

THE GOLDEN AGE



ADVENTURES
IN
FANFICTION

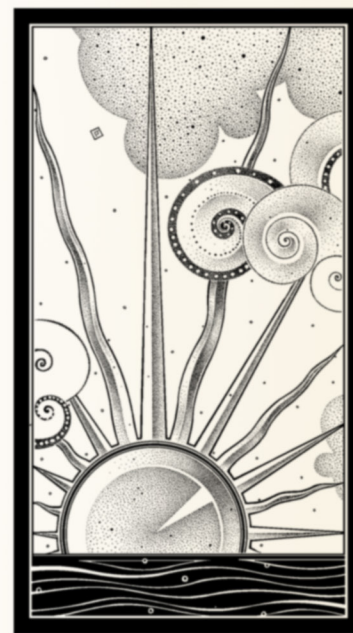
ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE

Disclaimer: Obviously, I own nothing but my own thoughts. Harry Potter and his world are the property of J.K.Rowling.



Red Hen Edition
Copyright© 2008 by the Author

THE GOLDEN AGE



BY
ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE



I. JUSTICE:

HARRY AND SHACKLEBOLT

I want to see some *punishment!*” Harry shouted. His glasses had fogged over. Absently, he took them off and wiped them, pacing furiously around Shacklebolt’s new office. A pale face caught the corner of his eye, and he looked up startled, trying to see who was eavesdropping.

It was his own face, reflected in a mirror: chalky-pale, gleaming with sweat. The mirror was an old, rippling one, the anthropomorphic frame murmuring concerns for the “poor boy’s” health.

“Looking a bit peaky, love,” it cooed. “Have another cuppa. Look, he’s got chocolate biccies with it. You’ll feel better after you eat.”

Harry grimaced and looked away. The first glimpse of the white face in the mirror had disturbed him. It looked too much like something he wanted to forget so completely that it would never appear again, even in dreams.

Shacklebolt studied him silently. Talking about the Reconciliation Commission seemed to push the boy — no, *young man* — into irrational outbursts. He let Harry sulk while he finished his tea, and then continued as if he had never been interrupted.

“Wide scale investigation and prosecution are simply not an option, Harry — ”

“After the first war, Crouch went after the Death Eaters — ”

“ — And we all know how well *that* worked out.”

Harry stopped pacing and subsided into a chair, head in his hands.

Shacklebolt pushed a tea cup over. “Drink it down. I want you to sit and listen to me. The Ministry is compromised, top to bottom. Only a few people in the entire wizarding world have nothing to be ashamed of. Nearly every one is implicated, one way or another — they were afraid, their families were threatened, they were tricked — ”

“It should be easy enough to sort out — ” Harry argued. Shacklebolt silenced him with a gesture.

“No. It’s not. We’ve had a dozen suicides since the Battle. Some Death Eaters and their sympathizers, yes, but also some poor sods who were forced to do things that they can’t bear to live with — ”

“They had a choice. People always have a choice.”

“Maybe so.” He leaned forward, pinning Harry with a dark unwavering stare. “But the question is, what did they have to choose between? Collaboration, or having their children

tortured? Is that a valid choice? What about the ones under Imperius? Do you think lifting the curse made everything all right for them, when they realized the things they’d done? What about husbands and wives who betrayed each other? Are trials going to help them?”

“The Carrows — ”

“The Carrows can be dealt with by ordinary legal means. What they did can be prosecuted without any reference to Voldemort.”

“The Malfoys — ”

“Prosecuting the Malfoys will bog us down for years. What we’ve got is a family whose home was occupied by Voldemort — ” he waved his hand at Harry’s angry exclamation. “You told me you saw this for yourself. Did they look like happy hosts to you? And how were they treated? I seem to recall that you saw Bellatrix putting Lucius under the Cruciatus?”

“ — He deserved it!”

“I’m telling you, Harry, that this would only make people sympathetic — to them. All the Malfoys have severe curse damage, and that’s the sort of evidence that makes a huge impression in court. You don’t understand how deeply Voldemort penetrated into every corner of our society. There are only a few thousand of us to begin with. We’ve lost nearly a twelfth of our population due to this war. If you start prosecuting on the basis of sympathies, or collaboration, or association, we won’t have enough witches

and wizards left! They'll all bloody well be locked up, or Kissed, or have their heads stuck on pikes, or whatever it is you think will satisfy you. We'll have informers coming to us with stories about their neighbors, or about business rivals — is that the sort of world you want to build? I tell you, the Reconciliation Commission is the only way to go."

Harry was not convinced. He looked away. Somehow, waking up the day after the battle had made him hope that everything sad was going to come untrue. Instead, they all faced a limping Ministry, filled with shamed witches and wizards who hardly dared to believe that Voldemort was gone.

"They're traumatized, Harry," Shacklebolt told him softly. "And so are you. We can't set the world right with anger and vengeance. The muck sticks to all of us, one way or another."

"Not all of us! Look at Hermione — "

"All right. Let's look at Hermione. We have evidence that she used an Unforgivable Curse at Gringott's — "

"She had to — "

"And speaking of Unforgivables, there are witnesses who saw you put the Cruciatus on Carrow. Are you sure you want to open Pandora's Box? Because know this: you start and there's no finishing it. You can't enforce the law for one wizard and not another, or we'll end up with something ugly beyond belief."

A shiver, and a weary shake of the head. Harry whispered, "We have a responsibility to the dead."

"Will punishing the guilty bring them back?"

"No. But they may — rest easier." He shut his eyes, "I know. I know. We have a responsibility to the living, too."

Shacklebolt smiled faintly. "Yes. Even the ones we don't like. It's too big, Harry. We can't have vengeance. We can't even hope for justice. We can only forgive, and start over."

"I don't know. Maybe I can forgive them, someday. But do you really think they can forgive us?"



SECRETS:

HARRY AND HERMIONE



he was not eating properly. She was hardly sleeping at all. Harry was growing alarmed for Hermione. She had been invited — no that was not true. She had demanded a voice in the reform of the Ministry, and was spending the summer learning its workings from top to bottom. Some departments were already extinct: the MUGGLEBORN REGISTRATION COMMISSION's office was empty. The last functionaries, in the midst of their somewhat befuddled celebrations on hearing of Voldemort's demise, had very sensibly protected themselves by destroying their files. Dolores Umbridge had been put on permanent leave.

But there were all sorts of offices Hermione had never

heard of, and she rattled on about them to Harry every evening; picking Mr. Weasley's brain about the inner workings of the bloated institution that employed nearly half of all British wizards and witches.

"But what does the Department of (Equilibration/Frater Inspection/Bewattlers — and on and on) — *do*?"

Well, it appeared, the short answer was that such a department provided employment to the witch or wizard who would otherwise be unemployed.

While the muggleborn often worked in the muggle economy or blythely collected the muggle dole, the rest of the wizarding world required gainful employment. Purebloods and even halfbloods could not be expected to demean themselves to make their way in the muggle world — even had they known how. Witches and wizards lived a very long time, and promotion was glacially slow. Departments were invented and tacked on: the Ministry expanded with every generation.

"And with a population of — well a little over eleven thousand, now — there's really no occasion for large businesses, or production lines. Wizarding businesses tend to be family businesses — like Weasl — " She stopped, recalling Fred, her memory skittering back and forth, limping when she paused at George and — George and — George and — She winced. Some thoughts hurt too much. It was easier to deal with the large and impersonal Gordian knot at the Ministry.

"What about this?" she challenged. "The Department of Unintended Consequences?" I never heard of anything so silly!"

Mr. Weasley paused before answering — looked very thoughtful, in fact. Finally, he said, "Perhaps you should have a look, my dear. It's a very small office — always has been. I don't think they have more than three people — the Head, the Assistant Head, and Photius Fingal. He's been there for donkey's years. I expect he could tell you quite a bit."

She found the door after much searching. An unassuming door with the department name in small black letters. She would have taken it for a closet door at first. She knocked.

No answer. She knocked again.

A moment passed. They *ought* to be at work. She opened the door anyway and peered in.

Despite the modest face the office showed the hallway, the office was quite large: there was a comfortable visitors' lounge, handsomely paneled. It looked like pictures of posh gentlemen's clubs, with deep leather chairs and an air of casual grandeur. A silver tray was set out with a crystal decanter and glasses. Three doors led off from the lounge. As she entered, there was the soft, discreet ripple of a harp arpeggio.

That was, apparently, a signal for a well-dressed wizard to emerge from his office — the one marked ASSISTANT HEAD. "I won't be a moment, my dear sir," he called out. "Help yourself to the firewhiskey. Oh." He stopped, seeing her, then he smiled politely. "You must be lost, my dear. Perhaps I can help you?"

Yes, he could help her, and no, she was not lost. The Assistant Head was shocked. "But — a young witch — I mean — "

"I am Hermione Granger. I am a representative to the Reconciliation Commission. I have a right to be here."

"No one doubts your right, my dear. But a young witch — here in the department!" He glanced anxiously at the closed door of the Head's office. "Perhaps this is a matter for Mr. Smith!"

And so the Head made an appearance. He was an even better-dressed wizard, and was very vexed to be disturbed at first, for it was his prerogative as Head never to do any work at all. Clearly, however, these were extraordinary circumstances.

"My dear," he beamed down on Hermione, so condescending that she wanted to slap him. "Your heroism is admirable, your resourcefulness inspiring. We have all heard of it, and are very much impressed. But surely there are other offices — larger offices, more appropriate to your stature — for you to inquire into. We have never had so much as a female clerk — not suitable for a witch, you see —"

"I *don't* see," Hermione replied, stone-faced. "I do hope you are not saying that you refuse to cooperate with me."

These words caused an anxious flutter in the bosom of Mr. Smith, and Hermione was hastily shown to the office of their clerk, Photius Fingal, who apparently was the individual who did all the actual work of the Department. The Head and the Assistant Head promptly retreated behind their own doors.

Photius Fingal's office was equally in posh club style. It was, curiously, the largest of the three. But that, Hermione saw, was because it was full of filing cabinets. Photius

Fingal himself was the sort of wizard who had thinned out as he grew old: a wiry little man coloured entirely grey. He peered at her over his spectacles, nonplussed by her presence in the chair opposite him.

"I do not understand, my dear child, why you are here."

Reining in her impatience, Hermione said slowly, "I have permission to be here. I am studying the workings of the Ministry. I had never heard of this department. I want to know all about it."

He gazed at her a little longer, leaned forward, and said, "You won't like it."



Harry, late that afternoon, was looking for Hermione in the labyrinth of the Ministry. Ron was spending the day in the Aurors' office. So many had died: so many were no longer acceptable as Aurors. The Ministry desperately needed new trainees not tarnished with the misdeeds of the Voldemort-infiltrated regime. No N.E.W.T.'s would be required. Rather, Shacklebolt had devised an orientation session, followed by some practical tests. If the candidate passed, he or she would be sent directly to training. Harry had already passed his test days ago. If Ron passed his — and Harry had no doubt he would — then they would train together. All his reservations about working for a Ministry dominated by Fudge or one of his creatures had been swept away by the defeat of Voldemort. Shacklebolt had convinced him that now was the

time for change. If Harry entered the Ministry now, he would have every opportunity to push for reforms.

The offices were nearly empty, the wizards and witches gone home for the day. Harry walked past his destination three times before he made out the small black letters. "UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES"?

"Hermione!"

He pushed the door open, and stood surprised at the lavish appointments.

"Hermione?"

"In here, Harry."

His friend's voice, oddly muffled, came from behind a half-open door. The office was dark, but for a single elegant desk lamp in the shape of a dancing fairy with dragonfly wings. Hermione was sitting behind the desk, her face shaded, the light shining harshly on the documents in front of her.

"Hermione, are you all right?"

A wet sniff. She cleared her throat and said, "Not very. I've had a bit of a shock, that's all. I'm sure I — Oh, Harry!" She stood up, reaching out for him.

He rushed around the desk to take her in his arms. Hermione was crying in earnest now, unable to talk coherently. "Awful — lies — dirty little secrets — can't stand —"

"Shh!" He rocked her against him, feeling her light bones underneath the knobby sweater. Her scent, warm and damp and herbal, reminded him of wet wandering nights when all the world seemed ranged against them. "It's all

right! Tell me what happened!"

She rubbed her nose, and shook her hair out, trying to pull herself together. "Look at this!"

"This" was a neat list — or chart, really. Shown by birth date were witches and wizards, their home address, their parents, and in the final column under the heading "Interested Party" was the name of a wizard. Harry scanned the list and recognized the recent names as those of Muggleborn witches and wizards. Hermione's name was among them. He glanced at the entry of "Interested Party" beside her name and frowned.

"What does this mean?"

She slumped back down in the leather chair and whispered. "It means that my father isn't really my father — I mean, he is — but my biological father was a wizard."

"What!"

"Mr. Fingal told me that not many people know about this office — it's the sort of thing that isn't talked about. This is where they keep track of wizards when they have illegitimate children with muggle women 'with whom they have had congress' in Mr. Fingal's awful words. A way of saying 'the ones they had affairs with — or seduced — or put under the Imperius Curse — or raped even,' I suppose."

"Why would they tell anyone? Why would they even know?"

"You know about the Hogwarts Quill? They have a Quill here, too, and it tells them such things! When the information is written down they send a "discreet" message to the "Interested Party." It made me sick, to see how many chil-

dren on this list are marked “deceased — ” how many never came to Hogwarts! Oh, Harry, don’t you see? It’s to keep track of us — the ones who live — to keep us from marrying a brother or sister, especially if the wizard himself were to die. Mr. Fingal went on and on about how “secure” they are — they wouldn’t have dreamed of sharing information with Umbridge’s office — she didn’t appear to know they exist! Not even Voldemort penetrated this. Why would he? He was nothing more than a Halfblood outsider himself — never really admitted to pureblood culture — just sort of squatting on it. Imagine, all those smug pureblood wizards strolling in here — all clubby and blokey and matey — chatting about their little bastards over their firewhiskey. It’s hideous!”

Harry was still rifling through pages and pages of the charts. He found the name he was looking for and sat down hard on the floor. “So she was a Halfblood, after all.”

“No, Harry. She was a Mudblood, just like me! That’s what we are, that’s what it really means. Mr. Fingal says that some of us really do come — now and then — from two people with wizarding blood in a previous generation, but most of us are some wizard’s “accident” — his “unintended consequence.”

“What are you going to do about this, then?” he asked, going back to the entry “Hermione Jane Granger.” He’s dead, after all. Shouldn’t you inherit something?”

“No, nothing. I wasn’t anything to him, but Mr. Fingal said that he was” — she laughed sharply — “a very proper, punctilious sort of gentlewizard.’ He wanted everything in

correct order. If I’d been a boy, Mr. Fingal thought, he might have acknowledged me, since his own son was in Azkaban for life — Sometimes wizards do, you see, and then they come up with a ‘nephew’ or a ‘cousin’ that nobody’s ever heard of, and make him the heir to carry on the family name. Girls are not considered very useful, but they need to make sure we don’t make a family’s blood *too* pure. Mr. Fingal thinks genealogy — even wizarding genealogy — awful rubbish. He says it’s been proven that in one out of every ten births paternity is ‘misidentified,’ but the office doesn’t collect data about wizarding marriages. ‘Not our purview,’” she imitated a reedy, old man’s voice. She gave a deep sigh, and said, “At least he wasn’t a Death Eater.”

“Who? Crouch, you mean? No, not that. This sounds horrible, but you know it could have been even worse. What do you want to do about this?” He stared at the names — names upon names — a puzzle coming together in a new and unexpected way. His mother’s red hair — Nothing, it seems, could ever simply be a coincidence. “Draco has an older *sister*?” he muttered, appalled.

“No more secrets,” she hissed. “No more lies. Think of them, getting away with this. How many of those women were Obliviated, do you suppose? My own mother! They told me how they tried and tried for a baby, for years. What did he do? Did he stalk her? Did he come into the surgery one day when Dad was out and — do it — and wipe her memory, and just walk away? Did he come to the front door

of our house? Did he come more than once? If he were alive, I'd slap his pompous face!"

Harry thought about it. It was so horribly easy, when you looked at it the right way. It must happen all the time. It was the sort of thing that decent wizards would never do, and that others would find too tempting to resist. Who would know? Who would report them? Even the Ministry had swept it out of sight, into this posh little office with the nearly invisible door. Layers of personal shame and weighty bureaucracy would protect it from witches, even from an energetic and untarnished Minister. Custom excused it. It had been going on a very long time. "Since there were wizards, probably," he muttered. He took another look at the list, shook his head at some of the names, and laughed at some of the others. Then he grew quiet.

"It's going to be a big shock to a lot of innocent people, if this gets out."

"Harry, it's got to come out, or else it will go on and on and on."



Come out it did, but very quietly at first. Hermione learned new lessons in wizarding jurisprudence, when she was informed of all the archaic laws protecting this practice and indeed, providing for the office itself.

The "Interested Parties" were protected by a grandfathering clause up to a certain date, and were informed that

their children would be notified of their parentage. They were further warned that any harm to those children would be thoroughly investigated and punished. Old, bad laws were repealed. Hermione herself helped write the new legislation, and found a career for herself. She would take her N.E.W.T.s as soon as possible, and become a driving force in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

The said children were duly notified, and there followed a few scandals, and ripples from the scandals, and one or two rather happy endings. Mr. Weasley was painfully apologetic, never having dreamed that the issue would personally affect Hermione.

He looked at the records in a daze. "I had no idea of the scope — I really — " He stole a quick look at Harry, and then at his wife. Molly's uncle was dead, and no good could come of raking up the past. At least they knew now that Harry was truly part of their family.

"Don't worry about me, Mr. Weasley," Hermione reassured him. "I'm all right with this. If he were still alive, it would be different — "

"Too right!" laughed Ron. "Imagine calling that pompous git 'Dad!'" His smile faded and he hugged Hermione around the shoulders. "It's not so bad, really! You're still our Hermione!"

Hermione discussed her own situation with her mother only once. She had gone to Australia to restore their identities to them, and found that they had no desire to return to England. Their childless lives down under were very pleas-

ant and rewarding, and they had swiftly sunk roots into the community. And then, too, her parents, she found, were not really very pleased that their daughter had modified their memories, whatever the reason.

"You played God with us, Hermione," her mother said. "I don't care if it was for 'the greater good.' You presumed that we were too stupid and helpless to take care of ourselves. I don't know if I can forgive that."

"But I gave your memories back!" Hermione defended herself. "You're just the same as you always were!"

"How do you know that? How can we know that? When you changed our memories you took parts of us away. Can anyone really understand the consequences?"

She cried, and they said they forgave her, but the rift remained. Hermione asked, the last night of her visit, in an attempt to broach the subject, "Was I adopted?"

"Not as far as I recall," her mother responded tartly. "If you were, I had a Caesarean for nothing!"

"Mum," she whispered, "did you have an affair — I mean, is Dad my real father?"

An indignant stare. "I should think he is! What is it? Are you still trying to find out where your magic came from? You told us that 'Muggleborns' crop up all the time!"

"Yes," Hermione replied, resigned to eternal ignorance in this single instance, "that's right."



"How was Australia?" Harry asked, over a muggle lunch. As a lark, he had taken her to the dreadful place where they had been attacked by Dolohov. The food was as bad as ever.

"Mum and Dad are staying there. They were so angry with me for charming their memories. I was so sure I was doing the right thing, but now I see I was hardly better than those wizards who had their way with muggle women and then deserted them or Obliviated them. Maybe we *should* stay away from the muggle world. It seems we do them nothing but harm. We always think we know better, and we blunder about as badly as muggles ourselves."

"Worse," Harry grinned. "We have wands. We can blunder *and* make things explode at the same time. I was surprised at how the investigation turned out. I was expecting a big scandal involving the Malfoys."

"Harry, you know I can't talk to you about individual cases." In fact, the cases were full of surprises. The Malfoys had been very, very helpful since the final battle, and Lucius Malfoy had apparently thrown himself on his wife's mercy when the existence of a daughter was revealed. Hermione had no idea what the young witch — now an Arithmancy apprentice in the States — had written to her new-found father, but Hermione herself had received a scalding missive from the witch. *"I hate the British Ministry of Magic. Never contact me again. I made a point of getting as far away from you nutters and toadies as I could when I escaped from Hogwarts. I hated Hogwarts, too, by the way. I figured out who my father*

was a long time ago, you idiots, so sod off!" She was informed, further, that *"It might have made all the difference when I was at Hogwarts, but now I would rather have hot needles stuck in my eyes than accept charity from Lucius Arsehole Malfoy."* Hermione laughed, a little sadly, at the memory.

Harry reached out and took her hand. "I know. I won't ask. I have to think a little better of him for not covering it up by killing her. It's hard for everyone, but it had to be done. Wizards will know there are consequences for this kind of behavior — "

"They'll be extra careful to prevent pregnancy. It doesn't mean the behavior itself will stop."

"— And any children will be safer now."

Grudgingly, she nodded. "That's true enough." She smiled, and nodded more firmly. "I couldn't bear to make things worse."

His thumb ran over her palm, quite by accident, and she looked up at him, startled by the sudden thrill.

"Harry — "

"Sorry," he tried to let go, but she held fast to his hand.

"No. It wasn't a mistake. I can't — Oh, Harry, sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if you and I — " she bit her lip, and laughed in embarrassment.

"If we'd been involved?" He looked at her: the clear smooth skin, the earnest expression, the rebellious curls, and felt intense love for this unique person. "Hermione, we'll *always* be involved. There is something between us that we'll never

have with anyone else — not even Ginny — not even Ron. You're the one who has never let me down and never lost faith — and never lost her head!" he laughed. "I'd be dead meat if you weren't the 'cleverest witch of your year!'"

"Rubbish!"

"No, it's true! I probably would have been dead my first year if you hadn't bumped into Quirrell when he cursed me. Or in my second year if you hadn't figured out the Basilisk. There are dozens of times that you've saved my life. And that has nothing to do with who our parents are or were or should have been. I reckon I owe you more Wizard's Debts than I can pay in one lifetime."

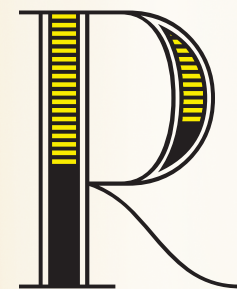
"Friends don't worry about what they owe each other, Harry. I feel just the same about you. Best Friends Forever?" She lifted her cup of horrid coffee.

"Forever."

III.



HARRY AND MCGONAGALL



Repairing the physical damage to Hogwarts had been one of the easier things to achieve after the Battle.

Once the bodies were removed, only a limited battery of spells was needed to fix the masonry, scour the

floors of blood — and other things left behind. Harry received an invitation to tea from the Acting Headmistress, and after some thought and some hesitation, accepted it. He wanted to see Hogwarts, his first true home, though it might never be his home again.

He wanted to take the train, but of course he could not spare the time. He flooed to The Three Broomsticks, was greeted by the usual fans, and walked to the gate. Everywhere he looked, he was reminded of past adventures. Every tree had its story. The shadows in the forest beckoned, but Harry smiled and shook his head. *Not today*

He passed the Shrieking Shack and sighed. Despite Harry's shocking public revelation of Snape's secret loyalty and sacrifice, the dead wizard had lain unattended, the prey of small curious creatures for some time after the final battle. Harry's own feelings toward the man were still disturbingly ambivalent. Certainly, Snape was a brave man, but he had been perhaps Harry's least favorite person in the world. At times Harry had hated him with a personal, intense hatred that surpassed his hostility to Voldemort. And the conversation — or vision — or hallucination — or whatever it had been with Albus Dumbledore, still bothered Harry deeply. It was after all, one's choices that determined what kind of person you were. Snape had chosen to follow Voldemort, for a time. Surely that told Harry everything he needed to know about him.

Clearly, McGonagall did not agree. She ushered Harry into the — Headmistress' Office. Yes. It was her office now

and likely to become so permanently. Dumbledore's portrait hung behind the desk, but Harry realized, looking at her, that McGonagall could not see it as she looked about the room. Her back was to it, and she made no attempt to turn toward it as she offered Harry a cup of Darjeeling and ginger shortbread biscuits.

"My favorite," she told him, not even bothering to emphasize the difference. The sherbet lemons were gone. The office was simpler now, cool and orderly, the habitation of a different mind. On the left hand of Dumbledore was an empty portrait.

"Is that — ?"

McGonagall turned. "Yes. It took some time for him to appear. He is out visiting now. Perhaps he will return while you are here."

Harry rather hoped not. He noticed the pensieve in which he had preserved Snape's disturbing memories.

He nodded toward it. "Did you — er — "

McGonagall gave him a brittle smile. "Yes. I did. I looked at it twice afterwards. There was a great deal to take in. I shall never forgive myself for my blind allegiance to Albus. And I shall never forgive myself for calling Severus a coward. He was the bravest man I've ever known."

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "A lot of people were brave — "

"No one dared what Severus did. And with no hope and no reward and no respect. Albus treated him no better than a house-elf. He spent the last year of his life among

people who loathed him as a traitor. I should have known — I should have seen it. The Carrows would have been so much worse without his intervention. What they could have done — ” She stopped, looking sick.

“Dumbledore told me — ”

“I really am not able to be rational about Albus yet, Mr. Potter. I can’t quite — ” She stopped, and looked at Harry keenly. “All that time he was planning for you to die. I cannot forgive him.”

“It was necessary — ”

“There’s always a way around a *prophecy*.” She uttered the word with infinite scorn. “Such rubbish! You didn’t need to be with those wretched muggles, and you didn’t need to live in a cupboard, and Severus Snape did not need to pretend to be a servant of Tom Riddle, luring a generation of Slytherins into his service, because Albus couldn’t be bothered to care about them!”

Harry was silenced, and applied himself to tea and biscuits.

After some time, McGonagall spoke again. “I am informed by Miss Granger that you do not intend to finish your education and sit your N.E.W.T.s. Is that true?”

“It’s true, Professor. I just don’t see the point, when I can be an Auror in a few months without them. It seems a waste of time.”

She narrowed her eyes, and Harry was dimly aware that he had blundered.

“I wouldn’t say that education is ever a *waste of time*.” She sat back, and considered, “The day may come when you

are tired of being an active Auror, and N.E.W.T.s would give you some flexibility, if you were to, say, wish to teach at Hogwarts. I do grant, however, that at times the standards here have not been all I could wish. Voldemort is gone, the war is over, and now is the time for Hogwarts to be a school again, and not a base of military operations!”

Harry smiled loyally. “It’s the best school of wizardry in the world!”

“It’s kind of you to say so, but Albus made many choices here for reasons not relevant to the quality of education. He had his secrets and his agenda, and did not always take into consideration the best interests of the students.”

That was too true for contradiction, and Harry sighed again, and reached for more shortbread. “I guess you’re going to make some changes.”

“Indeed I am.”

Harry smiled slyly. “Going to get rid of Slytherin House?”

“No.” she answered coldly. “I’m not. There is a place for people of ambition in the wizarding world. Nothing would ever change or improve or even get done without people of ambition.”

“Dumbledore was always suspicious of them. Ambitious people want power, and people who want power can’t be trusted with it.”

“Did he say that to you?”

“Well — yes.”

“Very curious. Yes, very curious words indeed, coming from the Head of the Wizangemot, and the Headmas-

ter of Hogwarts!" She got up and paced about the room. Briefly, she glanced up at the portrait of Dumbledore, who appeared to be dozing blissfully. Harry noticed that the glance was rather unfriendly. "There is no more powerful position in the wizarding world than that of Headmaster! The power — the awful responsibility! And he failed that responsibility. He failed Tom Riddle, he failed Severus, and he failed you. In the end, he failed all those Slytherins he sacrificed to keep Snape's loyalty to him secret. It was more than ruthless — it was unconscionable."

"It worked," Harry pointed out pragmatically.

She snorted. "After a fashion, and certainly not the way he intended."

He ate another biscuit, not wanting to hear about the Heroism of Severus Snape. "So, what are you going to do?"

"To begin with, a great many things have been done to us that will cause changes. The class sizes, willy-nilly, will be smaller, We appear to have lost nearly a third of the student body already!"

Harry looked up in surprise.

She studied her hands. "In a sense, Voldemort achieved his goal — at least temporarily. You are not the only student unwilling to return to Hogwarts. While you were away, things were rather desperate here. Many students died in the battle, of course. Others were targeted and killed with their families. Nearly all the Muggleborns who survived the battle to tell their parents about it have been withdrawn

from Hogwarts — and probably from the wizarding world altogether. There have been a great many transfers abroad — and not just Muggleborn students. Some families escaped during the war, and are not inclined to return."

"But there *are* changes I plan to make." She shrugged, with a touch of irony. "Radical changes. To begin with, I shall employ qualified teachers. Prefects will not be chosen for political reasons, an attempt will be made to address the problem of bullying at this school — " (Harry fidgeted, thinking of the Marauders) — "and there will be no hissing at the Sorting — whatever the student's house!"

"You were never fond of the Slytherins before," Harry challenged.

"I'll tell you right now, Mr. Potter," McGonagall shot back. "Things look rather different from the Headmistress' chair than they do from the viewpoint of the Head of Gryffindor. If I'm to be Headmistress, I intend to be Headmistress of *all* of Hogwarts, and that includes *every* house. I can never make up for the times I turned a blind eye to outrageous conduct. I can never make up my cruel words to Severus, but I can make a difference in the lives of his students."

"Students who didn't stand with us during the battle."

"No, they didn't. Of course, Albus had given them so many reasons to be loyal to him, over the years."

Harry considered that briefly. "So what else are you changing? Any new courses?"

McGonagall sat down again, adjusting her robes. It was

clear this was a favorite subject. "I'm having the Muggle Studies curriculum entirely revised — by Muggleborns. A term of it will be mandatory for all students, as will a term of Wizarding Life. These will be presented in such a way as to be useful whether the student is Pureblood, Halfblood, or Muggleborn. And at least one term of Latin. I never agreed with Albus about ceasing to offer Latin. It's necessary for real understanding of spellcraft."

Harry was feeling quite pleased about his decision not to return to Hogwarts. It sounded like it would be harder than ever.

McGonagall went on, "Unfortunately, I was not able to abolish the Sorting Hat — "

"Abolish the Sorting Hat!" Harry echoed, outraged.

" — And that's exactly the response I received at my meeting with the Governors. The Sorting Hat itself has developed reservations about the wisdom of creating such divisions in the student body... "

"Voldemort wanted to get rid of the Sorting Hat," Harry growled darkly.

McGonagall was unflinching. "A good idea is a good idea, no matter *who* proposes it. However, the Governors could not let go of that piece of tradition, so we will still have house divisions and house rivalries lasting from schooldays until death. It's a stupid tradition, but there you are. to mitigate those divisions, I'm establishing a number of new student organizations and activities that I hope will encourage

mixing. We had a theatrical society in my day — I loved it so — I played Rosalind and Beatrice — and so we shall again!"

Harry tried to imagine a young McGonagall acting in a play, and failed. He had no idea who Rosalind and Beatrice might be. *What did she play, a strict old teacher? Or a cat?*

She was talking more eagerly now. " — And I daresay you've heard about the Reconciliation Commission's proposal for wizarding primary schools, haven't you? Such a brilliant idea. The children will meet as equals before the Hat can tell them to dislike one another, and accidental magic can be dealt with less distress to the child."

Harry thought ruefully of his own schooldays with the Dursleys. The idea of a wizarding primary school looked pretty good to him in retrospect.

But McGonagall was enthusiastic for other reasons. " — Even better, there will be no more unprepared students! It makes quite a difference, I can tell you, when a student knows how to spell — and even more when a student can write a proper essay! I'm introducing a class in Fine Arts, too. So few know the art of wizarding painting, nowadays. Always those photographs! So ugly."

"As long as there's Quidditch."

"Oh," McGonagall agreed, a gleam in her eye, "there will *always* be Quidditch, if I have anything to say about it!"

There was a knock at the door. Pomona Spout poked her head in and said, "Minerva, the applicants are here. I was going to show them about a bit — Oh, *hello*, Mr. Potter!"

Harry smiled in response, and then realized that his face was covered with shortbread crumbs. He gave his mouth a hasty wipe with his sleeve and smiled again. McGonagall, for some reason, rolled her eyes.

"I'll come down with you, Pomona. I should have a word with them first. Help yourself to the rest of the biscuits, Mr. Potter. You appear to be starving. I'll be back in a few minutes."

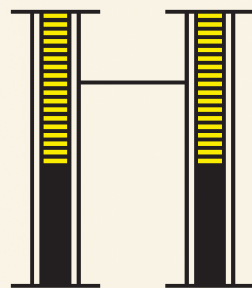
Harry nodded and poured himself more tea. The door shut and the room grew silent, save for the faint snores that reverberated through the walls. Harry was just biting down on another biscuit when someone spoke to him, startling him so badly that he nearly choked.

"My dear boy! How delightful to see you!"

IV.

THE HEADMASTERS' PORTRAITS:

HARRY, DUMBLEDORE, & SNAPE



Harry shot up from his chair, eyes already alight at the sound of the well-loved voice.

"Professor!"

Dumbledore beamed down at him from the portrait. Simply seeing him, even reduced to two dimensions, gave Harry's spirits a boost.

"Do you have time for a chat, Harry?" his favorite headmas-

ter asked. "Just the two of us. Rather like old times, wouldn't you say? Yes, rather for the best. Between us, my boy," Dumbledore lowered his voice confidentially, "Minerva is a bit — *testy* — with me lately. It wouldn't do to bother her."

"She certainly is making some changes," Harry agreed. "It's a shame about so many Muggleborns leaving Hogwarts. Hermione will like hearing about the new classes, at least."

"And how is the estimable Miss Granger? Is she returning?"

Harry shrugged. "No. She says she's just going to sit the N.E.W.T.s as soon as they offer them at the Ministry. She'll study on her own. She's got this project now that she doesn't want to leave. She's a little sad about not coming back to Hogwarts, though." Harry took a deep breath. "Did you know that Hermione was really a half-blood, Professor?"

Dumbledore's picture raised its painted brows. "Indeed I did not. That is most interesting. Who is her father, then?"

"He's dead. It was Barty Crouch — Senior, of course. It's got her really upset. She found out about this secret department in the Ministry — Unintended Consequences, and she found out that this happens a lot. Did you ever hear of that Department?"

Dumbledore smiled beatifically. "I may have had some acquaintance with it. Obscure, indeed. So Miss Granger is a half-blood. I suppose it is too much to hope for that there was a provision made for her in Barty's will?"

"No — nothing, and it's a shame. She doesn't even want it to get out, because she says then the purebloods will

nod and smirk and say they knew all along that a Mudblood could never be as powerful as Hermione is.”

“I daresay she’s right. So, Harry, how are *you*?”

“I’m all right — better than all right. I’ve been staying with the Weasleys, but Ron and I are going to get our own place, now that we’re going to be Aurors together. Mrs. Weasley nags Ron about school, but not as much as you might think, since he’ll be working for the Ministry.” He slumped back into the chair, frowning. “Professor McGonagall’s not happy with me about dropping out of Hogwarts. She thinks I should come back and then sit my N.E.W.T.s. You don’t think so, though, do you? I can be an Auror right away!”

“Only you can make that choice, Harry,” the headmaster replied. “Your choices will define your future. As long as it is the future you desire, your heart will never lead you astray.”

“I think I may vomit,” growled a resonant baritone. “More precisely, I wish I could.”

“Severus!”

“Uh — hello, Professor Snape.”

Harry looked warily over at the portrait of Severus Snape. It was not exactly flattering — it was a good likeness, and anyone who knew the man in life would have recognized him. In the portrait, however, Snape could not to be said to look greasy, or slimy, or any of the other terms Harry had bandied about with his friends. The most recent Slytherin Headmaster looked serious and dignified, more calm and relaxed than Harry had ever seen him. His robes blended

with the shadowy background from which he emerged. His hair shone like a raven’s wing: his eyes were impenetrably black. Harry wondered if he should tell Snape that he was looking well, and then decided not to risk it. If anything he said could be taken as an insult, it probably would be.

“Potter.” The name was clearly, coolly enunciated. It was neutral, and not burdened the tones of disgust and loathing that had so often accompanied it.

“Hello, sir. I’m glad to see you — er — I mean — ”

“Glad to see me as a *portrait*? Glad to know that I’m *dead*?”

“Really, Severus! There’s no need to browbeat the boy. He was merely offering a friendly greeting.”

“Albus, it pleases me no end that I no longer have to pay attention to a thing you say, so *sod off*. What are you doing here, Potter? Come under your invisibility cloak to pilfer Minerva’s shortbread?”

He was not glaring at him, Harry realized. He seemed faintly amused.

Harry shrugged. “She invited me. She’s not happy about me dropping out of Hogwarts. I told her it was a waste of time.”

Snape smiled. Harry felt a little apprehensive.

“I have underestimated you, I see. You never said a truer word. If you feel that a seventh year at Hogwarts is a waste of your time, then you are absolutely correct.”

“So — you think I shouldn’t bother with N.E.W.T.s?”

“Did I say that? No, Albus, don’t interrupt me. Potter has asked me a valid question, and I am perfectly willing

to answer it. Potter, I overheard you telling Albus that the Ministry will make you an Auror without the usual qualifications. If being an Auror is what you wish, then I'd say that you should take advantage of the special treatment once again afforded you, and seize the day."

"Thanks, I —"

"— If, however, you ever have second thoughts about your choice of career in later years, you might find your options alarmingly limited. You'll find the world has a short memory."

"That's what Professor McGonagall said."

