would be more fun for you to read it from him.”

Harry shook his head and continued reading. “And Ginny is seeker!” he shouted again. He lowered the letter and stared at Hermione expectantly.

Hermione sighed and looked up. “Yes, of course, she told me that too.”

Now it was Harry’s turn to tease. “So, you think the news about Ginny dating is more important than the news that she made seeker?”

Hermione rolled her eyes playfully. “Yes,” she contended, but the corners of her mouth betrayed her amusement.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “So, which bit of news did Ginny put first in her letter, the quidditch or the dating?” he demanded.

Hermione grimaced and admitted that it was the quidditch news.

“Well then,” Harry nodded with satisfaction. “It’s good to see at least some girls have their priorities straight.” Hermione decided that the only proper response to that remark was to tickle him.

The next day Hermione had a question for her boyfriend, prompted by the news in the letters. “Do you miss quidditch a lot?”

“Yeah, I do,” Harry answered. “Most of it’s the camaraderie, I think. I mean, I enjoy flying by myself but it *would* be nice to have someone else to fly with.” He looked pointedly at his girlfriend.

Hermione stalled. “Well, you know, I don’t have a broom ...”

“We could fly together,” Harry suggested. Hermione hesitated, then agreed with a sigh.

“As long as you don’t go too fast, or do any scary dives or stuff,” she insisted. Harry grinned and

assured her that she would be safe with him. He hurried up to his room to fetch his Firebolt while Hermione retied her pareo so that her legs were free enough to straddle the broom.

Once out on the beach, they experimented first with Hermione behind, holding tightly to Harry's waist. They quickly discovered that it worked better if she was in front, as she felt more secure with his arms wrapped around her while he gripped the broomstick in front of her. Eventually she relaxed and admitted she even enjoyed it. Soaring out over the ocean gave an even better view of the multiple hues of green and blue, and she exclaimed excitedly over the difference.

Harry leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "I think I should get you your own broom," he suggested, as she shuddered slightly from his closeness. Maybe for Christmas, or perhaps even a late birthday present." Hermione leaned her body back into him and turned her head to rest it against his chest.

"Maybe," she purred in a low, seductive voice. "But then we couldn't do this now, could we?" Harry swallowed hard and agreed that she had a very good point.

For the next three weeks, Harry and Hermione made time every day for flying, under the guise of exploring and mapping the rest of the island. Hermione soon became comfortable enough in her position in front of Harry, within his protective embrace, to hold onto the broom with one hand while taking notes with the other. Each day when they returned to the house she transferred their day's discoveries to a large map on the wall of the great room.

Their favorite find was a hidden pool of water, fed by a waterfall, far enough into the jungle as to only be reachable by air. It was roughly oval shaped, bounded by large, flat topped rocks suitable for stretching out and sunning. At the waterfall end it was deep enough to dive in without any danger of hitting the bottom, but the opposite end had a gradually sloping, sandy bottom. They decided to keep it their special private spot, and frequently stopped off for a quick, refreshing freshwater dip at the end of a day of exploring.

By mid October the group had a decision to make. The dry season was coming to an end, so there would be fewer days to relax outside and enjoy the sunshine. But more importantly, they had to deal the issue of 'island fever'.

This tropical malady had nothing to do with one's physical health; it related instead to one's state of mind. For some people it manifested itself as restlessness – the desire to return to civilization and get back to doing something productive with their lives. For others, a gradual sense developed that life didn't need to be so complicated. That there really was no truly compelling reason to do anything more than living day to day, accepting what the land and the sea gave you, becoming more in tune with nature and the incredible beauty surrounding you.

At this point, each of them except for Sirius alternated between the opposing emotions, while he

had pretty much decided to adopt the island lifestyle permanently. Being unjustly imprisoned for twelve years had a way of dulling one's sense of civic responsibility, at least with regards to the wizarding world. Reinforcing this sentiment was that he'd begun to enjoy the company of one of the beautiful island women from the village. His first priority at this time, though, was seeing to Harry's well-being. He'd made that commitment to himself and intended to keep it. So, since Harry and Hermione really did want to continue their education, and Mr. and Mrs. Granger really did want to see Australia, the four of them needed to move on before succumbing to the island malaise entirely, and Sirius agreed to accompany them.

On the last day before they left the island, Harry and Hermione made one last trip to their secret lagoon for a swim. Hermione's proper English attitude toward keeping certain portions of her body covered had been steadily eroding, and had finally weakened enough for her to decide to do something she wouldn't have even contemplated at the beginning of the summer.

As the two of them mounted the Firebolt for the short flight, Harry noticed that Hermione was missing one of the normal components of her daily outfit.

"Hermione, you forgot to change into your bikini top," he reminded her (somewhat reluctantly).

Without turning around, lest she lose her nerve, she replied simply, "I know."

Nothing more was said for the rest of the brief journey. But seeing her untie her pareo and drop it to the surface of the large rock where they landed, leaving her only in her bikini bottom, gazing open-mouthed as she gracefully dove into the water in front of the falls, then finally watching her surface, throw her hair back, and shyly move into the waist deep water at the shallow end, Harry decided that he was witnessing a Polynesian goddess returned to life.

He now understood the dazed expression he occasionally saw on Mr. Granger's face. And he knew he'd remember this day for the rest of his life.

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What If? ... An Alternative to Order Of the Phoenix On To Australia

Chapter 6, On To Australia

A magical boat was easily the most pleasant form of wizarding travel Harry and Hermione had yet experienced. Sort of a maritime version of the Knight Bus, but without the sudden stops and starts. With the stabilization charms it was actually a very smooth ride, skimming along through the waves at a speed equal to that of the fastest ocean racing boats. And like the Knight Bus, it was invisible to muggles.

By the end of the second day they were passing south of Fiji, and the two teens were standing in the bow of the boat with their arms around each other's waists, watching the sunset. Tomorrow they would land in Brisbane and begin the process of reacclimatizing to civilization. After tonight the pareos would be packed away until their next visit to the island, but this was one last chance to wear the colorful garb that more than anything else symbolized for them the island experience.

Anyone who'd known them back in Britain would never recognize the pair now. Besides their dark tans, Hermione had once more altered their appearances. This time, to Harry's amusement, she had begun with a switching spell on their hair. Over the past four months both had grown out their hair, so that Harry's was shoulder length and Hermione's fell past the middle of her back. Once everyone on board had a good laugh at the switch, she'd given Harry a trim so that he now had a full head of curly brown hair. By contrast, she'd lengthened her own with the result that she now sported long flowing, somewhat uncontrollable black locks. The young woman leaning up against the railing looked more like a native island girl than ever before.

While she was at it, Hermione had tried out the skin alteration charm she'd learned from the French witches in Tahiti on Harry's scar, but it didn't work. After sharing a concerned look with Sirius, they again resolved to look into this phenomenon further, and hopefully find someone with knowledge of curse scars once they made contact with the Australian wizarding world.

There was another, equally dramatic change in the English travelers. Six weeks of an island diet combined with all the physical labor and exercise had resulted in substantial weight loss for all of them. It had been greatest in the adult Grangers and least in Harry, since he had been rather skinny to start with, but they were all in considerably better shape than they had been. One unexpected result of this was that when they unpacked their regular clothing they discovered that much of it no longer fit!

It was the worst for Harry and Hermione. While everyone found that their shorts, skirts, and trousers were all several inches too loose around the waist, they could manage in the short term by pinning them or tightening their belts. For the teens, however, paddling a canoe for an hour or more each day had greatly increased their upper body strength. Their more highly developed arm, shoulder, back, and chest muscles had expanded their torsos such that every top they owned was now much too tight. Hermione, to her mother's amusement and her own chagrin, couldn't fit into a single one of her bras, being unable to fasten the clasps no matter how tightly she stretched the straps.

The first part of the problem was easily solved as Harry could borrow a shirt from Hermione's father, and she could do the same from her mother. But there was no way she could wear one of her mother's bras; the older woman was much fuller in the bust. Harry's initial thought, on hearing of his girlfriend's problem, was to suggest that she just go without one, but he had enough sense to keep this idea to himself. Mrs. Granger suggested she simply wear a bikini top under a tee shirt, but Hermione found some of her mother's tank tops that fit snugly and gave her enough support, and decided she could layer one of these under a blouse. Everyone agreed, though, that a shopping expedition would be their first order of business after they landed in Australia.