"Then why are you asking me? Trying to find someone other than Albus who agrees with you? He, of course, will say anything to make you temporarily happy — anything to distract you from the fact that he planned for you to die."

"I've already been through all that with him." He smiled at Dumbledore, who beamed back. "It was all for the greater good. I understand that now. When I was dead — well, I saw my Mum and Dad, and Sirius and Remus. They were really proud of me."

"You saw them? Your mother was glad you were willing to die?"

"Yes."

"How did sh — how did they look?"

"Young. They looked young and happy."

"Lupin looked young too? Was Dora Tonks there?"

"No."

"I see."

"You don't look as sad as I thought you would. I mean —"

"Potter, we're both *dead*! Could anything be more stupid than one dead person mourning another?"

He stared at Harry, black eyes unreadable. Harry fidgeted, feeling guilty.

"Professor, I'm sorry I didn't get help — you know, in the Shack. We might have been able —"

"No, Potter. Don't apologize. It wasn't anywhere near as painful a death as the dozens I had imagined for myself over the years. Rather a stupid and pointless one, considering that idiot's obsession with the Elder Wand, but it was over and I felt little regret at leaving the world."

"But — you're here — in the portrait —"

"Potter, you dunderhead! This is a picture! It's a phantom! That picture of Albus is a phantom. The real me is gone — I've no idea where — but gone for good, and thank the gods for it! No more torture, no more fear, no more cowering before a Dark Lord or a terrible old taskmaster. There's only a shred of me here, and about all it can do is peer over Minerva's shoulder and offer bits of sarcasm and tell Albus to *bloody well shut up*! And no one can do a thing about it."

"All the same, I want you to know that I really appreciate everything you did for me over the years. I know it was hard. Even if you were pretty rotten to me sometimes —"

"'Pretty rotten?' You mean I spoke unkindly to you at times. Well, too bad. Did I commit you to the care of abusive foster-parents? Did I ever starve or beat you? Did I plot

your demise for the *greater good*? Did I habitually lie to you? You have *no* idea what I went through to protect you, Potter, but it hardly matters now.”

Harry scowled. Snape eyed him coolly and remarked, “It is a pity, though, that you are determined to compromise your own future. As to the N.E.W.T. issue: you’re a fool if you don’t go and sit the Defense test at the Ministry. One N.E.W.T. is infinitely better than none. Take any test you think you might pass. Actually, it doesn’t matter — take any test you have the remotest chance of passing. You might be able to squeeze something in Charms or — ” he grimaced briefly “ — Muggle Studies. The day may come — not now, not soon, but say, two decades hence, when everyone’s forgotten the war and moved on, when the Minister of Magic may be someone you abhor and do not wish to support. Unless of course,” he considered, with a look of distaste, “You become Minister of Magic.”

“Quite possible,” Dumbledore mused happily.

“I wasn’t speaking to you. Of course, Potter,” he sneered, “that may never happen. We might have a dynasty of Weasleys, especially if you take care to abolish the political rights of those who disagree with you. People like that *are* Evil, you know.”

Harry blinked, rather charmed by the idea of a Weasley as Minister of Magic.

Snape rolled his eyes. “I was being sarcastic, Potter! I should have known you’d take that the wrong way.”

“Actually, sir, people convicted of serving Voldemort *are*

going to lose their right to vote or hold office.”

“How convenient for you and your friends. I strongly suggest you not abuse your advantage, or you’ll have a major uprising on your hands in the next generation. If you try to make serfs of the Slytherins, they *will* find a way to undermine you.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Professor. All is well.” Harry said, wanting to reassure him.

“‘All is well!’ What a *bloody stupid* thing to say! ‘All is well!’” Snape moved forward in the picture. For a frightening moment, Harry thought he would leap from the frame. “That’s the sort of idiocy uttered in a bad muggle horror movie just before all hell breaks loose! Life is unpredictable! People have their own agendas! You can’t believe anything you’re told! Just look at that smiling old Machiavelli behind the desk if you don’t believe me!”

Dumbledore shook his head pityingly. “Don’t try to make trouble, Severus. Harry simply likes me better than he does you.”

“Well, Minerva likes *me* better now, you old fart!”

Harry hoped the Headmistress would come back soon. He raised his voice, trying to change the subject.” Professor Snape! I wanted to thank you for giving me all your memories. It meant a lot to me, seeing Mum when she was young — ” he swallowed, “ — and when you and she were — friends.” There, he’d said it. But it tasted *really* bad.

A brief silence. Snape’s darkly glittering eyes were fixed on Harry. “What makes you think I gave you *all* my memories?”

"Well — er — "

"I gave you what you needed. Some of them were very painful, and it was pleasant to get rid of them — to experience them distantly, if at all. Surely you noticed something odd about the memories of your mother than I gave you?"

"Well, I don't know — "

"Didn't you think it *strange* that in those memories she wasn't particularly nice to me? Nagging — scolding — dissolving our friendship?"

"Well, yes — "

"Do you imagine it was the sum total of our relationship?"

Dumbledore looked grave. "Severus — don't."

Snape glanced at his former master with a hint of contempt. He asked Harry, "Don't you think you might have seen *best friends* playing, laughing, sharing joyous moments?"

"I — guess."

"Do you imagine that all you saw was all there was?"

"Oh." Harry considered this a little. "Oh."

"I repeat that I gave you what you needed. I kept the good bits for myself."

Harry flushed angrily. "Are you saying — "

Snape grinned. It was not a pretty sight. "I'll never tell. And you'll never know."

"Tell me!"

"Piss off."

"Severus, stop! Harry, I can assure you — "

Minerva McGonagall entered, astonished at the raging

row in her office.

"What is this? Mr. Potter, don't shout at the Headmasters!" She glanced at the empty dish of shortbread and raised her brows in disapproval. "I was hoping you would use the time I was gone for a little quiet reflection about your future!"

Snape smiled graciously at McGonagall. "We were just sorting out Mr. Potter," he declared, his voice even more mellifluous than in life. "He has decided he would, at the very least, sit the Defense N.E.W.T. at the Ministry. Unless, of course, he is *afraid* — "

Hotly, Harry protested, "...I'm not afraid. I show *you*!"

McGonagall was very pleased. "That's wonderful news! Good for you, Mr. Potter! I'm glad you realized that educational credentials, at least, are never a *waste of time*." Briskly, she shook his hand. "I'm sorry to hurry you off, but I need to interview a possible new History Professor. I'm very glad you've come to your senses!" She patted his shoulder, just enough to push him from the room.

"Good luck, dear boy." Dumbledore waved, smiling fondly.

Snape struck a triumphant pose. "Goodbye, Potter, I hope you'll think about our conversation." He lowered his voice, " — for a long, *long* time."

Harry glared at him. "I'll show you," he muttered.

Snape smirked, and raised a single finger in salute.

The door closed.

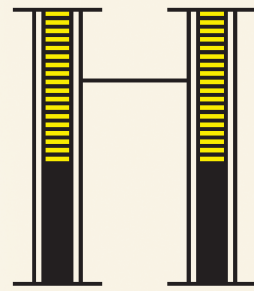
Dumbledore complained, "You were very hard on him, Severus."

"You are such a hypocrite. Potter will have at least one N.E.W.T. to his credit, and that is my doing, and not yours, with all your blathering about his heart not leading him astray. I don't know why I still feel obliged to look after the little snot, but I do." His eyes shone with some of their old malice. "There is, however, no reason I can't enjoy myself while saving him from his usual boneheadedness."

W.

DISAPPOINTMENTS:

HARRY AND RON

arry slapped the table in frustration. "But we were going to be Aurors together!" "Blimey, Harry! You'd think it was the end of the world! George needs the help and it'll be fun." Ron wiped his mouth, and sat back, waiting for the next explosion. It never came.

Instead, Harry's face seemed to fold in, withdrawing as he often did when things became too much for him. "I don't understand," he muttered. "We were going to be Aurors together! That was the plan. Our O.W.L.s don't matter! We don't even need N.E.W.T.s."

"So why are you studying 'til your eyes bleed to take the tests, then? Better you than me, mate. I'm done with school

and tests. I never want to take a test again. I think you're a nutter to do it. Are you going to eat that?"

"Take it." Harry shoved the rest of his chips across the table. Tom had a small private room — hardly more than an alcove — that was Harry's regular spot now at The Leaky Cauldron. It was impossible to sit in the main room. Well-meaning witches and wizards felt free to approach him, to touch him, to clap him on the back, to give him advice, to ask him personal questions, to make it impossible for him to eat. Harry was public property now.

Well, he'd always been public property, really, but the isolation of Privet Drive and the structure of Hogwarts had sheltered him to some extent. With all the strangers now crowding into his personal space, Harry longed more and more for familiar, friendly faces. Training alone would be bleak, indeed.

He tried the rational approach. "Come on, Ron! It's being handed to us on a silver platter! You said you wanted to be an Auror. What changed?"

"Dunno, mate. Me, I reckon." He finished Harry's chips, and regarded the empty plate with nostalgic regret. "Hermione says you're taking the N.E.W.T.s 'cos the git's portrait dared you to do it."

Harry stiffened. "It was McGonagall's idea. I'm doing it as a favor to her and because she told Hermione I was going to, and now Hermione won't let me alone."

"Better you than me," Ron repeated, insufferably smug. "No N.E.W.T.s required at Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes.

'Sides," he said, more seriously, "George needs me. He's like a bloke who's lost a leg. You'll be all right."

"We were going to be partners!"

"We *are*, mate! Just not at the Ministry. We can still get a place together. I'll be your eating partner, your drinking partner, your chess partner, and even your partner in crime — but I don't want to practice dueling or curses or shields, or anything like that. Not ever again. The war's over, Harry."

"What about the next war, then?"

"What next war? Crikey, Harry. There won't be any more wars, and if there are, we'll all be dead anyway, so who cares?"

"I do!"

"That why you're taking the tests? Maybe you'd like to teach at Hogwarts someday? Tell the little buggers how to defeat Dark Lords and Slytherin slime? I can't believe McGonagall's letting that lot stay at Hogwarts. They should be drowned at birth."

Harry rolled his eyes. "They're not sorted at birth, Ron."

"No — well, at the Sorting, then?" Ron considered. "Right — The Hat says 'Slytherin!' and the floor opens, dropping the little bastards into a bottomless pit. Or maybe something like that cupboard Fred and George shut Montague in... Wonder if W/W could get the contract for it? It'd be great."

Harry snorted. "You could write up a proposal and owl it to McGonagall."

Ron looked hopeful. Harry thumped him.

"She'd go spare, you git! A Howler'd be the least of it."

"She's gone soft, I reckon. Never figured her for the type."

"She feels bad about Snape."

"Why? I don't. The tosser got what he had coming. No loss to the world. And I still say you're a nutter to let him talk you into taking the N.E.W.Ts."

"I just want to show everyone that I'm not being given a break because of who I am."

"Maybe I want to show everyone that I'm not being given a break 'cos of who I'm friends with."

"Ron — "

"No, mate, it's true. So the Ministry smooths your way. No surprises, there. They're even willing to take me as part of a package. I get it. I don't like it, but I get it. Maybe it's time to be something besides Harry Potter's sidekick."

"You're not my sidekick," Harry snapped, uncomfortable and impatient.

"No? Then what am I? Hell, Harry, I'm not even your *faithful* sidekick. That title is reserved for Miss Hermione Granger, 'The Girl Behind the Boy-Who-Lived.'"

"What do you care what *The Daily Prophet* spews out? That was a stupid article. They even got her name wrong. 'Hermione *jean* Granger.' That shite about Hermione and me was just — "

"I know, mate. You can't expect people to understand. All they hear about is how you were alone together for months and months in the woods, and people figure that naturally you had to get up to something, and — "

"Do you think we — got up to something? Because we didn't — "

Ron's face hardened into obstinacy. "None of my business what you did or didn't do. Everybody thinks you did. And now that she and I — well, you shouldn't be surprised at all the sympathy cards. They think you've been right hard done by. It makes her raving mental, but there you are."

Harry pushed away from the table. "Let's go. She said she'd be at Flourish and Blotts. She says I need the seventh year text for the Muggle Studies test."

"Your funeral."

They stepped out from the coziness of the little shuttered alcove into smoke and noise. Conversation stopped. All eyes turned to Harry, and a few people rose to talk to him. Harry smiled tightly, and refused to let them shoulder Ron aside.

"— So sorry, Mr. Potter. Such a disappointment —"

"— Young witches today —"

A group of crabbed old wizards muttered loudly enough for Harry to overhear them.

"— What do you expect from her sort? No better nor she should be, traipsing over the country with a pair o' young wizards —"

Harry stopped and glared at them. The glassware behind the bar trembled ominously. A single glass toppled from the shelves, shattering brightly into the stillness. Ron put a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Come on, mate, don't you mind them."

Harry took a deep breath, and declared in a clear voice. "Hermione Granger saved my life a dozen times. She is a great

witch. I am privileged to be her friend, and people who gossip about her aren't fit to polish her shoes." A chair blocked his way. Harry threw it aside, and stalked out into the sunlight.

Ron grinned at him. "Well. That'll make the papers."

"I know. Like everything else. Are you sure you don't want to be an Auror? We could go up to people like that —"

"— You can't arrest people for being stupid —"

"— No. But we could loom threateningly."

"I leave the looming to you, Harry. Me, I'll just feed 'em Canary Creams."

Harry was grateful for his company as they strolled up the street. There was a crowd milling about in front of the bookstore.

"What's all that, then?"

"Bloody hell!" Ron shouted.

Eye-catching signs in the window promised the release of the gripping true account, **MONSTER IN OUR HOUSE: THE TRUE STORY OF TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE'S REIGN OF TERROR AT MALFOY MANOR.**

"That slippery bastard's gone and written a book!"

"All profits to be donated to the Albus Dumbledore Primary School Fund," Harry read.

"Evil, rotten wanker. Playing the charity card," Ron grimaced.

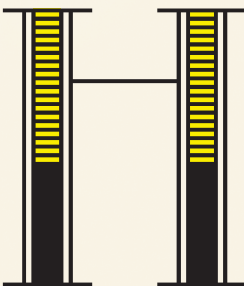
"It's just as well that *someone* can," a familiar, damnably silken voice observed.



VI.

RESTITUTION:

HARRY AND THE MALFOYS

arry turned to face Lucius Malfoy. He had not seen the wizard in over a month — not to speak to, anyway. Oh, he saw him often enough at the Ministry — hustled into an interrogation room, or leaving, head down but jaw still firm. He certainly looked better than he had during the war. The bruises had healed, and the eyes were less hollow. There were changes, certainly: the snake cane was gone, and the robes were not quite so intimidatingly expensive. Harry understood why Shacklebolt did not want to prosecute the family, but seeing the wizard walking freely in Diagon Alley still rankled.

Ron was sneering. “Think you can throw your money around and everybody’ll forget you were Voldemort’s right hand man?”

Malfoy eyed him coldly. “Mr. Weasley, when you were a prisoner in Malfoy Manor, did I appear to be his *right hand man*?” He dismissed him and spoke to Harry. “Mr. Potter, you know about the new school. Would you be willing to publicly endorse it?”

Surprised at the question, Harry replied, “Um — well — I don’t know much about it. Professor McGonagall thinks it’s a good idea — ”

Ron snorted. “She’d like anything with the word ‘school’ tacked on it. If Malfoy’s for it, you should be against it. We never needed schools like that before!”

“I was speaking to Mr. Potter. Perhaps he has his own and different thoughts on the matter.” He asked Harry directly, “Can you honestly say that you would not have preferred attending such a school to whatever muggle institution gave you your early education?”

Despite the knee-jerk impulse to disagree with anything Lucius Malfoy might say, Harry paused. He imagined the Dursleys’ reaction if he had received an invitation at age six to go to a wizarding day school. It was not a pretty picture.

“I don’t think my guardians would have allowed it.”

“Really?” Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. *Yes, there was that rumor...* “We are concerned about the difficulties in dealing with some muggle parents and guardians. We must find a satisfactory solution. Could we discuss this at greater length? You may have useful insights on the subject.”

“Don’t do it, Harry,” Ron growled.

“I won’t come to Malfoy Manor,” Harry said firmly. “You can’t reasonably expect it.”

“I don’t. Neutral ground, then? The Leaky Cauldron at eight this evening?”

“Who else will be there?”

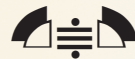
"Narcissa, naturally. She is very excited about this new venture. You, of course, may bring whom you wish." He cast a regretful glance at Ron.

Ron was adamant. "He'd be mental to meet with you lot. Don't do it, Harry!"

"I'll come alone," Harry said. In spite of himself, he was interested. What would his life have been like if he had known about the wizarding world at age six? What if he had been protected, even if only at school, from the Dursleys? Maybe it was a good idea. McGonagall thought so, and Harry had a lot of faith in her judgement. Hermione was wild about the idea, but Harry did not want her along tonight. She would dominate the conversation, and want to talk about things like courses of study and what books to read. Harry wanted to talk about other things, and all things considered, it would be better if he went alone.

"Eight, then."

"Harry, mate, you're a moron."



They met, of course, in private. Malfoy opened the door at his knock, and Harry found himself in a smallish room. Its only furnishing was a long table down the middle with a few chairs around it. There was a booklet at each place, probably a prospectus for the new school.

The greetings were awkward and monosyllabic.

"Mr. Potter."

"Mr. Malfoy."

"Draco's not here?"

Malfoy considered him. It seemed impossible that Potter would actually want to see his son, but perhaps it was simple curiosity.

"Draco is not in England at the moment. He has gone to the States, to finish his education. Gregory Goyle is with him."

"Not going back to Hogwarts, then?" Harry asked, just a little bit rudely.

"No. We thought that was perhaps not — a good idea." He looked past Harry and his face softened — minutely, but not so minutely that Harry could not see it. He turned and saw Narcissa emerging from an adjoining room. She was wearing something that indicated... Harry winced, feeling totally squicked by the realization that Mrs. Malfoy was pregnant. It was just so *wrong* that people so old would be having babies.

She approached, looking Harry in the eye. They might be considered quits as far as debts were concerned, but Harry still felt a certain gratitude to her. She was the only one of the Malfoys he found the least bit tolerable, and she was — was —

"You may congratulate me, or offer me your best wishes. Either is considered courteous when addressing an expectant mother," she kindly explained. "You really haven't a clue about wizarding etiquette, have you?"

"No," replied Harry, with heavy sarcasm. "too busy learning how to stay alive to have time for *etiquette lessons*, I guess. Anyway," he added, ungraciously, "I hope you're all

right. Isn't it sort of dangerous at your — I mean — ”

The Malfoys plainly considered him some sort of human flobberworm. Lucius Malfoy's mouth tightened, and he looked away bitterly, clearly longing for the good old days when he could have blasted a wizard for such terminal bad manners.

“I'm very well,” Narcissa assured him dryly. She was still taller than he, and it made him oddly uncomfortable. “So many have died, that it seemed very important to replenish our world. She's a witch, if you're interested. If you don't mind, I'd like to sit and get down to business. We were hoping to persuade you to make a public statement in support of the new school.”

Harry gave her a vague nod, sitting down, continuing to watch her out of the corner of his eye. She really was very nice-looking. It was still squicky, though.

He felt there was no reason to pretend with Lucius, however. “After all the times you insulted the Weasleys about having too many children, you'll excuse me for being surprised.”

Lucius looked at him thoughtfully. If he was sneering it was inside, not outside for the world to see. “I think you'll agree that an intelligent wizard is capable of changing his mind. It occurred to us, in observing the Weasleys, that their numbers, though too great in ordinary circumstances, had put them in an enviable tactical situation in these extraordinary times. And then — you may be too young to understand this, but surviving mortal danger sometimes makes one — ”
He paused, and then stopped, deciding against what he had

been going to say. His wife smiled, and said nothing. Lucius looked at her, and simply said, “Narcissa wants more children. If it makes her happy, then I want them too.”

“Lyra won't grow up an only child. We are in the process of adopting a Muggleborn orphan. She will be a companion for Lyra. She will be part of the wizarding world someday, and we think it is best that she grow up where she belongs from the first.”

Lucius saw that Harry could hardly believe this, and said only, “Consider it another gesture of restitution, Mr. Potter. Narcissa has also contacted her sister Andromeda, who, it seems, would be glad of help and support, now that she has a grandchild to raise alone.”

Harry growled inarticulately. He was Teddy Lupin's godfather. When the boy was old enough, Harry would take him in hand, and do what he could to correct all the Malfoy and Black influences. There was nothing he could do now, though; and after all, why shouldn't the Malfoy money go to help a boy orphaned by the Death Eater friends of his aunt and uncle?

The Malfoys were smiling at each other, holding hands. Harry thought he might gag. He looked at the cheerful purple pamphlet before him. It was discreetly decorated with twinkling stars and shining crescent moons. THE ALBUS DUMBLEDORE PRIMARY SCHOOL. The design reminded him of his old Headmaster, though it was far more sedate than anything Dumbledore would have worn.

“Are you going to send your daughter to the new school, or is it just for nobodies?”

"You *are* determined to be rude, aren't you?" The two Malfoys exchanged exasperated looks. Lucius continued, "Yes, of course Lyra will attend a wizarding primary school. I don't suppose it's occurred to you that I genuinely think them a good idea. Anything that gives the wizarding world another layer of protection against the muggles is a good idea."

Narcissa remarked, "I have been thinking about what you said to Lucius about your guardians. Had this kind of school existed then, they wouldn't have been permitted to refuse — not without some better reason than hating magic. They did, didn't they? Dumbledore actually placed you with people who treated you badly, denied you your heritage..."

"Don't say anything against Dumbledore!"

"I don't think that's necessary, really. All one has to do is state facts. Did the muggles beat you? Did they —"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Lucius Malfoy looked at him in honest wonder. "Was it to make your life so miserable that you would not mind losing it? That's —" he saw Harry's stormy face and said softly, "— extraordinary."

"I had to be there for the blood wards created by my mother's sacrifice to work. It was the only place I was safe."

Malfoy stared at him, obviously nonplussed. "Safe from everyone but muggles, it would seem. Who do you imagine was looking for you? I certainly wasn't. The Dark Lord was gone and life was good. The old crowd —"

Harry twitched at such a term being used to refer to

Death Eaters.

"— the old crowd was getting on with their lives, and keeping their heads down. The lunatics like Bella — sorry, dearest —"

"— that's quite all right," Narcissa assured him. "She was a lunatic, after all."

"— and Barty were locked away, one way or another. *No one* was going to come looking for you. Though I admit, had any rumor of your treatment surfaced, I might have. I could have caused a furor had the truth been known. You might have ended up as my ward. That would have been interesting."

"I don't imagine I would have lived long enough to find it interesting."

Narcissa rolled her eyes. Her husband sighed deeply. "That's a remarkably foolish thing to say. What do you think would have become of us if one hair of your head was injured? We would have had every incentive for you to be well and healthy."

"It would have been a bit of a problem for you when your *Dark Lord* turned up again, I guess."

"Certainly. I would have had to make a decision rather earlier than I did otherwise, and that might have been for the best. I never expected him to come back. I had heard rumors, those first years Draco was in school, but that night at the graveyard was the most hideous shock —"

"Oh, come on!" Harry snarled. "You knew! What about the diary? You were hot to get Voldemort back any way you could!"

"The diary!" Malfoy paled and covered his face with his hands. "The diary! It nearly cost me — Potter, I had no idea about the horcruxes. *No one knew!* I certainly did not, until I was asked to produce that damned diary and was nearly tortured to death when I couldn't!"

"You did know! You knew he set the basilisk on the school! Dobby warned me that you were up to something."

The Malfoys stared at him in total incomprehension.

"A basilisk?" Narcissa faltered

"Oh, come on! The Chamber of Secrets had a basilisk in it! You knew that!"

Malfoy was growing red with indignation. "I absolutely knew nothing of the sort. I was hoping to get Dumbledore ousted that year, certainly. I knew someone claimed to have opened the Chamber. It was a *basilisk*? Dumbledore knew that there was a basilisk at Hogwarts and did not send the students home immediately? Is it still there?"

"No, I killed it."

The Malfoys looked at one another again.

"With a sword," Harry added.

"You were what — all of twelve?"

"Yeah."

"Dumbledore never told anyone. I had no idea."

"Tell us everything — please," Narcissa asked, looking appalled.

Harry gave them the tale in short order. "Things started happening. Hermione figured out it was a basilisk. I found

the diary thrown away and starting writing in it. Tom Riddle answered, and showed me Hagrid getting accused of setting the monster loose. I saw all sorts of things that happened in his time when he was in school. Then the diary disappeared again. Then we found out that Ginny Weasley had been taken into the Chamber. I'm a parselmouth. You know that. I found the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, and went down to find her. And that's where I saw Riddle."

Lucius Malfoy's jaw dropped. "*He* — was there? You saw *Him*?"

"Yeah, Ginny was dying and he was getting more real by the minute."

"What — did he look like?"

"Like the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle I'd been writing to. I really thought he was all right, until he wouldn't help me. Then he did this trick with writing his name in letters of fire in the air, and rearranging them to say 'I am Lord Voldemort.' It was kind of a giveaway."

Lucius Malfoy was speechless.

Harry shrugged. "He set the basilisk on me and I killed it with the Sword of Gryffindor. Then I stabbed the diary with a basilisk fang and he broke apart like a mirror, and Ginny started breathing again. And then Fawkes flew us all out of the Chamber."

Lucius looked at the floor, beyond words. Narcissa looked at Harry suspiciously. "Somehow I think there's a great deal more to this story."

"That's the bare bones of it."

"And you — just left the basilisk there in the Chamber.

What else was there?"

"Dunno. Didn't look around."

"Do you have any idea what a dead basilisk would be *worth*? Why didn't Dumbledore have Severus harvest it?"

"Dunno about that either. Maybe he didn't want anyone to know about the Chamber of Secrets."

"Is it still there?"

"Most of it. Hermione and Ron went down and took some bits off it."

A silence. Narcissa asked delicately, "Would you object to the rest being donated to the School Fund?"

Harry shrugged again. "Not really. I guess I could take Slughorn down there. I don't know, though. It might be too rough going for him. There's this long drop, you see — "

"Perhaps — a ladder?" Narcissa suggested mildly.

"I guess." He looked at the silent Lucius. "You really didn't know about the basilisk?"

"I give you my word on my magic that I did not."

"And you didn't know Voldemort was back?"

Malfoy grimaced, and he studied his hands. After a moment he said, "As far as I'm concerned, he never did come back. No, don't shake your head, Potter. That thing that appeared in the graveyard that night was not the Dark Lord I served before. I don't know what it was. It was clearly not human, that foul thing that came out of a cauldron. It had a shred of the Dark Lord in it — certainly his power and his memories — but it was not the same being. You can't

imagine what he was like in the days when I came under his spell. You never saw the Dark Lord in the days of his glory: handsome, compelling, convincing. I was young — we were all young — and dreamed of a better world. He would talk — how he would talk! — about his plans for the wizarding world. It would be beautiful: a time when wizards would never fear muggles again — when we would live openly, our magic unfettered, with the whole world ours to command. We would not cling to the shadows, hiding our powers, but would walk in the sun for all to see. We would not conceal the Ministry in rubble and decay, but create buildings worthy of magic. It would be a new world — a magnificent one... "

Narcissa squeezed his hand. "And then that *thing* appeared. You saw it yourself. It wasn't sane, and it wasn't even very intelligent. It could cast very powerful curses, but it couldn't think things through. We didn't understand at first what had happened, but it seems obvious now that the shred of soul left to him from making all those horcruxes was not enough for the resurrection to work as it ought. Even the first time — in the last few years there were — signs of decay. Anyhow, as to you — there were so many ways you could have been destroyed — so many ways to win the war. He could have had Miss Granger receive some sort of irresistible scholarship that would have sent her far away — he could have subverted the other Gryffindors — but he wouldn't do any of those things. He had only a few ideas left in his head. The Dark Lord had tempted us with all sorts of

wonders, but I don't think he ever tempted you at all."

"Not likely — he said once that I should join him — that we'd do *extraordinary* things together, and that I'd see my parents again. I might only have been eleven, but even I couldn't be fooled by a face talking out of the back of Professor Quirrell's head."

"His — head?"

"Yeah. Voldemort came back and possessed Professor Quirrell. The Professor wore this big purple turban that smelled like garlic the whole year. You'd have thought with Voldemort in his head he'd have been a decent Defense teacher, but he wasn't. Voldemort tried to force him to kill me, but when I touched him he burned up."

"You realize," remarked Lucius Malfoy after a moment, "that you're saying that the great Dumbledore — the Great Legilimancer — did not notice that Voldemort was sharing skull space with a member of his staff, and that he was unaware that there was a live basilisk in the school."

Harry *had* thought about it from time to time. "Yeah. And he didn't catch that Professor Moody was really Barty Crouch Junior. It might have helped a lot if he had. Cedric Diggory wouldn't have died, and Voldemort wouldn't have used me for the ritual to bring himself back — or not back, according to you." He saw the look on the Malfoys' faces, and said. "Well, *you're* the ones who decided to name a school after him. I sorted it out with Dumbledore, and we're all right now, but even I know he wasn't perfect."

Narcissa lifted a hand in an exquisite, incredulous gesture. "Why didn't he at least say that you had destroyed Slytherin's monster?"

"Why didn't he tell everyone that you had defeated Voldemort your first year?" Lucius demanded. "If any of this had been public, it might have made a number of us think twice before surrendering to the Dark Lord."

Harry shrugged. "He had his reasons, I guess. He always did." He picked up the pamphlet and let it drop onto the table with a puff of air. "I don't want to talk about him anymore. Tell me more about this school. Is there going to be Quidditch?"

VII.

FRACTURES:

HARRY AND HERMIONE REDUX

"It's **only a recipe book**, Hermione. I don't think she meant it as an insult."

The offending book was a cozy shade of bread-crust brown: MADAM SIMNEL'S HEARTH AND HOME SPELLS FOR THE DOMESTIC WITCH. It even smelled like fresh-baked bread.

"You think not?"

"She just wants — wants —"

"She just wants her Ronniekins to be taken care of, poor

sweet boy! She's never liked me."

"That's not true, Hermione."

Harry blew out a breath, and sat back in his chair. He quite liked coming to Hermione's house in Guilford. She had kept the house while her parents were in Australia. It had lain empty waiting for the return that was not to be. The Grangers did not want to come back from Australia. Hermione had agonized over it, wondering if she had botched the memory spell. Her parents now remembered her, and remembered their life in England, but it seemed to have been unreal — or a long time ago, to them. They were nice to Hermione, now that they had forgiven her, but they never called or contacted her on their own. Hermione had told Harry that when she called them, there was a brief moment of silence, as if they were remembering her all over again, and then they were as pleasant as ever, though they did not seemed to have missed or even thought about her.

The house remained, though: quite a nice house. Hermione had considered selling it, but then thought again. Why should she? She did not need to live close to the Ministry. She could floo to work. The house was now in her name, and she had no desire to go live in a little cubicle elsewhere. Harry and Ron had helped her, over the past months, transform it into something quite different from the middle-class-muggle-suburban home it had been. Her parents' room she had left alone, other than to cram it with all the family pictures and souvenirs. It was there in case they came back,

because, Hermione, said, "You never know..." The rest of the house she had made her own.

Her bedroom was completely redecorated, in something approximately wizarding style — for a single young woman whose boyfriend spent a great deal of time there. Her girlish white bedroom suite was gone. It was dark wood now: a large, comfortable bed, hung with sheer draperies in dark red. Red velvet covered it. The walls were a sensuous violet. The books had been moved out to the living room.

The living room was now the site of Hermione's growing library. A glass display case between two windows had been moved out and replaced by a large desk, with plenty of room for her research papers. The piano she had left there, in case she ever decided to start playing again. The dining room — very formal and chic, and only used for company in her parents' time, she had left untouched.

The spare room was Harry's, of course. He kept some clothing there, and a toothbrush in the bathroom. He supposed it was a bit odd that he stayed overnight here while Ron and Hermione experimented with their new-found sexuality in the red room. (Or *RED* ROOM as Ron insisted on capitalizing it, with a wide, leering grin. Hermione would thump his chest when he said it. It was pretty annoying.)

She took her meals at the kitchen counter. There was room for three. There had always been room for three. It was very convenient. Once it had been Dad, Mum, and Hermione. Now it was Harry, Ron, and Hermione. The nook

off the kitchen she called “a media room,” and explained it all to Ron and Harry. Her parents had not thought televisions very attractive, and had their large one placed there, along with their expensive sound system, and their collection of videos and records. A comfortably squashy sofa and a long cocktail table faced it. Ron and Harry had discovered movies, after all their adventures, and never wanted to sit in the book-lined living room/library. They wanted to see other peoples’ adventures now: *STAR WARS* and *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*. They rather liked *DRAGONSLAYER* and they admired Indiana Jones. It was useless to try to talk to them. If either or both of them came over, she would order take-away, and they would watch films while they ate. And then Ron saw some football, and made Hermione buy a video camera in hopes of taping Quidditch games. They succeeded — with a little tweaking — and now they watched Quidditch for hours on end.

They were easy guests. Give them takeaway and some butterbeer. Pop in a tape. They were happy and oblivious as she returned to the library. Now and then Harry would look up, wondering where she had gone. Once he went to the loo, and saw her bent over a book, feet up, as oblivious to them and they were to her. It gave him an odd, guilty pang to see Hermione so divorced from them, in a world of her own. Sometimes Ron would notice her absence, and coax her back. Then they would sit cuddled together, his arm flung around her, until something really exciting would

happen. Then he would let go of her and sit forward, shouting at the telly, or jump to his feet. Harry glanced at her a few times during the Quidditch tapes. Hermione was not watching the games, it was clear. Her face was closed, as if she was in another, inner world, thinking of other things.

The garden had posed a problem until Hermione had learned some specific charms for keeping the grass cut. Hermione had never cared much for Herbology, for all she had earned her N.E.W.T. in it. However, one never knew when certain herbs would be useful, so she conscientiously cultivated a raised bed of magical plants in a sheltered spot that could not be seen by the neighbors. The walled garden made a jungle for Crookshanks, who lorded over it, culling the foolish mice and shrews that strayed into his private hunting preserve. What prey he could not devour, he thoughtfully left for his friend Hermione on the back step. She had to be careful, walking out the back door, or she would find herself crunching little skeletons underfoot. At least he no longer brought the carcasses inside. Hermione had been forced, a few years ago, to speak firmly to Crookshanks, when she found him playing with a small object in the living room, which on closer inspection proved to be the head of a lizard he had slain, and was now attempting to stick on the wall, like a trophy.

Harry thought the house was growing a little — gloomy. It was no Grimmauld Place, certainly, but it had changed over the months. So had Hermione. She seemed restless and dissatisfied, and would often, in the midst of conversa-

tion, simply walk away, shaking her head.

One day, he had helped her store some of her parents' things in the basement and had noticed a table in a corner, set up for making potions. It was gathering dust. "I used it during the summers, but I can't do everything," she had told him, with a dismissive gesture. "Potions make me think of Professor Snape. I don't seem to have the heart anymore. Besides, it doesn't matter," she said, her voice loud under the low ceiling. "It has no application to my work for the DMLE."

They had had such a pleasant dinner at the Burrow. Harry wasn't sure where it had gone wrong. Mrs. Weasley loved to have him, and always welcomed Hermione nearly as warmly. His relationship with Ginny now was a settled thing, and Ginny's parents seemed perfectly fine with it. Mrs. Weasley was making broad hints about wedding planning. When he thought about it, he realized that the hints did not extend to Ron and Hermione. In fact, he got the distinct impression that Mrs. Weasley was not entirely in favor of the marriage.

"Ron has to settle into the business," she said, smiling over the shepherd's pie. She no longer expressed any disappointment about W/W. She was concerned about George being alone, and wanted Ron to spend as much time with him as possible, and for both boys to spend as much time with the rest of the family as they could spare. In fact, Harry found that she was quite pleased that Ron did not want to pursue being an Auror — "too dangerous, even now, boys. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to play Quidditch, Harry dear?"

Ron and Harry had been meaning to get their own place, but life was so good at the Burrow, and when they wanted to get away, they could go to Hermione's. They went there frequently, and that had caused its own strains. Hermione often invited Ginny, but Mrs. Weasley always found some reason why Ginny could not possibly go. Harry suspected she was attempting to prevent him and Ginny from getting up to what Ron and Hermione were doing. Ron had spent two nights away in a row, and Harry became aware that Mrs. Weasley was not pleased about it. When they described their takeaway Chinese, and their takeaway curry, she was even less pleased.

"I suppose muggle foods might be all right, but there is nothing so nourishing for a young wizard as a home-cooked meal. I know that you could be a wonderful cook, Hermione dear, if you would just work at it a little. Witches who did well in Potions tend to be very good cooks. I took a N.E.W.T. in Potions myself."

Then she started asking questions about Hermione's house, and where the boys slept. Despite all of Mr. Weasley's efforts to change the subject, she began talking about wedding customs in the wizarding world, and the significance of the "Unstained Gift." Harry knew nothing about it, but the words made Mr. Weasley turn red, and the older boys snigger. Hermione stabbed at her plate, face hidden by her hair.

Ginny pushed back noisily from the table. "Who wants more pumpkin juice?" She slammed the pitcher down, glaring at her mother.

Then today, Hermione had received the cookbook by owl. "She thinks I'm a scarlet woman, and a bad housekeeper, and not good enough for her darling Ronniekins." She gave the book a poke. "Of course I'm a Muggleborn, and pitifully ignorant of sacred wizarding tradition. But you know, *some* people might think he's not good enough for me!"

"Hermione! Come on, it's a book. You like books."