Given that they were adopting new identities, they also needed to come up with different names. Hermione, predictably, had already given this some thought.

"How about Wendell and Monica Wilkins?" she suggested to her parents. The two adults simply stared at her.

"Where did that come from?" her mother asked with some amusement. Hermione colored slightly and shrugged.

"I don't know, they just came to me," she admitted. "What do you think?"

"Well, the last name's alright, I suppose, but I don't really feel like a Monica, and I simply can't see your father as a Wendell, do you dear?" she smiled teasingly at her husband.

"Personally, I liked the bloke in that movie, *Crocodile Dundee*," he declared with a smirk. "Paul Hogan. So I think I'll go with that."

"Do you really think it's necessary to change your first names?" Harry wondered. "I mean, I doubt if anyone in wizarding Britain even knows your first names. I didn't even know them until you introduced yourself to the Delacours."

"Now Harry, don't ruin our fun with logic," Mrs. Granger chided. "We're enjoying this." She burst out laughing at his gobsmacked expression at this role reversal. "Who do you want to be, honey?" she asked Hermione. "Just to be on the safe side, you should probably have a different last name than we do."

"That's easy," Hermione replied eagerly. "Jane Elizabeth. And Bennet for the surname." Her mother nodded knowingly. Jane Austen was her daughter's favorite author and Elizabeth Bennet

one of her best-known characters.

“Well, since you claimed Elizabeth, I’ll have to settle for Emma,” she decided with a grin, referring to yet another Austen character. “And what about Harry?”

Hermione noticed Harry’s hesitation, and guessed correctly that he was reluctant to give up the name that was one of his few links to his dead parents. “You could be Henry James, after the author,” she suggested while giving his hand a squeeze. “Then Harry can be your nickname.”

“I guess,” he decided with a shrug. “What about my last name?”

“That’s easy,” she smiled. “Darcy.” When Harry inquired as to the significance of that surname, however, she just shot him a sly grin and told him to read the book.

Sirius wasn’t planning to spend much time in muggleAustralia, so he didn’t care what they named him, and he agreed to also go by Darcy. His primary contribution to the project was to prepare all the fake documents they needed, working from their regular passports and other identity papers. After all, as a Marauder he’d had plenty of experience in forging official looking signatures.

The five of them spent nearly a month traveling around Australia, learning about the country and trying to decide on a place to live. Hermione’s mother really liked Perth, but felt that it was too far away from everything else, especially the school the teens would be attending, which was in the Queensland outback. Eventually they decided to settle in Richmond, outside of Sydney near the Blue Mountains.

The Grangers had enjoyed living close to London and Sydney was the largest metropolitan area in their adopted country. Additionally, this location gave them access to some spectacularly scenic hiking opportunities in the nearby national parks. They purchased a modest house for Hermione and her parents, while Harry and Sirius rented a two-bedroom flat about a block away. In actuality, Harry would spend most of his time living in the house with Hermione’s family when the teens were not away at school

And so Paul and Emma Wilkins began a new life in Australia. Anyone trying to track the former Mr. and Mrs. Granger would run into a dead end in Tahiti, where they seemed to have vanished into thin air. Similarly, there had been no official sighting of Hermione Granger since she’d crossed into France at the beginning of August, and Harry Potter had not been seen since he left Privet Drive the day before.

For his part, Sirius was anxious to return to the island, and took his leave after the others had settled in. After discussing the situation with Harry, he had decided to split his time between Polynesia and Australia. It turned out that the island woman he’d taken a fancy to had told him right before they left that she wanted a baby. More specifically, *his* baby. And he planned to make every effort to accommodate her wishes.

Everyone was very thankful that for the first time in four years, Halloween passed without anything out of the ordinary happening to Harry.

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Meanwhile, back in Britain things initially seemed to be going smoothly. The school year got underway without any great fanfare, although the absence of the two Gryffindors was a huge topic of conversation for at least the first month. This debate was greatly fueled when a sensational story appeared in the *Daily Prophet*, regarding the prophecy that had foretold The Boy Who Lived's defeat of You Know Who. Eventually it was grudgingly accepted by many in wizarding Britain (at least, by his supporters) that it made sense for Harry Potter to disappear at this time, since the dark lord might well seek revenge for his humiliation at the hands of the then one-year-old toddler.

It was a difficult period of adjustment for Ron, who lost his two closest companions, but his housemates stepped up and did their best to make him feel welcome to spend time with them. Without the two dominant personalities of their class, the rest of the Gryffindor fifth years were forced to assume more prominent roles at the school. They no longer had Granger and Potter drawing all the attention in their classes and in everyday life at the castle, respectively. It turned into a positive experience, both for their own personal growth and in bonding with each other, and by the end of the term the six of them – Ron, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Lavender, and Parvati – were closer than ever.

Gryffindor won their first quidditch match in a high scoring contest. Ron struggled in his debut as keeper, but the experienced Gryffindor chasers dominated the quaffle while the Weasley twins were far more skilled than their Slytherin counterparts. Ginny finally beat Draco Malfoy to the snitch, eliciting a vicious, insulting diatribe from her opponent that turned into an all out brawl after the final whistle. It quickly spilled over into the stands and resulted in the largest number of detentions ever issued at Hogwarts for a single incident.

At the end of October there arose an ominous reminder that the dark times had not ended. The first Death Eater trial resulted in convictions for Amycus and Alectus Carrow, specifically chosen by Minister Bones as two of the least sympathetic characters among the dark lord's followers. On Halloween night, however, Voldemort struck back. For the first time in fourteen years, the Dark Mark appeared in the sky over a destroyed wizarding home. The evil wizard had chosen his victims cunningly – the entire family of a Wizengamot member simply disappeared.

In the months to come, this same scenario repeated with every Death Eater trial, each time the target a Wizengamot member apparently chosen at random. By the end of the year Minister Bones was on shaky ground, and facing increasing pressure from the terrified governing body to halt the prosecutions.

And in a seemingly unrelated incident, Katie Bell somehow got hold of a cursed opal necklace on a Hogsmeade visit in December, and was seriously injured. This led to her being sent to St. Mungo's for an indefinite stay, and served to add to the growing level of unease among the students at Hogwarts.

In mid December Harry and Hermione made a trip to the Australian Academy of Magical Arts to introduce themselves to the headmaster. It was just after the end of the Australian school year, and the students were on summer break until the end of January. Hermione also hoped to get their booklists so that she could have a month to look the texts over before classes started. This would be their OWL year, after all, and she wanted to make certain they weren't behind in anything.

The two teens found the main office without too much difficulty, noting that the building was laid out much more logically than Hogwarts. There was an administration wing, which also included the library and infirmary, a recreational wing which contained a gymnasium, locker rooms, spell practice rooms, and student lounge areas, and a classroom wing, with the teachers' offices adjacent to their classrooms. The student dormitories and the dining hall were in another building, which was connected at the ground level. The greenhouses and the astronomy observatory were separate, similarly connected structures.

The headmaster was a balding man who appeared to be middle aged, although it was hard to tell with wizards. He looked up from his desk as the two new students approached his open door. From the way they were walking together and holding hands it was obvious to anyone that they were a couple.

"Ah, there you are," he greeted them, rising and coming around his desk, holding out his hand. "Welcome to the Australian Academy for the Magical Arts – or, as all the students call it – AAMA. I'm Professor Williams. And you are Miss ..." he paused to look down at the papers on his desk.

"Jane Bennet, sir," Hermione prompted, shaking his hand. "And this is Henry Darcy, although his close friends call him Harry."

"Mr. Darcy and Miss Bennet," Williams repeated with a smile. "Interesting."

Hermione smiled back. "The cover story is that my mother was a big fan of Jane Austen, and she couldn't decide whether to name me Elizabeth or Jane, so I ended up with Jane Elizabeth. Jane is in fact my real middle name, but few people in the wizarding world know that."