"If she thinks it's so important, why didn't she give it to Ron? Why can't *he* learn to cook?"

"Dunno. I can cook, Hermione. Tell you what — I'll make dinner tomorrow. I can make spaghetti bolognese and —"

"And you told me yourself that she doesn't even remember that he hates corned beef! Poor Ronniekins!"

"Hermione, who are you angry with, Ron or Mrs. Weasley?"

She lurched up and turned her back to her, leaning against the window. "Both of them! I'm sick to death of Weasleys! I never see anyone but Weasleys! All our other friends are gone!" Her shoulder shook. He got up and put his arms around her.

"I know, Hermione!"

"I miss Remus and Tonks so much, Harry. They were our grown-up friends. Without them, there's just us!"

"I miss them too," he muttered, his throat thick.

"If they were alive, I'd cook all right. I'd give a dinner party, just like Mum and Dad!" She ran to the dining room. "I'd have Dumbledore — here — and then Remus and Tonks, and Moody, too —"

"— And Sirius," Harry croaked.

"Yes. And Sirius. And Emmeline Vance — I always thought she looked so in command of herself. And maybe even — here —" she lowered her voice, and pointed to a place at the end, farthest from Sirius. "I might invite Professor Snape, too."

Harry laughed weakly. "That would be the dinner party from hell, Hermione."

"I don't know," she said, shaking her hair back. "I think it would have been — fascinating — now that the war is over and won. Those brilliant minds — maybe Remus could have found a decent job, or even taught at Hogwarts again. Professor Snape would be free — and who knows what he would have been like, without all the horrible spying and subterfuge?"

"You can talk to his picture if you like, Hermione. He's still pretty much the same old Snape!"

"That's just a picture." She pulled out the chair at the head of the table, and studied her invisible guests. "When I was a little girl, the teacher wrote my parents about how I related best to adults, not to my peers. It was always true. Except for you and Ron I never had friends my own age. Except for you and Ron, I still don't."

"Not true," he answered, placing himself opposite her. "I think you should give a dinner party. You can invite Neville and Luna — they're good friends, you know. And Ginny," he winked, pointing the place next to him. "Invite George, too — he'd like it, and he's seeing Angelina —"

"Harry," she said, her face darkening. "Those are *your* friends — your Quidditch friends — and I now have three Weasleys

at the table. Who's going to talk to *me*? Who's going to talk about the things *I* care about? About magic, and research, and ancient runes, and the rights of magical creatures — "

He pondered the matter — "Well, Bill is really smart, and Fleur — "

"And they're talking about living abroad again! I'm not surprised. Mrs. Weasley might have softened a little when we were at war, but put her and Fleur in the same room now, and you still have a catfight. She doesn't think anyone's good enough for her baby boys. No wonder Charlie's already gone back to Romania."

"There's always Percy — "

"He's a Weasley! And right now, he's trying so hard to fit in — it makes me sad."

"You could have a real grown-up party, you know. You could invite McGonagall and Shackbolt!"

Hermione laughed in spite of herself. "The Headmistress of Hogwarts and the Minister of Magic both at my table?"

"Why not? Maybe not now, but someday." He saw that she was still sad. "Do you feel that the Weasleys are pushing you to get married? Does it bother you?"

"They're pushing you harder. Doesn't it bother you?"

"No! I'd marry Ginny tomorrow, if I could. I'm going to ask her as soon as I finish my training. I always wanted a family. Don't you?"

"Harry, I *have* a family! They might not think about me, but they're still my parents. And Ron and me — I don't know. He's not interested in anything I do! He never asks me about

work. Only Mr. Weasley and Percy do." She sniffled into his shoulder, and he hugged her again.

Her voice muffled, she whispered, "I always thought that however strange and overachieving as I am, there would be someone for me. My grandmother said 'there's a lid for every pot.' I thought I could find someone who'd be like me — who'd be really bookish and clever and interested in the same things — and our children would be brilliant — and perhaps we'd teach at Hogwarts together or research together or write books together. When I think about the future with Ron I just see nights of watching Quidditch tapes on the telly and learning to make shepherd's pie just the way he likes it and being laughed at in front of the children when I tell them how important school is. I thought I loved Ron, Harry, but maybe it was the war. Now I'm just scared."

"Are you upset with him for not being an Auror?"

"A little — maybe. I don't know. The Auror program is so demanding, and Ron isn't a very diligent student. Maybe it wasn't right for him. But now — maybe I need to see if that person I dreamed about is still out there for me. But Harry, what if he died in the war? What if he's already gone? Should I just settle for Ron because he's there?"

"I don't know. Give him a chance, Hermione. But give yourself a chance, too. If you want to cool it off for a while, I'm sure he'll understand."



Perhaps he might have, but that conversation never took place. Instead, on Thursday night Harry arrived at Hermione's to find himself in the middle of a blazing row. Ron had brought home the latest prank item from WWW — a Cascading Flower Fountain that burst forth from a bouquet Ron presented to Hermione. She had been very pleased, and had put the roses in a vase on the piano. She was puzzled when she looked up to thank Ron again, and saw him counting under his breath. At "ten —"

The flowers exploded. Sprays of colored water bloomed up, drenching the piano, the papers on her desk, the oriental carpet, the bookcases —

"The *books!*"

Hermione was screaming, hitting at Ron with a soggy copy of THE CHARMS COMPENDIUM. Harry rushed in, admiring the gorgeous colors, but thinking that Ron had put his foot in it this time, and no mistake.

"Hi, Harry!" Ron waved, grinning. "Isn't it brilliant? Gerofff, Hermione. Blimey, that hurts!"

"How do you stop it?"

"Dunno yet. Thought I'd test it."

Hermione had gone white around the mouth. She gave Ron another blow, tucked the book under her arm, snatched up the vase and ran out the front door, spurts of pretty-colored water trailing after her. The boys followed her, as she ran around to the back garden and threw the vase down on the grass. A crazy, asymmetrical fountain pulsed pink and

blue and gold through the Love-Lies-Bleeding. Ron hurried over, and righted the vase. The fountain once again sprayed forth in all its glory.

"Come on, Ron — we'd better stop it. *Finite Incantatem!*"

There was no effect. The colored water fountained on cheerfully, refracting the late afternoon sunlight.

"*Reducto,*" screamed Hermione. The vase was blasted into sand. The roses shredded into a bloody mist. She glared at them and stamped back into the house, kicking off her wet shoes in the kitchen with an unintelligible curse.

That night, there was no takeaway. There was no telly. Hermione raged through the living room, discovering the limits of cleaning and drying charms. Ron made the mistake of laughing at the sodden mess.

"Get out." Hermione did not raise her voice.

"Aw, come on, Hermione. It was funny! They're just *books!*" He waved a drying charm over the closest book. Hermione screamed again and rushed to it. She showed Ron the results.

"The pages are sticking together! It's ruined! I'm going to have to go through each of the books and dry every page separately. It'll take hours! Days! You've soaked the piano, too!"

"It's not like you ever play it!"

"It was *mine!* What a mean, rotten, passive-aggressive — Get out! I don't want to look at you!"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Come on, mate. Let's go and leave her to it."

Harry shook his head and muttered, "I'll stay and help, Ron. She's not as mad at me. See you later."

Ron shrugged and left, grumbling, "It was *funny!*"

Hermione sat down in a chintz wing chair with a wet, squelching noise. She wiped away angry tears. "That's it, I swear."

Harry did not answer, but set about drying the chair cushions and the worst sections of carpet. It was tricky: the wool fibers were fighting the spell, trying to shrink. Harry concentrated on his work. After a few minutes, Hermione got up and opened the piano, performing a drying spell herself.

"I'll have the tuner in. I don't know what harm this has done."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll finish the carpet, then I'll make you something to eat, Hermione. After we eat, we'll start on the books."

She was ominously silent.

Harry was not a bad cook, in his own opinion. He had bought the ingredients for the dinner he had promised, and now got them out, working carefully as he diced an onion, unaccountably reminded of Snape as he chopped. Hermione was muttering in the living room. While the herb flavors melded, and the pasta cooked, he set places for the two of them at the counter, and opened a bottle of wine, left over from Hermione's parents.

When it was done, he led her into the kitchen gently, his hand in hers.

She sniffled, and picked at the spaghetti doubtfully. After

a few bites, she began eating with real enjoyment.

"This is wonderful."

"It's the only thing I know how to make for dinner. I'm better at making breakfast."

"It's really good. Maybe I should give the cookbook to you. I didn't know you could cook so well."

"Well, Mrs. Weasley never lets me help when we're at the Burrow."

"Too bad. I love Italian food."

They drank through their wine, beginning to laugh a little. He put his arm around her shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. When the bottle was empty, Hermione found another in her father's little wine cellar in the basement. They worked on the books, and then they drank some more wine. Then they went to bed. Together.

VIII.

QUIDDITCH:

HARRY AND GINNY

There was a Hermione-sized hole at the Weasley kitchen table. Harry felt it keenly: an irritating *not-thereness* that caused him to look up and about from time to time, searching for his absent friend. The Weasleys, for the most part, were doing their best to pretend that there was no such person.

"More Spotted Dick, Harry?" asked Molly, very solicitously. Half the table erupted in sniggers. Molly glared only at Ginny, who was laughing out loud, clearly thinking that her daughter must be held to a higher standard than boys, who, after all, will be boys.

"No, thank you," Harry managed, feeling that this was a no-win situation. Ron elbowed him, grinning. The ridiculous name did not prevent him, however, for putting out his plate for another slice of the pudding.

"Well!" said Arthur, looking about him affectionately. "Our last dinner before our little Ginny leaves for the last time on the Hogwarts Express! I'd say this calls for a toast. To Ginny!"

Harry raised his pumpkin juice immediately. Her brothers grumbled good-naturedly, but followed suit. "To Ginny!"

"Our little girl!" Molly grew misty-eyed. "I fancy the owls will be flying thick and fast this year," she said, beaming at Harry. "Only a few months to wait!"

"Thanks!" replied Ginny, saluting them in her turn. "Only a few months, and then N.E.W.T.s!"

"You know what I mean, Ginny dear," Molly told her in a stage whisper. Harry blushed scarlet.

"As a matter of fact, I'd like some more Spotted Dick!" Ginny declared. Her brothers guffawed.

It did not help when Molly said, "Well, you know where it is, dear. Hush, now, boys. Don't be so silly!" She smiled, a little anxiously, "I'm sure you'll have a splendid year, even if things didn't work out quite as we had hoped —"

Ginny got up and gave herself a hearty helping of pudding. Harry knew Molly was a little disappointed that Ginny had not made Head Girl. McGonagall had talked to Ginny about it, and explained that The War and Hogwarts School were two different things. As Headmistress, McGonagall intended to run Hogwarts simply as an educational institution, putting aside all other considerations. Harry knew that there had been some pressure exerted on McGonagall to make Ginny Head Girl this year. It was "only proper," "a nice gesture." Others had said plainly, "she deserves it, after losing her brother like that, and her father being who he is." McGonagall said that the positions of Head Boy and Girl would not be awarded based on politics during her tenure as Headmistress.

Instead, the Head Girl was someone Harry did not know at all: a Hufflepuff whose face he could not recall. He was occasionally surprised to realize how few people he knew by name at Hogwarts. He had been focused on the war and on his own concerns in his school years. If they hadn't been in Dumbledore's Army or played Quidditch or tried to kill him, he didn't know them.

Surprisingly, Ginny did not care about being Head Girl at all. "I *am* going to have a splendid year, thank you, Mum. I'm going to make a decent showing on my N.E.W.T.s and I'm going to play Quidditch. Gryffindor is going to wipe the floor with the other houses and bring home the Quidditch Cup. And that is *my* plan for my seventh year."

"Good on you, Ginny!" George smiled. "You show 'em how it's done!"

"Dunno," laughed Ron, "'Weasley is our Queen' doesn't have the same ring!"

"I think 'Queen of Quidditch' sounds brilliant, Gin," said Harry. He was a little guilty around Ginny. He was a little guilty around Hermione. Since the breakup, Ron had tried to speak to Hermione twice. It had not gone well. He had tried to make a joke of his prank the first time. The second time he was angry. Hermione was angry too, and just as convinced as Ron that she had a right to be. She said she was moving on: busy with her work and her ideas, but not too busy to make time for Harry.

That brought him to Their Relationship, or whatever it was. Harry's introduction to sex had been fueled by wine, confused affection, and terrible anxiety that he might lose Hermione as a friend. He had loved Hermione since his first year at Hogwarts, and in some ways it seemed perfectly natural to move on to physical closeness. At the same time, he felt terribly conflicted. He knew he was betraying both Ron and Ginny at some level, but as long as he could keep the Hermione part of his life and the Weasley part of his life separate, he felt he could achieve some balance. Both parts were too precious to lose. They were all he had.

His relationship with Hermione was so hard to define. They had never dated, and so she couldn't exactly be called his girlfriend. It was hard to label someone so brilliant and

independent and — *special* — as Hermione with such a commonplace word as "girlfriend." They had shared experiences that had made them closer than brother and sister, but they were not brother and sister, and never would be. Hermione was Hermione: his best and loyalest friend. That she also made him blissfully happy was an unexpected wonder.

Ginny, he supposed, was more what people would describe as a "girlfriend." Everyone thought their relationship was so suitable. Ironically, now that the scandal had died down about Hermione, the papers were printing speculations about when the "wedding of the century" would take place. Ginny never talked about the wedding, for which Harry was deeply grateful. He didn't know how his changed relationship with Hermione would fit with a marriage to Ginny, but he supposed it would all sort itself out someday. Ron seemed to think the wedding was a settled thing, too; and he expressed his own horror of the spectacle his mother would make of it. They strolled out of the house, looking at the setting sun, talking about it quietly.

"Ten times worse than Bill and Fleur, mate. Mum *likes* you. Dunno why women make us go through it all. Can't they just arrange it all without us, and tell us about it afterward?"

"Ginny doesn't talk about it. Do you reckon she's expecting it?"

"I reckon so. That's what they all want, innit?"

Harry was not so sure. His mum had married right after Hogwarts, and so had Mrs. Weasley, apparently. It would

be a way of being close to his parents, to live his life as they had done. He blew out a breath, and was considering talking about it, when Mrs. Weasley called to them.

"Ron — George is looking for you. Something about the business, I shouldn't wonder. Harry dear, Ginny needs to feed the chickens. Could you help her?"

Ron and Harry grinned at each other, not taken in by such a transparent maneuver. Harry rolled his eyes, and went to find Ginny.

Ginny nearly ran him down, bucket in hand. "Come on," she growled, "you might as well help, since Mum's making such a bloody fuss about it."

The coop was low-roofed and dusty and full of feathers. Harry thought the hens were sort of off-putting. Ginny showed him what to do. "It takes about five minutes, but we'd better stay longer to make it look good."

"To make *what* look good?"

"Our *romance*," she snarled. "Our betrothal or arranged marriage or whatever-the-bloody-hell-it-is. I could hex Mum six ways from Sunday."

"I thought — well, you know."

"No. I don't know. What should I know? I'm being watched like some kind of sacred virgin. If only Mum knew! What a laugh!"

Harry blushed. "Uh, Gin —"

"She's such a hypocrite, you know. Ever seen her wedding picture? She got married the week after her N.E.W.T.s and Bill's practically in the picture, she was so big!"

Harry really, really did not want to know this.

"She just wants you to be happy."

"I *know*! She'll never understand that I need different things to make *me* happy."

"Are you saying you don't want to — you know —"

"No. I don't know. Marry you? Have you *asked* me? Do we go anywhere together without a least two of my family watching us? Do we have a chance to really get to know each other? I'll bet you know a lot more about Hermione than you do me."

"Well — I — uh — could be —"

"You had that time — all that time together — out there in world, fighting to survive. And now I can't even see her because of Ron. Her house sounds brilliant."

"Well — it's — yes — very nice —"

"Why do you want to marry me?"

Harry nearly passed out with relief. This question, awful as it was, was much better than discussing Hermione with Ginny. He could even be fairly coherent. "I've always wanted a family of my own. Not just to get sort of adopted into one — like yours. Not they aren't great, but — I want my own family —"

"That's not what I'm asking. Why do you want to marry *me*?"

"Well-uh — you're a great witch, Ginny. You're pretty, and brave, and a super Quidditch player."

"And I'm there, and a member of your adopted family, and it's all so convenient. You've never asked me out."

"By the time I wanted to, it seemed like a bad idea."

"And now?"

"We see each other all the time. I mean — it's like we're already —"

She narrowed her eyes. "Not good enough, Potter." She took a deep breath, and asked the question she'd always shied away from. "Is it because I look like your Mum?"

"Bloody hell, Ginny!"

"— because that would be creepy, and I could never live up to it. Or is it because I look like *my* Mum? I don't know which would be worse!"

Still in shock, Harry shook his head. "You don't look anything like your Mum!"

"And I won't, not if I can help it. Quidditch training will keep me trim, I hope."

"Quidditch?"

She set down the bucket, and dragged him around behind the coop, away from prying eyes.

"Listen to me. I've got a plan after Hogwarts, and I don't want Mum tumbling to it before I'm ready."

"What plan?"

"I'm pretty good at Quidditch. This year I'm going to be better than good. I want to go professional, Harry, and that's not going to leave a lot of room for you and me."

Harry tried to think of something to say. Whatever he had imagined, it was not this. And yet —

It made sense.

"The Holyhead Harpies?" he guessed.

"Maybe. If I make the cut. Harry, when the time comes,

you've got to back me up. I'm not saying I never want to get married. I'm not saying I wouldn't marry you — but I want to be out on my own! I don't want to go from Mum and Dad's house to my husband's house like some sort of chattel! I've got to have a few years — just a few years of my own! Don't ruin this for me, Harry. If you decide you want to marry me someday, fine, but you're going to have to make a better go at courtship than helping me feed chickens. I'm going to have my own place, and you're going to call on me, and we're going to spend some private time together, and maybe then we can decide if Harry and Ginny are a real couple and not just a reenactment of the Life of James and Lily Potter."

Offended, he turned away. "Don't talk about them like that."

"I'm not saying anything about them! I don't know them, and neither do you! I just don't want to pretend to be something I'm not, that's all. I want a little part of my life just for myself. Is that too much to ask?"

He shook his head, not sure how he felt. "No. You're right. You shouldn't be used to make someone else's plans come true. I know what that's like. You take the time you need. After all, we'll hardly see one another for the next few months. Afterwards, if you want to see me, you know where I live."

"Not sure I do."

"I'm fixing up Grimmauld Place. Kreacher's better now. It's mine and I think I can do something with it. Ron really wants to move in with George, and I don't want to interfere with that. I need some time to myself too, I suppose." He ought to

have his own address, even if he spent most of his nights with Hermione. The wizarding world was just like a small town. He certainly didn't want Hermione's name dragged through the mud again. She seemed to like having her own space, too.

"Are we still friends?"

"Sure." He kissed her cheek, really meaning it, though he was a little displeased with her for talking about his parents the way she had. No one was allowed to joke about his parents. "Always. Is it all right if I see you off tomorrow?"

"Just don't make too much of it."

"Right. But we'll get together at the first Hogsmeade weekend," Harry promised.

"That would be nice," Ginny agreed, giving him a quick kiss in return. She did not attempt more: her mother was at an upstairs window, watching them with fond pride. Ginny noticed her, and shrugged. "Come on, then. We're done here."

Harry followed, strangely light of heart. Ginny was just not ready to settle down — not like his mother at all. Maybe she would look at things differently in a few years. A family would be nice, but time to sort out his own life — and evenings to spend with Hermione — looked pretty good at the moment.



IX.



HARRY AND THE WIZENGAMOT

With a modicum of tweaking, the mobile phone that Hermione had persuaded Harry to buy worked perfectly well, even in the magic-heavy confines of Grimmauld Place.

Kreacher — the reformed Kreacher — had organized a party of his fellow elves to complete a massive restoration of the London townhouse. Thinking it over, Harry had decided he did not want to let go of this link to Sirius. The pain of losing his godfather was still present, but mixed with it were precious memories. Sirius may not have been happy here, but the fact that he *had* been here at all, and that he and Harry had shared some good times under this roof, made the decision fairly easy.

It was a big house, after all: the rooms that he disliked could be shut up, until their turn came to be metamorphosed into something bright and welcoming. Sirius' room would not be touched. Hermione might roll her eyes discreetly at its status as a shrine, but she said nothing about it to Harry. Sirius remained one the household gods of Harry's life: the third member, along with James and Lily, of Harry's personal Trinity.

While Harry stayed at Hermione's place, his bedroom was completely redecorated: painted, cleaned, fumigated, reconstituted, and reinvented. The kitchen was next, and by the time Harry had time to see how the work was progressing, it was pleasantly unrecognizable.

He called Hermione, asking her to come and see it right away. "Yes — I know you're busy, but you've got to see this! You've got to have dinner anyway, Hermione, so why not have it here?"

In fact, Hermione came soon, flooing on through as soon as she ended the call. The telephone had proved a wonderful idea. It constituted an entirely private and nearly instantaneous way to speak to Harry. Owls were all very well, but they did not travel as fast as the speed of sound.

"Harry!" she cried, giving him a kiss on the cheek and a warm embrace. "Oh, hullo, Kreacher! Oh, Harry! How wonderful it all looks! It's bright and airy, but you've still kept some of the feel of the old townhouse."

"So you approve?"

"Very much!"

"Good. Kreacher said he'd do the drawing room next. Let's eat!"

Kreacher's cuisine was not as advanced as his interior decorating. The food was good, but very old-fashioned: mutton chops with bread sauce, Brussels sprouts (but very good ones), a coffee-flavored "shape —"

(" — I didn't know anyone still made blancmange!" whis-

pered Hermione. "It's so nineteen-hundred!")

— and, at the last, Camembert cheese and biscuits, served with a dusty bottle of excellent sherry that had lain undisturbed for decades in the cellar. Harry had recently discovered a taste for cheese. He had grown up on hunks of dried-up Cheddar, but he had found the soft texture and delicate tang of Camembert and Brie very exotic and satisfying. Vernon had always hated "filthy foreign food." Harry, as a natural reaction, was beginning to branch out a bit.

They had so much to talk over. Harry's training was going well — his instructors were brilliant — he had made the best decision of his life in not going back to Hogwarts. He had succeeded in earning N.E.W.T.s in Defense, Charms, and Muggle Studies, and that was enough. Hermione said nothing, not wanting to boast that she had earned those, and additional ones in Herbology, Runes, Arithmancy, and Transfiguration. There had been a time when nothing would have stopped her trumpeting her own accomplishments, but she had grown up a little, and remembered how much Professor Snape had hated the sight of her hand up and waving.

Hermione had news of her own, and finished another bit of lovely cheese before making her announcement. "I've decided to petition the Wizengamot for the Crouch estate."

Harry blinked owlishly behind his glasses. "I thought you didn't want it to be public knowledge. I thought you didn't want any part of Crouch or anything of his."

"Well, I thought again," she answered fiercely. "Why shouldn't

I have it? I'm Mr. Crouch's only living descendant, and if no one of nearer blood puts in a claim, the Ministry will seize the lot after seven years have passed. Why shouldn't I inherit? The more I think about it, the more outrageous it seems to lose what ought to be mine. There's a big country house in Sussex and a vault at Gringott's. Who knows what the family owned? Maybe I could do some good with more resources. I have some ideas — "

"Hermione," Harry objected, "if you need money, you could always — "

"But don't you *see*?" she interrupted, becoming a bit strident. "It's *mine*. I was his *daughter*. I ought to get *something*!"

"Sure. Right." He said, trying to soothe her. "It's all right, Hermione. If that's what you want, I'm all for it."

"I'm glad you feel that way. You can help me."

Harry wondered what he had got himself into.

It was quite simple. Harry would attend the hearing. He would sit there, lending her visible support. At this moment, Harry could command a great deal of influence, and many members of the Wizengamot would not wish to stand in his way.

"It's all in a good cause, Harry," Hermione declared. "It sets an important precedent. I got my hands on a copy of Mr. Crouch's will. He doesn't mention me, true: but on the other hand, he doesn't explicitly cut me off. I have proof through the Unintended Consequences documents that he was indeed my father. The other heirs are dead: Mrs. Crouch in Azkaban, and Barty Junior a year after he was

Kissed. I think I've got them!"

"Okay. What will you do with the money, and the house, and all the what-have-you?"

"Whatever I like!"

She was in a wonderful mood, and quite willing to be shown the remarkable improvements Kreacher had made to his bedroom. She was not done talking, however, and went on and on about her plans to the kindly darkness, long after Harry was fast asleep.



"MUGGLEBORN SUES TO INHERIT CROUCH ESTATE!!!!!!"

Harry tossed the latest issue of the DAILY PROPHET into the dustbin. He had known that there would be a tremendous scandal. He hated scandals himself, but for Hermione's sake, he would set his face to the storm and ride it out. It could have been worse, if Rita Skeeter had been alive to wield her poisonous quill.

But Rita was dead, one of the many killed anonymously in the last days before the final battle. Whether she had been silenced by Voldemort — for she *had* been the author of that earth-shaking tell-all in the QUIBBLER during Harry's 5th year — or whether a victim of one of her countless cruel stories had taken the opportunity to exact private revenge was still unknown. No close family members had come forward to demand priority status for her murder investigation. Harry hoped it would not be assigned to him. At any rate, bad as

the story in the PROPHECY made Hermione look, Harry was sure that Rita could have made her look far worse.

The Wizengamot delayed proceedings for two weeks, until public excitement forced its hand. There were lurid speculations about the events leading to Hermione's conception: the vilest rumors were circulated concerning her mother's morals, appearance, intelligence, and choice of career. Since the editors of the DAILY PROPHECY were not clear as to what a 'dentist' might be, they ignored it, and suggested something quite different — a profession rather older than dentistry. The wizarding world, unfortunately, had no libel laws at all. Hermione bit her lip, and added that to her growing list of Changes to Be Made in Due Course.

Letters to the Editor appeared in the pages, deploring Hermione's greed — her lack of simple decency. If she *were* the child of a wizard, conceived out of wedlock, she should have remained forever silent, hiding her shame from the world. It all showed she hadn't had a *proper* upbringing. When something of the sort was said to Harry one day, he retorted sharply that it was hardly her fault if her father had failed to provide her with a magical upbringing. If wizards fathered children, they should take care of them. He had no sympathy for parents who deserted their children, and he said so, loudly and often.

Others felt that Hermione was pandering to blood prejudice — that she was ashamed of being a Muggleborn, and was trying to make herself more socially acceptable in cer-

tain circles. "IS HERMIONE A HALFBLOOD?" was the question repeated everyday on the front page of the PROPHECY.

Harry's involvement in the case stirred up the manky old rumors about an affair during the Hero's Wanderings, as his horrible camping trip was now being called in the papers. Hermione kissed him, and told him not to mind, and held her head high.

"Let them say whatever they like, the hypocrites!"

The Auror Office gave him leave on the morning of the hearing. Most of the Aurors were going, too, eager to hear the juicy bits. Shacklebolt himself was to be the Interrogator. Harry found a seat in the midst of some loyal friends. The Weasleys came, of course, except for Ron, who was just too busy at the shop. It was probably just as well. Ginny sat by him, gave him a wink, and took his hand, determined to keep up romantic pretenses for her parents' sake. Luna floated in, escorted by Neville, who stared at some people near Harry until they moved away, muttering. People he knew, and people he did not know poured into the chamber.

One young woman caught his eye: a tall, pale girl, very good-looking, whose long platinum hair reminded him irresistibly of someone. She came in, and paused in the doorway, looking about. Harry hoped for a moment that she was looking for him, but she was not. Her eyes, ice-blue and glittering, were fixed on a spot behind him, and she sneered. Harry started and exchanged a quick look with Ginny.

"Do you think — ?" she asked.

"She must be! I'd know that sneer anywhere! Don't you

remember her? She was Head Girl my third year.”

“I remember her now. Percy hated her. She looks different. Didn’t she wear her hair in one long plait down her back?”

“Yeah. I didn’t see the resemblance then. Perdita Robinson. She was a Ravenclaw.” Not feeling he owed the Malfoys anything, he turned his head, and saw them sitting very still, perfectly devoid of expression. Harry smirked.

Shacklebolt entered, tall and imposing, and the spectators settled down into an expectant silence.

The hearing was miserably protracted. Proof was provided from the appropriate department that Bartemius Crouch, his wife, and his legitimate son were all dead. Hermione had seen to this ahead of time, since she knew that there would be some trouble over it. The transfigured body of Crouch Senior had never been found. The body of his wife, who had died in Azkaban, had been summarily tossed into the common burial pit that served for all deceased inmates. The proof of their deaths was taken from Crouch Junior’s statement under Veritaserum, which had been administered by Severus Snape, and preserved in the pensieve of Albus Dumbledore. Additional memories of the event had been provided by Harry, who had seen and heard details that Dumbledore had come upon the scene too late to witness.

The names of two deceased Headmasters of Hogwarts gave an air of respectability to what Hermione admitted to herself was very shaky evidence. She suspected that without Harry’s support, and in any other circumstances, her

case would have been thrown out, or at least delayed until a full seven years had passed. If she wanted to do things in the ordinary way, she supposed she ought to wait.

But she did not want to wait. She knew the Crouches were dead, and she felt this was her moment to make a statement about the corruption of pureblood wizarding customs.

The evidence was admitted. It was next established that no other close relative had come forward to claim the estate.

Next, there was the matter of her birth.

“Let us hear from Eustacius Smith, Head of the Department of Unintended Consequences.”

That gentleman had obviously never expected to appear in something so sordid as a lawsuit involving his own department. He appeared, grimacing in his discomfort, and settled uneasily into the witness box.

“Identify yourself.”

“Eustacius Smith, Head of the Department of Unintended Consequences.”

“Does your department have records which pertain to the birth of one Hermione Jane Granger?”

“Well — yes, we do, but — ”

“Can you produce said record for our examination?”

“Yes, but our records are *private*, you see — ”

“As Miss Granger has waived anonymity, and as the wizard in question is deceased, the record can be presented. Deceased wizards and witches have no right to privacy.”

There was a slight delay, as Mr. Smith had not encumbered

himself by actually carrying a physical document on his person. His clerk, Photius Fingal, however, was prepared for this exigency, and with an apologetic nod to the Wizengamot, crossed the daunting open space to his Head, and handed him the file.

“Well — ‘This is the statement of Bartemius Crouch, Senior, relevant Interested Party re: the birth of Hermione Jane Granger, born of the muggle female Lesley Anne Brockley Granger. Said infant shall be referred to henceforth as the Subject.’ This document has all the usual stipulations — ”

“For the benefit of the worthy members present, please describe this stipulations.”

“Very well. That this is not a public acknowledgement of paternity, nor an attempt to admit the Subject to the rights and privileges of a legitimate heir of the family in question. It merely recognizes the participation of the Interested Party in the conception of the Subject, and requires us to intervene in case any inappropriate attachment is reported between the Subject and any member of the Interested Party’s family related in a closer degree than second cousin.”

“If such an — attachment — had been reported, what would be your procedure?”

“We would notify the Interested Party immediately. If the Interested Party were to be deceased, we would notify the head of the family, or the father of the Innocent Party. If absolutely necessary, we would discreetly approach the Innocent Party directly.”

“The Innocent Party not being the Subject, I take it?”

“No, certainly not!”

Another member called for the document to be read in its entirety. It was.

Hermione forced herself to sit still and not squirm while Smith droned on. She felt the eyes of the entire wizarding world on her. She knew where Harry was, and all her friends were, and tried to take strength from that. Smith finished reading, and a low murmur rustled through the Chamber.

Discussion was called for, but no one wished to speak. Shackbolt called for a vote on the question, and by a sufficient majority, Hermione Jane Granger was declared to be the child of Bartemius Crouch by right of blood, and was subsequently to be known to the wizarding world as Hermione Jane Crouch.

Hermione started up at that, ready to object, but Shackbolt looked at her grimly, and told her that it was part and parcel with finding her the blood heir. Hermione had known as much, but had hoped to evade it.

“I must use the Crouch name, I understand that — but I would prefer to be known as Hermione Crouch-Granger.”

This was considered in very bad taste, but was permitted.

The hearing was far from over, however. Crouch’s will was read, and after sufficient study, it was clear that Hermione Jane Crouch had not been specifically mentioned as someone who could *not* inherit. The will was an old one, leaving everything to his wife, and in the event of her death, to his son, Bartemius Junior.

Then a relation of Mrs Crouch’s brought up the point

that the Crouch Estate might contain her possessions, and that this young person might be considered the heir of Bartemius Senior, but not of his wife.

And thus there was a wait, while Mrs. Crouch's own will was retrieved. This document left everything to her husband.

Shacklebolt said, "The sequence of events demonstrates that Mrs. Crouch predeceased her husband. There is thus no separate property issue. Bartemius Crouch, Junior is also deceased. Miss Gr — Crouch, has entered documents pertaining to their deaths."

One elderly witch observed, "Then the question before us, it seems, is: 'can Miss Crouch be considered the heir of her brother?'"

There followed so much portentous nodding and rubbing of chins that Hermione thought she would scream.

Then another member, who Hermione thought only spoke up to make trouble, demanded a public viewing of the pensieve memory, as he was not at all convinced that Bartemius Senior was dead.

This was the most awful part of the hearing for Hermione. Dumbledore had made a point of preserving this memory, as it had been at the time one of the best pieces of evidence that Voldemort had returned. It made a tremendous impact on the hearing. Barty Junior's mad laughter, the horror of the scene, Harry Potter in *mortal peril*, the commanding voice of Dumbledore, the quick and resourceful assistance of Snape: all of it provided the assembled with thrills of suspense, and

righteous satisfaction at seeing a villain come to judgment.

It was established that Bartemius Crouch, Junior had died intestate. Thus, under wizarding law, his relations up to and including the second degree were eligible to inherit. Within short order, Hermione Jane Crouch found herself the sole possessor of the substantial Crouch Estate.

There were hugs and congratulations: there were also hostile stares and mutterings. Harry pushed his way through the crowd to Hermione and put an arm around her. She felt and looked triumphant and tired. Various functionaries needed to speak to her, to arrange her access to the Gringott's vault and to Croughthwichicombe Hall. At least it was *spelled* "Croughthwichicombe." It was *pronounced* "Crushem."

"Croughthwich was the old spelling," she was informed by a tottering, ancient wizard. "The family simplified it in the twenties."

"So before the nineteen twenties — "

" — the *eighteen* twenties, my dear Miss Crouch!"

Harry retreated to a quiet corner, letting the others gossip about what it all might mean for the future. He was not the only person seeking to get out of public view. He felt another's presence, and looked up to find Lucius Malfoy, looking equally surprised, standing next to him.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry only nodded. He was willing to work with the Malfoys on public projects, but not willing to chat like friends. Lucius, however, had something to say.

"Very generous of you, using your influence to assist your friend. Miss Crouch has become a very wealthy young witch, if my estimate of the Crouch fortune is accurate."

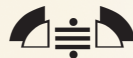
"Miss Crouch-Granger."

The older man managed a small, tight smile. He glanced over Harry's head, and Harry could imagine at whom he was gazing.

"A wizard, however powerful, Mr. Potter," Lucius remarked quietly, "has only a finite amount of influence. It must be used carefully, and replenished whenever possible. You have expended a great deal of influence in helping Miss Crouch — Granger. When you attempt to use your influence in other causes in the future, you will find that people may feel they have already paid their debt to you. I hope you find the sacrifice worthwhile."

"I do. Parents should take care of their children," Harry answered coldly. "There's no excuse for deserting them. If they do, they should pay."

Lucius regarded Harry as he would an curious object on exhibit. He refrained, out of reasonable caution, from observing how interesting it was that Harry was obviously still so angry at his own parents. "Oh, parents always pay, one way or another. I hope, that when you become a parent, you remember your words and your righteous indignation. Perhaps you will find being a father more complicated than you imagine. If you will excuse me, I must go speak to someone."



CROUCH COUNTRY HOUSE TO BE NEW SCHOOL!!!!

Harry set down the DAILY PROPHECY, and finished his tea.

"Are you sure about this, Hermione?"

"Absolutely. It will make a wonderful school. That stupid name will be forgotten, and it will become the Albus Dumbledore Primary School to the end of time, I hope. Oh, Harry! Look at this picture of you and Lucius Malfoy talking! You should have stopped the photographer. It looks like he's advising you. He is such a snake. Pictures like this are very powerful, Harry. You should be more careful. You could lose a lot of influence in the Ministry, if people think you're listening to him. Oh — I meant to ask you — whatever happened to Draco? You said he was in the States?"

"Yeah, he's at some place called Miskatonic University — "

"*Miskatonic!*" Hermione screamed, forcing Harry to cover his ears. "Draco Malfoy is at *Miskatonic University*? That is so unfair! They have the original *Necronomicon!*"

"Then it sounds just like Malfoy's thing!" Harry muttered.

"*H.P. Lovecraft* went to Miskatonic University!" Hermione stormed, slamming down her toast with reckless abandon. "There isn't anything like it in England. The Lower School — the College — is only for boys still — the girls go to Salem Witches' Institute — but the University is co-ed now, and there aren't any wizarding universities left in Europe!"

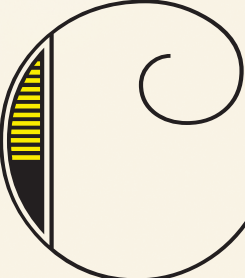
"Another item for the To-Do List?" Harry teased.

"Someday. Yes. *Draco Malfoy! Miskatonic!*"

X.



HARRY AND THE POSH DINNER PARTY

roughthwichicombe Hall was not a thousand-year-old edifice on the scale of Hogwarts, but then, what was? It was a rambling fifteenth century manor house, with a charming rose garden, mullioned windows, and a wealth of odd rooms. Hermione and Harry spent a day exploring it — an uncomfortable day, at times.

They had been greeted by a trio of house elves, all female. Their pitiful joy at the arrival of a proper Mistress surprised Hermione too much to permit her to immediately make plans for their liberation. Instead, she told them, in the most positive tones she could muster, about her wonderful plans for a school, and how the house would be filled with little witches and wizards, and were they sure they would like their peaceful life disturbed, because —

Of course they would. Harry saw that at once, and also pointed out that the kids would need lunch, and who better to provide it than house elves? Lunch needn't be a feast like dinner at Hogwarts, but it would be a nice feature, and something "magical" for the muggleborn. In fact, he was a bit peck-

ish, and wouldn't mind some lunch himself. They ate it in the big dining room that had once been a buttery in another age of the house, admiring the carved oak wainscoting.

"This is quite a place," Harry remarked. "I like it."

They wandered through the ground floor first. Hermione was much taken with the library, but of course most of the books would have to be either removed or locked away when the students came. She grew quite animated, thinking about how to stock a library for children ranging in age from five to ten.

"With Muggle and Wizarding literature. No muggleborn will leave this school without reading Beedle the Bard!"

There was a grand piano in the drawingroom. Hermione thought that music should be in the curriculum. Maybe they should even offer music lessons. The room could be used for that.

"I had to quit piano lessons when I went to Hogwarts," Hermione told him. "It made me sad. Professor McGonagall is talking about developing art and music classes at Hogwarts. I think that would be a wonderful thing for the students. I don't see why the school couldn't have an orchestra, or at least have a teacher come in to give lessons —"

"You might want to set aside these family things somewhere else, Hermione," Harry suggested, looking over a selection of Crouch portraits and awards proudly displayed throughout the downstairs "Maybe you put it all in a room about the family —"

"Maybe," she shrugged. "I don't know. Let's look upstairs."

Hermione could not quite think of this as a family home, much less her own family home. Some things she found,

like the room that had obviously been Barty Junior's, distressed her. Mrs. Crouch's room, perfectly preserved, was simply depressing. A few graying hairs remained in the silver-backed brush on the dressing table. Hermione shuddered, thinking of Polyjuice Potion.

There were many other doors, though. There were ten bedrooms on the first floor. Seven of them were quite large. There were three bathrooms, which would not be sufficient toilet facilities for a school. Those would need expansion.

On the second floor were more rooms, smaller ones. The nursery was there, full of forgotten toys and phantom laughter. Next to it was a little schoolroom. Evidently it had been the Crouch tradition to educate their children at home before they went to Hogwarts. It was horrible to contemplate Barty and his poor mother, and all her efforts to raise her only child ending in a lonely death in Azkaban.

There was a narrow staircase at the end of the second floor hall, which led up to the attics. Dilly, the head house elf, told them there had once been a ghost there, a ghost of a little girl who had suffocated in a trunk in the attic, but she had been exorcised when Bartemius Senior inherited the house.

"Master didn't like untidy things, or things that made trouble."

"So it would seem," Hermione said, a little tartly. "Thank you." To Harry, she remarked, "Professor McGonagall thinks we'll only need six regular classrooms to begin with. She estimates, based on the what the Quill has written, that we would have an average of twenty children for each age

level. Of course, not all of them will accept the invitation."

"So few?"

"Well, a number of muggle families were attacked — the ones that had muggleborn children at Hogwarts. Any younger children were — lost."

"Oh." Harry thought a little, and said, "Are you sure you want to give this away, Hermione? It's pretty great. It's not much like Malfoy Manor, but it's just as big. Someday you may wish you hadn't —"

"No, I won't," Hermione growled. "It may be mine legally, but it will never feel like home to me. Nobody ever wanted me here. I suppose I should be grateful that *he* didn't get rid of me the way he did that ghost!"

"Well, even Malfoy didn't get rid of his Halfblood daughter. Some did, I guess."

"More than you know. You'd be surprised at some of the names in those files."



Before long, the school was progressing very well — far faster than anyone had imagined it could. With Hermione's generous gift of Croughthwichicombe Hall, the magic of Harry's name, and the Malfoys' financial backing, things were beginning to fall into place. They would not have done so, however, without the energetic assistance of Minerva McGonagall, the Headmistress of Hogwarts. She had gone public with her support of the project, laying out the numer-

ous reasons why this was an idea whose time had come.

The planning committee began meeting at the school site, in the library, every Saturday. It was a motley gathering of strange bedfellows indeed. McGonagall was there, of course, with Hermione; and Harry dutifully accompanied Hermione to every meeting. Now that they had earned their N.E.W.T.s, she had told them they must call her “Minerva.” Hermione could manage the name fairly well, but Harry found the syllables sticking in his throat. Even worse, Professor McGonagall was calling him “Harry.” It was just *wrong*.

The house was metamorphosing into a school. Toilet facilities were expanded. Books were purchased. The dining room became the Head’s Office. Dumbledore’s Hogwarts portrait was laboriously copied and charmed, and would be a feature of the new school. A big room off the kitchen was converted into a lunchroom and decorated with colorful murals. Hermione insisted on calling it the Refectory, and had insisted so loudly that in the end she got her way.

That was largely because Hermione, on McGonagall’s advice, had taken the precaution of making the gift of the school building contingent on her becoming a school governor *in perpetuo*. McGonagall was a member of that body as well, in her capacity as Headmistress of Hogwarts. Lucius knew it was unwise to put himself forward, but Narcissa, on the strength of the Malfoy donations, was installed as a school governor, and very pleased about it.

The Malfoys always arrived together, sitting side by side

for mutual support. Griselda Marchbanks was a governor, as was old Professor Tofty, who had been injured by Death Eaters, but was nearly himself. His friend, Tiberius Ogden, lent his support. The two elderly wizards seemed very excited about the proposed school.

So excited was the worthy Tiberius Ogden, that he was moved to quip, upon seeing Minerva McGonagall, Narcissa Malfoy, and Hermione Crouch-Granger seated at the same table, that they embodied perfectly the principle of The Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. Only Narcissa was unoffended.

“After all,” she purred, “I *am* a mother. How can anyone object to being called what they are?”

Hermione was about to make her views known on the whole wrong-headed issue of thaumaturgic iconography, but Harry hastily interrupted, uttering in his desperation a question so inane that it derailed even Hermione’s chugging train of thought.

“Why don’t we have a dinner party?” Everyone stopped and stared at him. “I mean — ” he said, “ — everyone’s got to have dinner anyway, so why don’t we have a big meeting and invite the Minister, and — ”

“An excellent notion,” McGonagall approved. “Properly mentioned in the *Prophet*, It will keep the project before the public eye. A very good project for *you* to organize, Harry.”

Narcissa had been rather annoyed, thinking this duty should naturally fall to her, but the touching sight of her husband’s eyes shining in unholy glee at Harry Potter’s

dismay caused her sit back and smile herself. Besides, she needed her rest. Everyone else liked the idea, and Harry found himself the chosen victim to organize a party that he would never have dreamed of attending in any other circumstances. Immediately following the meeting Hermione sat down with him and forced him to start planning. It was worse than any revision from their school days. If they were to be responsible for this event, everything must be *right*.

Where to have the dinner was the first question.

"I won't have the Malfoys in my house, Harry!" Hermione declared. "The idea is just too awful."

Harry agreed that it really was pretty awful. He liked Hermione's house a lot. It would spoil things if the Malfoys were to look down on Hermione because her parents' house, though very nice, was an upper middle-class suburban house of the muggle persuasion.

"How about Grimmauld Place? Kreacher and his chums are at work on the dining room. It'll be super when they're done. And it's certainly a wizardly sort of place. Mrs. Malfoy can't sneer at an old family home, especially if the family was hers, after all."

"I don't know Harry. All things considered —"

Harry thought again, and then agreed that he did not want the Malfoys, reformed or not, in Sirius' house. Once again, he wondered how he had found himself planning a dinner party for the wizarding elite. Years of frying up bacon and eggs for the Dursleys did not seem like the right sort of preparation.

They went round and round on the subject of the location. Hermione did not like the idea of having the dinner at either of their houses. Malfoy Manor was out of the question.

"Why not have it at the school?"

"Oh, Harry! I don't want to have it at Hogwarts! It's an independent project, and I think —"

"No, I mean have it *here* — you know — at 'Crush'em' Hall."

Hermione paused, and sat down, thinking hard. "We've already remodeled the dining room as the Head's Office."

"Have it in the Great Hall, then! You've still got the kitchen, for the kids' lunches. I suppose we *could* have it in the lunchroom —"

"The Refectory, Harry," Hermione corrected him. "Honestly, we should use consistent terminology. The Refectory might be a little too — cute, I think."

"I dunno — I like the unicorn and dragon murals, but — I guess I see what you mean."

"Exactly. Narcissa Malfoy might have said that the Refectory is "charming" for little witches and wizards, but she might not think it was the place for a proper dinner party. I like the idea of the Great Hall. Of course, it's not like Hogwarts —"

"You know — the house elves probably would know what to do."

"Harry?"

"Crouch had to have given dinner parties. The house elves will know what to do! Let's go talk to them!"

The house elves indeed knew what to do, and were utterly

enraptured by the idea that Young Mistress wished to give a party. However, there were things that were the purview of the hosts, not of their house elves. The guest list must be drawn up, invitations must be issued, a menu had to be approved, a seating plan arranged, and decorations chosen. It was etiquette hell.

Harry desperately wanted to invite Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, but how to place them at the same table with the Malfoys? They wanted to invite some of the Hogwarts faculty, but how to invite some without inviting them all? Hermione settled the matter by having the tables set up to their full capacity in the Great Hall, and then counting the number of places. They discovered that it was possible to seat no more than fifty with any degree of comfort. That settled the issue, until Harry and Hermione looked at each other, and screamed “*Fifty?*” in unison.

After a break for restorative drinks, Harry said, “No way, Hermione. No way are we giving a party for fifty people.”

“We don’t *have* to, Harry,” Hermione reasoned. “We just can’t give a party for *more* than fifty. Let’s work on the guest list, and as long as it’s under fifty, we’re fine.”

“Couldn’t we put this off until the school’s ready to open?”

“Actually, the school could open today, if it were only a matter of classrooms,” Hermione told him. “But it’s more than that. Minerva and I have only now sorted out the issue of how the students are to be transported. It’s far more complicated than Hogwarts, since this will be a day school.

The Assistant Head will be in charge of the network of floos and licensed apparition aides. We also will offer a bus — ”

“ — The Al-Bus — ” Harry grinned. “I heard you talking about that — ”

“ — for those who required something more conventional. And then there is the matter of finding a Head and a faculty and a staff, though that is moving along nicely. Maybe we should wait until the Head is chosen. It would be an opportunity to introduce him or her.”

“You should be the Head, Hermione,” Harry told her.

“No, thank you!” Hermione shook her head vigorously. “Deal with little children just learning how to read? It calls for someone with real experience. We’re interviewing some candidates though — there’s one muggleborn who’s been teaching in muggle schools for years. She pretty much left the wizarding world after she graduated Hogwarts and couldn’t find a job.”



After the initial interviews, Hermione was not sure if she liked Jane Rochester or not. She was very well qualified, and had presented the board with enthusiastic letters of recommendation. Her grasp of educational theory seemed comprehensive, and she was very interested the project. Though she was muggleborn, her grades while a Ravenclaw at Hogwarts had been outstanding, and she had earned ten N.E.W.T.s: in Transfiguration, Charms, Runes, History, Arithmancy, Herbology, Potions, and Muggle Studies

— more than Hermione had herself. She was in her middle thirties, and seemed to be entirely nondescript — medium height, medium weight, straight brown hair cut short, direct brown eyes. Not ugly, but not a beautiful woman either.

Ms. Rochester had a no-nonsense manner, and answered the questions the governor's board put to her without arrogance, but also without false modesty. She seemed confident of her abilities, and quite clear about how challenging this new undertaking would be. Hermione felt somehow that she was just not — well, *impressed* enough by Harry — or by any of them. Yes, she felt, Ms. Rochester should show more gratitude in being interviewed for the position, considering that she had missed the war entirely.

There had been many aspirants for the post, but she was the only one with any kind of professional credentials from an institution of high learning in the actual teaching of young children. Harry liked better a pretty witch named Rowan Praetorius, who was a cousin of the Longbottoms. She had tutored some relatives — rather successfully — for they had done well their first year at Hogwarts. Hermione was in favor of an Australian wizard by the unlikely name of Max Rockatansky. He was fairly young, but he was a strong wizard, and had the charisma and twinkling blue eyes that spelled “Headmaster” to her.

McGonagall, however, liked Jane Rochester, and was adamant in her support of her. She took Hermione aside one night after a particularly acrimonious governors' meeting.

“Jane was a splendid student. It was a shame she had so few opportunities when she left Hogwarts. If she had been a prettier girl, perhaps — ” she pressed her lips together, and then said, “Yes — that would have counted for quite a bit, but there she was, a muggleborn with no influential wizarding friends, and not charming enough to make people overlook her birth. There weren't many openings in the Ministry that year, and what there were went to relations, just as they generally do.”

“Why didn't she get an apprenticeship, then?” Hermione asked, feeling annoyed, and a little nervous, as she sometimes did when she realized how very special her own position was, and the dangers — and advantages — that had accrued to her because of it.

“For the same reason, Hermione!” McGonagall answered, becoming testy. “Who's going to take on a muggleborn with no connections when so many children of friends and relatives may be clamoring for the chance? There was nothing, and after awhile Jane gave up. She wrote to Hogwarts, asking for the certificate we issue to satisfy the muggle authorities, and went on to muggle University. I never heard from her until a few weeks ago, when she saw the notice in the DAILY PROPHET. Evidently, she never stopped subscribing.”

“Malfoy's daughter got an apprenticeship,” Hermione objected, feeling rebellious.

McGonagall gave her a quelling look. “Perdita Robinson is a beautiful girl, and had to go as far as America to get her

apprenticeship, and at that, it's with an elderly wizard with a known taste for young witches. I don't think you need envy Perdita Robinson, or wish her fate — all seven years' worth! — on Jane Rochester."

The Malfoys also rather liked Rowan Praetorius, to whom they were both distantly related, but even Narcissa had to admit that she was perhaps just a *little* young to be made the Head of a school. Lucius definitely did *not* like "that *Australian*," and the interview had had some tense moments, with two very masterful men glaring at one another, wand hands twitching. As little as they liked the idea of a Mudblood heading the new school, it appeared inevitable that Jane Rochester would be made Head, and Rowan Praetorius offered the position of Assistant Head.

But before the offer was made, Harry asked to speak to Ms. Rochester. He had discovered that she had been at Hogwarts around the same time as his parents, and wanted to hear about those days. Hermione was not sure that was a good idea, but an appointment was made, and Ms. Rochester arrived at the school and was shown into the library.

As always, she did not stammer or blush when meeting *Harry Potter*, but shook his hand just as she would anyone else's — just as she had Lucius Malfoy's.

Hermione was direct. "We wanted to know more about your experiences in the wizarding world. Harry is interested in your school days, and how they would influence your approach to teaching wizards."

Ms. Rochester raised her eyebrows, clearly wondering why Harry was not speaking for himself. He was not officially a school governor, and she could not see why she should be coming at his beck and call, but Ms. Crouch-Granger, despite her age, was a governor, and she had little choice but to do the polite and satisfy the girl's curiosity.

Harry himself felt that he ought to make clear what it was he wanted to know. "I'd like you to tell me about going to school with my parents."

"Oh, my!" laughed Ms. Rochester. "That does make me feel old!"

"Well, what was it like — when you went to Hogwarts?"

Ms. Rochester's smile faded and she gave Harry a long, measuring look. "It was a long time ago. I've put it behind me."

"But you knew them, didn't you? What was Hogwarts like in those days?"

"Quite a bit like it is now, I imagine. Students come and go —"

"No. I mean, what was it like going to school with my parents?"

"I was in fourth year when they were in seventh, I was a Ravenclaw and they were Gryffindors. I knew them by sight, of course, but I'm sure they didn't know me."

"But you saw them! They were Head Boy and Girl! You must remember *something*!" Harry was getting angry, feeling that she was evading the question.

"I really don't feel my impressions of other students during my school years are relevant to the post I'm applying for. I'd rather not talk about this."

"Well, I want to talk about it!" Harry nearly shouted.

Hermione pressed her hand over his. "We have to insist. We think it's very important that the Head of the school be open and aboveboard about his or her views. After all, you weren't exactly a presence during the War — "

The nondescript woman sat silent for awhile, and then sighed, "I guess the game is up. I should have known this would happen. Nothing has changed."

"What do you mean?"

"All right. It seems I have nothing to lose, but you may not like what I have to say."

"I want to know."

"I wonder if you do. Well, there's nothing for it. I thought I'd give the wizarding world a last try, but — All right. I'll tell you." She grimaced and then said, "Hogwarts was a lot better after my fourth year."

"Why was that?"

Very grimly, Ms. Rochester said, "Because that's the year the Gryffindor gang called 'the Marauders' finished school. That's what you wanted to know about, wasn't it? Yes, I went to school when your parents were there. Your father and his cronies ran the school exactly as they liked, and if you were smart, you stayed out of their way. Your other choices were sucking up to them or a bracing dose of public humiliation. Lucky for me that I wasn't deemed worthy of their notice."

"I know they liked to play pranks. Sometimes they got out of hand, but they meant well. Well, except for Peter

Pettigrew, of course — "

Ms. Rochester listened in silence. Then she said. "I told you wouldn't like what I had to say. I'm not very fond of pranks myself. They're not much fun when you're on the receiving end. In fact, they can be very cruel — "

"Sirius and my Dad were not *cruel* — "

"I don't know what they were like as adults. When I was in second year, I saw them pants a student — "

"I know about that," Harry said impatiently. "It was a Slytherin — "

Ms. Rochester's eyes flashed, and she answered rather sharply. "What does *that* matter? What should it matter? I *hate* that stupid House rubbish! They ganged up on a lone student and tormented him, laughing. I stood there on the edge of the lake, so ashamed that I wasn't doing anything to stop it, but I was *afraid*. Everyone was afraid of them! I was afraid to tell my parents about it for fear they would either take me out of school, or make a fuss, and I knew that there was nothing a pair of muggles could do. I'm ashamed of it to this day, and that is why I've never tolerated bullying in any class I teach."

"But my mother — Lily — she stood up for Snape — well, until he called her a filthy name — "

"I saw her there — I'd heard she was the boy's *friend* — but she was about to burst out laughing. You think he didn't notice, even hanging upside down? And then that James Potter offered to let the boy go, if she'd go out with him! What kind of *friend* goes out with a bully like that? I

couldn't stand any of them! And then to drop the Slytherin boy, because he called out a rude name in a state of panic and anguish... My fellow Ravenclaws said at the time he didn't fit in with the crowd she had moved up into, and she'd just been looking for an excuse to lose him."

"Snape was a spiteful, greasy git — "

"I read that he was pretty brave during the War. He never did anything to me. He wasn't doing anything to *them* that day, but they sought him out, the way bullies always do, choosing the lonely, unattractive outsiders no one likes — "

Harry was offended. "Snape always gave as good as he got."

"He wasn't giving much, hanging upside down with his pants off. He was very tough to bear it. At least he didn't make the list of suicides Hogwarts has totted up over the years. All very discreet, of course. 'So-and-so has withdrawn due to ill health.' 'She left to go back to the muggle world.' 'He's gone abroad to study — '"

"They say that when there are suicides?" Hermione asked, horrified.

"Or when some girl is pregnant, and there's no wizarding marriage in view," Ms. Rochester told her. "There was a girl in my House, a fifth year, who left one night and never came back. We knew what had happened, though. It wasn't a *boyfriend*, mind you. It was some bully who knew she'd be too ashamed to tell — "

"You had better not be talking about Sirius!" Harry shouted.

"I thought you wanted to hear about my school days. That was one of the more memorable episodes. As I said, things were better after fourth year."

Hermione tried to take control of the interview. "Well, maybe — "

Harry was furiously angry, and interrupted her. "My parents sacrificed their lives for me — "

With painful patience, Ms. Rochester pointed out, "I thought we were speaking of my school days. And what parents *wouldn't* sacrifice themselves for their child?" She looked down her nose, pulling herself together. "I understand. I don't think we have anything else to say to each other. If my employment is going to be contingent on my reverence for those rather unkind boys, thank you, but no. I was under the impression that this was a post that would be chosen on the basis of *professional* qualifications. I am not going to pretend things never happened, or conveniently rearrange my memories to suit the current political climate. I shall write my withdrawal to Professor McGonagall. Don't bother to see me out." She rose and stalked out, head held high.

"Well," said Hermione. "That went well."

"Good riddance!" Harry snapped. "We don't need her kind! We'd be better off with Mrs. Weasley! She's taught all her children — "

"— with somewhat uneven results — " Hermione muttered.



Minerva McGonagall was not happy with them. She called

them to Hogwarts and rounded on them for a quarter hour.

After a brief pause to take a breath, she went on, "Fortunately, I have been able to persuade Jane to reconsider. I explained that you were speaking as a private individual, not on behalf of the Governors."

"Who knows whose side she was on during the War?" Harry snapped. "For that matter, maybe she didn't even *have* a side. She was lying low like a coward, and then she has the nerve to criticise *my parents!*"

Hermione knew that Harry should not have pressed the woman to talk, but he was much too angry to reason with at the moment. The Headmistress of Hogwarts, however, was not inclined to give an inch.

"What I principally know about Jane Rochester is that she is an excellent teacher and the best chance we have for a Head who will bring fair play and high standards to our school. That is what we want, isn't it?"

"I don't see why Rowan can't be the Head. Or Mrs. Weasley —"

"*Harry Potter!*" McGonagall interrupted. When he was quiet, she steepled her hands before her, and asked quietly, "Do you understand what is meant by the terms 'political corruption?' or 'cronyism?'"

He glared and refused to answer.

McGonagall sighed, and said, "The wizarding world is small, Harry. So small that it's easy to give out jobs to our friends and relatives, because we know them and love them. But don't you see that it's just that attitude that has led to

so many of our troubles? Don't you see that giving a plum position to Mrs. Weasley is not much different than the pureblooded fanatics wanting to keep all the plum positions within their own little group?"

"Mrs. Weasley —" Harry began hotly.

"— raised Ron Weasley, who wrote on one essay that Belladonna is the name of a star in the constellation of O'Ryan," supplied the gloating voice of Severus Snape's portrait. "She also completely failed to control the twins, those purveyors of subversion and chaos. If she cannot control two children, how could she control a school?" Snape smirked, his voice a syrup of sweet reason.

"Yes," agreed McGonagall. "Thank you, Severus. Mind you, if Molly wished to teach a class, we would seriously consider her application."

"Maybe very *young* students," Hermione temporized. "She loves little children so much." Actually she was not sure about Molly's hot temper and tendency to favoritism, but Harry wanted Molly recognized, possibly because he knew she would be so disappointed when there was no wedding to plan next summer.

"We are going to vote in two days," Minerva said with quiet force, "and we are going to vote to appoint Jane Rochester Headmistress of Albus Dumbledore School. Anything else is simply wrong — it would mean putting personal feelings and family preferences ahead of merit. Do you believe in the pursuit of excellence, Harry? Would you place someone on your

Quidditch team simply because he was your friend?"

Hermione blushed, remembering her own adventure in manipulating Quidditch tryouts. It had seemed the right thing to do at the time, but she suspected that McGonagall would not see it that way. She was glad that McGonagall's eyes were fixed on Harry, and not on her. To her embarrassment, she saw that Snape was regarding her with amused interest. She turned her back on the portrait, and smiled at Harry.

"You know she's right, Harry. And it's not like you'll be seeing much of her anyway. I'm sure she'll be a very good Headmistress. Let's go home and finish planning the party."

McGonagall nodded in approval. "Very good. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask. Be sure to invite all the Hogwarts Governors. They can be a touchy lot. And it would be sensible to have Narcissa Malfoy vet the menu."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. "I'm sure we can manage," Hermione answered, rather stiffly.



"Hermione, I've got to invite Ginny. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley won't understand if I don't."

She gave him an expressionless stare. "Harry, you wouldn't get yourself into these situations if you would just *tell* people what's going on. Ginny should tell her parents that she doesn't want to marry you. Inviting her as your girlfriend just raises unfounded hopes. They'll thank you someday if you're just honest with them."

"Yeah, maybe *someday*. But they'll give us hell *now*. I promised Ginny I wouldn't tell her parents about her Quidditch plans."

"So why does that mean you have to keep up this stupid pretence? How is it that you have to protect Ginny?" She drew herself up, and asked, "Are you ashamed of me?"

"No! God, no! It's just that — I thought you hated gossip — and the talk about the 'Wanderings' has only now died down. And I'm trying to stay friends with Ron, and that won't work if thinks I've stolen you —"

Her voice turned icy. "*Stealing* me implies that I am somehow someone's property. Is that what you mean to say? That I was Ron's chattel and you *stole* me away like sack of galleons?"

A no-win situation. "I don't think that way, but you know that Ron does — a little."

"I don't care how Ron thinks, if you want to describe his reptile-brain reactions as 'thinking.' If you're going to ask Ginny, that's your decision. I would never lower myself to demand that you choose between us." She turned her back, and continued making notes for the dinner menu.

Harry doodled an elaborate seating chart, trying to keep mortal enemies as far apart as possible. With the current Hermione/Ginny situation, he would have to sit between the two girls, and hope that everyone drew the conclusion he wanted, instead of the correct one.

"It always worked for Dumbledore," he muttered bitterly.

"What worked for Dumbledore?"

"Misleading people. Telling them zip and then twinkling

at the train wreck. Why can't I do it? Maybe if I practice, I'll get it right by the time I'm, say, a hundred and twenty."

She pursed her lips. "You shouldn't criticise Dumbledore, Harry. Everything he did, he did for the Greater Good, even if parts of his plan aren't perfectly apparent to us. It all turned out for the best, didn't it?"

"I'm not sure Snape thinks it turned out for the best. Or Andy Tonks."

"I'm surprised. I didn't think you cared what Professor Snape thought."

"Thinks. What he thinks. Whenever I go to Hogwarts he's there in the Headmistress' Office and he gives me that *look*. He still thinks I'm an idiot."

"Well, you're alive and he's dead, so you must have done something right." She frowned, considering, "Or he did."

"Maybe we should ask Mrs. Malfoy to look over the guest list. I can't make any sense of the Hogwarts Governors. One old sod from St. Mary Axe is still on the list, but the Weasleys told me that he's dead."

"Harry! I thought we agreed we do this ourselves. It's bad enough that the Malfoys are involved at all. Next you'll want her to look over my menu!"

"What if we're missing something? What if there's something about wizarding dinners that aren't in the books? What if we're going to look stupid?"

"It's going to be fine, Harry. Trust me."



Altogether, it could have been worse, he supposed, but not much. With a book on wizarding customs and some painstakingly drawn diagrams, Harry achieved a seating plan that placed the Malfoys and Weasleys on opposite sides of the Great Hall. Hogwarts was represented by its Headmistress and its Heads of Houses. The new Gryffindor Head was someone completely unknown to Harry. It bothered him somewhat, though Hermione pointed out that there had been years and years of Gryffindors, and it wasn't reasonable to expect everything to go to people they had known from school.

The Minister was there, sitting to the right of the Headmistress. To her left was Headmistress McGonagall. and many of the Department Heads. The current editor of the DAILY PROPHET and her husband were in attendance, and a good sprinkling of the Wizengamot. The governors of both schools and their guests sat at a table set perpendicular to a longer one. The new Headmistress was in the center of the head table, looking about her with an inscrutable expression.

The good part about sitting down to dinner, Harry thought, was that he would no longer have a young woman on each arm, pulling him slowly but relentlessly in two. Ginny was dazzling in blue and Hermione was resplendent in red. Both looked quite gorgeous. Harry kept wondering why everyone's eyes looking down toward their waist level. At first he wondered if his fly was open, but Ginny hissed in his ear,

"They're looking for an engagement ring. On any of us."

Harry saw Lucius Malfoy struggling not to laugh. The Malfoys were whispering together, looking very amused. Possibly it was because of the problems Harry had when he tried to shake anyone's hand, or even move. He supposed the evening would figure in a long letter to Draco at Miskatonic University.

Endless pictures were taken. One elderly wizard starting droning on about the precedents for polygamy in the wizarding world, telling a long, involved story about "Gold-Tree and Silver-Tree," and about the harem of the wizard Caliph Haroun al-Raschid until at last even Harry grasped what was being said. He managed a weak grin and slunk away, his arms pinched to the point of nerve damage by the girls' grips.

The house elves had furnished a splendid meal, though it was a strange mix of the old-fashioned and the trendy. Some of it was well-received and some of it was not. Hermione's smile hardened like cement.

"What is this, Hermione? It tastes really strange. Did you tell the elves to serve this?"

"I told the elves to use their judgement. They wanted to know some of my favorite foods, and I told them. That's goat cheese with tomatillo salsa. They're only trying to please me."

There was a soft and puzzled murmur rustling down the tables. The wizards and witches gamely tried to eat the curious dish, thinking it was some sort of pudding. A hiss of reaction followed. Mafalda Hopkirk uttered a choking scream and fell backwards, arms flailing. Half the table rose

to come to her aid. The other half were choking as well.

"Did you say that was from a goat, Hermione?" asked Kingsley Shacklebolt desperately. "Don't you know that a large proportion of wizards and witches are allergic to *anything* made from a goat?"

"Don't eat it!" screeched Professor Sprout. "It's *poison!*"

Harry saw the Malfoys discreetly spitting into their serviettes.

"Oh, this is a gala night," he groaned.

Headmistress Rochester, on the other hand, continued eating her portion with every sign of enjoyment. Madam Hopkirk's limp form was spirited away, and the offending plates abruptly disappeared. After some hasty imbibing of potions, the replacement, Angels on Horseback, was greeted with relief. Two elderly wizards were speaking loudly enough for Hermione to hear.

"You can't go wrong with oysters," sighed one. "This is more like!"

"Well," said his companion, as if continuing a previous remark, "I suppose the school is a good idea, but other than that, I don't see that much has changed. There are the Malfoys, still at the head table, as they've always been. The Potter boy doesn't seem to understand — "

" — Shh. Later."

Above them all, looming over them, was a huge copy of Dumbledore's portrait from Hogwarts. Headmistress McGonagall had spoken privately to Headmistress Rochester about the pros and cons of Dumbledore being able to look over

one's shoulder at all times. Thus, his portrait was placed, not in the Head's office, but in the Great Hall, so that all the children would see the wizard for whom the school was named.

A few other notables had smaller likenesses decorating the walls. Copying portraits, even in a smaller size, took some tricky charms work, but the pictures made a good effect. McGonagall thought it important that the children know that there was more than one wizard worthy of respect. The small portrait of Headmaster Snape, on McGonagall's advice, was indeed in the Head's Office and faced the Headmistress's desk.

Harry overheard the two Headmistresses talking about it. "Occasionally he gives very good advice — if you sift through the sarcasm. More importantly, he is my reminder not to judge by appearances. I think you'll find his company interesting."

"Actually, I already have. We have quite a bit in common, it seems."

A number of speeches were made. Harry and Hermione listened dutifully. They drank champagne for the toasts, and disregarded much of the news about the school's opening the following September, since it was not news to them.

Headmistress Rochester was introduced, and rose to make some remarks, when there was a tremendously loud "Pop!" and a tall and skeletal wizard, staff in hand, Apparated into the middle of the Great Hall.

The newcomer, in ragged grey robes, bellowed, "Not invite me, will you? I'll curse the entire proceedings! I'll —"

Shrieks of horror filled the hall.

"— It's Lord Thingy!"

"— He's back!"

"— Run for your lives!"

"*Sit down!*" roared Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Everyone!"

The stampede paused. A number of guests peered back through the doors. The newcomer was not Voldemort, it appeared, but —

"John Wellington Wells!" trilled Griselda Marchbanks. "We hadn't heard from you in thirty years. We all thought you were dead!"

"Dead? No — not dead — doing research. Where the hell is Albus?" Madam Marchbanks gestured up to the huge portrait. Wells gaped at the sight.

"You poor old blighter! What have they done to you? No, don't shush me, woman! Then I find out you're having this bacchanal without me! I won't have it! *Maleficarus ad* —"

McGonagall rose to the occasion and transfigured an empty place at the head table beside Ginny, who blinked. "Do join us, John. We're so delighted to see you. Perhaps Miss Weasley can bring you up to date. Ginevra, this is John Wellington Wells, the longest-serving Hogwarts Governor."

"Ha!" Ragged grey robes trailing in his wake, the wizard sat down with a leer at his fair companion's cleavage. "*Now to the banquet we press — !*"

Shacklebolt relaxed, declaring "— *Now for the eggs and the ham!*"

Lucius Malfoy sat, smiling. “ — *Now for the mustard and cress!*”
McGonagall concluded, “*Now for the strawberry jam!*”
Harry and Hermione exchanged a bewildered look.
“*The Sorcerer,*” McGonagall explained. Seeing their blank faces, she added sharply. “*By Gilbert and Sullivan.*”

“Oh,” said Hermione, blushing.

Harry was unenlightened. “Are they wizards?” He looked at the elderly Mr. Wells, who gazed back, clearly as puzzled by Harry as Harry was by him. “Who is he?”

Minerva McGonagall rolled her eyes. “You shouldn’t have asked that, Harry.”

“Sorry — but — ”

“You really shouldn’t have asked that.”

For the elderly wizard was standing up again, beaming at the guests, who were all gazing at him in anticipation — every one — Malfoys, Ministers, Weasleys, and all. To Harry’s utter confusion, he burst into song:

*“My name is John Wellington Wells,
I’m a dealer in magic and spells,
In blessings and curses
And ever-filled purses,
In prophecies, witches, and knells.*

*If you want a proud foe to “make tracks”?
If you’d melt a rich uncle in wax ?
You’ve but to look in
On the resident Djinn,*

Number seventy, St. Mary Axe!

*We’ve a first-class assortment of magic;
And for raising a posthumous shade
With effects that are comic or tragic,
There’s no cheaper house in the trade.
Love-philtre? we’ve quantities of it;
And for knowledge if any one burns,
We’re keeping a very small prophet, a prophet
Who brings us unbounded returns:*

*For he can prophesy
With a wink of his eye,
Peep with security
Into futurity,
Sum up your history,
Clear up a mystery,
Humour proclivity
For a nativity? for a nativity;
He has answers oracular,
Bogies spectacular,
Tetrapods tragical,
Mirrors so magical,
Facts astronomical,
Solemn or comical,
And, if you want it, he
Makes a reduction on taking a quantity!
Oh! — ”*

To Harry's creeping horror, the guests began singing along. They all seemed to know the song — even Ginny. It was an eerie thing. He had never seen so many witches and wizards at one time — smiling.

*"If anyone anything lacks,
He'll find it all ready in stacks,
If he'll only look in
On the resident Djinn,
Number seventy, St. Mary Axe!*

*Then, if you plan it, he
Changes organity,
With an urbanity,
Full of Satanity,
Vexes humanity
With an inanity
Fatal to vanity?
Driving your foes to the verge of insanity!*

*Barring tautology,
In demonology,
'Lectro-biology,
Mystic nosology,
Spirit philology,
High-class astrology,
Such is his knowledge, he
Isn't the man to require an apology!*

Oh!

*My name is John Wellington Wells,
I'm a dealer in magic and spells,
In blessings and curses
And ever-filled purses,
In prophecies, witches, and knells.

And if any one anything lacks,
He'll find it all ready in stacks,
If he'll only look in
On the resident Djinn,
Number seventy, St. Mary Axe!"*

The song over, he settled creakily into his chair beside Ginny and asked, "So, my dear Miss Weasley, what I have missed? Who's this Lord Thingy fellow?"

Harry and Hermione left as soon as they decently could, and made their farewells brief. Mrs. Weasley was still rather green from the goat cheese, but she and Mr. Weasley were humming happily. They took Ginny home with them, but Harry begged off, telling them that he had an early morning the next day.

"My place or yours?" Harry asked Hermione, already in a better mood.

"Mine, I think."

"We could watch telly."

"We could. I need to get away from wizarding affairs for a little while. Honestly, Gilbert and Sullivan? Goat cheese? I had no idea."

"Neither did I. It's not like it's the sort of thing they ever served at Hogwarts."

"It doesn't affect me. I love it. I wonder if it's a real allergy,

or some sort of taboo. Maybe Madam Hopkirk was having a psychosomatic reaction. Goat cheese is actually quite nourishing. If approached with the proper attitude — ”

Just before they vanished, they clearly heard the voices of some of the other departing guests, still roaring out Wells’ ridiculous song;

“Oh —

*His name is John Wellington Wells,
He’s a dealer in magic and spells,
In blessings and curses
And ever-filled purses,
In prophecies, witches, and knells.”*

“Hermione,” Harry declared. “the wizarding world is just — strange.”

XI.

LOOSE THREADS:

HARRY AND THE EDGECOMBE AFFAIR

“**I** still don’t see why Professor McGonagall is so annoyed,” Hermione told Harry over breakfast. “[j]ust because a few people imagined they were sick, she thinks the dinner was a catastrophe. And now everyone is carrying on over that John Wellington Wells! Disappeared over thirty years ago, and now

he’s on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* every day!”