"I actually never even heard of the book until I met Her ... Jane, that is," Harry added. "She's going to tell everyone who asks that she decided as soon as she met me that we were fated to be together. But I know that she looks past my name and sees the real me." The two students turned to each other and shared a private smile, knowing that his statement was truer than their new headmaster realized.

"Well, as you requested, I and my assistant are the only ones here who know your true identity," he confirmed. "Do you intend for it to remain that way?"

"As long as possible, yes," Hermione replied. "The situation back home is still up in the air, and there are a lot of people, on both sides, who aren't very happy with Harry right now. We dropped

out of sight four months ago and have been in hiding ever since. We hope that's long enough that two students appearing in Australia in January won't be obviously connected to two that left France in August."

"Well, I certainly wish you luck with your plan, and I must say it's a pleasure and an honor to have both of you here. Let me show you around."

There were some immediately obvious differences between this school and Hogwarts. One was the climate. The summers were hotter than anything they'd experienced in England, and the winters much milder, with freezing temperatures a rarity. They would never need cloaks or overcoats here, and snow was seen only in the mountains. Consequently, their school attire would be much lighter and more modern than the traditional long sleeved robes worn at Hogwarts. Bare arms and legs were the order of the day during most of the school year. The standard uniform was a sleeveless tunic, tailored appropriately for each gender, combined with leggings of variable length, according to the individual student's taste. The two English immigrants decided to go with mid-thigh length bike shorts at first, and adjust later if necessary. The outfit was finished off with leather, sharkskin, or dragonhide boots.

Headmaster Williams filled them in on the curriculum as they strolled about the grounds. The Australian model was loosely based on that of its mother country, including seven years of instruction, with students taking OWLs after their fifth year and NEWTs at the end of the seventh. The academic year, however, began at the end of January and ended in early December, with a two week break in July. Had they started their education here, Hermione, with her birthday in September, would have been in the year ahead of Harry. Thus, she would be the oldest student in their year, but the headmaster didn't foresee any difficulties with that.

Since the population of Australia and New Zealand was much smaller than that of Britain and Ireland, the school was only about half the size of Hogwarts. There were twenty to twenty-five students per year, with roughly one hundred fifty total. Consequently, there was no need to separate them into competing houses. Everyone was housed together in one large dormitory, grouped by year and by gender.

Australia was a relatively young country, settled to a large extent by undesirables or others who were seeking a different life than was available in Britain. Its people tended to be more rugged and self-reliant and held less regard for tradition. There were no thousand year old castles on this continent. All the school buildings and furnishings were at most one hundred years old, and often much newer. The curriculum and attitudes at this magical school also reflected this heritage, with less emphasis on History of Magic, Astronomy, and Divination and more practical applications in Charms and Transfiguration.

There was a component of Aboriginal magic in several subjects, as the spells and rituals performed by the original inhabitants of the continent had developed along some different lines than the traditional European methods. Hermione's eyes lit up at this, as she was always eager to learn about other cultures. She had witnessed a hint of this in her contacts with the Polynesian magic users on BlackIsland, and was eager for this additional opportunity.

Another significant difference was that all magically raised students were required to take Muggle Studies for their first three years, and a course called Intro to Magical Society was similarly required for all muggle raised students. The two students shared an exasperated grimace upon hearing this, and Harry was briefly tempted to ask to sit in on the Intro course, even if it meant being in a class of third years, to see what he'd missed out on.

Both teens were delighted to learn that there was a considerably different interpretation of the Reasonable Restriction on Underage Magic here. Students were encouraged, not forbidden, to practice the spells they'd learned during the year when they returned home for breaks. So long as they abided by the International Statutes on Secrecy, keeping magic away from the eyes of uninformed muggles, they were free to perform spells appropriate to their level of training. Of course, they'd both done exactly that while they were on Black Island, but it was good to know they could continue their training here in Australia without fear of official reprimand.

At the end of the tour they sat down with the headmaster to select their courses. Harry was inclined to forego History of Magic and Astronomy, and had no interest in continuing Divination. Hermione certainly agreed with his Divination decision, but wanted to see what a competently taught History of Magic course would be like. She also decided to stick with Astronomy at least through her OWL year, since there was a different arrangement of constellations to be studied in the Southern Hemisphere.

At Hermione's urging, and with her enthusiastic assistance, Harry had been studying her Arithmency and Ancient Runes books during the past two months, since they were among her favorite subjects, and he felt ready to join her in those two courses. They both signed up for Defense, Charms, Potions, and Transfiguration, which were required of all students, and both elected to take Herbology. Hermione had had her fill of Magical Creatures and opted not to continue with it, but Harry decided to stick with the course in honor of Hagrid, his first wizarding acquaintance.

Thus, when everything was settled, Hermione had nine courses and Harry eight. The headmaster pronounced these to be acceptable schedules, and added that they would also be eligible to sit the Muggle Studies OWL if they desired. Harry tried hard to hide his amusement at Hermione's irrepressible excitement when they were given their book lists. Unfortunately, she noticed and shot him a look that he knew meant that he would be spending a great deal of time in study during the next month.

-ooOoo-

Harry and Hermione were both shaking their heads and smirking as they exited the bungalow and stepped out onto the sand of the deserted beach. After spending Christmas with the Grangers (and it was a decidedly different experience to celebrate Christmas in the middle of the summer!) Sirius had brought them to Black Island for the week between Christmas and New Years. It was now New Year's Eve, and they'd just ushered in 1996 with the appropriate noise and merriment, exchanging kisses at midnight. Their hosts had had considerably more to drink than they had, however, and the kiss between Sirius and his lady had progressed into much more. The teens had quickly decided to go for a walk on the beach when the adults made obvious their intent to retire

to their bedroom to continue their celebration.

Out on the sand in the warm night air the younger couple shared a longer and more passionate kiss of their own after exchanging some suggestive speculation about the example their elders were setting for them. When they broke apart Harry boldly proposed a celebratory activity of their own.

“No, Harry, we are not going to go for a night fly together in the nude,” Hermione laughed while hitting him playfully in the chest.

“But you said you wanted to do something romantic,” Harry pointed out with a grin.

Hermione shook her head and groaned. “Dream on, Potter.”

“Well, how about midnight skinnydipping in the ocean?” Harry suggested hopefully.

“No way!” Hermione shot back. “You know what they told us. Nighttime is when the sharks and other predators come closer to the shore to feed.” Harry’s eyes widened at what she didn’t say in her rejection of his idea.

“So, the nude part’s OK then?” he countered. Hermione merely rolled her eyes. “How about if we go to our little spot in the jungle with the waterfall?”

“Maybe someday later when we know each other better,” Hermione demurred, not letting on that the same idea had also crossed her mind.

“But we’ve known each other for more than four years now,” Harry persisted playfully.

“You know what I mean,” she sighed. Not wanting to ruin the mood by getting her upset, Harry relented, giving her an affectionate hug. Eventually they settled on a moonlit flight on the broom – fully clothed.

While Harry fetched the broom, Hermione changed to a pair of short shorts and a cropped tank top that left a lot of skin showing, which she knew Harry would enjoy. She thought about how enticing the skinnydipping idea had been, and knew that if he had pressed she would have agreed to a partially nude swim in the lagoon. That memorable day in October still gave her a tingly feeling inside. With that thought in mind, she decided not to wear anything underneath the tank top.

After returning with the broom, Harry’s eyes were immediately drawn to Hermione’s bare midriff, and he couldn’t keep his hands to himself. Once they’d risen high above the island he wrapped one arm around her waist. Sighing contentedly, she closed her eyes and leaned back into him and he added a second arm.

“Harry,” she murmured. “You’re not holding onto the broom.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “We’re hovering. Open your eyes.”

She looked and gasped. He’d maneuvered them so that they had a perfect view of the moonlight

shining across the water. "It's so beautiful!" she declared softly.

Harry wrapped her up more tightly and tentatively slid his hands under her top. Hermione reached up and covered his with her own, but instead of pushing them back down as he expected, she moved them higher, onto her breasts.

Harry's breath immediately caught in his throat. Both of them were silent for a while, simply experiencing the sensation. Finally Hermione sighed happily, then whispered with a smile, "You need to breathe, Harry."