Harry lowered the paper guiltily. Hermione did not like him reading at the breakfast table. Today’s installment of MY BRILLIANT CAREER, THE LIFE AND OPINIONS OF JOHN WELLINGTON WELLS, covered the wizard’s adventures in Africa circa 1872-1876, in the hidden valley of Pal-ul-don.

“I like reading his stories, Hermione. I don’t believe them, but they’re pretty exciting and sometimes pretty funny. People are tired of the war, Hermione. They want to move on.”

She huffed, but refrained from arguing. It was a pleasant breakfast. Their careers were going well. Hermione was auditing the records at MLE, and Harry had just had the pleasure of catching a muggle-baiter the day before.

The wizard had taken it into his head that he wanted to learn to drive a muggle car. Finding the training process inconveniently slow, he had used a Confundus on the examiner, and strolled away with a license. Unfortunately, chaos had ensued, for the wizard had caused three accidents on his way home — one of which he had avoided with a very public levitation — and the examiner had been injured, still under the Confundus, as he walked through a plate-glass door. There was a real satisfaction in taking such a scofflaw into custody. That the perpetrator was a Slytherin reserve player from Harry’s third year made it all the sweeter.

It seems that such periods of calm can only be transitory, for the very morning of that peaceful breakfast, something occurred that gradually grew into a crisis in the course of

the month of November.

The suicide of Marietta Edgecombe had consequences: both long-term and immediate. Though Shackbolt had tried to wipe her memory, it was apparent that she had contacted her mother beforehand and told her part of the truth. Her ravaged face, covered in a hot and heavy balaclava, had not gone unnoticed. Everyone wondered what had become of her. Rumors were rife, but only certain former members of Dumbledore's Army knew the truth.

She was not important, as witches were accounted, and so her death was only merited a small notice in a back page of the DAILY PROPHET. However, as word got out that Marietta had offed herself with a Killing Curse, questions were raised and memories reawakened.

"WAS MARIETTA A DEATH EATER?" demanded one headline — a headline that drew angry responses from Ravenclaws who had known the girl. Her mother, the desolate Niobe Edgecombe, issued a formal challenge to the publisher of the DAILY PROPHET. She did more: when the DAILY PROPHET, always the mouthpiece of the Powers That Be, refused to print her letter of protest, Madam Edgecombe wrote a passionate defense of her daughter, denouncing the vicious mutilation of her only child, a criminal assault that had never been punished or even investigated. The letter featured an eerily still photograph of the dead Marietta, eyes closed, the blotchy letters spelling out "SNEAK" livid against the ugly pallor of her skin. Thousands of copies were

affixed to every building in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, and as her last act before her resignation from the Ministry, Madam Edgecombe flooded them to every wizarding household in England and sent bundles of the letters through the international floos, spreading the story abroad.

"Harry," his supervisor warned him, "It's not illegal to post the notices. We can't muster the Aurors to take them down."

"Then I'll have to take some personal time," Harry replied stonily. "It's ridiculous. That crazy woman should just shut up. Other people are grieving for better people than *Marietta*. Marietta knew what she was getting into when she joined Dumbledore's Army. Nobody else cares about that little sneak."

He was worried about Hermione. Quite a few people knew or suspected who was behind Marietta's disfigurement. A few anonymous letters appeared in the DAILY PROPHET, wondering why the girl's curse damage could not have been healed, if the perpetrator had done the right thing and come forward. School pranks were one thing: ruining another student's life and driving them to suicide was quite another. Ravenclaws at the Ministry were heard commenting bitterly on Professor Flitwick's failure to protect one of his own — and then their voices would drop as they would add, "but you know who was behind it — that lot always got a pass."

The issue came up in a session of the Wizengamot, and Harry did his utmost to quash discussion, using his trump card — The Official Wizarding Secrets Act. He had the

right, with his Order of Merlin First Class, but as Hermione pointed out, it had only driven the speculation underground; it had not silenced it.

"And now the duel is scheduled to be held at the Ministry!" Hermione complained. "Everyone is getting administrative leave to go watch it! It really disrupts my schedule, and it will look odd if I don't go. It's so medieval and barbaric. Imagine: they can duel to the death without any criminal liability! Of course, if Madam Edgecombe survives, we can see that she is properly punished for misusing the floo. She'll get at least six months in Azkaban for that."

Hermione was sorry that Marietta was dead, naturally, but it was not her fault. She had not forced Marietta to kill herself. People always have choices, as Dumbledore had wisely said. It was very worrying, though. She felt that she was under scrutiny. A few whispers had reached her that Umbridge, who knew all about Marietta, was spreading gossip about Hermione, describing her as malicious and vindictive, using her cleverness to devise sadistic tortures for her enemies. Hermione hoped these rumors were being treated as they deserved. She had never done anything to anyone who didn't deserve it.

She shook out her hair. "It's all very sad, of course, but what do you expect? Madam Edgecombe was Umbridge's creature, monitoring the floo, and was a collaborator, just like Marietta. I loathe a traitor." She added, rather sheepishly. "Besides, I forgot about her."

The crowding onlookers at the Ministry the next day were

disappointed. The DAILY PROPHET's early edition featured a retraction, admitting that there was no evidence whatsoever that Marietta Edgecombe had been anything but an innocent young witch, and that the editorial staff regretted any distress their speculations might have caused the family of the late Miss Edgecombe. When Harry brought up the need to arrest Madam Edgecombe, Shacklebolt turned on him in exasperation.

"Drop it, Harry."

"But she broke the law — "

"Oh — and you never have? Great flaming wizard's balls, Harry! You want me to arrest and prosecute a witch who has lost her only child for trying to tell the world about it in the face of bureaucratic stonewalling? How the bloody hell would that make me look?"

"It's the right thing to do."

"Says who? Are you going to make the arrest? Are you?"

"Yeah, I'll do it."

"Oh, right, with a dozen photographers in your face. How the bloody hell would that make *you* look? Harry, the wizarding world is still recovering from arrests in the night and families murdered. You'll only make yourself look the bad guy if you haul in Niobe Edgecombe. Leave it."

"Maybe you'd better tell Madam Edgecombe to 'leave it.' She's trouble, Kingsley, and eventually we'll have to do something about her."

He was still considering what to do, when he received a frantic floo call from Hermione. "Madam Edgecombe has

challenged me to a duel, Harry! She's says that if I don't meet her, she'll publish a pamphlet entitled, "*Hermione Granger Murdered my Daughter!*"

"Meet me at Grimmauld Place at five, Hermione. Kreacher can make us dinner and we'll talk about what to do."

It was a silent meal. Hermione considered how very damaging Madam Edgecombe's accusation would be. People not in possession of all the facts might get the false impression that Hermione had been the aggressor —

"I could publish a pamphlet myself, you know," she declared. "I could tell the whole story of Dumbledore's Army, and about how she betrayed us to Umbridge."

"You could," Harry agreed. "But the fact that Marietta's mother was under pressure at work might make people sorry for her."

"Or I could just duel her," Hermione snapped, shoving away her plate, "I'd knock her on her silly arse and everyone would laugh at her."

Harry did not think that anyone in the current climate would laugh at Madam Edgecombe, but did not want to tell Hermione so. He wished there were someone he could ask. Shacklebolt was unsympathetic, and he was not sure he wanted to confide in McGonagall. She was still irritated with him about the School Dinner Debacle. But —

"I think we might go to Hogwarts, Hermione," he spoke up. "Maybe McGonagall would let us talk to Dumbledore."

"Oh, Harry! Let's go now."

McGonagall was frosty, but admitted them to the Headmistress' Office. She departed, giving them a look they had not seen often from her, a look that suggested that she would be counting the spoons on their departure.

"Harry, my dear boy," exclaimed Dumbledore. "How delightful! And you brought Miss Granger with you. This is practically a party! Severus, look, it's Miss Granger!"

"Charmed," gritted Snape's portrait. "I'm off, then."

Dumbledore was dreadfully disappointed. "Severus, where are you going?"

"To see if there's a pub!"

Dumbledore was sorry, but there was little advice he could offer, other than to sit down with Madam Edgecombe, and have a heart-to-heart about the dreadful toll of the war. He did not think a public duel at all a good idea.

"Either Miss Granger will win, and seem a bully, or she will be defeated by a desperate woman, who has said publicly that she has nothing to lose. That could have — fatal consequences. No, no, no. A duel won't do. A private settlement seems the wisest course."

"What are you suggesting, Albus?" asked a hated voice. Snape was back, a pint of lager in hand, regarding them all with contempt. "That they appear at her door at dead of night and eliminate the problem? You know, the two of them could hit her with a *Confundus*, and then a Memory Charm, and make her forget she ever *had* a daughter. And then send her to Australia."

Hermione turned red, realizing that somehow Snape had learned of her dealings with her own parents. Harry considered the idea. Wiping Madam Edgecombe's memory might be the most merciful thing, after all.

Before he could ask for more particulars, Dumbledore tutted, "Now, now, Severus. There's no need to take that sort of tone with them — "

"Well, you *are* discussing how to remove a difficulty discreetly. I'm surprised you haven't consulted Lucius. He's very good at that sort of thing. I certainly am not suggesting that you kill her, but it would, of course, be an easy matter for two war heroes to deal with a bereaved middle-aged clerk."

"Stop it!" Hermione burst out angrily, "You're talking as if we were some sort of Death-Eaters!"

"Well, the girl *is* dead." Snape pointed out delicately, "You mustn't be surprised that her mother doesn't like it."

Harry was fierce in Hermione's defense. "We were at war!"

"Ah," considered Snape. "Did Miss Edgecombe know that? I believe she may have been under the impression that she was at school. Permanent mutilation is a pretty stiff penalty for telling tales. Not even your father of famous memory ever did anything *permanent* to me."

"Marietta betrayed us!"

Snape's portrait took a long drink and then fixed Harry with a curious stare. "Why should she have chosen to be loyal to you, rather than to her own mother? I confess that you puzzle me. I understand you're working hand in glove

with the Malfoys now, Potter. Lucius tried to *kill* you. And yet, for a frightened sixteen-year-old girl there is to be no forgiveness? And I thought *I* was a hard man!"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. After a moment, Hermione spoke.

"Of course, it would be very wrong to duel with Madam Edgecombe when she is not in her right mind. I'm sure Harry and I can deal with her in a humane, sensitive way. I think we've taken enough of your time."

"Yeah, thanks for the ideas, Professor," Harry said, over his shoulder. The door closed behind them.



The disappearance of Madam Edgecombe caused a brief, intense stir, and utter silence followed. A few of her associates wondered, but the witch seemed to have vanished into perfect oblivion. All her papers — including notes for a forthcoming pamphlet — were gone as well. Nothing about it appeared in the pages of the DAILY PROPHET, which featured the newest thrilling episode of MY BRILLIANT CAREER — the one in which Wells traveled to Russia and crossed wands with Rasputin over the The Lost Staff of Koshchei the Deathless. It was pleasant popular entertainment, and a welcome distraction from the difficulties of daily life.

Keener observers of the wizarding scene took the appropriate lesson from the affair. Lucius Malfoy was noncommittal when intimates tried to approach him discreetly,

though he and Narcissa had plenty to say to each other in the well-defended privacy of their home. Witches and wizards, after all, live very long lives, and sometimes biding one's time—even for decades — is the best course.

Hermione found Professor McGonagall increasingly distant at the governors' meetings. Harry disliked Headmistress Rochester so much that he grumbled at Hermione's insistence that he keep attending the meetings with her. There were, he felt, more important things he could be doing to revolutionize the wizarding world.

Ironically, only the QUIBLER raised the issue, now and then, with stories that Madam Edgecombe had transfigured herself into a rock, that she had traveled back into time to see her daughter, that she had been seen wandering near Uluru in Australia, that she was dead and haunting a muggle tea shop in Charing Cross Road. The QUIBLER's position was that Marietta was certainly not a Death-Eater, and that her tragic death was due to the malevolent influence of wrackspurts.


"Let Mr. Lovegood print what he likes," Hermione comforted Harry. "A free press is the foundation of civil society."



XIII.

PAINFUL CLARITY:

HARRY AND NEVILLE

“ *ailure to pay by the thirty-day deadline will result in the confiscation of your vault at Gringotts and its entire contents —*”

“I can’t believe this!” Harry shouted.

“Master is displeased?” wailed Kreacher, appearing with a pop.

“Call me Harry.”

“Harry is displeased?”

“Not with you, Kreacher. It’s these bloody goblins!”

The goblins were angry with Harry. They had been rebuilding for months, and just in time for the Christmas holidays had sent Harry an immense bill for structural damages, personal injuries, and the theft of a watch dragon. Harry wanted to ignore them, feeling that he was not liable for damages caused in a combat situation. He had freed them from Voldemort, the wretched little berks.

The goblins, apparently, were refusing to be grateful. It was understandable that the goblins were demanding restitution from the vaults of known Death-Eaters. As far as Harry was concerned they could confiscate the lot and welcome to it — just not *his* lot.

He flooded directly to Hermione’s house, full of righteous

indignation, waving the notice.

She looked up from a cup of cocoa, very calmly, and said, "Yes, I know. I got one too."

"You too?"

"I'm the Mastermind behind The Great Gringotts Robbery. They're not pleased. I suppose we have to see it from their limited perspective, Harry. They may have not turned Bella-trix Lestrage's vault over to us, but on the other hand, they didn't turn yours over to her. They feel wronged, and goblins really don't like feeling that. It's the sort of thing that ignites Goblin Rebellions, just as Professor Binns always told us."

Harry was not up for a recap of a Binns lecture. He prowled Hermione's kitchen restlessly, and opened the fridge, absently scrounging for something interesting to eat.

"If you're hungry, Harry, find something and eat it," she pointed out primly. "You shouldn't stand there with the door open. It wastes energy."

He slammed the door shut with a growl. "I was just looking. Why don't you use cooling charms, anyway?"

"Because I don't want to. By the way, you left your socks under the bed again. I don't mind picking up for you now and then, Harry, but I am not your maid or your mother, and —"

"All right!" he shouted. She raised her brows at him, and he grumbled, "All right. I'm sorry I yelled. What are we going to do about the goblins? You're not going to pay them off, are you?" He slapped the notice down on her counter. "This is totally unacceptable. I am not paying this, and those greedy

little shites had bloody well better not confiscate my vault!"

"They won't, Harry!" she reassured him, rather eagerly. "I'm sure we can persuade the Ministry to pay the goblins on our behalf. The damage at Gringotts was due to the war. We have every right to expect the compensation to be made on our behalf by the entire British wizarding community. I can't see any problem. Everyone's being very helpful lately at work."

Harry snorted. That was an understatement. No one could describe Hermione as popular, but nowadays people certainly jumped at her every command. She had even been given a personal secretary, a Ravenclaw two years their senior, who had a stammer Harry did not remember from school. It was probably a result of the war. *Mind you, lots of people seem to have tremors or stammers when Hermione's around...*

"Oh — and Harry — don't forget to pick up the mince for dinner. Be sure it's nice and lean. The last —"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Harry growled hastily, as he escaped to the floo, feeling put upon. Without Ron in the picture, Hermione's tendency to nag had no target but Harry, and after a while it was like the screech of rusted metal scraped along a gravel road and crushed under mighty wheels of broken glass.

The motion to reimburse Gringotts on the behalf of Harry Potter and Hermione Crouch-Granger passed with only a handful of dissenting votes two days later. It was a very large sum, and would mean cut-backs elsewhere, but few seemed willing to oppose anything that Hermione so vocally favored. She had taken to wearing very nice, posh robes to work, and

walked through the Ministry halls feeling very much at home.

It was odd, though, she thought. Odd how people whispered when she passed, or did not meet her eye, or seemed to disappear when she was near. When approached, she was greeted with broad smiles, but when her back was turned, the susurrations of whispered gossip followed her everywhere. And now and then, when she saw Kingsley Shacklebolt, he did not smile, but looked at her in a grave, appraising way. It was — unsettling.

Harry, too, was feeling unsettled. The Weasleys were always super, and his mates in the Auror Office seemed to think he was shaping up well, but he could sense that others were having reservations about him. He remembered his second year, when everyone thought he was the Heir of Slytherin. This felt the same, and it was creepy. He was uncomfortably aware of what the source of the problem might be, and hoped it would blow over soon. Surely it would, if nothing happened to stir people up again. At least no one was protesting the Ministry's payoff to the goblins on his behalf — much.

That afternoon, an owl appeared with a message. Harry did not recognize it, and opened the message with a degree of caution.

Harry,
I'm home for the Christmas hols.
Could the two of us get together for a
drink? I'd really like to talk to you.
How about after you're done with work
tomorrow — around five?

Neville



Harry was surprised. He ought not to be: Neville had become a pretty impressive wizard. He had defied Voldemort to his face. He had wielded the Sword of Gryffindor. Every time Harry saw him, however, he was struck anew by the disparity between the Neville of memory, pudgy and trembling in first-year Potions, and the adult Neville, tall, broad-shouldered, and self-assured. He wondered if the first-year was still there, somewhere inside Neville, but as he sipped his drink and looked at the man opposite him, he saw no sign of it.

It was very nice to sit with Neville in his warm and cozy alcove at The Leaky Cauldron. The voices outside were low and masculine, Neville was quiet company, and the pint before him was good. Harry had told Hermione that he was meeting Neville, and not to expect to see him that evening. It was prevaricating, he knew. If he wanted to, he could certainly make it to Hermione's in time for dinner, but he felt like having a night to himself.

"So — how's Hogwarts?"

Neville shrugged. "It's good. Different. Everyone's very much nose to the grindstone. The new classes are all right."

"Rather you than me, mate. I'm so glad I took my N.E.W.T.s. I couldn't have stuck it out another year."

"It's not so bad. It's not like I did much studying last year."

"I suppose not."

"And I want all the N.E.W.T.s I can get." A slow smile quirked

at the corners of Neville's mouth. "I want to do Professor Sprout proud, since she's taking me on as her apprentice next year."

"Really? That's brilliant! What — a real apprenticeship? Is she planning on retiring?"

Neville smile became broader. "Not until I finish the apprenticeship."

"So — Crikey! You'll be a Hogwarts professor! Bloody good for you!" Harry felt genuinely impressed. "Hermione will be jealous. Professor of Herbology. That's great news!"

"Yeah, I reckon we're all growing up. Me a Professor, you an Auror, and Ron — "

Harry said straight-faced, "Ron, the respectable businessman."

They both laughed a little. Neville smiled briefly into his drink.

Harry added, "And Hermione, the Ministry mover-and-shaker."

"Yeah, Harry — I wanted to talk to you about — " Neville stopped and then cast a privacy charm. "That's better." In spite of the charm, he lowered his voice. "I wanted to talk to you about Hermione."

For a moment, Harry wondered if Neville was about to confess a secret passion for Hermione, and went through several different things he could say. Neville, however, was not crushing on Hermione. Rather the contrary.

"There been talk about her, Harry. Pretty bad talk."

Blushing furiously, Harry now wondered if news of his

changed relationship with Hermione had slipped out.

"What kind of talk?" he asked, bracing himself for embarrassment.

"That's she's going Dark, Harry."

Whatever he had expected, it was not this. Harry sat as if hit by a stunning charm. "That's rubbish!" he managed, after a gaping moment.

"Is it? I hope so. People have been hearing things, getting owls — it's all over the place. Gran told me some when I was home. Hermione's been throwing her weight around since she got the Crouch money." He put up a hand to prevent Harry's angry interruption. "Yes, I was there. I supported her. It's just that people are scared of her, Harry." He took a breath and blurted out, "People say that she killed Madam Edgecombe."

Harry's jaw dropped. "She didn't. That's a lie."

"Well, nobody's seen her, and she was pretty brassed off at Hermione. Just as she was about to issue a challenge, she ups and disappears. Nobody wants to cross her at the Ministry. At Gran's people were calling her 'The New Umbridge, Same as the Old Umbridge.' I told them they were wrong, but you need to know what's going on."

"Yeah. Thanks, Neville. People get crazy ideas. Hermione can be sort of — determined, I guess, but she means well. She's been working really hard on the board of the new school."

"She's around the Malfoys a lot, Harry. How's that working out?"

"Fine, I guess. They're putting a lot of money into it, and letting Hermione have her way about a lot of the details." Realizing how he was making Hermione sound, Harry changed the subject a little. "I've been to some of the meetings. I can't say I like the new Headmistress much — she was laying low all through the war, and now she thinks she can tell us all what to do. Do you know she's going to make all the teachers take a month of training this spring? That's really insulting to someone like Mrs. Weasley, who taught all her children!"

Neville didn't think it sounded so bad. "Looks like she wants everyone to be prepared. I wish I could have had a school to go to, instead of being taught at home by Gran and Uncle Algy. I knew I wasn't ready for Hogwarts, and it took me years to catch up. So you go to the meetings, too? I reckon that's where you've been spending all that time with Lucius Malfoy."

"I'm not spending all that much time with Malfoy. He comes to the meetings with his wife."

"Sounds like they're all in it together. I'm surprised that Draco doesn't show."

"He's at uni in the States. Miskatonic University. The Malfoys say he likes it a lot."

Neville was studying him thoughtfully. "Seems like you know a lot about the Malfoys, Harry. Does it ever seem like Lucius is trying to — influence — you? Get you to do things?"

"What do you mean?" Harry said, frowning.

"Well, I've seen pictures of the two of you together — "

"That picture was taken at the hearing. You were there! They keep printing it all the time. Malfoy was telling me not to waste my influence. Probably pretty good advice."

"Could be."

They drank for a while in uneasy silence. Finally Neville spoke again.

"So — are you and Hermione an item?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Well — word is she broke up with Ron. She seeing anybody else?"

"No."

"Well — how about it?"

"Neville!" He nodded. "Yeah, we're seeing a lot of each other. I visit the Weasleys, too, but she's on the outs with them. She doesn't have a lot of other friends." *Any other friends, actually*, he admitted to himself.

"I see. So what *did* happen to Madam Edgecombe?"

Harry took a drink, turning red again. "It's private."

"Harry," Neville said, in a low, serious voice. "Did *you* do something to her?"

"We just wanted her to shut up about — "

Neville shot to his feet, looming over Harry, casting a long shadow over his face. "*Did you do something to her?*"

"We didn't hurt her!"

"What did you do?"

"None of your business!"

Neville did not back down. He stared at Harry grimly. "Harry. Tell me. If you don't, I'm going to have to find out some other way, and that could be worse."

Harry's hand touched his wand. Just as suddenly, it occurred to him that hexing Neville would be an incredibly bad idea. He really did not want someone digging into this matter. He could not get out of the alcove without Neville moving, which Neville did not seem inclined to do. He could disapparate, and storm away as he had done throughout his schooldays, but that would not help Hermione or himself. And it would be cowardly. Harry really did not want to seem a coward to Neville.

"It was the same thing Hermione did to protect her parents. She wiped her memory and replaced it with another. She doesn't remember Marietta, and she's living in Australia. She's all right."

"Hermione did that? Did Malfoy go with her? Was it his idea?"

"No — bloody hell, Neville, we wouldn't trust *Malfoy*. It was Hermione's idea. I — sort of helped."

Neville stared at him in horror. "Harry. What's she done to you? You can't go around destroying people's minds!"

Harry winced, seeing what they had done through Neville's eyes. It *would* have to be Neville, the boy with the parents who were not ever coming home, not even with the war over and won.

Half-heartedly, he tried to explain. "Hermione was just trying to get her to be quiet! She has a right to protect herself!"

"She doesn't have a right to do that to *anyone*! Since when is she a licensed Mind Healer? Do you know what can happen when amateurs start mucking with people's memories?"

"What was she supposed to do?"

"She could have dueled her. She could have apologized. She could have written a book explaining herself. She could have done all sorts of things besides wiping a witch's mind clean! How can she be all right? How can Hermione know enough to do a personality reconstruction? Madam Edgecombe's probably in the Australian version of St. Mungo's folding *chewing-gum wrappers*!"

An awful pause. Neville still loomed, full of tall indignation. Harry had never felt so ashamed.

He croaked out, "Look, you can't go telling people about this. Everything is still pretty chaotic. Hermione could get in a lot of trouble, and she meant it for the best."

"Harry," Neville said, sitting down heavily. "Listen to yourself. You're an *Auror*. You're not supposed to break the law to suit yourself. That's everything we fought against. What gives Hermione the right to rearrange people's lives?"

"She's the brightest witch I know."

"Oh — so she can make decisions for us because she's smarter? Going to be the new Dumbledore? Hell, Harry! Dumbledore didn't start playing games like that until he was a hundred years old! Thinking you should run things because you're smart and powerful isn't just Dumbledore's sort of thing — we're talking about Voldemort! And at least

Voldemort did all seven years at Hogwarts and was Head Boy. No, Harry. Hermione can't tell us how to live and what to do and say because she thinks she's smarter than everyone else. I'll put up with that when hell freezes over! What about you? Do you want her to treat *you* like her minion?"

Harry considered his words, and had to admit that he particularly hated it when Hermione did just that. "I'll talk to her."

"You'll have to do better than that, Harry. She's got to find Madam Edgecombe and give her back her mind. And maybe you should have someone else with you when you talk to Hermione. Just — for safety's sake, in case she starts throwing *Oblivates*."

"Hermione wouldn't — " Harry thought again. "You?"

"I will if you like, but I'm not the best choice. Hermione doesn't really respect me after I was a duffer all those years in Potions."

"Luna?"

"She doesn't respect Luna either, mate. You know she doesn't. She thinks Luna's a nutter. What about Professor McGonagall?"

Harry blushed. "She and Hermione aren't getting on just now. Professor McGonagall is still hacked off about the Governors' Dinner that we organized. It was sort of — a flop."

"Really? Gran said it was brilliant, and John Wellington Wells showed up. It's true, though. I can see Hermione doing better talking to a man. Maybe Shackbolt? You all were in the Order of the Phoenix together, and he's Minis-

ter of Magic. Hermione might listen to him, and he could help keep it quiet, if he thinks that's best." Very earnestly, he added. "I do understand why having a huge scandal right now wouldn't help, but you can't just sweep a *person* under the rug. Even a person you don't like. Where the hell did Hermione get an idea like that?"

"I told you. It's what she did to protect her parents. She already knew how to do it."

"Oh. And did they appreciate it?"

"Not very much. And then we talked to Dumbledore's portrait and Snape had to interrupt, and he threw it in Hermione's face. I don't know how he found out about it."

"Harry. Snape was being *sarcastic*. He's sarcastic all the time, especially to me."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"No. It's just a picture. Snape is dead. When the picture tries it on with me, I remind it of that. It shuts up then, most of the time. I don't think you should go to a portrait for advice anyway. You don't know how much of Dumbledore is there. Gran warned me years ago about our family portraits. They only have bits of the person in them, and sometimes they're the wrong bits."

"Yeah — well, I didn't grow up around any family portraits." Then he remembered Mrs. Black at Grimmauld Place. *She couldn't possibly have been that looney all her life, or all the time...*

Grudgingly, he admitted, "Maybe things are going wrong. I promise I'll talk to Hermione, and we'll do something for

Madam Edgecombe. But Hermione really feels isolated. I'd like you and Luna to come to dinner — Friday, maybe? Hermione needs to have friends around who know her. It won't be easy, talking to Shackbolt."

XIII.

HEIRLOOMS:

HERMIONE AND HER FATHER

There were days when she regretted her impulsive generosity. This was one of them.

Harry had gone to meet Neville for the evening, and Hermione found herself very much at loose ends. She could not blame Harry for wanting to spend time with his other friends — not *exactly* — but his absence brought home to her how few human ties she had to the wizarding world. It wasn't as if she could say in return: "Oh, that's fine. I'll owl Lavender/Parvati/Ginny/Luna/anybody. We'll have a Girl's Night Out. You don't mind, do you?"

Sometimes it made her sad. Wasn't school the time to build friendships? She hadn't succeeded particularly well, and it was so unfair. There had been the War, which had made normal life impossible. She had devoted herself to helping Harry, and she had spent nearly all her free time with him and — Ron — and here she was on a Friday night with little to show for it.

Ties to the wizarding world? She snorted back a bitter laugh. Ties to *anyone*! Her parents were in Australia, and unless she called them, they remained blissfully ignorant of her existence. There was not a single soul in the muggle world that she could describe as a friend. In effect, she had vanished into thin air and no one had ever come looking for her. She had always been an outsider, even in the exclusive primary school for the gifted her parents had paid for. An outsider, trying to force her way in with her books and her cleverness and her views about how people ought to get on, if only they had the proper attitude. She was gone from them now, and utterly forgotten, her name existing there only in glowing school reports that would probably be purged in a few years. She had hoped for more from the hidden world of witches and wizards.

Witches and wizards, she had found, were just like muggles, only more so. They were just as prejudiced and blinkered and parochial and unimaginative as the muggliest muggle slumped slack-jawed in front of a telly. They were worse, of course, because they were all *armed*. Even the most pathetic excuse for a wizard knew a few ugly jinxes to cast when irritated. At school, children had the power to hurt and harm and disfigure, far more easily than their muggle counterparts, and everything in their culture urged them to experiment with and refine these powers. She had done her share of it, after all. Dead Marietta's marked face would never leave her memory. She had been wrong,

perhaps, not to have removed the hex at the end of the summer, but she had *forgotten*. Besides, it was not her *fault*! Why hadn't any of the adults in on the secret done anything? All right, she understood that Marietta had been obliterated and had not been able to ask Hermione to remove that brilliantly persistent hex. Her mother, though, seemed to have known who had been behind Marietta's just punishment — she could have come to her and begged for forgiveness, instead of wasting time with those hidebound "Healers" at Saint Mungo's!

She moved about the house restlessly, unable to settle down to anything. If only her situation with Ron hadn't made an evening with the Weasleys an impossibility! She was painfully lonely. She missed the Weasleys, for all that she said otherwise to Harry. She missed Ron, for uncouth and impossible as he was, he had been a very exciting lover, which Harry, alas, was not. Harry — oh, Harry. Harry was *nice*. Perhaps too nice. And in some ways, he was too much her brother for this — whatever kind of relationship it was — to last.

I must get out of this house, but where to go?

In the end, she went to the Albus Dumbledore School. It was hers, after all, and people ought to remember it. She had the free access of a school governor, even at nine o'clock at night. She stepped out of the floo and admired the satiny gleam of the dark woodwork. It was a splendid building, and Hermione felt the familiar pang of regret, imagining what it would have been like to reign as mistress here. She should

have waited, and considered, and looked about before she had given it all away. If put to it, the Malfoys could have coughed up an adequate school facility. She had not yet seen Croughthiwichicombe Hall in the spring, and suspected it would be enchanting in every sense of the word.

Dumbledore's giant portrait was dozing above her head. A light shone out from under the door of the Headmistress' Office. Hermione passed by, not caring to chat with Jane Rochester, but she heard voices, and paused. One of the voices was deep and velvety, and engaged in very earnest conversation.

So. Headmistress Rochester was in her office of an evening to talk to Professor Snape's portrait? *She must be as hard up for company as I am!*

Curious about what they might have to say to one another when alone, Hermione pressed her ear to the door.

Which swung open, soundlessly. "Come in, Miss Crouch-Granger," the Headmistress called.

The room was lit only with soft witch-light. It cast odd shadows on Jane Rochester's thin face and reflected off the surface of Snape's portrait, making his face paler than ever, his dark eyes more cavernous. Some might call the light romantic, but Hermione thought it was rather eerie.

Very embarrassed at being discovered, she pulled herself erect, knowing she should have anticipated simple portal wards. "I heard voices. I was not sure you wanted to be disturbed."

"We don't," Snape told her, sounding very bored. "But I would not want your latest adventures in eavesdropping

to be in vain. Shall we provide a penseive, so that you may observe our entire private conversation?"

"I'm sorry," said Hermione, feeling no one had the right to challenge her presence in her own house. Trying to find some reason to be there, she told the Headmistress, "I've just come to sort through some of the Crouch heirlooms. I didn't want to bother anyone while they were at work. I didn't know you were here."

"Quite all right," Headmistress Rochester assured her, brow contracted skeptically. "Go right ahead. Would you like some tea first? I was just about to make myself a cup."

"No, thank you," Hermione refused, with a glance at Portrait Snape. He was staring at her with a black and bitter gaze, obviously wanting her gone. She scowled back at him, and he snorted, rolling his eyes at the Headmistress. "I'll just be going, then," Hermione said in farewell. "Don't mind me."

"I won't."

"Well, I mind her — " Snape told the Headmistress as the door closed. "She's not what she appears to be, you know — "

The voices abruptly stilled. Hermione realized that a privacy ward had been cast, and felt very offended. They were probably talking about her!

Defiantly, she stalked to the grand staircase and decided she really would take another look at the Crouch collection. It was stored in Mrs. Crouch's bedroom: family souvenirs and magical artifacts and grimoires and genealogies. Hermione had gone through the Gringotts vault and found little other

than heaps of money and some old-fashioned jewels. Apparently, the Crouches had been proud of having nothing they need hide from the eyes of other wizards. That did not mean that some of their possessions had not been used for very dodgy ends. Hermione still had not located the invisibility cloak that Crouch had used to sneak his son into the World Cup. Hermione very much wanted such a cloak of her own. It opened a world of possibilities. She could indeed use Harry's whenever she liked, but somehow she would always have to tell him what she wanted it for. She needed her own, if she was to find out what was being said about her at the Ministry.

The room was to her left, further down the hall. The darkness closed in around her, and Hermione called out, "*Lumos!*"

Eyes followed her. The whispers began.

"— she's one of us, they say — "

"— dear Albus told me. A Halfblood — "

"— yes, yes, but better than nothing. She's known for fighting that latest dark wizard, what's-his-name — "

"— I thought that was the Potter heir — "

"— yes, but she's very much the power behind the throne — "

Head held high, she flung open the door. A soft rattling and murmur stirred in the room. It was musty and close, and much more crowded than she remembered. Others had been here, dutifully setting aside everything pertaining to the last two generations of Crouches. Hermione would need her wand for searching through the room, and so lit a pair of beautiful little lamps, whose fairy arms each held a

candle. Perhaps she should take them home...

"That's *her*, Mamma," hissed the voice of young man. "She's the one I told you about."

"Oh, is it really?"

Hermione turned and found herself facing a wide portrait set on the floor. Part of it was concealed by the corner of the bed, but Hermione had no trouble distinguishing the subjects of the painting. It was a fine family group of the Crouches: mother and father, and young Barty. Her half-brother was fresh out of Hogwarts, dressed much like his father for his first job at the Ministry.

Her father was looking at her. Hermione clutched at her wand, willing herself not to run away. This was perfectly awful. He was looking at her, very gravely, and saying nothing. Barty Junior was still whispering furiously to his mother.

Mrs. Crouch was a delicate-looking woman, with neatly groomed fair hair and robes as impeccable as her husband's. "How do you do, Hermione?" she greeted the girl in a soft, lady-like voice. "I am Thalia Crouch." To the man beside her she said, "Speak to her, dearest. You know you ought to."

Bartemius Crouch, Senior, cleared his throat and spoke. "Hello, Hermione. How are you?"

"How am I?" Hermione wondered. This was positively surreal. "I'm quite well, thank you. I'm just going through some some of the magical items. You wouldn't know what's become of the invisibility cloak, would you?"

"Sorry, no," answered Mrs. Crouch.

Her husband said, almost simultaneously, "What do you want it for?"

Hermione drew herself up, and replied, "That is none of your business. You have no right to question me, since you took such care never to play a role in my life. You never even spoke to me or looked at me at the World Cup or at Hogwarts. It's a little late to be all paternal now."

"I told you," sneered Barty Junior. "Nasty Halfblood bastard. No breeding, no decency. Just here to grab what she can. I should have killed her when I had the chance."

"Barty, darling!" his mother expostulated. "Halfblood she may be, but she's the last of the Crouches. I know that means a great deal to your father."

"It does," Crouch agreed, his eyes studying Hermione. "Your brows are very like my mother's. You may think I never looked at you at Hogwarts, but I did. I took care, though, that you not see me looking. You might have thought me some dirty old man. I found out a great deal about you. A brilliant student — the best of your year. I was wrong not to acknowledge you and bring you forward. I would have, if not for Barty. It was all mixed up with having to look after Barty. I always meant to do something for you when that was settled."

His son barked a contemptuous laugh. "That's not what you said when I confronted you with the papers from the Department of Unintended Consequences! You know what he told me then, Halfblood? That you were nothing to him — a mistake — an error in judgement! You should never have been born."

"I did not put it that way, Barty," Crouch said heavily. "I know you were disappointed in me — "

"Disappointed?" Barty sneered at Hermione. "Do you know what is like for your world to end, Halfblood? Do you know what it's like to find out that your life is a lie? That your own father betrayed your mother, and lowered himself to rut with a Muggle? You should have been wiped off the face of the earth. The very next night I pledged myself to the Dark Lord."

"Then why didn't you kill me?" Hermione asked in a whisper. "You had nearly a whole year to do it."

He sniggered. "Couldn't do that. Had bigger fish to fry. Had to get to Potter first. Oh, I was loyal to my Master. He needed Potter, and I daren't tip my hand and ruin everything. I had plans for you, of course, oh yes. Later, when everyone was busy moaning over the corpse of the Boy-Who-Blundered-into-a-Killing Curse-again."

Hermione sneered back at him. "Well, Harry destroyed your precious Master. By the way, speaking of blunders, how is that Halfblood Dark Lord thing working out for you, anyway? Did you know? It's very interesting, because either you knew and you're a hypocrite, or you didn't know, and you're a fool!"

Barty shrieked and pointed his painted wand at her. "*Avada Kevadra*." The painting briefly glowed a pretty apple green. The young man swore horribly, and vanished off to the side of the picture. Hermione burst out laughing.

"He's your *brother*, my dear," Mrs. Crouch reproved her

gently. "You ought not to provoke him so."

"Well, he shouldn't try to curse me! Be fair!"

"Why should I be fair, Hermione?" the woman in the portrait asked, astonished. "He's my child, and you aren't. One must always stand up for one's own child." Her eyes rested reproachfully on Crouch. "That's where you went wrong, Bartemius."

"True. I confess it. Sending Barty to Azkaban was a great mistake, but it was the honorable thing."

"You're such an idealist, dearest," Mrs. Crouch informed her husband with hesitant tenderness. "People do hate that, you know."

Hermione protested. "I don't think that's true — "

Crouch shook his head. "It only proves Thalia's superior understanding of human nature, for it is undoubtedly true. I see it now. I see how I could have managed it all so much more cleverly, had I not been bent on impressing everyone with how much more clever and high-minded I was than anyone else. Pictures do talk among themselves, you see. I've learned quite a bit about how your nasty little war played out. Dumbledore always liked to give the impression that he was an idealist himself — someone who always thought the best of everybody. What he actually thought, of course, was that we were all children — some naughty, some nice — but all ultimately longing for a kindly grandfather to tell them how to think and what to feel. Obviously, he was as great a fool as I. Riddle, too, tried to recreate wizarding kind in some bizarre manner he fancied superior, but of course he was such a lunatic most

of us wouldn't have dreamed of following him. As for myself, I thought that if the wizarding world could see that I would treat my own son no differently than any other criminal — ”

“Oh, Bartemius!” his wife mourned softly

He frowned. “— than any other *criminal*— it would inspire the rest of the slugs to put the law and civic duty first. What it actually did was make me appear inhuman and appalling.”

“He was your *son*, dearest. It's only natural to favor your son. If you don't, people don't feel they have any common ground with you, and they become frightened — ”

“So you see, my dear — Miss — er, Hermione,” Crouch concluded, debonair brow knit in thought. “That's where it went to pieces. I was dealing with people as they ought to be, not as they are. I dislike saying it, but I daresay that where's Tom Riddle and Dumbledore came a-cropper, too.”

“People *ought* to be better than they are,” Hermione interrupted, rather fiercely. “Or at least witches and wizards ought to be. We have no excuse. All this power, and it's wasted on mean and petty hexes and stupid Quidditch games and joke shops and ridiculous imitations of lower-middle class muggle life. Where's the great wizarding literature and music? Where are our great buildings and achievements? Why did muggles get to the Moon ahead of us?”

Crouch looked at her with some satisfaction. “Those are excellent questions, Hermione. Questions that I have often asked myself. I suppose the answer lies first in our very small population. If you examine the muggle world — as I

have — you will find that truly creative people are unusual, and genius quite rare. There simply aren't enough of us — and besides we have already won the Birth Lottery, so to speak, by being gifted with our magical abilities. It would seem rather greedy to expect musical or artistic or scientific genius in addition to that! Most witches and wizards are very ordinary people with the extraordinary gift of magic.”

“But Mozart — ”

“A muggle, my dear. I know the stories and the silly things in the popular histories, but the fact is, it's absolute piffle about Mozart and Shakespeare and Leonardo and Isaac Newton. All muggles, through and through. The closest the English wizarding world has come to a genius in something other than magic was the poet Christopher Smart, and the conflict between magic and his religion drove him mad.”

“I don't know who Christopher Smart is. Sorry.”

Crouch winced and looked very disappointed. “Do go to the library and look him up. Mid-eighteenth century. Half-blood. Mother was related to the Abbotts, and thus he was our cousin many times removed. Wouldn't go to Hogwarts. Thought we were evil. Ended in a madhouse. Are you fond of cats, Hermione?”

Startled at the change of subject, she said, “Well — yes, I am. Very fond of them.”

Crouch smiled faintly, and began to recite:

*“For the Cherub Cat is a term of the Angel Tiger.
For he has the subtlety and hissing of a serpent, which in*

goodness he suppresses.

*For he will not do destruction, if he is well-fed, neither
will he spit without provocation.*

*For he purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he's a
good Cat.*

*For he is an instrument for the children to learn benevo-
lence upon.*

*For every house is incomplete without him and a bless-
ing is lacking in the spirit.*

*For the Lord commanded Moses concerning the cats at
the departure of the Children of Israel from Egypt.*

For every family had one cat at least in the bag.

For the English Cats are the best in Europe... "

He broke off, with a little self-conscious laugh. " — And so forth, at great length."

"Bartemius can recite books and books of poetry. It's part of his Gift of Languages," Mrs. Crouch informed Hermione. "You don't have the Gift, I understand."

"No," Hermione said stiffly. "I wish I did." She sat down on the bench by the dressing table, and played with the silver brush. "If I understand you correctly, you are saying that to change the British wizarding world, we first need more witches and wizards."

"Well, not necessarily, first, but yes, I do think our population needs to be larger — "

" — and that it's important to seem normal and One of the People, and be a doting parent — "

"Oh, yes," Crouch agreed. "The public always goes for that. Pictures of the fond parents and the little kiddies. Dumbledore did remarkably well for a politician without a family. Usually it's the kiss of death. No one thinks you have a stake in the future. That was one of Voldemort's chief weaknesses as a public figure, too, though of course he was too balmy to recognize it." He recollected that his own family had been *his* Kiss of Death, so to speak, and harumphed. "Of course, it doesn't do not to keep an eye on the children — make sure they don't do anything to embarrass you. I shouldn't have left it all to Thalia here, while I was building my career."

"I didn't mind, dearest," Mrs. Crouch assured him fondly. "You were doing very important work."

"Yes, yes," he replied testily, "but don't you see? Barty managed to completely undermine it all, with his idiotic teen-age rebellion. Had I the chance to revisit my mistakes, I should nip all that nonsense in the bud, and the best way is to start when they're young."

Hermione was very interested. "A proper, unexceptionable home life, well-behaved children with a carefully directed education. What else?"

"Quidditch," he answered succinctly. "Either manage to be interested in Quidditch, or have someone about you who is. Shows the common touch."

"I think Quidditch is ridiculous," Hermione objected. "What a waste of resources, time — everything. How can

such a tiny population have all these Quidditch leagues?"

"The opiate of the people. If Riddle had presented himself as a rabid Quidditch fan, he might have succeeded. Creates a great illusion of normalcy, and people love that. I was always very visible at the World Cup. It's a very important event internationally, and a very good place to get one's face and name known."

Hermione felt she should be taking notes. He was very plausible, but he was not being entirely honest with her... She rose from the bench, and leaned closer to the picture.

"You can't claim you're hands are clean, you know," she objected. "What about Sirius Black? He wasn't even given a trial!"

Crouch sniffed. "And the rest of the wizarding world was simply outraged and appalled, of course. My dear Hermione, I don't deny that mistakes were made, but Black did his own case no good by not denying guilt at the scene. Surely by now you have learned enough of wizarding law to know how it differs from Muggle criminal statutes."

"It's pretty primitive," Hermione agreed, not caring to be diplomatic about it.

"Perhaps so, but the public wanted action, and I was within the letter of our law. You will find that when people are frightened they will do anything to feel safe. They will offer up their rights and liberties and sell out their friends and neighbors. Tell me, was there an outcry for trials later? Did some concerned citizen or some public-spirited journalist campaign for Black to have his day in court? Did Dumbledore?

"No. I've never understood why."

"Hermione, the answer before you is that he also believed Black to be guilty, and that he had no more regard for Muggle legal forms than any other wizard. Our customs are different, our law is different, and until you accept that, you will never be fully a part of the wizarding world."

"Oh, yes — different customs. Like the custom you followed when you raped my mother?"

"Hermione!" Mrs. Crouch gasped.

Crouch glared at her. "You know nothing about it. I never harmed your mother."

"What a lie! You raped her and got her pregnant and obliviated her, and you have the gall —"

"I did not harm your mother!"

A deep, wounding silence. After a moment, Crouch continued, in a low, angry voice, "I have already made my apologies and explanations to my wife. Whatever wrong I did, I did to her as well, and she has forgiven me. If you actually want to know what happened, instead of braying out your stupid assumptions, I will tell you. Can you be silent and listen?"

Hermione huffed a deep, indignant breath.


"Yes," she said, and sat down on the floor in front of the picture.



XIV.

SPELLBOUND IN DARKNESS:

HERMIONE AND HER FATHER II

“ *did not harm your mother!*”

Hermione could not believe that the portrait of Bartemius Crouch, Senior — her father — could be telling the truth. Much as she would like to believe that her mother had not been injured by her first contact with the magical world, it seemed highly unlikely. Still, she sat on the floor in front of the picture, waiting to hear Crouch’s side of the story.

“Perhaps I should go, my dear,” Mrs. Crouch suggested. “It may be easier if you speak to Hermione alone.”

Hermione thought Mrs. Crouch was a very understanding woman.

“Besides,” the lady continued, “I must go see to Barty. He is such a sensitive boy. You hurt his feelings horribly, criticizing his life choices, Hermione. That wasn’t very nice of you.”

Hermione thought Mrs. Crouch was a brain-dead, blindly indulgent mother.

“It *would* be easier if Mr. Crouch and I talked alone, thank you,” she said crisply. She sat without speaking again until the woman had vanished, bustling away anxiously to soothe her child’s wounded sensibilities.

Crouch looked back at her and sighed. “Yes, I know.”

“What a Mama’s boy. She certainly convinced him he could do no wrong.”

Crouch grimaced. “The fault is mine as well. I was not at home enough in Barty’s early years. Thalia never could say no to him, and so if there was disciplining or punishing to be done it was always left to me. Looking back, I can perfectly understand why Barty hated me by the time he was six years old. Thalia always made such a good impression in public, but — ”

“ — She was actually a terrible mother.”

“Well — yes. That did not become clear to me for some time, however. As I said, much of the fault is mine. None so blind as will not see. We began our lives together with such hopes. I suppose everyone does.”

“So where does my mother fit in with all this?”

Crouch appeared to be considering what to say. “I believe the muggle term is ‘mid-life crisis.’”

Hermione scoffed. “You were having a ‘*mid-life crisis*?’”

“So was your mother.” He saw her shock and incredulity. “Of course,” he amended, “mid-life may be an inappropriate term. Your mother was only thirty-five at the time, and even though muggles do not live as long as wizards, she might still be considered young. Nonetheless, Lesley was a woman of mature years and judgment, and a very unhappy one.”

“How did you meet?”

He smiled to himself, enjoying the memory. “Did you ever wonder — ? No — I daresay not. You would have taken

little notice of me. However, perhaps, if you think about it, you will recall that when first you saw me at the World Cup, I, unlike the wizards about me, was not making an ass of myself in matters of dress."

"Yes. I do remember that you looked very — dapper — I suppose."

He gave her a suspicious, uneasy glance. "Not inappropriate, I trust?"

"No. Your clothing was very nice, and you could have easily been taken for a well-to-do Muggle."

He was satisfied, and settled back into his comfortable, painted wing chair. "I've always prided myself in my ability to fit in — to understand the customs and appearance of any circle in which I found myself. It's an indispensable skill in diplomacy — even more important than a talent for languages. Too often, British wizards make a fetish of not making any accommodations to other cultures."

Hermione was impressed. "Oh, I totally agree. And it's so foolish. The people you deal with would feel you had no respect for them."

"Just so," he nodded approvingly. "Of course, to dress and behave appropriately, one must travel and study the natives in their normal surroundings. I knew wizards all over the world. I also — though it was not something I was very open about, wizards being as close-minded as they are — spent a great deal of time in Muggle London."

He frowned. "You see, what you said about the lack of

wizarding high culture struck a chord in me, for I found it so myself. One achieves a good position in the Ministry, one has a family and a fine home and one makes the usual social rounds, but after a time one begins to wonder if — " he paused.

" — If?" Hermione prompted.

"To be honest, I wondered, 'Is this it? Is this all there is? Will I be at the office, and then home, and then dining with the same faces and ideas and jokes for the rest of my very long life?' I tell you, it was not a very attractive prospect."

"You were unhappy yourself."

"Frankly, yes. I thought that when Barty went off to Hogwarts, Thalia and I would renew our relationship, but that did not happen. She had had a difficult time when Barty was born, and then when he went to school she became very depressed. She had devoted every moment to him until he was eleven, and then she seemed lost. I suggested that we try for another child, but she could not bear to make Barty feel that we were 'replacing' him. She wrote to him every day, and lived for his letters. And gradually, we ceased — " he grimaced again. "I am sure you do not wish to hear the particulars, but after some time, we were married in name only."

Hermione shook her head emphatically. "I certainly don't want to hear the particulars!"

"And it was a grim time — the years in the late Seventies. Voldemort was gaining ground, and there was a sort of feeling of impending doom hanging over us all. I would leave the Ministry and slip away into Muggle London to escape. There

was so much to see and to do. I had been going to the cinema for years. I still fancy myself something of film critic."

"Really? You went to Muggle films?"

He snorted. "What else? Please don't say things unworthy of your intelligence, Hermione. I remember the date I met Lesley perfectly well: November ninth, nineteen seventy-eight. A grey day and the streets slick with rain. The *Daily Prophet* was full of gloom. Barty was in his seventh year at Hogwarts and Thalia wouldn't show me his letters. I knew — without wanting to know it — that he was in a very dodgy crowd, spouting all sorts of stupid Blood Purity rubbish. Dumbledore had owled me about his behavior and I had rowed with Thalia about it the night before. I was, as you say, an unhappy man."

"So you went to Muggle London, and —?"

"There was a little cinema in Soho that showed old classics on Thursday evenings. I saw the poster for *Brief Encounter* and could not resist. I always rather liked Trevor Howard. Have you ever seen it?"

"*Brief Encounter*?" Hermione shook her head. "It must be very old."

"1946, actually. Marvelous piece of work. Directed by David Lean." He smiled wryly. "Yes, I suppose it's old, and it's black-and-white, and nothing at all of interest to someone your age. Your mother, however, also loved the classics — as I'm sure you know."

Hermione scowled, thinking. "I don't — oh." She remem-

bered. "Yes. Sometimes she would watch old movies on the telly by herself, but Dad and I always wanted to change to other things, and she never made a fuss about it. I remember she tried to get me to watch some of her favorites with her, but I really didn't see the point."

"It's very hard when your child doesn't love the things that are precious to you," Crouch sighed. "But it seems to be the law of life. I'm sorry Lesley had no one to sit with her. However, on November 9, 1978, she did."

"You went into the cinema, and you saw *Brief Encounter*. She was there."

"Exactly. I believe I had seen her there before. That night, very few people were in the audience. I sat down during an old newsreel they were showing, and the light shone on your mother's face, two rows back. It was a very nice face, watching the screen with such interest and intelligence and curiosity — so thoughtful and responsive. The film began. It's quite moving — and the music ravished me. Near the end I could hear someone sobbing, and I realized that it was the woman behind me. The light came on, and she was still in tears. I don't know what I was thinking, but I approached her and offered her my handkerchief."

"She said, 'I didn't know anyone still carried pocket handkerchiefs! You must work in the City.'"

"'Actually, I do,' I told her. 'Are you all right?' She blew her nose, and apologized for being silly over an old movie. We talked, and I invited her to join me in a teashop nearby. I

remember that we had fresh Banbury buns and we must have talked for hours. It was the best conversation of my life.”

Hermione was entranced. “But nothing happened?”

“Of course not!” Crouch was indignant. “We had just met. All the same, I found out all sorts of things about her — and she about me, too. While I obviously could say nothing about the wizarding world, we had plenty to talk about. I told her I had a job at ‘the Ministry.’ I was just evasive enough that she received the desirable impression that it was something I could not speak of. I suppose it made me something of a man of mystery. She told me she was a dentist. I was curious, and asked her why she had become one.

“‘I’m an idealist, I suppose,’ she said. She laughed a little.

“‘I think all healers ought to have ideals, really,’ I told her, ‘Otherwise, their work would be unbearable. What interests you the most about it?’

“‘Preventive dentistry — well, obviously one way of preventing disease is worth fifty ways of curing it. That’s where my ideals come in. Preventive dentistry is all about with conditions, living conditions and hygiene and common-sense.’

“It was wonderful talking to her. She was interested in the world — all of it, and she wanted to make it a better place, out of a deep, unsentimental desire to do good. I had never met anyone like her.

“We told each from the first that we were married. I even told her that I had a son at boarding school. She looked sad, and I wondered what was wrong.

“She told me how much she wanted a child, but it had just not worked out. They had tried all sorts of therapies and treatments, but with no results. Lesley had even broached the idea of adoption with her husband, but he was absolutely against it. She was beginning to feel very much alone, since he seemed to share none of her interests in the arts or in social causes. That she might also never be a mother was almost more than she could bear.

“I told her that having a child was not necessarily a cure for her problems. I said — well, perhaps I said too much. She would have gathered that Thalia and I had gone our separate ways and that I too, was finding life rather a disappointment at the moment.

“We agreed to meet again the following Thursday.”

“And did you?”

“Yes. We saw *Suspicion*, with Cary Grant and Joan Fontaine.”

Hermione smiled. “Do you remember every film you saw with my mother?”

“Yes,” he answered, quite seriously. “I have an excellent memory anyway, but even without it, they would have left a vivid impression. I was intensely conscious of my secret life as a wizard, and each film seemed a comment on it and a rebuke to me.”

“Tell me.”

“Very well: *Brief Encounter*, *Suspicion*, *Odd Man Out*, *Jamaica Inn*, *The Third Man*, *Rebecca*, and *An Outcast of the Islands*.”

“But when — ?”

“The night we saw *Jamaica Inn*, if you must know. The

film disturbed me deeply. The heroine finds herself among people who are not what they appear to be — who have a secret life unknown to her, one that could threaten her very existence.” He took a deep breath. “But it could not last. We both felt dreadfully guilty. After we saw the last film, we went to the flat I had taken, and afterwards she told me she could not see me again. She and her husband were taking up a practice in Guilford, and were trying to make a go of their marriage. She said goodbye, and walked down the stairs alone. I sat in the darkened flat, absolutely winded. I had no thoughts at all — only an overwhelming desire not to feel anything ever again.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione whispered. “Surely she must have known — when she knew she was — well — didn’t she try to contact you?”

“No. I kept the flat for some time, but I received no letters. I never heard from her again. When I received the notice from the Department of Unintended Consequences, I was — I don’t know — I was not sure what to do. I found her address in Guilford and waited outside one afternoon, wearing a Notice-Me-Not Charm. She emerged, looking very different — happy, I suppose. She and her husband were taking you for an outing. I did not get a good look at you, for you were tiny and wrapped up tightly, but they were laughing and talking. They were a family. I left soon afterwards.”

“You didn’t alter her memory then?”

“No. Why should I? I was always very careful about doing

no perceptible magic in her presence.”

“ — I asked her, you see, if my Dad was really my father, and she said he was — ”

“I understand that you performed a global memory charm on her, did you not, when you hid her from the Death-Eaters?”

“Yes — but — oh, no!”

“I’m afraid so, Hermione. If you knew nothing about me, how could you be sure that you had restored all her memories intact? It is a tricky business, and something is always lost.”

Hermione felt like crying. “She hardly remembers me! I have to remind her that I exist!”

“I am very sorry. It was a terrible misfortune that you never had proper magical guidance all those years. It would have spared you so much — I should have come forward — whatever the consequences — ”

“No!” Hermione protested. “It’s not your fault! I was so arrogant! I thought I could do anything! You’ve suffered too, anyway.”

“True. Shortly after Barty began working for the Ministry, he somehow found out about you. Obviously, he was enraged. He told his mother, and they both felt utterly betrayed. Dreadful things happened. I made hideous mistakes. Barty was revealed as a Death Eater; Barty was sent to Azkaban; Thalia became terminally ill; she implored me to let her take Barty’s place. The final horror was all those ghastly years with Barty in the house under Imperius. My life was a nightmare. The weeks I spent with your mother are

very nearly the only time in my life I do not regret.”

They sat together in silence for some time. Finally Hermione said, “Thank you for telling me. It means a lot, to know that she wasn’t raped or abused — ” Her voice caught in her throat. She realized that tears were running unheeded down her cheeks. “Could I speak to you again sometime?”

“Whenever you wish, Hermione. I have all the time in the world.”

She stumbled out, casting odd shadows. The room settled into soft rustles, as the portraits whispered to one another.

“Did you tell her anything resembling the truth, dearest?”

Thalia Crouch emerged from the shadows at the edge of the frame, and resumed her place by her husband.

“I told her what she needed to hear.”

“She was so worried that you had hurt her Muggle mother. Did you?”

“I don’t wish to discuss it — but no. Much of what I told her was true, and if the rest was not true, then it ought to have been. There was no point in telling her what happened when the poor woman and I saw each other that following February. She was expecting the child and was ready to leave her husband for me.”

“And obviously that could never have happened,” Thalia observed serenely, patting Crouch’s arm.

“No,” he replied dully. “I did, in fact, have to *Oblivate* her at that point, but it was for the best. A nicely-judged *Oblivate*, if I say so myself. She would have remembered

me and the films we saw, but nothing afterwards.”

“You were very bad, dearest, to betray me like that. Whatever you tried to make of your little affair, it wasn’t really very happy, was it?”

“No. I suppose not.”

“And you came back to me, after all, and here we are, together as a family forever. That is what *I* call a happy ending. Oh, here’s Barty! That dreadful girl is gone, Barty. Come here, darling.”

XV.

INTERVENTION:

HARRY AND THE OLD CROWD

In the end, Harry decided against consulting with Shackbolt. He had never had much luck in asking adults for help, and now did not seem a good time to start.

I suppose — we’re the adults now, anyway, he realized in wonder.

Young adults, of course, but of legal age and full of experience. The thought gave him more confidence. Neville had made it clear that he must speak to Hermione, or Neville would do it himself. Neither of them thought that would work particularly well. Bringing in Shackbolt, as a former member of the Order of the Phoenix seemed like a good idea at first,

but then Harry realized that telling him what had been done to Madam Edgecombe might irreparably damage Hermione's career. He had never been all that close to Shacklebolt, was not sure he could be trusted to protect Hermione.

He would not be the one to suffer. Right now Harry knew he had a certain immunity, even though he was as guilty as Hermione. Shacklebolt had not pursued the matter of Harry's use of the Unforgivables, and the papers seemed only to want to print praise of their hero. Hermione was vastly more vulnerable. Her adventures during their wandering still had not received the recognition they merited. Instead, her morals were questioned, and her birth and the inheritance suit had made her a controversial figure. Harry had done what he could to help, but another public scandal might be too much.

Lucius Malfoy had warned him about spreading his influence too thin. Malfoy understood such things. Harry detested him, but couldn't help feeling a certain gratification when Malfoy took time to talk to him after the Governors' meetings. Harry found them curiously comforting: short, serious conversations about the state of the wizarding world and what was being done to rebuild it. Malfoy never talked down to him, or gave the impression that he thought Harry was not adult enough to know the challenges confronting them. Mrs. Malfoy was always very nice to him too, and Harry was concerned for her as she got bigger and bigger with her pregnancy, and sometimes seemed frail and uncomfortable. She talked in such a loving way about her new baby, and about the little Muggleborn who

had just come to live with them. The girl's name was Willow, and the Malfoys told everyone that she was a beautiful child. Lucius Malfoy looked like a different person the day he proudly declared that Willow had performed her first accidental magic and was clearly destined to be a strong witch.

And then Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy always told him how Draco was getting on at Miskatonic. It gave Harry the eerie feeling of a Past-That-Should-Have-Been being superimposed over the ugly realities of the last few years. In the Malfoy's conversations, Draco was no longer his hated enemy, but a classmate and a sports rival, who had also suffered in the course of the War.

It was a very seductive version of the past. Sometimes Harry had to struggle to keep the actual facts straight. He would replay events in his mind, wishing that some of his stupider mistakes could be undone. What if he had taken Draco's hand when offered, and not made an enemy at the age of eleven? He invented new conversations in which he managed to reconcile both Weasley and Malfoy, and somehow they ended up in the same compartment eating chocolate frogs together. He did not offend Professor Snape that first day in Potions, and made the man see him as Lily's son. He united all the houses, and no one plotted to sneak Death Eaters into Hogwarts. Dumbledore trusted him enough to tell him everything he needed to know to free Sirius, and to find and somehow destroy the horcruxes. Dumbledore did not die, and was still Headmaster of Hogwarts; Snape did not die, and was still in the dungeons, eternally brewing potions...

Of course, that was all make-believe. He might as well imagine a childhood at Hogwarts, or living with Weasleys, or even — he laughed and winced simultaneously — under the guardianship of Severus Snape! It would be easy to lose himself in such fantasies, but it would not help his situation or Hermione's.

He sat beside Hermione today at the latest meeting of the governors of the Dumbledore school, considering how best to deal with the subject of Madam Edgecombe and the rumors that Hermione had used Dark Magic. Should he talk to her alone? He could hardly take the high road, when he had been as eager to get Madam Edgecombe out of the way as Hermione herself. Yes, they had gone too far, but Hermione had a right to protect herself. No one else seemed likely to step up to do it.

During a break, Harry whispered to Hermione, "I've been thinking, Hermione. Why don't we have a dinner of our own — over at my place, say? Everyone is home for the Christmas hols."

Hermione groaned. "Oh, Harry! Not another John Wellington Wells fiasco! I couldn't survive it!"

"No, just our own old crowd. I had a good time with Neville the other night, and he'd like to see you, too. We could ask Luna. We haven't seen her in months."

"Not Ron," Hermione said flatly, her lips thinning to invisibility. "Not Ron and not Ginny. I'm not ready for that, Harry. Maybe someday, but not yet."

"All right," Harry agreed. "Just the four of us. We can hear

about Hogwarts. Neville really likes the new courses."

"All right. I can take Luna for a night. She's been a loyal friend, after all. It would be — different." Hermione found herself in favor of the idea. It was very grown-up, holding a private dinner party. Inviting schoolfriends, with no one older, gave it a certain cachet as an event that marked their coming of age. And she needed friends so very much. "I like it. When?"

"Tomorrow night?"

"So soon? Well, I suppose we could have it at my house, Harry —"

"I'd really like to have it at Grimmauld Place. Sort of a remembrance of the days of the Order of the Phoenix."

"If you put it that way, I understand. Tomorrow night. I'll mark it down in my organiser."



Files and memoranda and conferences and floo calls. Hermione was overwhelmed with work the following day. Her secretary called in sick, leaving Hermione to manage the work alone. By noon she was tense and snappish, her hair standing straight on end from all the times she had rumbled it in frustration. She was informed of her curious appearance by the mirror in the Ladies', and she promptly silenced the object permanently. Somewhat calmer, she splashed water on her face, left the room, and walked down the hall, thinking that perhaps she should get some air.

"Hermione, are you quite all right?"

She turned, and saw Percy Weasley not ten feet away, studying her anxiously.

"Oh. Hello, Percy."

He came closer and asked in an undertone, "Have you been crying?"

She stared, not understanding him at first. "Oh! No. Just worn to a frazzle, I'm afraid."

"I believe in hard work, but sometimes one must take a break, if only stay sharp. Would you join me for lunch?"

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. Percy? Ask her to lunch? He was looking at her in a perfectly open and unsuspecting way —

"I'd love to."

They began talking about their work as they walked. The other Weasleys — no, make that Ron and twins — had always mocked Percy for his devotion to duty and his love of Ministry work, but Hermione, away from the presence of those arbiters of taste, found Percy very agreeable and like-minded company. She had been afraid he would try to raise the issue of her break-up with Ron, but soon found that nothing was further from his mind. They found a table for two in the Ministry canteen, and enjoyed a light meal while they talked over their respective frustrations and triumphs.

Percy was silent a moment, and then said, "I never told you how happy I was for you when you won your suit. The Crouch name is a very old and honorable one, and I'm glad it hasn't died out."

"Not *completely*," Hermione said, a touch wryly.

"No — I'm sure Mr. Crouch would be very proud of you and the good start you've made at the Ministry." He gave a mirthless, self-conscious laugh. "Oh, I know how my family jokes about him calling me 'Weatherby' and how I didn't notice that he was in such a — " He cleared his throat. "He must have been overwhelmed, torn between his family and his duty. I can understand that perfectly. No wonder he wasn't himself. He was a great man, and a great wizard. He wasn't the only one who found the events of the War too much for him."

"You're very kind to say so, Percy," Hermione replied. "I've — " Impulsively she confided in him. "I've found a portrait of him at the new school. He spoke to me so kindly, and gave me heaps of advice about working for the Ministry."

Percy shook his head. "He didn't treat you as he should have, Hermione. I don't mean to set you against him, but he did fall short of the mark there."

"Yes. He confessed it to me. He said he was sorry, and that he had made terrible mistakes. That's why he wants to help me — to keep me from doing the same sorts of things."

"Do you suppose — " Percy began, and then blushed hot pink. "Do you suppose I might see him sometime? I did like working for him so very much."

"I don't see why you couldn't."

"The school is such a splendid idea. It's most generous of you, giving away your family estate for the betterment of wizardkind — most generous."

Percy's speech might once have struck her as pompous. Well — it *was* a bit pompous, but it was also well-meant. And true, too. She *had* been generous.

"I don't deny that I regret it from time to time. It's a beautiful place. You'll enjoy seeing it. Giving it away was the right thing to do — otherwise the school might have been delayed for years. It's so important to get right to work making the wizarding world a better place, and that starts with education!"

"I couldn't agree more!" Percy nodded eagerly. "The absolute foundation of society. By eleven, children have learned bad habits and blood prejudice, but if one were to get hold of them when they were younger —"

"Oh, yes. I don't care much for the new Headmistress personally, but she has put together a sound syllabus for primary schooling. It dovetails nicely into the Hogwarts curriculum, especially with the changes Professor McGonagall has made."

"Do tell me about them! I've only heard third-hand. Ginny never writes the parts that I'm interested in. It's only Quidditch and smash the oppo and all that."

Hermione actually laughed. "I can believe it. Not that Ginny isn't quite a good student, of course."

"I worry about her. Mum talks about nothing but her marrying Harry at the end of the year. Somehow I think — that's not what Ginny wants."

"Really?" Hermione was surprised, and then, thinking it over, not so surprised. "Well, maybe she wants a little time

to herself. That's not so much to ask. Maybe she'd like to be independent for a year or two first and see the world. Being the wife of the Great Hero is likely to be very difficult."

"You're so right. Like living in a fishbowl! But Mum is set on it. I don't know what Ginny would do otherwise, anyway. I don't believe she's interested in the working for the Ministry, though I suppose George and —" he stammered, "R — Ron — Ron might give her a place at the shop."

Hermione smiled painfully. "You can say Ron's name, Percy. I'm still upset about the books, but —"

"What about the books?"

Briefly, Hermione gave him her version of the water prank, detailing the damage to her book collection, her family's home, and her grand piano. Percy, having heard about the glorious nature of the prank, but not about the damage it had done, was gratifyingly sympathetic.

"They just don't think, that lot. They just don't respect the feelings of others! I had no idea it had done so much harm —"

"It's all right now —"

"No, it isn't, Hermione! When Ron told me about your row, he didn't really describe what he did, which makes me believe that he didn't really understand why you were so distraught. Books, musical instruments — they have little value to him, so he doesn't recognize their value to others. I'll have a talk with him."

Hermione sighed, thinking that such a talk was unlikely to be productive. Percy grimaced. "Oh, I know he'll scoff, but

you'd be surprised. My word carries a bit more weight than it used to. Without the twins piling on me — " he stopped and blushed again. "You must think me a horrible person. I do miss Fred, but you must understand that the united twins were unstoppable at home. They were allied against the world — against their own family. I never had a chance growing up. It's very different now — George misses Fred horribly. I've seen something odd at the shop. You'd think that George would try to make Ron take Fred's role as the loose cannon — George was always a bit more responsible — but it's not like that at all. George has somehow taken on Fred's part, leaving Ron to be the responsible one. As awful a thing to say as it is, I think it's been good for Ron. He loves the business and he's getting good at it — especially the business part — the talking to people part. A joke shop may not be my cup of tea, but it may be just the thing for Ron."

"Yes. I think you're right. After all, if it's wrong for other people to tease me for being a good student and loving books, it would be equally wrong for me to despise them for liking jokes and Quidditch and that sort of thing. People are all individuals, after all."

"That's a very mature attitude," Percy approved. "I've always thought you a very sensible, hard-working girl. I know how hard it is when people talk behind one's back and are so eager to attribute the worst motives to one."

Hermione frowned. "I'm not sure I understand you."

Innocently, Percy did not try to obfuscate. "I had heard

such silly gossip about you. One can't avoid it, you know. There are always those, even in one's own department, who spend hours talking instead of working. Ever since Madam Edgecombe vanished, there has been talk — stupid, odious, talk. I've put paid to it in my own department — I think I know a fellow Gryffindor better than they do, certainly."

She felt she had plunged suddenly into icy water. "People have been talking about me — and Madam Edgecombe?"

"Please don't think I believe such rot! After all the rubbish the papers printed about you, it was just outrageous to hear such slime. Saying that you have used Dark Arts — or made away with the wretched woman — it was too much! I gave them a piece of my mind, I can tell you!"

Hermione could barely process his indignation. She said weakly, "That was very good of you, Percy. Thanks."

He paused, appalled, looking at her again. "Oh, no! Have I put my foot in it again? You *hadn't* heard, had you? Hermione, I'm so sorry — "

"No!" She gulped and then flapped her hand in negation. "No," she repeated, lowering her voice. "I really appreciate you telling me. I had no idea. Now I understand so much of what has been going on around me. You acted as a friend, telling me."

He looked pink and miserable. "I just wanted to have a pleasant lunch, that's all. I thought you knew."

"I do, *now*," she said, very firmly. "Don't blame yourself, Percy. I needed to know this. I don't hear all the rumors and I wasn't able to do anything about it."

"I know it seems wrong and silly," he ventured, "but it does help if one goes about and chats up people. I schedule time for it each week. I find out all sorts of things that way, things that I would never know through professional channels. Your father did that, you know — always talked to people. He did it better than I do, of course — he wasn't so clumsy." He grimaced and took a long gulp of tea.

"It's all a matter of practice, I expect," she mused.

"That's it! I hope to be rather more graceful in a few years. One can't hope to advance in the Ministry without superior communication skills, and I'm afraid that includes what you and I would dismiss as gossip. Of course," he considered, "You, and I, too, to a far smaller extent, benefit from our relationship to Harry. As long as you have Harry on your side, you're pretty safe."

She shivered. "I'll just have to keep Harry on my side, then."

"Not much chance of losing him! Here — I'll pay — No, really — If you must, you can pay next time. We'll do this again won't we? Splendid!"



So it was that at dinner that night, Hermione was not taken utterly by surprise. The realization that she was suspected, that she was in danger, danger, danger haunted her while she dressed for the dinner at Harry's. When Neville, looking so tall and manly, gently broached the matter, Hermione was almost relieved. She had had a little time to

consider her situation. She was, as she acknowledged later to herself, very, very lucky.

Instead of denying it, or blaming Madam Edgecombe, which might have been her first impulse otherwise, she did exactly the right thing. She burst into tears.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry hung over her, miserably guilty. "I told Neville all about it. He made me see what a terrible thing we did. We've got to find Madam Edgecombe and put her right."

Hermione ran upstairs to the room she had shared with Ginny, and threw herself onto the bed, sobbing. She could hear voices outside the door, concerned for her, wondering what they had better do.

The door opened, and someone came and sat on the edge of the bed.

"We've all been so frightened for so long," Luna said. "It's hard to remember that we don't have to fight anymore. I've always wanted to go to Australia. It's never been properly explored, you know, not really."

Hermione lay still, collecting her terrified, scattered thoughts. Quite suddenly, she knew what to do.

"I've felt for such a long time that we did something terrible, but I didn't want to go against Harry," she whispered. "You and Neville mustn't miss school — not your last year. Harry can't afford to miss his training. I have some leave coming. I'll go myself and take care of it. It's only right that it should be me. I did it, and I should fix it."

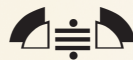
Neville and Harry were standing in the doorway, very

subdued. Neville said, "I know you've always done everything to back Harry up, Hermione. You've been great, but this time you went too far. I'm glad you figured it out for yourself. I hate the thought of you going alone, though."

"No — it's all right," Hermione replied, thinking very quickly and clearly. "My parents live there now, after all. I can stay with them. The sooner it's done, the better. I'll find Madam Edgecombe, give her back her memories, and help her do whatever she wants to do. I'm ready to face the consequences."

"Hermione," Harry groaned. "I was just as guilty as you. We'll pull through together."

She flicked him a smile, thinking how unlikely it was that he would have to answer for anything, ever. How could he have ambushed her like this? She was on her own, but she was Hermione Crouch-Granger, and she could cope with whatever danger Fate threw in her path.



NIOBE EDGECOMBE IN AUSTRALIA! Exclusive Interview to **THE DAILY PROPHET!**

The mother of Marietta Edgecombe broke her silence Thursday, revealing that she had emigrated to Australia, trying to put together the pieces of her shattered life. Rumors that she was dead or somehow magically silenced were proved unfounded when the witch herself contacted this news organization, wishing to set the record straight.

"I was so devastated by Marietta's death. I blamed everyone. I even blamed myself. I should have blamed the one really responsible — Tom Riddle, who called himself Lord Voldemort. He's

the one ultimately responsible for everything."