Harry let loose a loud exhalation, causing them both to chuckle. "I had no idea my heart could pound this hard while just sitting still," Harry noted nervously. "Can you feel it?"

"My heart is beating pretty fast too," Hermione pointed out. "And your hands are better positioned than mine to be able to tell."

Harry hugged her closer, making her moan at how incredible it felt. Harry joked that it was making him lightheaded, and if he passed out, she'd have to land the broom. But when he started to move his hands back to the broom handle, she stopped him, letting him know that she wanted them to stay right where they were.

After another period of pure bliss, Harry broached a related topic. "Is it too soon to ask you to marry me? This feels like the perfect moment."

"Unfortunately, it is," Hermione responded wistfully. "Too soon, I mean, although you're right about the perfect moment. We'll have to wait until you're seventeen. You need to be of age to enter into a commitment like that."

"I don't suppose there are any loopholes to get around that, are there?" he mused. "Like maybe for the last surviving heir of a Noble Family? Could he be considered an emancipated minor and therefore an adult?"

"Oh, and I suppose you think the Potters might be wizarding nobility?" Hermione inquired. Harry nodded eagerly and she laughed. "You have such a vivid imagination!" she declared, patting his leg affectionately. "For one thing, there's no such thing as an adult minor. That's something of an oxymoron, and at any rate it wouldn't work." Sensing the question he was about to ask she quickly explained. "An oxymoron is a term that is self contradictory. If you're considered an adult, you're no longer a minor. But besides that, there's no such thing as a noble family in the wizarding world, the Black family's arrogance notwithstanding, and not at all in Australia. And even in muggle England, the age of majority is no lower for the nobility."

"Oh well, it was worth a shot," Harry responded with a theatrical sigh.

"Now, if we lived in Scotland ..." Hermione teased. When Harry groaned she laughed again. "Don't get your hopes up. Can you see my father moving us back there for that reason?" She felt his chest vibrate as he chuckled at that thought.

Suddenly she shuddered when his thumbs began to explore a bit, redirecting her attention to their current activity. “Harry,” she murmured in a low voice. “What do you say we pay a visit to that waterfall again?”

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What If? ... An Alternative to Order Of the Phoenix And So It Ends

Chapter 7, And So It Ends

Harry and Hermione, now Henry and Jane, squeezed each other's hands in eager anticipation as they approached the train that would transport their group of students northward from Sydney into the Queensland Outback. Australia was large enough that several trains were required this day, one traveling west from Brisbane, one traveling south from Darwin, and another east from Perth, making several stops along the way. Magically, despite the considerable difference in distance travelled by the four trains, they would all arrive at the school at the same time.

Hermione had cast a clever jinx on Harry that would prevent him from accidentally using her real name, stopping him after one syllable. If he slipped up, he would seem to be referring to her simply as 'her'. In addition, to further disguise his identity, Harry now wore blue tinted contact lenses, and his curly brown hair thoroughly covered his forehead.

Due to the multiple trains, and the smaller student body overall, there were only a fraction of the students riding their train as there had been on the Hogwarts Express. Word spread quickly about the two new transfer students, which were a rarity here, as in most wizarding schools, and before long all the older students on the train, and most of the younger ones, would stop by to greet them and welcome them to AAMA.

"G'day, mate," a tall, sandy-haired youth greeted them as they stepped into one of the three cars on the train. "I'm Thomas, and this is Chris and Jack. He shook Harry's hand, and gave Hermione an admiring glance before taking her hand as well. "And in here are Jessica, Sarah, and Emily. Join us, if you'd like?" He gestured to a compartment, in which the just named students sat looking expectantly out at them.

"Hi, I'm Jane and this is Henry," Hermione responded quickly, moving into the compartment to introduce themselves to the others when Harry hesitated, his distrust of strangers making a brief appearance. "As you can probably guess from our accents, we're new here; our families just moved from England." There followed a flurry of handshakes and greetings, as well as a dozen quick appraisals in each direction.

It turned out that Thomas was in his last year, and one of the acknowledged leaders in the school. Jessica was his girlfriend, Chris was his best mate, and Jack was his younger brother. Harry and Hermione were pleased to learn that Jack and the two other students, Sarah and Emily, were also

beginning their fifth years. Jack and Sarah were evidently a couple, and Emily was Sarah's best friend. The two girls quickly offered to help Hermione out with anything she needed – girl talk for “fill her in on all the school gossip and pump her for details about the cute guy she was with.”

Harry quickly stowed their trunks, while Hermione carefully lifted Hedwig's cage into place. As frequently happened, the snowy white owl attracted notice. “You have a beautiful owl,” Sarah commented. “There are only a few like that at AAMA.”

“Yes, we're quite fond of her,” Hermione replied with a smile as Hedwig primped for her audience. Emily and Sarah exchanged a grin at their new friend's use of the plural pronoun.

Meanwhile Harry had let Crookshanks out of his cage, and the cat stretched out on his lap for a few seconds before jumping off and curling up near Hermione's feet. “Wish I could say the same for your cat, mate,” Jack joked, eliciting chuckles from the rest of the car. Hermione managed to stifle her indignant retort, since they were pretending that the half kneazle belonged to Harry rather than herself.

“But he's been right useful though,” Harry countered, tacitly conceding that the big, bowlegged, squashed-faced cat was nothing to look at. And that much was certainly true, considering the important role he'd played during their third year in the Sirius/Pettigrew drama. Hermione promptly changed the subject, asking a question about their new school.

Several things quickly became apparent. No one seemed to care about their blood status, or even inquired about it. Australia, being a nation of immigrants, had little concern for class distinctions, and that attitude carried over into its magical sector. Lacking the forced separation of the Hogwarts house system and its resulting rivalries, the students mixed more freely. They also seemed friendlier, although Hermione thought this might have also been a part of the national character.

Another revelation was the considerable variation in the students' mode of dress. For some of the more daring, usually older, girls their leggings were so short as to disappear under their tunics. There also seemed to be a competition among these same females with regard to the necklines of the tunics. Hermione had decided on a relatively modest, but still attractive, scoop neckline that she felt showed plenty of skin and a hint of cleavage. She quickly realized that she was probably in the minority, as V-necklines predominated among the girls who had assets worth displaying. While none of them were shockingly low cut, they certainly got Harry's attention.

This, of course, was their intended purpose. The two new students received considerable interest from the opposite sex, and not just due to normal ‘check out the new guy/girl’ curiosity. Both of their bodies were more developed and in better shape than they had been the prior school year, a product of their time on the island combined with an additional year of physical maturity. They'd each been pleased with their new physiques, and had continued to work out after landing in Australia. The results were made obvious by the cut of their new attire, something that would not have been the case with their old Hogwarts robes. Hermione's curves were now quite apparent and Harry would never again be considered a skinny little boy.

Some of the more aggressive students, a few of each gender, made their intentions rather obvious, even though Hermione quite conspicuously kept hold of Harry's hand during the introductions and subsequent conversations. Being new, they were reluctant to be seen as rude, so they good-naturedly tolerated the teasing and flirting. Their patience and good humor ultimately paid off. They would need to be assertive for a few weeks, but eventually things settled down.

It didn't take very long for their identities to move past the 'new kid on the block' stage. For Harry, it was first his skill in Defense class, soon followed by his quidditch prowess. At AAMA, there were two levels of competition, an intramural league and a school team that competed against other Pacific Rim wizarding schools. Upon learning that Harry was interested in playing quidditch, Jack informed his brother, who was looking to replace the seeker on his team, who had graduated in December.

For Christmas Sirius had bought Harry a new broom, the best one made in Australia, deciding that it would help Harry blend in better. It was called the Lightning Bolt, put out by a broom manufacturing company called Southern Cross to be a competitor to the Firebolt. Sirius got a kick out of the name, and decided it must be destined for Harry. When Harry showed up at the informal tryout with the world class broomstick, everyone's eyes bugged out.

"You sure you can handle that?" Thomas wondered, running his hand over the gleaming mahogany wood.

"No worries, mate!" Harry grinned. After seeing him fly for several minutes his new teammates wore matching grins of their own.