When asked about her accusations against Hermione Crouch-Granger and her threats to duel the publisher of this paper, Madam Edgecombe was apologetic. "I think I was mad for awhile. No — I *was* mad. Everything was a storm in my head. I couldn't accept what had happened. I wanted to die."

She was asked what had happened to change her feelings.

"I had always dreamed of travel, but with the war and raising a child alone, it wasn't possible. Suddenly, I was terribly, dreadfully free, and I decided impulsively to leave everything behind and start anew. I went to Australia because it was as far away as I could get, and because I wanted to wander the desert wilderness alone and think things through. I was on a spiritual quest to find myself."

As suspected, the rumoured sighting of her near Ayers Rock proved to be factual. Said Madam Edgecombe. "The desert is so full of peace. I came into contact with local wizards who use magic in an entirely new form. I plan to dedicate the rest of my life to study and research here. I shall never return to England. I wish you well, but this is goodbye."

Madam Edgecombe then broke the connection, but left an address at the Australian Ministry where she may be contacted in an emergency. Another victim of the War has found hope and reconciliation. Our best wishes go with Madam Edgecombe in her future pursuits.



"She was really all right?" Harry asked in amazement, setting down the paper. Hermione had arrived only yesterday, back from her lightning trip to Australia, and Madam Edgecombe was showing she had little appetite for vengeance. He had come to Hermione's house to support her, and now the news was all good.

Hermione eyed him with a touch of scorn. "Of course she wasn't *all right*, Harry! She was very sad when she had her memories again. She didn't want to see me or talk with me, but I told her that people were worried about her. I'm glad she contacted the paper. Now maybe all the rumors will settle down."

"I suppose. Hermione, we can never do anything like that again!"

"Of course we won't, Harry," Hermione assured him patiently, not wanting to offend him — not wanting to do anything that would make Harry cease to be her ally and protector. "We'll work for change, but strictly within the law from now on. After all, people look to us to set an example."

"That's right," he agreed. He was hugely relieved to find that he and Hermione would not be sent to Azkaban, or that he would not be reprimanded and forced out of the Auror program. Not having to discuss this with Shacklebolt allowed him to take a deep breath of satisfaction. He should have known that Hermione could handle it all.

Hermione got up and began clearing the dishes. It was shamefully easy to make Harry believe whatever she needed him to believe. She was sorry it was necessary to deceive him, but he had brought it on himself. He had had no right to tattle to Neville and Luna, and then to stage an "intervention," as if Hermione were the one at fault! She would never trust him with a secret again. If he had known how hard she had worked on Madam Edgecombe, rifling through her memories, giving her back bits and pieces, selecting it all carefully, modifying what needed to be modified, and deleting what must be deleted...

Well, it had been a frightful lot of work, but Madam Edgecombe seemed saner and happier now. She had not really remembered Hermione at all, but Hermione had implanted the right things to say to the DAILY PROPHET. Now the poor woman could return to the Outback and her "spiritual quest," and Hermione could get on with the business of reforming the wizarding world. It was a vexing detour, but a tremendously educational one, in a way. She must discuss it with her father.

Harry was asking her a question.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

His embarrassment alerted her. "Well," he said, "I really liked having people to dinner. I know parts of it upset you, but it was really neat having friends over. I was thinking about having a party."

"Harry — of course you can have a party if you like. Have a proper holiday party! Kreacher can get out some of the Black family's decorations: Black stars, Black tinsel, Black lights, Black balls — "

"Stop!" he laughed helplessly. "You're a scary woman, Hermione!"

She smiled. "Don't you forget it! So," she said casually, "Who's invited?"

"Everyone!" He shrugged, and then said, "I want to invite Ron and Ginny, Hermione, but I want you to come too. Do you think you'll be all right? I imagine," he hesitated. "I imagine Ron will want to bring Lavender. He's seeing her, you know."

"How is she?" Hermione asked. "Is the bite any better?"

"Now and then. At least her face wasn't bitten. No one can tell from the outside. It never does quite heal though, you know."

"I'm sorry it happened to her. Of course Ron-Ron can bring Lav-Lav. If I come," she smiled, readying her bomb-shell. "I'd like to bring Percy."

"Percy!"

"Yes. We've become friendly at work. He's been very kind to me. It would be a nice gesture."

"Hermione," Harry asked, quite crestfallen. "are you thinking about — *dating* Percy?"

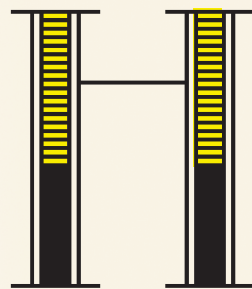
She threw up her hands. "No, Molly-Jump to Conclusions-Weasley — I'm not! We're friends. You know — *friends*? Well, Percy is *my* friend, and I'd like to bring him along."

"Whatever." He shook his head. "Percy?"

XVI.

CELEBRATION:

HARRY AND THE NEW YEAR



Harry wanted the first real party of his very own to be a success. On New Year's Day, he would open Grimmauld Place from three in the afternoon to midnight. Planning a party, when it was his own party, and not a political

function, could be something of a lark. All the muggle treats he had longed for and never been permitted would be spread out in every room — every flavor of crisp, and Kreacher's version of those delicious little cheesy-bite thingies that Aunt Petunia served her lady friends. There would be cakes and tarts and tiny meat pies and crusty fresh bread and even huge platters — at Hermione's behest — of veggies and fruits. He would serve all the exotic cheeses he was exploring, with the best of best biscuits, and there would be simply heaps of cold ham and cold chicken and cold beef and pickles. Kegs of butterbeer, and two-score dainty bottles of gillywater, a crate of firewhiskey, and muggle wine and beer and soft drinks from a dozen nations were stockpiled in the cellar. Kreacher drew out of his foggy memory a recipe for perfect cocoa topped with whipped cream, and another for hot mulled cider. At Harry's house there would be no stinginess or selfishness or mingy thrift. Everyone would have enough of everything they liked, even Harry himself.

Kreacher had finished the work on Grimmauld Place, brightening and updating the house until it sparkled. Harry decided to take down his Christmas trimmings. For his New Year's party everything would be very simple and plain. The only decorations would be banks of candles softening the witch-light in the house to warm gold. The new furniture blended well with the well-polished pieces Harry had kept. Harry watched the preparations unfold, toes wriggling in his socks with anticipation.

He thought it would be fun to expose the uninitiated to the delights of Muggle electronics. To that end, Hermione rigged a shielding charm that enabled Muggle music to be played in the kitchen, dining room, and drawing room despite the high level of ambient magic. The atmosphere was highest in the library, making it not the best choice for Harry's idea of entertainment. It held Harry's private desk, anyway, and what papers he had would be locked in there, and the room sealed off from visitors. Instead, Harry had Kreacher clear out one of the biggest unused bedrooms, and it was furnished afresh as a larger version of Hermione's "media room." Plushy, squashy sofas and chairs faced the largest telly money could buy. He put together a collection of films that might be entertaining to witches and wizards — his own favorite, *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*, of course, but many others. He thought, once introduced to the idea of alternate dimensions, his friends would enjoy the *STAR WARS* trilogy.

Since he was inviting all his old Quidditch teammates and quite a few of his rivals, he also asked Hermione to bring the videotape they had made of the last game between the Harpies and the Cannons. Hermione provided the tape glumly, knowing that once the Quidditch fiends had seen it, they would always want more, much more. Harry was inviting his mates among the Aurors, too, and there was a little overlap, for two of the Hufflepuffs from Harry's early years at Hogwarts were junior Aurors, whom he saw every day at work.

Another group included the original members of Dumb-

ledore's Army. Not all of them, of course. Some were scattered in the aftermath of war. Cho Chang, luckily, was out of the country, visiting distant relations in Hong Kong. Had she been in England, he would have felt wormish not inviting her — though he knew it would have been a disaster.

He had not intended to invite older adults, originally, but he was going to the Weasleys for New Year's Eve, and it would have been awkward not to invite them all. Percy might have been hesitant about accepting, had not Harry given him a individual invitation in writing, mentioning how much Hermione appreciated his help as she was settling into her Ministry work. No — they were all coming, and Hermione was warned and ready.

Having invited the Weasleys, he felt he ought to invite the last surviving members of the Order of the Phoenix. He approached Shackbolt nervously, assuming that the Minister of Magic had better things to do on New Year's Eve than attend a trainee Auror's party, but Shackbolt was very kind, and said he would make time to have a look-in. None of the rest were available, or were too old, or were not in a celebratory mood.

However, he should not have been surprised to learn that Horace Slughorn had heard about the occasion. Harry received a cheery note. *"Such a jolly idea, an old-fashioned open house. All of your old teachers would love to wish you the very happiest of New Years!"* After that, it was impossible not to invite every member of the Hogwarts staff.

Altogether, Harry found that he had no idea how many people were actually coming, for word was out about Harry's party, and all sorts of people wanted to be invited: people whom Harry had not dreamed of inviting. Those who managed an invitation would be bringing their own family and friends and less-favored acquaintances. There was nothing for it, but to order in supplemental provisions. He could not bear the idea that people might be sent away with empty stomachs.

"It's just a party," he complained. "It's for my *friends*. There was an article in the *Prophet* about it! How stupid is that? It's not like it's some sort of political rally!"

"Harry," Hermione told him wryly, "everything you do will always be political, in a sense. You're a hero and a symbol. Naturally everyone wants to be associated with you. It's not like they'll stay the whole time. The article got it wrong, of course. It said the party started at six. Probably the crashers will come for a few minutes, just to say they were here."

The trickiest of all were the Malfoys. Mrs. Malfoy had said something about wanting Harry and Hermione to see their little Willow. A Governors' meeting was so inappropriate, but perhaps they and Andromeda Tonks might drop by just for a moment on New Year's Day and bring Teddy and Willow...

"You told Mrs. Malfoy they could come!" Hermione was astounded. "Harry — the Weasleys will be here and they'll be here all day long! How are you going to manage it without a ghastly scene?"

"Mrs. Tonks and Mrs. Malfoy are pretty thick together

now. I want to see Teddy, and how can I say they can't come and bring that little orphan of theirs! I've thought about it, Hermione, and I told them to come around four. I'll meet them by the drawing room floo. You know Mrs. Weasley — she won't leave the kitchen or at least the dining room the whole time she's here. Up in the media room, I'll put on the Quidditch game about half past three. The rest of the Weasleys won't budge from the room until it's over — and that won't be until nearly seven! It's perfect!"

She raised her brows. "Thank you for letting me know to be in the drawing room, too. At this point I can deal with the Malfoys more easily than the Weasleys." She thought about it a little more. "Really, I'd like to hear more about Miskatonic, so that's a safe topic. Anyway, I'll see to the music. I was thinking about putting on some soft classical music — beautiful stuff that wizarding types won't have heard and can't possibly sneer at. We can have something more popular in the dining room and kitchen."

"Sounds super! Thanks, Hermione!"

Before he could hold his wonderful party, however, there was New Year's Eve dinner at the Weasleys to get through. Harry worried about Hermione, and asked what she would be doing on New Year's Eve. She was vague, but did not seem unhappy.

"Oh — I don't know. I thought I'd drop by the school and look over a few of the Crouch family things. They collected some wonderful magical items over the years. And then I'll

just head home, make myself a scrumptious dinner for one, and relax with a good book. Don't worry about me, Harry. I'll be fine. I need to rest up for your party the next day! I'm looking forward to it so much!"

"Yeah," he smiled. "It'll be great."



To Hermione's annoyance, Jane Rochester also seemed to have nothing better to do on New Year's Eve than to spend it in her office at the Dumbledore School. There was a covered dish, kept warm by a charm, set aside on a table; and on her desk, a cauldron at the boil. An oddly-marked drop cloth covered a portion of the floor. Hermione wondered if the Headmistress was redecorating already. Hermione could have sworn those were arithmantic symbols...

"Visiting the Crouch Room again, Hermione?" the Headmistress asked.

"Yes. There is so much to go through — "

"Quite."

Hermione looked beyond her and saw a bottle of champagne, chilling in a bed of ice, and two crystal flutes on a silver tray. "Are you expecting someone?"

"Later, perhaps," the Headmistress remarked. "Was there anything else you wanted?"

"Oh — I meant to ask to have a look at the science syllabus. It's so important to reconcile muggle scientific discoveries with magical research."

"Of course. It's in the staff room — I shan't be a moment."

She disappeared through an inner door, and Hermione was left standing in the Head's office. She felt eyes on her, and turned to find Professor Snape's portrait regarding her with curiosity.

"You're quite enthralled by the Crouch memorabilia, I take it."

"Yes — I suppose I am. It's quite interesting, finding out about one's ancestors."

He did not honor that with a reply, but narrowed his eyes. "I understand you did not sit the Potions N.E.W.T."

Embarrassed, Hermione shook her head. "No. I was very — depressed — at the time. It was so awful, what happened to you — I've rather lost my taste for the subject."

"I see. You wished to honor the memory of my *sacrifice*," he intoned, very sarcastically, "by dropping altogether the subject nearest my heart. An extraordinary way to show your respect."

"I've been extremely busy," she huffed indignantly. "too busy to study an area that doesn't apply to my work — "

"Potions applies to *everything*!" he roared, sunken eyes flashing black lightning. "Just because your little clerkly paper-pushing does not demand it for the moment, you cannot know what your *life* may require! Such a trade-school mentality. I thought you were the one for long-term thinking in your little clique! Of course," his voice dropped to a derisive purr. "your talent was always for following directions — for mere brewing by-the-book. I never saw any evidence of any more creative talent. Perhaps it's as well you have dropped a

subject at which you knew you could never excel.”

“I was the best Potions student of my year!” Hermione snarled, her pride rubbed raw. “I was the best Potions student at Hogwarts! I made Polyjuice my second year. Name any one else who could do as much!”

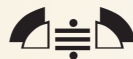
“Yes, I remember how well *that* went!” Snape shot back. “At that, you never would have done it on your own. Without Potter, you would have lived a humdrum existence indeed.”

“Without Harry, I wouldn’t have lived past my first Halloween at Hogwarts,” Hermione retorted tartly. “I would have had my head smashed in by a troll! What kind of school has trolls in the dungeons?”

Snape shrugged, not arguing the point. “Schools administered by Albus Dumbledore. Ah! Headmistress!” he greeted Jane Rochester in a far pleasanter tone. “Let us not keep Miss Crouch-Granger from her *family*.”

Without expression, the Headmistress handed Hermione the necessary folder. “No, indeed. Good night, Miss Crouch-Granger.”

“Good night.” Hermione stepped outside and heard the lock click behind her, and then sensed the unnatural stillness of a silencing charm.



Dinner at the Weasley’s was not the happiest meal Harry had ever experienced among them.

The clan had gathered, and the table was extended mag-

ically to include them all. Molly and Fleur bickered over the sauces and over how done the vegetables should be, and about the treacle tart Molly had made, *just in case* the exquisite confections Fleur had brought for pudding were not enough. “It’s Harry’s favorite, after all!”

Harry was placed between Ron and Ginny — when Ginny was allowed to sit — and Molly smiled fondly whenever she looked their way, which seemed to be every five minutes.

“She’s like a vampire,” Ginny grumbled, running back and forth, serving the menfolk. “Don’t eat all the Yorkshire puddings, you lot. Leave one for me.”

“First come, first served,” said Ron, shoveling, and Ginny rapped him over the head with a spoon. “Ow!”

“Are you sure I can’t help, Mrs. Weasley?” Lavender Brown asked timidly, embarrassed to be the only female present doing nothing but eating.

“But you’re a *guest* here, Lavender dear,” Molly protested. “Besides — with your condition, I wouldn’t *dream* of making you work.”

Lavender flushed red and her eyes filled. She glanced up the table at the scarred face of Bill Weasley. He was talking with his brother George, and had not heard. Ron’s heaping plate had his undivided attention at the moment.

“Don’t mind her,” Ginny whispered, “she doesn’t mean any harm. She doesn’t realize how it sounds.”

The great topic at dinner was how very important it was to start planning a wedding *early*. Molly went on about the

troubles she had had, and how to avoid them. She raised the issue of a bridal gown, which was unfortunate. Fleur offered to take Ginny shopping in Paris, which entirely took the wind out of Molly's sails.

"Of course, Ginny dear, if that what you want, it's perfectly fine with me. I *had* hoped you would wear your grandmother's gown. I wore it, too, you know, and with a few alterations —"

Ginny snorted, and then pretended to cough. "Sorry. I hadn't thought about it, actually. So, are any of you coming to see me destroy Ravenclaw next month?"

The meal seemed to last for hours, and was as delicious as usual, though the undercurrents between Molly and Fleur, and Molly and Lavender, and Molly and Ginny really did not make for a peaceful evening. Bill would lay his hand on Fleur's whenever Molly said something particularly outrageous — as if to say "it's only the one night." Ron was oblivious. Mr. Weasley wanted to hear about the "Muggle-style" entertainment they were to have the following day. George wondered if it would have applications to the new product line. This proved the most successful subject of conversation, and Harry tried to keep it going as long as possible.

Percy startled everyone when he mentioned lunching with Hermione.

"She's doing splendidly — a hard worker. We had such a pleasant time. She's full of plans and ideas, like any newcomer to the Ministry — but she'll learn. She just needs a mentor — someone to take her under his wing."

"As long as that's all she's under," Ron muttered.

Percy heard him, and sniffed, "There's no need to be vulgar. I would have thought, knowing Hermione so long, you would have been careful not to damage her books. I couldn't blame her for being angry with you."

"So?" George began to grin, "Is there a Ministry romance in the works between Big-Head Boy and the Brain of Gryffindor?"

"What's that?" Molly asked, not catching the conversation.

Helpfully, Fleur told her, "Percy was speaking of taking Hermione Crouch to lunch. He said he had a good time."

"Hermione?" Molly asked, wide-eyed. "Percy, are you seeing Hermione?"

Percy said patiently, "Yes, Mother. I see her every day at work at the Ministry. We had a nice lunch together and discussed the importance of early education."

"Better you than me," Ron growled. Lavender smiled uneasily.

"Yes," Percy said, rather smugly, "I'm sure you're right."

"Well —" Molly was bewildered, but trying to adjust her opinions. "Hermione and Percy! Perhaps that would be for the best, after all..."

"Molly," Arthur said softly, "They just had *lunch*."

Harry tuned the conversation out, not being charmed by the juxtaposition of Percy and Hermione in the conversation. It was time for pudding, and he found himself in the position of trying to please two witches at once. It meant eating both a piece of treacle tart and a helping of *soufflé au*

chocolat, which all in all, was no bad thing.

And thus the evening passed. A kiss with Ginny at midnight sounded nice enough — but not a kiss witnessed by her entire family and positively stage-managed by her mother. It was actually rather disturbing to have his potential mother-in-law hovering and cooing. The Weasley men laughed at them both — and surreptitiously scowled at Harry. Lavender smiled weakly. She had a headache, it seemed, and went home just after midnight. Molly thought it very sensible, and urged Lavender to have a good sleep-in and not worry about Harry's party.

Harry could not let that pass. "I'd be very sorry if you didn't come, Lavender!" he declared. "You're one of the people the party was planned for from the first!"

She smiled, more naturally, and promised she would be there. She flooed home, and Ginny dragged Ron aside, asking him what he meant by letting Lavender floo home alone.

"But she's just going home!" he shrugged, hunting through the kitchen for a late-night snack. "She doesn't need any help!"

"It was rude! You're supposed to see her home, you horrible lout!" She glared at Harry. "If anyone treated *me* like that, he could just find himself another girlfriend!"

With that, Harry decided that he needed his rest, and escaped to the quiet of Grimmauld Place.



"New Year's Day!"

Harry awakened early, in a hurry to get up and dress, and then he prowled the house, gloating over his preparations. When Hermione arrived, just after noon, he showed them to her all over again. The food was laid out: sumptuous, lavish. Everything would be kept fresh and at the perfect temperature with the help of Kreacher's helpful little magics. The candles would be lit at precisely five minutes to three. Hermione had brought the music for each room, and loaded it into the players. The videotapes sat ready by the telly. Harry had a little schedule scribbled on a shirt cuff. He had given some thought to his clothes. He might have gone completely muggle, ordinarily, but since some older wizards and witches were coming, he decided to mix the styles. Over a plain white shirt and tan dress slacks, he wore casual wizarding robes in black, loose and unfastened. Black was also a compromise. Everyone would be looking for meaning in everything he did. He liked green, but someone was certain to see a pro-Slytherin message there. Black was safe and familiar, and after all, it wouldn't show the dirt.

Hermione was quiet, but admiring and praising everything. She was full of her own concerns. Her father had asked for her help — for something minor, perhaps, but important to him. He wanted a special frame, a frame charmed to admit no one but himself, around a canvas depicting the Crouch library as it had been before the school changed everything. It would not be too difficult — there were several pictures

of the house for a wizarding artist to work with. Hermione agreed it was a very good idea. The framed canvas could be placed elsewhere, and Hermione and her father would be able to chat in private more easily. More important to him, no one else would be able to enter the frame, giving him some escape from his wife and son.

"They're quite mad, Hermione. It's dreadful to listen to them. I feel as if I would do anything to be alone."

She quite understood. Besides, he would like to have the picture placed somewhere else — somewhere that he could use to observe the doings at the school. He was quite interested in Hermione's project. "An idea whose time has come," he agreed. "Punitive measures were not perfectly effective against Dark Wizardry. I merely drove the movement underground. Much better to indoctrinate the young. If Barty had not been home-schooled..."

And then, Hermione had been more upset than she realized by Professor Snape's jeers. Once home, she had gone downstairs to her old potions laboratory. It was really quite nice. She spent some time dusting it and thinking about the Seventh Year Potions Curriculum. It would give her something to work on in her spare time. The book was already there, since she had planned to study ahead as she always had. She would not be held back, waiting for the slowest in the class. She would not have to listen to teachers either gibe at Harry, or fawn over him. She might make great progress in a short time.

As much as she hated to admit it, Professor Snape was right: Potions applied to everything. She had been silly and sentimental to be put off. So much of the spell work on Madam Edgecombe could have been achieved more easily with Potions, which she could have carefully prepared ahead of time, and then administered in a moment. Potions could keep Hermione herself healthy and alert and productive much more safely than could spells. One could do extraordinary things with Potions, if one applied oneself properly. If she had questions, she could write to Professor Slughorn. She was not sure asking Professor Snape for his assistance would garner her anything but more sarcasm.

She busied herself with getting the music going in the kitchen and dining room. Those rooms were on the ground floor, and Hermione had selected light Christmas music — not too loud, but very cheerful. The candles were lit throughout the house. The clock chimed three, very sweetly. Harry beamed at Hermione, waiting for the guests.

"I'll wait by the drawing room floor," Hermione volunteered. "Most of the guests will arrive there."

"Not the Weasleys. They can get through straight to the kitchen, if they ask for it by name."

"I know." She trotted upstairs, waiting for the fire to blaze green.

Surprisingly, the Weasleys did not arrive together. Molly and Arthur, with Ginny in tow, came at the last stroke of three, as expected, bringing massive quantities of food. It

all looked good, naturally, so it was laid out, mostly in the kitchen and dining room. Ron, Charlie, and George arrived soon after. Arthur was enchanted with the “muggle music machine,” and Harry showed him how to use the controls.

“Oh, Harry, dear! This is just splendid!” Molly praised. “You’ve done wonders with the old place. It could use a woman’s touch, of course, “she confided at the top of her voice, “but it’s very nice all the same. My, the cider smells lovely — just a hint more cinnamon, though, I think,” she muttered, rummaging through the cupboards.

The drawing room was up on the next floor, and Hermione started the music there: Glazounov’s *THE SEASONS*. It all looked and sounded and smelled very good. Harry had put together a very nice party, Hermione thought approvingly. Ginny entered the room and threw herself into a chair.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Ginny. How are you?”

“Oh, sit down. I’m not going to yell at you. I’ve missed you. Percy was singing your praises at dinner last night.”

“That was nice of him. I had a pleasant lunch with him the other day.”

“So he said. So — you and Percy?”

“No! It’s not like that.”

“If you want to get Ron back, you probably could. I think after our cozy family dinner last night Lavender might head for the hills. Mum was rather awful to her — without meaning to be, but still...”

“Ron and I will never work. We’re just too different — ”

“Right. He’s a man and you’re a woman. I understand.”

“I hear that your mother is wild over weddings.”

“Oh, thank you very much!”

“You’re not?”

“No. Between us, I may have a chance as starter for the Harpies next year.”

“You want to play *Quidditch*? Professionally?” Remembering that not everyone was the same, after all, she smiled encouragingly. “I’m sure you’d be brilliant at it. Does your mother know?”

“No! I don’t want her to know until it’s all settled. She’s fixed on this idea of Harry and me marrying as soon as I finish school.”

“I thought — you and Harry...” Hermione’s voice trailed off, as she considered the possibilities.

“Maybe someday. Maybe not. Maybe when he gets a clue about courtship. Not while I live at home.”

“Oh! You want to move out after school?”

“Absolutely. My own flat, my own friends. Like you. I’ve never even seen your house.”

“I’d love to have you over. Why can’t you visit before school starts?”

“It’s impossible. Mum watches my every move. I’m lucky I’m allowed out of her sight today. She’s busy downstairs insulting Kreacher. After I finish school, though, I’m off.”

“We’ll have another party to celebrate.”

They stayed together, chatting happily. Hermione saw the Weasley men, now including Bill and Percy, pass upstairs on their way to see the taped Quidditch game. She smiled to herself, feeling safe for the time being.

Lavender Brown popped through the floo at that very moment, looking about uncertainly. Hermione got up to greet her. "Hello! How nice to see you! It's just Gryffindor girls up here right now."

"Hello, Hermione. Is — ?"

"Ron's gone upstairs to watch Quidditch. I thought you were coming together."

"I thought so too, but he never showed."

"Never mind. Let me get you a drink."

"Look here," Ginny said, giving Lavender a hug, "Got to run. I want to see that game. The two of you can talk about my awful family behind my back, and welcome to it!"

She darted upstairs, quick and lithe as the athlete she was.

Hermione and Lavender looked at each other and sighed. "I do like Ron an awful lot," Lavender confessed, "but he can be so inconsiderate. How could he forget we were coming here together?"

"He just hasn't quite grown up, I'm afraid."

"I get the impression that his family — except for Ginny, of course — isn't interested in him growing up."

"Maybe so. He's always been the baby brother. So much has changed, people cling to the familiar."

"I suppose."

More old friends were arriving: Lee and Seamus and Oliver and Angelina. Another half-dozen came in the next five minutes. Hermione directed most of them to the upstairs Quidditch game. She told Angelina to make Harry come downstairs and greet his guests.

Everyone was mixing nicely. Lavender saw Parvati and rushed into her arms. They vanished into a corner, absorbed in whispers and confidences. Hermione was glad to see Lavender looking happier.

Neville and Luna arrived. Hermione had dreaded seeing them, but met them with a smile and a hug for each. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too," Neville said softly. They led Hermione aside, wanting to hear all about Australia. She had practiced the tale, and made it brief.

Luna considered her story, her blue eyes full of visions. "It sounds as if Madam Edgecombe had an epiphany in the desert. It's certainly always been the place for it. I must go there."

Neville was curious, "She was that forgiving? Really?"

"Not very forgiving," Hermione told them, looking rather miserable. "It was horrible. She was so unhappy when she got her memories back. She could hardly bear to look at me. It was very, very uncomfortable. I apologised, but she didn't want to hear about it. She said I wasn't worth suffering over. Then she became very, very calm and listened when I told her that people at home were worrying about her. She shook her head, and said it wasn't home for her

— not anymore. Everyone she loved was gone and she didn't want to go back. She needed the sun and the heat on the rocks and the great empty space in the Outback. Now that she had all her memories and education back, she saw there was work to be done down there that would fill her life." Hermione grimaced. "I sort of slunk away. She's not happy, but she has something to live for now."

They both sighed. Hermione waited, terribly anxious, but doing her best to hide it. She hated thinking about it, hated recalling Madam Edgecombe's pain and loneliness, her memories of being afraid of Umbridge, and being afraid for Marietta, her agony when she found her daughter dead... She blinked and gave a great sniff.

"Well," Neville said, "I still think someone should have gone with you for support. It sounds like it was very hard thing to do, but I'm proud that you did it, Hermione. Everything's all right then."

Hermione gave a weak laugh, "As far as possible, given everything that's happened."

Harry came down and met them, looking very happy. Everyone seemed to be having a wonderful time. More guests were coming through the floo, and most were going downstairs to the dining room after the requisite handshake with Harry Potter.

Hermione stood loyally by him. Harry muttered, "I hope my hand doesn't fall off before midnight."

"I'm sure there's a potion for it."

At precisely four, Andy Tonks arrived carrying Baby Teddy.

She stepped aside to let the Malfoys emerge from the floo. The pair of them were smiling, dressed with casual stylishness. Lucius Malfoy was carrying a pretty toddler who appeared to be about one year old. She even resembled a Malfoy somewhat, with her white blond hair and enormous blue eyes.

"Our little Willow," Lucius introduced her, with some pride.

"She's a sweetheart," Hermione admitted. Privately, she imagined that the Malfoys had examined every Muggleborn orphan in Britain before finding one who met their exacting criteria. At least the little girl would have a home.

"Thank you, Miss Crouch, we're rather taken with her ourselves," Narcissa smiled. She was escorted to a sofa, where she and her sister and the babies took up residence. Harry knelt down in front of Teddy, grinning and tickling, studying for resemblances.

Andromeda Tonks admired the drawing room. "Not much as I remember it. You've done wonders, Harry. This is charming."

"Feel free to take a tour," he replied with a smile. "Pretty much everything is open but the library. I locked that up."

"Probably a sound idea," agreed Lucius. He cocked his head, watching Harry play with the babies. "I had no idea he was so fond of children," he murmured to Hermione.

"Yes, Harry does love children, but he has a special bond with Teddy, of course."

"Perhaps he is anxious that other children have childhoods as unlike his own as possible."

Hermione eyed Lucius warily. How much did he know?

"Possibly. How is Draco?" she asked changing the subject.

"Very well indeed. He joined us for Christmas, but could stay only two days." Lucius and Narcissa had concluded that they needed more time with Harry Potter, softening his memories of Draco before he was ready to be faced with the real Draco himself. Even with careful coaching, recent events were still too fresh for all the unfortunate impressions to have faded.

"I'm glad he could be with you at all. He must be very busy with his studies," she added wistfully. "Have you considered visiting him there?"

"Yes. Not both of us, of course," he nodded in his wife's direction. "An international floo or portkey would be too much for Narcissa. However, I am going next month. He told us of some startling research that could impact the entire wizarding world."

"Here in England, too?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"My dear Miss Crouch, our own little island is not the whole wizarding world! No — what Professors Quigley and Stone have found may impact the entire planet — our very survival. It is quite shocking and alarming."

"Really?" Hermione asked, curiosity fully roused, "What? damage to the magical cortex? A flaw in the arithmantic continuum?"

"Nothing so specific to our world, actually. They have good evidence that the muggles have succeeded in altering the planet's climate. Yes. The entire Earth is growing warmer. The consequences are certain to be disastrous."

"The Earth has undergone many changes — it's somewhat cyclical. Have they considered that?"

Impressed and approving, Lucius considered the young witch before him. "They have. I have seen a copy of their preliminary report. As I say, I read it with growing alarm. If the muggles succeed in making the planet uninhabitable, we shall be destroyed along with them. Draco is going to South America in two months to take part in field studies. The rain forest there — source of so many of our vital magical plants and animals — is being laid waste at an astounding rate. I confess it is sometimes hard to grasp how vast the muggle population is — and how fast it is growing. There are *billions* of them — literally billions. It is quite — an intimidating prospect."

Rather disoriented at the notion of Draco Malfoy, the environmental activist, Hermione could do nothing but nod. "I would love to read their work. If it stands up to scrutiny, it would certainly be something that every witch and wizard should know of."

"I shall obtain a copy for you." Lucius told her, more earnest than she had ever seen him. "We are facing global catastrophe. When one has children, such a threat makes all other issues trivial. It is essential that someone in the Ministry knows of this danger — someone with influence. Mine, unfortunately, is currently nil. Do read the report and consider it. If you are convinced, you could not do better than to share it with your friends."

They were distracted by more and more guests arriving every minute. It was clear that everyone was here to see Harry.

Lucius advised him, "You must greet everyone. It will mean a great deal to them. Imagine how someone you slighted would feel, after coming to see you."

"That's true," Harry agreed, feeling guilty. "I just meant to have a nice party."

"You called it an 'Open House,'" Lucius replied. "You should not be surprised if you are taken seriously. It's quite a wonderful idea, actually, but you must play your part."

Harry spent the next several hours standing in front of the floo, shaking hands. There was a brief stir when John Wellington Wells swirled out of the fireplace. He squeezed Harry's hand in an eager, painful grip, and then was away to the dining room, drawing a group of admirers away. Another stir was caused by the entrance of Kingsley Shacklebolt, accompanied by a group of Aurors. The Hogwarts contingent arrived, Slughorn beaming delightedly at his 'favorite student!' McGonagall gave Harry a quizzical look, and kindly forbore to shake his hand. Harry was inexpressibly grateful. Others came, faces that he was too bewildered to recognize, thanking him for saving them, for saving a wife or a child or a friend or a father.

Hermione was busy, restocking refreshments and keeping the music running. To her surprise and gratitude, Ron took over upstairs, displaying to the astonished and delighted visitors the wonders of videotapes. The media room was packed,

and would have been stifling without cooling charms. Many had never seen a film or a television program, and it occurred to Ron that some version of this could be a tremendous hit in the wizarding world. He and George talked about it nearly the entire evening, sketching out different ideas.

Narcissa and Andromeda only stayed two hours. They and the babies seemed to enjoy themselves. Narcissa particularly liked "those exquisite *hors d'oeuvres*," as she referred to Aunt Petunia's cheesy bites. Even Lucius commented on the beauty of the music in the drawing room, and complimented Miss Crouch on her taste. "If one is going to use muggle creations, by all means choose the best!" He, of course, remained nearly the entire time, an encouraging, useful presence in the background, drawing persistent talkers away from Harry: sending guests down to the dining room for more refreshments, or upstairs for more entertainment. As far as possible, visitors were encouraged to leave by the kitchen floo, to relieve the congestion.

Only later would they learn of the Herculean efforts in the kitchen, where Kreacher and Molly and Fleur labored to replace the food that was being greedily consumed by the dozens, the scores, the hundreds of guests. Others lent a hand, and the kitchen was filled with the honest domestic magic of willing workers, chopping and slicing and baking and boiling and cleaning and arranging and serving.

By the stroke of midnight, Harry was glassy-eyed and exhausted, his hand held out before him limply, as voices

around him cried and sang and toasted the New Year. Hermione estimated that nearly a fifth of the total British wizarding population had come through Harry's drawing room floor. The house certainly looked like it. While the guests had mostly been very respectful, they had also spilled food and drink and fingered the furniture and trampled over the carpets.

Harry groaned, surveying the wreckage of his beautiful house. He would have to be at work in eight hours. Lucius Malfoy discreetly flooed away, just as the Weasleys came looking for Harry to say goodbye.

"A lovely, lovely party, Harry," Molly praised him. "I am so proud of you! So many friends!"

Arthur patted him on the back sympathetically. "It was very kind of you to invite so many people, my boy. They'll never forget it."

"Neither will I."

"Well — a New Year, you know. May it be nothing like the old!"

Harry nodded dumbly, not wanting to imagine living through a year like the one just past.

Ginny kissed his cheek, laughing at him. In a moment, they were gone.

Hermione collapsed onto the sofa. "Leave it, Harry. Let Kreacher take his time picking through the rubble. What kind of potions do you have about the house for that hand of yours?"

"Dunno," he mumbled blankly. He stumbled to a chair and was instantly asleep, head thrown back and mouth open.

"Well, I'll find something. Why don't you rest a bit? I'll get up in a minute..." Involuntarily, she stretched out at comfortable full length. Her eyes shut, and she was blissfully asleep herself, dreaming of the dappled shadows of the rainforest.

XVII.

MYSTERIES:

THE VANISHING HEADMASTER

In the wizarding world, Harry's stock was up again. The "Potter Open House" was featured in the *PROPHET*, and talked about in homes throughout the British wizarding world. A very striking picture of Harry and Ginny was printed at least once a week, with leering captions wondering when "the day" would be announced. Oddly enough, both Ginny and Hermione ground their teeth in exactly the same way whenever they saw it.

But Ginny was safe — in a way. The school term had begun, and she was back at Hogwarts, having quite a nice time. She was seeing a handsome and sensitive Hufflepuff, a year younger than herself. Kendrick worshipped her, acceding to her every demand, and even anticipating her desires. He was not only very considerate and good-looking, he was refreshingly normal: no neuroses, no tortured memories, no unhappy associations. He had survived the occupation of Hogwarts and the final battle with few scars, physical or mental. He

was a sound Keeper, as well. They were good for each other, she thought. The relationship was a healthy one, for what it was. With no brothers at school, no one would blab about it to her mother — or to Harry, for that matter.

Harry was such a mess, after all. She had always accepted his special relationship with Hermione when they were in school, but somehow, seeing them at the School Dinner and then at the Open House, the whole situation gave her an uneasy feeling. There was more going on there than met the eye. Hermione was her friend, but Ginny was not blind to what a nag she was — and even, sometimes, what a bully she could be. Cho had never had a chance with Harry. Hermione was very possessive of Harry — look at how she had taken over the party and played the part of hostess. Ginny would have been glad to have helped, but Hermione never let anyone else get close to Harry, other than Ron, and even that relationship seemed a little — off.