"We've got the championship in the bag," Thomas whispered to Chris.

"Unless they grab him for the competition team," Chris pointed out. Thomas's grin vanished. That was indeed a very real possibility.

Chris proved to be prophetic, as Harry dominated intramural play, and was soon put on the interscholastic team. He and Hermione privately discussed this development with Sirius, but they concluded that no one outside England had ever seen Harry play quidditch, so he wouldn't be recognized by his flying style.

Other than that, the year was extraordinary in its ordinariness. Henry Darcy eventually drew the notice of scouts for the Australian national team, who were beginning to look ahead to the next World Cup three years hence. For her part, Jane Bennet quickly drew notice for her classroom abilities. The better students began to flock to her, and her table at the library came to be jokingly declared as standing room only.

As time went on, the more studious male students resented the fact that Henry always had first claim on the most favored seat by Jane's side, but didn't dare to complain, as they were smart enough to recognize the futility of such an action. As well, the more athletic female students

resented the fact that Henry only had eyes for Jane, who was in the stands for every practice and game. They also kept those feelings to themselves, as they had no desire to cross the possessive witch who had demonstrated a wider knowledge of hexes than any other student. Despite these minor inconveniences, the two new students greatly enjoyed being at the AAMA. It was by far the most pleasurable school year either of them had ever experienced.

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Amelia Bones's frustration had reached the a critical level. Voldemort's strategy to weaken her government with attacks on Wizengamot members had paid off in dramatic fashion. In order to avoid a no confidence vote she had reluctantly suspended the Death Eater trials.

She'd tried everything to thwart the dark lord. The Taboo on the Morsmordre spell had netted the Aurors one Death Eater when they'd caught Gibbon lingering too long, gloating under the Dark Mark after the second attack. But after that Voldemort had caught on, and made sure to cast the signature spell immediately prior to departing the location of his attack. The Aurors had countered by switching the detection charm randomly to one of the three Unforgiveables. That strategy had netted them Pettigrew, but at the cost of the lives of five Aurors when the dark lord had made an adjustment of his own and set an ambush, killing the response team as soon as they apparated to the home under attack. After that, there was considerably less enthusiasm among the Auror Corps for the quick response tactic.

Finally, she'd put pressure on Dumbledore to use his vaunted spy. When the headmaster had protested that using Snape's information would blow his cover, Bones had retorted acidly that the intelligence he gathered was worthless if they didn't act on it. She pointedly reminded the elderly wizard that his potions professor was the only Death Eater still at large, and that she had plenty of evidence to have him arrested. Now the Chief Warlock and the Minister of Magic were about to meet for a discussion that had the potential to end the war.

Bones had little patience for Dumbledore's leisurely greeting and soothing pleasantries when she arrived in his office. Declining his habitual offer of a lemon drop she came immediately to the point. "What do you have for me, Albus?"

"It seems that Tom is planning a bold move, Amelia," Dumbledore revealed, calmly stroking his beard. "He hopes to catch us by surprise by changing targets. While we are expecting another attack on a civilian target, he intends to strike us more directly, by storming Azkaban itself. With a single blow he intends to retrieve his supporters, strengthen his forces, add the dementors to his ranks, and further demoralize our citizenry."

"So he still doesn't know that the dementors have been moved elsewhere?" Bones confirmed. Dumbledore nodded in grim satisfaction. Snape had been specifically instructed to keep this information from the dark side forces.

"Then this time the tables are turned, and we can set an ambush for him," she declared in rising excitement. "We can take him out once and for all!"

Dumbledore's expression turned grim. "There is one additional condition I must make you aware of," he informed her. "You'll need to take him alive. He must not be killed or all our efforts will be for naught."

"What!" she shrieked, rising from her chair. "You cannot be serious, Albus! Why ever not?"

Dumbledore sighed, took off his spectacles, and rubbed his eyes. "I will not reveal the details, but Tom has performed a series of rituals on himself that prevent him from being truly killed. He would only be disembodied, and thus would escape, only to return at some future time. This is how he was able to survive his encounter with Harry that night in Godric's Hollow. He cannot be finally destroyed until I have succeeded in reversing these rituals."

Bones glared at the much acclaimed wizard seated across the desk. Setting aside the issue of his refusal to divulge the entire story, even to the Minister of Magic herself, she asked, "And how long will that take?"

"I cannot say," Dumbledore replied calmly. "I can only pledge that I will not rest until the task is completed."

"Fine, then," she snapped. "But I have no intention of risking my Aurors' lives because of this. If you expect him to be taken alive you can bloody well come and do it yourself!"

The two of them stared at each other for nearly a full minute before the headmaster nodded.

Upon returning to the Ministry, Bones summoned Scrimgeour and Robards and the three of them sat down to develop their plan. The ten death eaters that had been held in Azkaban all these years were among the most vicious of the dark lord's followers, and included Bellatrix Lestrange, her husband Rodolphus and his brother Rabastan, Dolohov, Rookwood, Travers, Mulciber, and the werewolf Fenrir Greyback. They had now been joined by eight of their recently convicted comrades. The Minister was emphatic that under no circumstances were any of these killers to be allowed to escape.

Scrimgeour and Robards nodded grimly. New instructions would be issued to the goblin guards. The bloodthirsty little devils would not be at all reluctant to be part of this operation. Not only were the warriors be eager for some action, but their contract also included a combat bonus.

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Valentine's Day was certainly nothing special for single people, Ron reflected sullenly as he and Neville strolled through Hogsmeade. It just so happened that a Hogsmeade weekend coincided with the holiday this year, and many of the students in the castle were taking full advantage of that fact. The usually tight group of fifth year Gryffindors had paired up, leaving him and Neville as the odd men out. Not only that, but he had to watch his sister being escorted into Madame Puddifoot's by her boyfriend, that Ravenclaw git Michael Corner. He supposed that he *could* have

hooked up with Romilda Vane again, but she hadn't really been interested in him in the first place.

When the two Gryffindors settled into their chairs at the Three Broomsticks, he noted that at least they weren't the only ones without a date. Cho Chang and her friend Marietta were sitting at a different table, and as he watched them the pretty Chinese girl gave him an odd look, then glanced away with tears in her eyes. According to Ginny, she'd been crying a lot this year, because of what had happened to Cedric. Upon reflection, Ron decided that he probably reminded Cho of Harry, who had had a crush on her for a while before he got together with Hermione.

He sighed, wondering how his best friends were doing and how they might be celebrating today. If they were here this year, he imagined that they would want to spend some time alone together, but they'd also make sure not to leave him out entirely. He still missed them terribly. He wondered if he'd ever again have friends as close as the three of them had been. Along with that sense of loss came regret that he hadn't been as close to them during their final year at Hogwarts, due entirely to his acting like a jealous prat. One never realized just how precious something was until it was gone.

He looked up again to see Loony Lovegood wandering, in a daze as always, into the pub. To his dismay she headed right for him. Although he had to acknowledge that the girl, a neighbor of his from Ottery St. Catchpole, had grown up to be rather cute, he always tried to avoid her since she was completely off her rocker.

"Hello Ronald," she greeted him dreamily. "I see you're still suffering from a Wrackspurt infestation." Beside him Neville goggled while Ron rolled his eyes and looked away.

"Yeah, whatever," he mumbled dismissively. Luna continued to stare at him for another few seconds, then turned away.

"I must be going," she declared. "I'm on a mission for my father, you know." Ron shook his head. No, he didn't know and he didn't much care either. "Bye now," she added. Then the blonde girl with the butterbeer cork necklace and radish earrings serenely strolled away, unconcerned with the snickers coming from some of the other tables.

Ron turned to meet Neville's questioning gaze. "Don't ask," he muttered, picking up his glass and draining his butterbeer. "What do you say we head back to the castle?"

At the feast that night Ron's mood had not improved. He glared at his sister, sitting a ways down the Gryffindor table giggling with her friends. She had a flushed, slightly dazed look about her. Like she'd just been snogged silly. Every so often she sneaked a shy glance at the Ravenclaw table and blushed some more. Ron turned his attention to the other table, immediately spotting the object of her attention, Corner, who had a smug, self-satisfied look on his face. Ron immediately decided that he needed to get Fred and George together so the three of them could pay a little visit to the dark-haired Ravenclaw git. They needed to explain to him, in painful detail, the consequences of touching their little sister.

The youngest Weasley male grimaced. Why did little sisters have to grow up? Or lacking that, why couldn't she date someone safe, like ... like Neville here. It would probably take his shy friend an entire year to get up the nerve to hold her hand.

It had been so much easier during Ginny's first three years at Hogwarts when she'd wandered around the castle totally smitten with Harry Potter. Ron knew that his best mate would never dream of taking advantage of his sister. Not that Ginny ever had the slightest chance with him, once he and Hermione had discovered their feelings for each other. In hindsight, things couldn't possibly have turned out any other way. Harry and Hermione had been ... well, Harry and Hermione. The two of them just were. It was inconceivable that they'd ever be separated. She was totally devoted to him and he to her.

Of course, Ginny *had* been Harry's date to the Yule Ball. What if, say, Harry had fallen for her after all and he and Hermione had decided to stay as best friends? How would that had played out? In that case, Ron and Hermione might have ended up spending more time together and ...

Ron shook his head. No, that would never have worked out. He hadn't even thought of Hermione as a girl until the Yule Ball. Of course, she had looked spectacular at that event. He winced. That fiasco was a memory he'd just as soon forget, as it had nearly cost him her friendship, permanently. But while he greatly valued that friendship, a life together with Hermione would be one unending argument. The two of them could scarcely be in a room together for more than an hour without sniping at each other. The girl was positively mental. Harry was welcome to her; somehow he not only was able to tolerate her, he actually appreciated Hermione's annoying, know-it-all characteristics.

Thinking of the two of them so intensely caused him to duck his head, lest anyone else at the table spot the moisture creeping into his eyes.

Great Merlin, he missed them so much!

Ron was finally brought out of his reverie when Neville nudged him. Looking up, he saw that his friend was gesturing toward the head table.

"Where do you suppose Dumbledore is?" he wondered. Ron noted that the headmaster's chair was indeed empty, and that Snape's was similarly unoccupied. The thought occurred to him that perhaps the Order was up to something.

"I dunno," he responded with a shrug. "I guess if it's important we'll hear about it tomorrow."

He had no idea how right he was. For the next day would see the beginning of a weeklong celebration in wizarding Britain, the likes of which hadn't been seen for more than fourteen years.

-oooOOOooo-

Albus Dumbledore leaned back at his desk and exhaled a long breath. The academic year that had just ended was the most extraordinary he'd ever been through. Given the goings on during Harry

Potter's first four years at Hogwarts, that was no mean feat! And to top it off, virtually nothing had gone the way he'd expected, going all the way back to the previous summer. Harry's disappearance had set off a chain of events that he would never have imagined possible.

To begin with, the repercussions from that incident had cost him his newly hired Defense instructor before she'd even taught her first class. Of course, he'd had no regrets whatsoever over the loss of Delores Umbridge. She would have brought nothing but trouble to the castle, gunning for Harry from day one. And he was certain that the messy-haired lad would not have backed down. He still shuddered to think about how that clash might have played out.

That development had unquestionably turned into a major positive for the light side. Riding the wave of his and Harry's restored popularity, he'd been able to replace the detestable witch with Remus Lupin, who had turned out to be invaluable in more ways than he'd anticipated.

Although difficult to control, the new Minister Amelia Bones had been an enormous boon to the battle with the dark forces of Tom Riddle. She had single-handedly changed the course of the entire war, and would surely go down as one of the most respected ministers in history. Her brilliant initial move against the Death Eaters produced a setback from which the dark lord was never able to recover, resulting in his eventual defeat at Azkaban.

The headmaster lowered his head and closed his eyes, while massaging his temples with his fingertips. Riddle's plan of attack had been nearly perfect. He had arrived on the prison island with Snape at his side, accompanied by a host of newly created Inferi. These latter were none other than the reanimated corpses of the missing Wizengamot members and their families – men, women, and children. It was a terrifying scene. The dark lord's expectation had been that the sight of these foul creatures with familiar faces would overwhelm the human Azkaban guards, while he persuaded the dementors to abandon their posts and join him. Then he would release his imprisoned followers, and with these new additions his forces would once again be unstoppable.

But there were no dementors at Azkaban, and the goblin warriors were not fazed by the Inferi. Alive or reanimated, male or female, adult or child, the human forms of the attackers were all the same to them. Voldemort's response when he discovered he'd been set up had been swift and deadly – he'd executed Snape on the spot and turned to face Dumbledore in a rage.

The few who witnessed it would all agree that it was a duel for the ages, as the two most powerful wizards of the age battled it out on the rocky terrain of the desolate island. The Chief Warlock's advancing age, combined with the dark lord's complete lack of any scruples regarding the darkest spells slowly turned the tide. When Voldemort finally slipped a killing curse past Dumbledore's defenses it appeared to be over, until Fawkes the phoenix flashed into its path and intercepted the deadly green light.

The surprise of that avian interference was enough to throw the dark lord off balance for an instant, just enough time for Dumbledore's Flame Whip to catch his wand arm, severing it above the elbow. In no time he was bound and taken to the most secure cell deep in the depths of the fortress, never to see the light of day again. And Dumbledore received even greater acclaim, having now defeated two dark lords in the same century.

Much to his displeasure, every Death Eater on the island had been killed ‘trying to escape’, but his complaints went unheeded in the atmosphere of relief and celebration that soon enveloped the country. He still intended to see Severus Snape awarded a posthumous Order of Merlin for his sacrifice, and hoped that he could get Harry’s and/or Sirius’s support for the resolution when he presented it to the Wizengamot.

The remainder of the school year had passed in relative quiet. Horace Slughorn had been enticed out of retirement to fill the Potions slot for at least the remainder of the school year. There *had* been that small nuisance of a plot against Dumbledore’s life, but of course he knew he was never in any danger from Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Greg Goyle. Although he felt it unfortunate that the Gryffindor girl had been injured, she’d eventually recovered and returned to her classes.

The headmaster would have preferred to handle the matter internally, but once Bones had got involved it was out of his hands. Dumbledore was amazed that with everything else going on, she and her Aurors had still followed up with their investigation. Thankfully, the three boys involved were underage and weren’t sent to Azkaban.

Now, however, it was time for him to turn his full attention to the matter of Tom Riddle’s horcruxes. Astonishingly, by a series of fortuitous happenstances, things had progressed much faster on this front than he’d anticipated. After Snape had been killed, he’d needed another confidant and had brought in Lupin, who was also indebted to him. Within a week after being briefed on the soul repositories, and Dumbledore’s suspicions about which objects might have been used, the werewolf had brought in Slytherin’s locket! He’d recognized the description as that of one of the dark objects they’d found while cleaning out Grimmauld Place. How it had gotten there was something of a mystery, since Dumbledore’s investigations had suggested that it was in an entirely different part of the country. It appeared that Kreacher, the ancient Black family house elf, was involved somehow.

The next one, Hufflepuff’s cup, had been discovered by Nymphadora Tonks and her mother in the Lestrangle family vault. When Draco Malfoy had been arrested, on top of everything else that had happened to her family, Narcissa Malfoy had gone mad, ending up in the long term care ward at St. Mungo’s. Consequently, upon the confirmation of the deaths of Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Rabastan Lestrangle, Andromeda Tonks was the only next of kin remaining. The most curious thing, from Dumbledore’s point of view, was how the younger Tonks had even known to look for the Hufflepuff relic. He’d had no idea that she and Remus were an item.

The easiest one had been Nagini, who had been killed during a follow-up raid by the Aurors on Voldemort’s headquarters. Other than the snake, the raid had revealed little. There were no records, or documented plans to be found – Tom Riddle had always kept all of his scheming in his own mind. What *was* evident was that the dark lord had exhausted his ranks of followers. He’d staked everything on the Azkaban raid to turn the tide once more in his favor.

The strangest, by far, of the horcrux finds had been Ravenclaw’s diadem. The entire story was not entirely clear to the headmaster, but he’d determined that it involved his Divination professor, an

odd 4th year Ravenclaw, and a hidden chamber in the castle the house elves called the Come and Go room. The soul fragment had possibly briefly possessed Trelawny, causing her to declare herself the rightful heir of Ravenclaw, right before both professor and horcrux were wiped out in an explosion involving an Erumpent horn. Dumbledore had later destroyed the diadem with the Sword of Gryffindor, just to be certain.

He was also inclined to not bother with hiring another Divination professor, in no small part due to how badly he'd been misled by that ill-fated prophecy.

The upshot of all of those remarkable coincidences was that now, his upcoming mission to retrieve the Gaunt family ring would be the final, rather than the initial horcrux quest.

Of course there was still the matter of Harry Potter's scar. It broke his heart to think of what had to happen; he'd grown quite fond of the boy. He'd have to figure out how to deal with that issue when he finished with the ring.

-oooOOOooo-

Uluru (aka Ayers Rock), Northern Territory

Hermione stirred and awoke, and raised herself to a sitting position while she gathered her thoughts. A light blanket that had been covering her fell away, exposing her bare torso. Quickly she snatched it back into place, then, after a glance over at Harry on the next bed, settled back down again, wondering how she and Harry managed to get themselves into such bizarre situations. She sincerely hoped that this would be the last time.

Currently, they were in a rather primitive hut near the geological formation that was considered the most magical place in Australia, lying on two simple woven mats, covered by nothing but a pair of thin handmade blankets. The hut was owned by an aboriginal shaman who'd spent his life studying soul magic, whom they had sought out for advice about Harry's scar.

The news about the death of Dumbledore, caused by some sort of cursed ring, had been an overwhelming shock all on its own, but it was followed soon after by an urgent message from Remus Lupin. Lupin had been the one to discover the headmaster's body, and afterward had taken some time to go through his notes on the secret project they'd been working on. The short of it was that in his effort to achieve immortality, Voldemort had split his soul and embedded the fragments in several objects, all of which needed to be destroyed in order to make the dark lord mortal again. Dumbledore had been fatally wounded while destroying the final object. Or rather, the final but for one. His private notes indicated that Dumbledore believed that Harry's scar also contained a soul fragment, torn from the evil wizard unintentionally and without his knowledge by the reflected killing curse on that fateful Halloween night. They also revealed his belief that it could only be destroyed with Harry's own death.

Upon learning this, Sirius, who'd been doing research of his own into Harry's scar connection with Voldemort, stepped up his efforts. He had found an ancient native magic user who was widely regarded as the foremost practitioner of soul magic on the continent and made

arrangements for Harry and Hermione to visit the man during their winter break in mid-July.

The balding, wizened old man with dark leathery skin brought to Hermione's mind a more human looking version of Yoda. After peering closely at Harry's scar while muttering some incantations, he put both hands on the teen's head and began to chant. In just a few seconds the expression on his face confirmed their worst fears. He'd insisted that the dark spirit be dealt with immediately, and before Harry and Hermione knew what was happening they'd been hustled into a ritual unlike any either of them had ever heard of or even dreamed existed.

It only took a glance at Hermione, seeing the look in her eyes, for the shaman to decide that she would be of great use in the ritual. Her function, he declared, would be to anchor Harry's own soul to his body while the fragment was exorcised. This was possible because the pair of them had a soul connection of their own, he declared, and the benefit would be to increase Harry's chances of surviving the process to a near certainty. Hermione, on hearing that, agreed instantly, although her enthusiasm dimmed somewhat when she heard precisely what the ritual entailed.

She now fought to control the blush that colored her face at this thought, focusing on the fact that the ritual had been an overwhelming success. It had gone more smoothly than the shaman had even hoped. It turned out that the fragment had already been under stress, due to Voldemort's fundamental inability to tolerate feelings of love, which Harry had been experiencing an abundance of recently. In less than an hour of magical tug of war the fragment was dislodged for good, permanently closing Harry's connection with the most evil wizard of his time, and making the latter mortal once again.

Now Harry, who'd been put into a light healing sleep, began to awaken, and Hermione wrapped the blanket around herself and moved over to his bed. Kneeling beside him, she took his hand in hers and gave it a squeeze.

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Hi. How are you doing?" she asked eagerly. "He said it worked! How do you feel?"

Harry's attention had been focused on the girl hovering over him wearing a blanket that was gradually losing its grip but he now directed it inward. "I'm fine," he decided. "Better than fine actually. I feel great. Like something that's been weighing me down without me knowing it has been taken away. Like I'm finally free!"

He paused and considered the rest of his body, now aware that he was completely naked under his blanket, which wasn't much more than a sheet, and realized that the same must be true for his girlfriend. He sat up and gave her hand a squeeze of appreciation, knowing how awkward the experience had been for her.

"How are *you* doing?" he inquired, turning the question back on her.

With her free hand Hermione tugged the blanket up to her chin and frowned. "I'll be alright, I guess. But Harry, you have to swear that you'll never tell anyone what we had to do! Not even my parents or Sirius. Dad would have a fit, and Mum would never let me live it down. And you know

Sirius would tease us unmercifully.” Harry immediately nodded, but Hermione, now that her worry over Harry was alleviated, was letting her other feelings take over.

“Harry, it was so embarrassing! I was positively mortified!” she began to rant. “Having to get naked in front of a total stranger was bad enough, but to have all our body hair shaved off! And then to be painted on ... well on our most intimate places! And then to be pressed up against each other and bound together from head to toe for the entire length of the ritual!”

“I didn’t think that part was so bad,” Harry observed with a grin, making an attempt to lighten the mood. “I rather enjoyed it.”

Hermione scowled and punched him on the arm. “Oh, trust me, I could tell. I could feel your ‘enjoyment’ poking me in the stomach the whole time!”

“I’m really sorry you had to go through all that,” Harry commiserated, stroking her arm consolingly. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciated it, just like everything you always do for me. You do feel it was worth it in the end, though, right?”

Hermione’s face softened. “Of course it was. I’d have done even more than that if we’d needed to.” Both teens blushed at the implication of that declaration. “And I suppose part of it was being taken by surprise. If I’d had more chance to prepare myself mentally, you know, work myself up to it.” She sighed. “I suppose I’m just being silly, but ...”

“No, you’re not being silly at all,” he assured her with another squeeze of her hand. “But what?”

“I just always felt that the only man that should see you naked was your husband,” she confided. “And your doctor.”

“Well, this guy’s sort of a healer, isn’t he?” Harry suggested. “And I ... well I plan to be your husband eventually.”

Hermione’s ire melted at the earnest, caring look in his eyes and she threw her arms around his neck, unconcerned that her blanket fell away again. “Oh Harry, I love you so much. You’re right, of course.”

After she regained her composure, Harry teased that he noticed her doing a bit of staring herself while they were starkers, and with another blush she admitted it. She finally joked that they might even look back on it years later and laugh. Harry then suggested that the experience was actually pretty erotic, and perhaps they might want to try something similar again sometime.

After affecting a mock look of horror, Hermione grinned. “Which part,” she wondered impishly. “The bodypainting or the shaving?” Harry pretended to furrow his brow in concentration, trying to decide, which gave her a chuckle, and they continued the playful banter. Hermione complained about the red paint all over her breasts, which prompted Harry to point out that now she would fit in with all the other English tourist women on the Australian beaches. Hermione laughed out loud at that observation. For it was true that many fair skinned female visitors from her home country,

on being exposed to the topless beaches in Australia for the first time, tended to overdo it. These unfortunate ladies ended up with painfully red patches on the parts of their upper bodies that had never seen the sun before.

Soon Harry received a clean bill of health, their clothing was returned, and they expressed their heartfelt thanks to the shaman. The little old man assured them, with what Hermione thought looked suspiciously like a leer in her direction, that it was his pleasure. As the two of them began the walk back to the nearby village, where Sirius had been instructed to wait for them, Hermione noticed a thoughtful look on her companion's face.

After a minute or two he turned to her and asked, "What did he mean when he said our souls were connected?"

Hermione shot him a warm smile. "I'm surprised you haven't noticed," she responded. "Think of all the times over the years that we've known what each other were thinking, shared the same thoughts, or even finished each other's sentences. We've shared a connection since, oh, possibly as far back as first year. We're just in tune with each other, and have been for years. Some people refer to that as a soul bond."

"Oh," he replied, nodding thoughtfully. "I wonder if that means we could automatically be magically married or something. You know, like we're fated and our magic recognizes it, therefore it's already a done deal. Maybe even magically recorded in a Ministry somewhere?" He shot her an anxious glance out of the corner of his eye.

Hermione just shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Harry, where do you get such silly notions? Magic simply doesn't work like that. It can't bind you to someone without anyone even doing anything, or being aware of it! Just think of the chaos that would cause!" Harry shrugged sheepishly, and she wrapped an arm around him for a quick hug before continuing.

"And think of how horrible that would be. I would hate to live in a world where there was some completely arbitrary determination that you were married to someone without even knowing it. That would be even worse than an arranged marriage. It was bad enough that you were forced to compete in the Triwizard Tournament against your will. How would you feel if you were told that saving Ginny in the Chamber had triggered a soul bond and you were married to her when you were twelve and she was eleven! Can you see how absurd that would be? Not to mention that children of that age are in no way mature enough for a marital relationship! There's a reason for the age of consent being what it is."

Both of their faces wrinkled up in disgust at the image that suggestion brought to mind. Hermione stopped and turned to face him. "Sorry, Harry, you're just going to have to marry me the normal way." She squeezed his hands and grinned, which he returned.

"And when might that be?" he challenged, still smiling.

"Well, I already told you we couldn't get engaged for another year yet," she reminded him. "So I'd say the earliest would be the following Christmas. That is, if you're still interested by then."

She raised an eyebrow with the last qualifier, returning his challenge.

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that,” he declared. “Besides, you have to marry me. You don’t have a choice.” She cocked her head inquiringly, and he leaned in close to whisper his reasoning.

“I’ve seen you naked.”

Hermione was taken aback for an instant, then a merry smile blossomed on her face. She punched him playfully and took his hand, turning to resume their trek, both of them laughing happily.

As they approached the village Hermione raised an important question. “So, what do you want to do now?” Harry immediately understood what she was asking. Now that the danger was over, would they return to Hogwarts or remain in Australia?

“Well, I do miss Ron, and ...” Harry paused, with a look of consternation on his face. “Actually, except for Ron, and Ginny and Neville to a lesser extent, there’s not that much else I really miss from back home. And there’re the twins. It would be interesting to see how their joke shop turned out. But I like it here, I like AAMA, and I’m certainly enjoying this school year more than any I ever had at Hogwarts. I mean, for once I’m able to live and act like a normal person.”

Hermione smiled. “Yeah, a normal person who just happens to be the hottest young quidditch star in Australia,” she teased.

Harry grimaced and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Well, at least I got that on my own, for something I actually did.” Hermione nodded her understanding. Now it was Harry’s turn to tease. “But you forgot to add that I’m also dating the hottest and most brilliant witch on the continent.”

Hermione tried to roll her eyes, but the smile that blossomed on her face interrupted her attempt at the dismissive gesture. “Oh, Harry, what am I going to do with you?” she sighed, wrapping her arm around his and laying her head on his shoulder.

Harry shrugged and grinned. “I’m sure I can think of something,” he replied suggestively. Hermione groaned and shook her head, deciding it was time to return to the original topic.

“It wouldn’t do in any case to change in the middle of a school year,” she pointed out. So I think we should stay through the rest of this year for certain, and get our OWLs, and strongly consider finish out our schooling here. We should also see how Mum and Dad feel about it. I get the impression they really like it here. And Sirius seems pretty happy, too.” After a moment’s thought she added, “Perhaps we can have Ron visit over Christmas holidays.”

Harry stole a quick kiss. “That works for me. Then he scratched his head and added impishly, “So, now that I don’t have to worry about hiding my scar anymore, can we switch our hair back? I think the bushy look is better on you than on me.”

Hermione laughed and gave him a hug. “We’ll think about it.”

Epilogue – Years Later

Harry paused, picked up the parchment from the table, glared at it, threw it back down, and resumed his furious pacing. *What were those morons thinking?! How could anyone in their right minds let that murderer go free?!!*

Suddenly, his wife burst through the door and wrapped her arms around him. “Harry! Did you hear?” she all but shrieked in dismay.

“Yes, it’s all right here,” he snapped angrily, gesturing at the offending document. “He’s been released and he’s making no secret of the fact that he’s coming for me. Since Dumbledore’s long since gone he’s going to take out his revenge on me.”

“Harry, what are we going to do? Do you think we ...” Hermione began as she wiped her eyes determinedly.

“WE aren’t going to do anything,” he declared firmly. “I’m the one he’s after.”

“No, Harry!” she shot back. “We’ve always been a team and that’s not changing now.”

“But you have to keep the children safe,” he argued. “We can’t let anything happen to them. And you know what he’s like; he wouldn’t hesitate to use them to hurt me.”

“Can’t we just leave?” she suggested. “We can all go to the island. He’ll never find us there.”

Harry hugged her again. “Do you really want to hide for the rest of our lives?” he whispered. Hermione hesitated, then shook her head.

Hours passed, then days, and Harry grew increasingly desperate. Suddenly no one wanted anything to do with him. The Ministry was no help, washing their hands of the entire matter. Those whom he’d considered friends and allies melted away. He’d hoped that with strong backing he would be able to prevail, but now it looked that wasn’t going to happen. He was on his own.

Finally, the moment they’d been dreading arrived with a loud crack of apparation sounding from the street outside their home.

“Jane, it’s him!” Harry yelled. “Take Lily and go! I’ll hold him off.” His wife shot him a fierce, determined look, then grabbed their daughter and disappeared. Swallowing hard, Harry stepped out into the street to confront his nemesis.

There, waiting for him, was the figure of the revolting being he’d hoped to never see again, looking even more inhumanly evil than he remembered. “Harry Potter,” the gaunt creature hissed. “Now we meet for the final time.”

Suddenly Hermione was standing beside him. “What ...? You came back? But ...” Harry

stammered, turning slightly to her while keeping an eye on his opponent.

“You know I’ll never leave you, Harry,” she declared softly. “I’ll be with you forever. Now wake up.”

“Huh?”

“Wake up, Harry. You’re having a nightmare.”

Harry’s eyes shot open to see his beloved wife anxiously leaning over him, stroking his cheek. “Oh Merlin, that seemed so real,” he gasped once he’d taken in his surroundings. “I thought ...”

Hermione nodded with a smile. “I know. I figured it out as soon as you shouted. You haven’t called me Jane in years.”

She shot him a mock scowl and poked a finger into his chest. “No more watching Westerns while eating pizza right before bed for you, my dear husband.” Harry ducked his head and grimaced. “Which one was it?”

“High Noon,” he muttered.

“So, you were Gary Cooper and I was Grace Kelly?” Hermione smirked. He nodded with a sheepish grin and she chuckled. “Well, my mum says every little girl wanted to be Grace Kelly while she was growing up, so I suppose that’s not so bad. She leaned in and gave him a tender kiss. “Are you OK now?”

Harry nodded. “You don’t think there will ever be a chance ...?”

“None at all,” she reassured him. “He’s imprisoned under the same wards they used for Grindelwald, and he was locked up at Nurmengard for more than fifty years before he died of old age. Dumbledore cast them himself before he died. Tom Riddle can never leave the prison or he’ll die instantly.”

Harry nodded again and leaned back against his pillow, but Hermione could see that he wouldn’t be falling back asleep anytime soon, and she was also wide awake. With a sly smile she sat up and pulled her nightgown off over her head. “Maybe we can think of something else to occupy your mind.”

Harry’s breath caught, just as it always did when she disrobed in front of him, and he supposed it always would. His gaze dropped to her full breasts, and then further to her thickened waist and the bulge in her tummy – the newest member of their family was due to arrive in five months. Life was truly wonderful.

Afterwards, the two lay in each other’s arms, fully satisfied and about to drift off. Hermione gave him a soft kiss on the nearly invisible scar on his forehead, and they shared a knowing smile.

All was well.

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