Are Harry and Hermione seeing each other? I mean — really seeing each other? It was ridiculous, on the face of it, but there was *something* there. And Ginny had noticed Hermione talking with Neville and Luna in that way they had had at Hogwarts: that secretive way they had used when they were trying to exclude her.

Let them have their poxy secrets! Ginny had a future, and it did not have to include Harry. If Hermione wanted him — well, let her have him! Except that was just wrong, in Ginny's opinion. Just as wrong in its way as Hermione and Ron.

Harry, too, was wondering what was going on in his life. Hermione had been great about the party, but they were not seeing as much of each other as they had a few weeks before. *Is Hermione still upset with me about Madam Edgecombe?* She was as nice to him as ever, but she no longer seemed interested in staying overnight — and she always expected him to leave when he had dinner at her place. Maybe he should have a talk with her, but it would be uncomfortable and horrible and maybe make things even worse. Hermione was tired a lot lately, and maybe she just needed some space.

Hermione had a great deal on her mind. She had done so much to help with that wretched Open House, and the papers hardly mentioned her. Instead, that bloody picture of Harry and Ginny was plastered on the front page, and those stupid conjectures about weddings and wizarding bloodlines irritated her no end.

The Crouches are a better family than the Weasleys! she thought angrily, and then was surprised at herself. That was thinking like one of those idiot purebloods, and it was a waste of brain-space to harbor such ideas. Still, it was aggravating to be ignored. She decided to discuss it with her father.

"Well, Hermione, I actually think it for the best," he said, after silent consideration. He liked his new background very much, and had thanked her effusively. He had a comfortable chair, and his books, and his privacy. The picture hung in a classroom upstairs: the future Wizarding Culture classroom. Bartemius Crouch was interested in the subject, and

thought it important for both the muggleborn and wizarding born to take it, in order that they hear a balanced, unbigoted presentation of what wizarding culture was and should be.

"It will be a corrective to the rubbish some of the children hear at home," he remarked. "I, of course, will be glad to serve as a resource to the instructor." He was smoking a pipe, thinking as he puffed. Hermione thought he looked very distinguished. "To get back to the problem at hand, my dear — are you sure you want to be forever associated with Potter in the public mind?"

"I think that's inevitable."

"Perhaps — but — look here, are you planning on *marrying* the boy?"

"Oh! Sometimes I think it might be nice, but —"

"I thought you wanted to be Minister of Magic."

"I do."

"You won't be if you marry Potter. *He* will be Minister of Magic. *You* will be Mrs. Harry Potter. Is that what you want?"

Instantly she knew the truth. "No! I don't want to be important for being Mrs. Anybody. I want to be important for being Hermione Crouch-Granger."

A little wintry smile of approval flickered across the portrait's face. "Very good. If that is what you want, then Harry Potter is last person you should marry. If you remained in his inner circle, of course, there are other possibilities. There was that Dolores Umbridge who was Cornelius' hanger-on. She became quite the power-behind-the-throne, and she

did it by being a sort of "office wife."

"Eeeww." Hermione grimaced. "I don't want anyone ever seeing any likeness between me and Umbridge. She tried to take over Hogwarts, you know, and she used a Blood Quill on Harry."

"Really? And she is not in Azkaban?"

"She disappeared just before Christmas. Harry thinks she's gone into hiding or left the country altogether. Or maybe someone did her in. I knew that she'd received a number of death threats, but that's hardly a shock. Not only did she torture students when she was at Hogwarts, but she was a very eager to collaborate with Voldemort and his blood-purity fanatics. She headed the Muggleborn Registration Commission, and is responsible for the imprisonment and death of scores of people. Of course she never admitted to doing anything wrong, even after being suspended from the Ministry; and she insisted a full investigation would clear her name. She even tried to stir up trouble for me. Now that she's gone, of course, the investigation has been dropped. I don't think there's a witch or wizard in England who is sorry to see her gone."

"Not surprising. A revolting woman. Such a toady."

"And there you have it," Hermione replied. "I don't want to be seen as anyone's toady. I don't want to *be* anyone's toady."

"There is, of course, the emotional factor. Will you be very unhappy if you *don't* marry Potter?"

"No — I don't think so. We've tried being — closer —

and it's nice, but really — I can't see it for a lifetime. Being his friend, yes. You know I was with Ron Weasley — until he played one prank too many. I really found him more — exciting — if he weren't so impossible. Oh! That reminds me. Percy Weasley asked if he could speak to you sometime. He had such a good opinion of you."

"Astounding. I was hardly at my best at the end of my career. I teased him a bit — and it was not very kind of me — calling him 'Weatherby' even in front of his family. A bit pompous, but quite bright."

"Yes, that's Percy. He's been very nice to me at the Ministry."

Crouch frowned. "Any hint of romantic interest there?"

"I don't think so."

"Good. He's not a good matrimonial choice either, since you say you don't want to be Mrs. Minister. Percy Weasley is very ambitious, and probably has his eye on high office. He'll never be Minister of Magic unless he can polish off that 'poor boy made good' awkwardness of his. I daresay he'll be looking for a wife who can help him socially."

Hermione shuddered. "You mean — tea parties and charity events and chatting with the wives of other dignitaries? I can't think of anything I would do worse or hate more."

"Don't shirk. You'll have to do some of that even on your own behalf. Not that I think Percy Weasley will ever make the top spot. You don't become Minister of Magic by working hard and being a good secretary. At any rate, you want to be careful of romantic entanglements at the Ministry: it

can ruin a woman's career."

"Not a man's, I take it." Hermione said sourly.

"Not usually. The world is the way it is, Hermione. No scandalous scenes, no tears in public. You'd be better off with someone outside the Ministry. Someone very personable —"

"Who likes Quidditch." Hermione finished.

"Yes — that would be advisable. Whether you approve or not, Quidditch binds the wizarding world together."

"I did like Ron," Hermione sighed. "Sometimes I thought I even loved him — but he was so inconsiderate and rude. If we had children, he would scoff at studying and buy them brooms instead. And now he's a partner in the Weasley joke shop!"

"Is the business doing well?"

Hermione blinked. "I think it is. Harry says they're making a lot of money. The wizarding world is so obsessed with pranks and tricks —"

"Hmmm. If his behavior could be — adjusted — he might do. War hero — Quidditch — jolly joke shop — respectable businessman — good pureblood family, but not arrogant about it. Yes," Crouch concluded. "He might do very well. There's no hurry of course. It takes a great deal of time to rise in the Ministry. Realistically, you can't expect to be Minister — even if everything goes smoothly — until you're around seventy or eighty."

"Seventy!" Hermione protested.

"I know that at your age it sounds like forever, but you must face reality. It might happen earlier were you a wizard

— and Potter might be Minister by the time he is forty. The deaths in the war might play a role in faster advancement for your generation. However, I don't know of any witch who became Minister before she was a grandmother. A lot of the old-timers don't like to see the mother of young children devoting herself to a high post — presumably to the detriment of her family. A grandmother, on the other hand — well, everyone respects a matriarch. It is an ancient tradition. You may be the exception that proves the rule, of course."

"If Harry becomes Minister," Hermione predicted gloomily, "I'll never have a chance. He'll be Minister until the day he dies."

"Really? Do you think your friend Harry would *like* being Minister?"



A few nights later, Hermione's curiosity overcame her. They met at the Albus Dumbledore School Governor's meeting. The question buzzed through Hermione's head, as she played her part going over the syllabus for the teacher training that would begin in March. "Do you ever think you'd like to be Minister of Magic?" she asked Harry idly, after the Governor's meeting broke up.

Harry stared at her. "You're joking, right?"

"No. Seriously, do you ever think about the future? What will you want to do when you're tired of being an Auror?"

"I guess I'd like to grow roses. I think I'd like gardening, if it were my own garden."

"Harry! Be serious!"

"I am serious. You think I'd want to be a Fudge or a Scrimgeour? Shacklebolt is all right, I suppose, but he's made a lot of concessions and compromises that I just couldn't."

"You may feel differently when you're older."

"Maybe. I'd like to be head of the Aurors," he confessed. "That's the kind of work I think I would know how to do. Catch the bad guys and let someone else sort them out. You're the one who ought to be Minister of Magic."

"Harry!" Very pleased and flattered, she asked, "Do you really think so?"

"Yes. We need someone smart as Minister — someone *really* smart, and with new ideas. You're the best witch in Britain, Hermione. You should be the one."

She laughed, pretending it was a joke. "Me as Minister — you as Head Auror! We'd be quite a team!"

"We always have been, Hermione. It's just the way things should be. So — do *you* want to be Minister?"

Deciding a bit of the truth would not hurt, she admitted. "I think about the good I could do. It would be a change to have someone in office who really understood the muggle world. Of course," she dismissed it with a laugh. "it couldn't possibly happen until I was old and grey, so who knows what we'll be like then?"

They were leaving the meeting room, when they overheard Professor McGonagall ask Jane Rochester, "Have you noticed anything odd about your portrait of Severus?"

"Odd?" the younger witch asked. "How do you mean?"

"He's become — unresponsive."

A pause. "I'm not sure I understand you."

"He seems to be asleep. He's stopped speaking. Even when I address him directly he never opens his eyes."

Lucius Malfoy overheard, and was curious. "That's very — unusual."

McGonagall glanced at him briefly, and then asked Jane Rochester. "Could I speak to your copy? Perhaps he knows what is wrong."

"I suppose — well — of course."

They all trooped into the Headmistress' office and formed a rough half-circle in front of the portrait of Snape that faced the Head's desk. Harry scowled at the well-remembered face, and then realized that this image was too still: eyes shut, hands folded together — as immobile as a muggle picture.

"That's creepy," Hermione whispered in Harry's ear. "He looks — dead."

"Severus!" called Narcissa. "Wake up!"

The figure did not stir.

"What's happened to him?" Harry whispered to Hermione. "Can something go wrong with a picture?"

"I don't know, Harry," Hermione whispered back. "I've never heard of anything like this." She asked McGonagall, "Did you ask Professor Dumbledore to speak to him?"

McGonagall nodded gravely. "I did. Albus could not enter the frame. And before you go out to the hall, I already

spoke to the portrait of Albus here, too."

Hermione said, "Sometimes frames can be charmed to repel any other portraits."

"Filius did not see any such charms used on the portrait at Hogwarts. It's changed — it's like a muggle portrait. I was hoping that Severus could explain what had happened, but with this picture the same — "

"I wonder — " Hermione muttered. "Wait here, Harry!" she said, "I've got to check something upstairs."

While the others speculated and wondered, Hermione ran up to the WIZARDING Culture classroom.

"Hermione!" her father said, seeing her breathless and excited. "What is the matter?"

"Something has happened to the portrait of Professor Snape!" she told him. "At first it looked like he's asleep, but he doesn't move or snore or appear even to breathe. Professor McGonagall says the Hogwarts portrait is just the same. Professor Dumbledore can't enter the frame. Do you have any idea what is going on?"

"I hardly know Snape. He might think it an intrusion — " Crouch answered, " — but I'll have a look." Briefly he vanished, and then was back, looking startled. "That was unpleasant."

"What happened? Is the frame spelled for privacy like yours?"

"No. I didn't sense any magic at all. It's just a frame. The portrait is just — a portrait." He was thoroughly puzzled. "It's like a *muggle* portrait," he said, thinking aloud. "There's

nothing alive there.”

“How could a portrait die?”

“Oh — it couldn’t. I don’t know. All I can tell you is that whatever was in there of Snape — is gone.”



“Do you reckon he’s alive somewhere?”

Harry and Hermione had retreated to the kitchen of the school, where the overjoyed house elves were feeding them hot cocoa and madeleines. Hermione had enjoyed them in France, and now they were one of the house elves’ specialties. She dipped one in her cocoa and let the flavors melt on her tongue. Then she returned to the practical.

“How could he be, Harry? We saw him *die*. He was buried in Hogsmeade Cemetery. Dead is dead.”

“Unless you’re Voldemort,” Harry shuddered. “I don’t know, Hermione. I’ve seen some things — ”

“Voldemort’s spirit had been kept alive by the horcruxes. Snape didn’t have any.”

“ — That we *know* of!”

“I don’t believe it, Harry. I don’t believe a horcrux is involved. The way he died — it wasn’t like anything you said you saw with Voldemort. Besides, it’s been months! If he were able to get to an antidote, he would have done that right away. It doesn’t make sense.” She thought a little longer. “Unless someone helped him.”

“Who’d do that? It’s not like he had any friends.”

“That’s not true, Harry. The Malfoys were his friends, and if you asked Professor McGonagall, she’d call herself a friend.”

“But she’s not involved, or she wouldn’t be wondering about the portraits.”

“There is that.”

Harry thought a little more, munching. “Maybe a time-turner! Maybe somebody went back in time, gave him an antidote and helped him escape.” He saw her shake her head. “Naw, you’re right. Doesn’t make sense. Still, I might sniff around the cemetery. See if anyone has disturbed the grave.”

“There aren’t any more Time-Turners, Harry. They were all destroyed during our fight at the Department of Mysteries.”

“I know they say that, Hermione, but that’s awfully hard to believe! Somebody could have been using one — maybe a few people. They couldn’t *all* have been there. And why couldn’t they make any more? I think it’s all pretty dodgy.”

Thinking about it a little more, she agreed. “You may be right, Harry. The whole matter of time travel has never been explained to my satisfaction. And of course, there were many different kinds of Time-Turner devices. Some could be set to different time spans, and some had only a localized effect — ”

“Professor Dumbledore had all sorts of gadgets and toys in his office. I didn’t know what most of them did. And then Snape was in there for nearly a year.”

“McGonagall was there first.”

“But we know that Dumbledore and Snape had secrets together. Snape was good at sniffing out things with that

great beak of his. What if he knew something, and told someone who would help him?"

"Still — *who* would do it?"

"My money is on the Malfoys. There's no telling what they have hidden away in their vault at Gringotts. If they're involved, Snape might already be gone to America to join Draco."

"Let's ask a few questions."

They found McGonagall and Rochester still discussing the matter over tea. Everyone else but the Malfoys had left. The two of them were sitting off by themselves, whispering.

"Excuse us," Hermione said to the two Headmistresses. "But when did you last speak to the portrait of Professor Snape?"

"Let's see," McGonagall considered. "I know it was sometime just after Christmas. It was certainly during the holidays — oh, I know! I mentioned your Open House, and he had some remark or other to make about it."

"I can imagine," Harry smirked. "And you?" he asked the other woman.

"I really couldn't say," Jane Rochester replied. "Probably about the same time, I think."

"So the portraits haven't spoken since the first of the year."

"So it would seem."

Harry nodded. "Hermione and I were discussing the possibility that he's alive."

"Impossible!" McGonagall exclaimed.

"What about you, Miss Rochester?" Harry asked. "Do you think it's impossible?"

"I don't know," Jane Rochester told him. "Maybe it's magic."

The two Malfoys were silent, and then looked at each other positively wildly. Just as suddenly, their faces subsided into blank calm. Harry decided then and there that they needed watching.

Hermione had an early morning next day, so Harry said nothing to her. Instead, he retrieved his Invisibility Cloak from the pocket where he always kept it. It was his secret weapon as an Auror, and he was never without it now. He was able to overhear some whispered conversation, and as soon as they all left the school, he put on his cloak and followed the Malfoys. He was not surprised to find that their destination was Hogsmeade Cemetery.

They hurried directly to Snape's grave. Harry had meant to drop by, and promised himself he would do so again. Someone had scrawled graffiti on Snape's marker.

*GREASY GIT
Die Filthy Death Eater
Slimy Snape*

— were the words he could make out in the darkness. It was a rotten, cowardly thing to do. He would have to have a word with the caretaker and then he would ward the grave himself.

The Malfoys had disillusioned themselves, but Harry could see what they were doing.

Digging up Snape? Why? Well, probably to find out what I'd like to know. Is he there or not?

They were quick about it, at least, using levitation and

cleaning charms. Harry peered over the edge of the grave, bracing himself for what they would find.

"He's not here, Narcissa!" Lucius hissed to his wife. "There's only a bone and some dust!"

"I can't believe it!"

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Harry said out loud, enjoying their moment of shock. "There are laws about mucking about with the dead."

"Harry!" Narcissa called out in hushed voice. "Severus isn't here! He really might be alive!"

"Is that what you came here to find out? What was the hurry?"

Lucius looked exasperated. "When you suggested he might be alive — suddenly resuscitated, if the pictures were any indication — the first thing that occurred to me was that he was alive — and in his coffin! He might have needed help getting out — or he would die, buried alive! We didn't know if he was buried with a wand! I don't suppose *that* occurred to you?"

Harry felt green and giddy for a moment. "It didn't, actually, but thanks for that mental image. He's really not there?"

"It's empty, but for this," Lucius held up a long clean bone. (A human thighbone, Harry guessed.) " — And this." A handful of dust trickled through his fingers.

Harry studied the piled earth. "When you started, did it look disturbed?"

Lucius shrugged. "Not that I noticed. I was really too anxious to dig him up to consider the matter. I don't think

Severus Snape was ever in this grave at all."

Narcissa repeated, rather excited, "He really might be alive!"

More soberly, Lucius said, "Or someone found a use for his body."

"That wouldn't explain the change in the portrait. Or what we did find here. The bone and the dust must have been transfigured to look like Severus' body."

"All right," Harry said reasonably. "If he were alive, where would he go? It seems to me he would have gone to Malfoy Manor."

"But he hasn't," Lucius said. "After all, he had no great reason to trust us."

"So where *would* he go?"

Narcissa was wide-eyed. "I have no idea. Hogwarts was his only home for years and years. The Princes left him nothing at all. You could check the wizarding residency rolls, I suppose, but I don't believe he owned any property."

"True," Lucius agreed quickly. "He would have said something about it, if he had inherited anything — or even if he'd bought something. Perhaps he's left the country."

"Or perhaps he's lying sick somewhere," Narcissa fretted. "I confess I feel badly about Severus. I put him in such an impossible position — "

"You know what I think?" Harry asked. "I think he's in America, somewhere near Miskatonic University."

"Draco would have told us — " Lucius shook his head. "If we'd known about him, we wouldn't be here. What I think

is that if Severus has found a way to cheat death, he's probably eager to get as far from all of us as he can. Perhaps the best thing would be to let him go in peace."

"I have some things I want to say to him."

"Perhaps you do. That doesn't mean he wants to hear them."



An Auror's life is one of excitement and incident. If he had been in charge of the department, Harry could have detailed someone to watch the Malfoys. Being but a trainee — if a very special one — he was kept quite busy, and knew nothing of an apparition to a shabby muggle house in a decaying muggle mill town. Nor did he ever know what the Malfoys found there, or the strange story they heard. What would have surprised him the most, however, was the identity of the other person the Malfoys met at Spinner's End.



Snape fans, this is for you at your request



XVIII.

A WRINKLE IN TIME:

SPINNERS' END

The dark, polluted river had not changed. Nor had the decaying town looming beyond the river's edge. A few birds sang half-heartedly among the dead branches, startling into flight at the sound of faint popping noises.

"This is disgusting," the taller of two cloaked figures remarked, prodding gingerly at some half-empty tins with the toe of a shining boot. "This place is a tip. You do realize that muggles are destroying the planet?"

"You may have mentioned that, Lucius," his wife replied with admirable patience. "And Draco would hardly talk about anything else at Christmas. But this really is the place."

"Disgusting," the wizard muttered.

A squirrel darted to the top of a scraggly bush, and stopped, watching them with taut suspicion. The movement caught Malfoy's eyes, and he paused.

"It's a squirrel," Narcissa pointed out. "Are you going to kill it in self-defense?"

"Certainly not. Poor creature. It's hard to believe any decent animal can survive in this midden. I suppose the rats thrive, of course."

"Some of them."

Lucius gave his hand to Narcissa, and helped her scramble up the muddy bank. The lamentable rows of abandoned houses were revealed. They seemed to sag in the middle, as if depressed by their own ugliness.

"He *lived* here. He came back here every summer. No wonder he was bloody near off his head sometimes."

"Come on, then. It's just through here."

Narcissa seemed to know her way through the maze of identical houses. Endless rows, countless houses, each one indistinguishable from the others. Did muggles have no concept of individual identity at all?

"You seem very familiar with this place," he said.

"I told you. I came here with — Bella — to talk to him. He tried his best to help Draco. I owe him for that."

"I suppose so."

Lucius regarded the streetlights with puzzled contempt. Some shone forth brightly, some not at all. Beyond the houses, a huge chimney reared up.

"What is *that*? Do you suppose some muggle was feeling inadequate? Seems very phallic to me."

"I've no idea. Please, Lucius, let's have a look and get away from here. The smell is so vile —"

Their footsteps echoed on the cobbles as they passed boarded and broken windows. She reached the last house, and pulled at Lucius' sleeve.

"Here it is."

The last house in the row seemed as derelict as the rest. Lucius studied it with revulsion. It seemed incredible that a wizard of Severus Snape's quality could have come from such a hovel. The mother was a Prince, of course. Good stock in the past, but gone off in the last few generations. Snape's mother had fallen *in love* with a muggle — and not even a rich, attractive muggle. It was obscene that a wizarding child had been abandoned in this kind of squalor. It pointed up the problem of mixed marriages, though that was a touchy topic in these times. Things were changing, luckily. With the new school, magical children would be spotted earlier, and removed from neglectful, abusive muggle homes. It was not entirely the muggles' fault of course. It was unreasonable to expect such limited creatures to understand the needs of a magical child, much less provide it with appropriate support and nurture.

Unbidden, the thought came to him that Snape, at least, had had a magical parent who in theory could have done better for him than this. *There are many kinds of abuse, and not all abusive parents are muggles.* He shook his head, not ready to think about the subject when there was already so much to occupy him. At least his Willow was safe in the nursery at the Manor, far from slums like this. Neither she nor Lyra would ever set eyes on such a place.

He shrugged. "It looks deserted. Stay behind me. He might have left a few surprises for any intruders."

Very warily, he raised his wand, considering which charm to use. The whole place might be cursed: it would be just

like Severus. He should have brought a house-elf and sent it ahead to spring any traps.

"Aloha — "

The door opened a crack, and silver light spilled out onto the doorstep. Lucius blinked, and put out his left arm to shield Narcissa.

A resonant, familiar baritone growled, "Don't dream of standing on ceremony, Lucius. And good evening to you, Narcissa. I thought you might be along. You'd better come in."

"Severus?" the Malfoys gasped in unison.

"You look — "

" — well."

" — very nice."



A glamour, of course. Lucius scowled to find himself so easily taken in. The meager single window only seemed to be boarded up from the outside: one could see perfectly well through it once within the tiny sitting room. It was brightly lit, for the wizard in residence had been hard at work. Bookshelves lined the walls, most of them empty, some of them full of gaps like a mouth missing teeth. A few boxes were in the process of being filled. A large trunk was open in the far corner. Lucius guessed it was a multi-space trunk, since Snape was piling box after box into it. He glanced enviously at a Wendish alchemical text of the 13th century. How had a gutter-dwelling Halfblood managed to lay hands on such a treasure?

But these questions were secondary. Lucius was more occupied with looking at the wizard he had known since his own Hogwarts days. If he had passed him on the street he might not have known him. It was astonishing, the extent to which changing one's hair could alter one's appearance.

Narcissa, to his irritation, was admiring Snape fondly. "So very nice, Severus. The lighter color goes well with your complexion. I do like the length and the way it feathers over your ears, and — " for a moment Lucius thought indignantly that she would *caress* Snape. — "The way it falls to the side on your brow. Very nice, indeed. I take it you are in disguise?"

"Quite."

"Are those — muggle clothes?"

"As you see."

The grey-blue jumper and charcoal slacks made the most of Snape's height and broad shoulders. He looked more at ease that Lucius had ever seen him. Not off guard — no, indeed. There was no mistaking the wary, intent gaze, and the hand dangling the wand to the side as if idly, but actually in a good stance if suddenly attacked.

Lucius heaved a sigh, smiled disarmingly at his old friend, and displayed his hands openly.

Snape looked down his long nose, and gestured to the shabby sofa. "Do take a seat. Narcissa, you look tired. May I offer the two of you a drink?"

"I'd like that, Severus — " she said, easing her pregnant body down onto the lumpy cushions.

"I can — "

" — *after* you tell me how it that you come to be standing here — alive!"

Lucius sat by his wife, and nodded, rather bemused. "That is the question, Severus. We believed you to be dead. We went to your funeral. We've even spoken to your portrait. How did you manage to fool us all?"

Snape raised a brow and smirked. "I didn't."

Narcissa shook her head. "I don't understand. You didn't do what?"

"I didn't fool you. Not in the least. I was in fact quite dead until last New Year's Eve."

Lucius' eyes widened. "A Resurrection rite?" he whispered. "No wonder you don't wish to be found. The Ministry — "

Snape snorted, lounging back against his empty bookshelves. He seemed more imposing than ever, despite the simple muggle garments. "I assure you, no Dark spells were used. A great deal of ingenuity went into the new me, but nothing that can quite be called Dark."

"Then how — ?" Lucius murmured, eyes gleaming.

"You want to know?"

Narcissa said forthrightly, "Yes, *I* want to know. We thought you were lying in your coffin buried alive! When we dug you up all we found was a bone and some dust."

Snape winced with disgust. "You — *dug me up?*"

"Of course — I'm sure you would have done the same for us, my dear chap," Lucius said impatiently. "How did you *do* it?"

"Hmm." Snape looked away, lips quirked triumphantly. "You *really* want to know?"

"Of course!"

"*Then*," Snape declared, drawling out his words with high glee, "you will each swear an Unbreakable Vow never to reveal anything you hear or see tonight. You and you alone will know, but no one else — *ever*."

"Not even Draco?" Lucius asked.

"Certainly not. If you are not prepared to swear, then you must leave immediately."

"This is your revenge," Narcissa hissed, very indignant, "for having to swear one to me! It's very unforgiving of you, Severus."

"Nonetheless," Snape repeated, savoring the moment. "I must insist. I'll tell you all, but you must first swear. You cannot tell anyone of my existence, nor can you tell of anything or anyone else that you see under this roof tonight. You cannot seek me out hereafter, nor give anyone information that would cause them to find me. You each can be the other's Bonder."

Lucius and Narcissa looked at each other, and then hastily produced their wands. Lurid lights danced on the ceiling, reflected from the red tendrils of flame wrapping around the Malfoys' hands. It was done.

"And now for that drink I promised you," Snape purred. "I believe you are partial to elf-made wine, Narcissa."

"There's only the one bottle left," a woman's voice put in, as a hidden door opened, and Jane Rochester stepped through it, "but I did find some unchipped glasses."

There had been, from time to time, social situations that had sorely tested the Malfoys. The past year, in fact, had been unfortunately replete with them. Rarely had they been so gobsmacked, however, as to see the muggleborn Headmistress of the Albus Dumbledore School standing in the miniscule sitting room of Severus Snape's childhood home, holding a tray of drinks. She, too, was dressed very casually in muggle style. Narcissa amended that thought, since she thought she had never seen a witch look so common, so utterly without style as Jane Rochester. Witches should have a certain air — a certain distinctiveness. Miss Rochester was wearing rather tight muggle trousers of a coarse blue fabric, black ankle boots, and a cable-knit cream jumper. In Narcissa's eyes, she simply did not look like a witch. Her respect for the new Headmistress dwindled considerably.

Lucius did not judge her quite so harshly, since he thought the witch looked better than usual — more animated and thus not quite so mousy. She was dressed very badly, of course, but it was hardly surprising, considering her background. Evidently she had been helping Severus pack up his household.

"Headmistress," he inclined his head slightly. "How are you this evening?"

"Mr. Malfoy." She nodded to Narcissa, still studying her disapprovingly, "Mrs. Malfoy. Here."

The drinks were distributed, and everyone had something to do.

"So," Narcissa began, with a brittle smile, "Here you are,

Severus. How?"

Snape sniffed his wine, eyes closed, and sighed reflectively. "The story begins, like so many others, with Albus Dumbledore..."

Lucius shuddered. Narcissa patted his hand. "Drink your wine."

Jane took the sagging chair and watched the couple opposite her. Snape remained standing, pacing restlessly at times as he talked.

"Dumbledore was very good at giving one the illusion of intimacy: that is to say that he liked to make one feel the chosen confidant of his secrets. It was a clever form of manipulation, but its flaw was that sometimes he let more slip than he intended. I was, after all, a spy.

"He had had years at Hogwarts, year and years and years to accumulate toys and treasures and gadgets. I doubt most were his: some were Hogwarts property, mislaid and long forgotten; some might have been spoils of war.

"Nevertheless, there they were. A few were hidden in plain sight in his office. Some were safely tucked away, and I allowed Dumbledore to imagine that only he knew where. After his unfortunate demise — " Snape sighed and looked out the window at the dismal street. " — well, Minerva cleared out the office and put the toys away, but did not bother to conceal them. Sentimental, probably — no doubt she felt a little guilty at taking possession of *his* office. Later, when I was sent by — " he paused again, and the corners of his mouth turned down

“ — by *that creature* to assume the role of Headmaster, I had the leisure to examine Dumbledore’s possessions minutely.”

Lucius slapped the arm of the sofa, eyes flashing. “The Philosopher’s Stone? There were rumours — ”

“Alas, no. Albus claimed to have destroyed the one in his possession. One can never be quite sure he was telling the truth, but I believe that if he had had one available, he would have used it to heal the wounds he incurred destroying one of the Dark Lord’s horcruxes.”

Narcissa shook her head, and hesitantly asked, “A Time-Turner, then? Is that how it was done?”

Snape sneered at Lucius in amusement. “How many times have I told you that she’s the brains in your family?” The amusement faded to a pensive frown. “So often the case... Nevertheless, Narcissa is absolutely correct. Dumbledore indeed had a Time-Turner — two Time-Turners, to be exact, and one was quite powerful, capable of sending one back over a year. I cannot tell you how I obsessed over that object, during those dreadful months in the Head’s Office, trying to think of a way to save the situation. In the end, Dumbledore himself was the obstacle: I could think of no way to overcome his blind determination to send Potter to his death. I believe the old man was more than a little mad in his last months.”

“Oh, *really?*” Lucius snorted.

“And it was too late to bypass him and approach Potter directly. I realize now that antagonizing the boy was a strategic mistake. Dullard that he is, he was the key to destroy-

ing the Dark Lord. Had I known Dumbledore’s plans earlier — had I *known* about the bloody horcruxes — I could have gone after the wretched things as soon as Dumbledore realized what we were facing — but he could not bear to share his secrets, the old fool. It would have been different, had the Time-Turner been strong enough to take me back to Potter’s first year, because I can see an entirely different path that I could have taken. I should have befriended Potter.”

“Yes, you should have,” Jane agreed. “If you wanted revenge on James Potter, what sweeter revenge than to take his son away from him?”

Lucius and Narcissa looked at each other, rather intrigued by the idea. Somehow the white witch light in the room darkened to a mistier grey. The shadows deepened.

Snape scowled. “It’s pointless to indulge in useless regrets, but easy enough to picture what might have been. I could have retrieved the brat from that bitch Petunia. His muggle aunt,” he explained to the Malfoys. “I knew her and loathed her from childhood. When I was trying to teach Potter Occlumency, I discovered that she kept the boy in a cupboard until he went to Hogwarts.”

The Malfoys were shocked. There had been rumors, but nothing this appalling had surfaced.

“At any rate, had I been the one to reveal Potter’s heritage to him, the boy’s gratitude and loyalty would have been *mine*, instead of being wasted on Hagrid. I could possibly have made something of the boy, or at least have protected

him somewhat from Dumbledore's machinations. Then, too, for my own satisfaction, I could have subtly poisoned his image of his father, bit by bit. You know the Hat wanted to put Potter in Slytherin?"

"No. That would have been — interesting," Lucius considered.

"In short, I realize that I was a great fool where Potter was concerned, but that is neither here nor there now. A year was not enough. I needed more time to untangle the past, and there was no more time. The Time-Turner remained unused, and I went to my inevitable fate."

"But then — " Narcissa prompted.

Jane spoke up. "Then I began speaking to the portrait of Severus in my office. What began as an exercise in possibilities moved rather quickly from the realm of hypothesis and fantasy to action and quite corporeal reality."

Snape saw their curious stares fixed on Jane, and said impatiently, "Obviously I could *do* nothing myself. It was Jane who did all the heavy lifting, so to speak. I, however, was the one who knew the way to return to the world of the living."

Narcissa's stare narrowed. "But why *you*?" she asked Jane, suspiciously. "Why would *you* go to the trouble?"

Snape actually laughed at that point, but it was Jane who answered.

"Because Harry Potter is a little shite."



They all laughed for some time, and drank up the rest of the bottle.

Lucius recovered first. "Of course he is, but what has that to do with Severus' remarkable resurrection?"

Jane set down her glass, and told them about her first meeting with Potter and the obnoxious Miss Crouch-Granger.

"I came back to the wizarding world in good faith, after having been treated extremely badly in the past. I came back to do a needed job for which I was uniquely qualified. I found myself being grilled by two self-important teenagers, neither of whom I considered competent to judge my academic credentials. I was grilled, judged, and found wanting by *Potter* due to my lack of reverence for his dear departed father, that horrible bully James. I was quite ready to wash my hands of the whole business, but Minerva persuaded me to stay on. I signed a two-year contract, as you know, but at the end of that time, I'm leaving. Further acquaintance has not improved my opinion of Miss Crouch or Mr. Potter."

"Miss Crouch-Granger," corrected Lucius, with mock reproof.

Jane smiled. "I always call her 'Miss Crouch.' It irritates her so. I can already see years of misery if I stay. She'll be a millstone around the neck of the Head of the Albus Dumbledore School until the day she dies. She'll always know better and will always believe that only her opinion has value. And she, in my eyes, is quite uneducated and ignorant, and very much convinced that she knows everything."

"She was quite a good student — " Narcissa pointed out, hesitantly.

Jane waved that away fiercely. "Her general education ceased at age ten. She has not since studied literature, languages, history (don't describe what's taught at Hogwarts by that word!), maths, the arts, geography, physical or biological science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, or the philosophy of education. And don't try to tell me that Astronomy as it is taught at Hogwarts deserves to be called science. It's nothing more than constellation and planet identification for the purposes of drawing astrological charts. There is no theory, no system, no investigation into first principles. Hogwarts education is essentially practical education in performing magic. I can't tell you what I went through trying to catch up my first year at muggle university. As it was, it took me an extra year to finish. But as to Miss Crouch — her knowledge of current events in the world as a whole is shaky at best. I grant you it's better than any other witch or wizard her age, but she has no education to speak of, as I would define education. And I have studied the subject of education itself, studied it for years and worked in the field. Her pushing interference in the syllabus of the school is unwanted, unwelcome, and condescending. That she brings her little boyfriend along like a weapon to governors' meetings is offensive. Quite obviously, the boy is bored to death, and is only there to provide her 'muscle.'

Another laugh. "Do you really think that they're an item?" Narcissa asked, rather curious.

"Oh, look at them! She broke up with one of the Weasley boys, I heard, and she and Potter appear to be joined at the hip. I noticed how edgy the putative girlfriend was around her at that appalling dinner party."

"I had a wonderful time," Lucius protested virtuously. "But back to Severus — you helped him to spite Potter?"

"There was that," Jane granted. Snape looked very amused. She looked around at him, and raised her brows. "Do you want to tell the rest?"

Snape sat on arm of the chair, seeming quite relaxed. "Jane and my portrait had much to talk about. We had been at Hogwarts at more or less the same time, and could share anecdotes and old grievances. The portrait had enough of me in it to advise her through the potions and the final rite. It was very odd, awakening suddenly. I did not recognize Jane at first, and was totally disoriented, since my last memory was of dying — with Potter looking at me. Jane had to show me the memories of her conversations with my portrait to give me any continuity. And of course — " he said, gesturing at a nearby stack of DAILY PROPHETS " — I needed to do some reading to understand the world months after my demise."

"And the memories in the penseive?" Lucius wondered. "The memories that salvaged your reputation?"

Snape snarled, "No power on earth could make me want those memories back! Losing them is what makes my new life possible. I recall the content, but not the terrible pain. For pain I was in — years of it. Pain and love unrequited,

humiliation and bitter regret. I gave all that to Potter, to make of it what he could, and by doing so purged myself of everything that made death desirable." He studied his wand curiously, with a wry smile. "My patronus has changed."

"And then there was your death itself," Jane reminded him. "Potter and his cronies behaved like idiots."

"Jane is referring to the fact that Potter might have actually *done* something besides stand there gawping. The injuries were severe, but had I had proper care, I very likely would not have died. They were busy at the moment, though, and hurried off to attend to more important matters."

"But you *did* die?" Lucius pressed.

"Entirely. I died — met my Maker — gave up the ghost — kicked the bucket — shuffled off this mortal coil, ran down the curtain, and joined the bleeding choir invisible! I was an ex-Snape." He and Jane shared a private laugh, and then he said, "but there was the Time-Turner, not to mention some other possessions of my own still at Hogwarts. Jane retrieved them after a tea visit with Minerva, and then our plans were in motion. Her Potions N.E.W.T. proved essential, though I was able to direct her to my personal stock of antidotes and healing potions."

"And I used Arithmancy," Jane added. "My calculations indicated that New Year's Eve was the date that gave us the best chance. And it had an additional advantage. Everyone would be busy and away from the school."

"You performed the rite at the Dumbledore School?"

Narcissa asked.

"I needed the portrait and I needed a great deal of space, and I could have the required equipment there without undue comment. That snooping Crouch girl came by early in the evening, but I got rid of her. She wanted to speak to Daddy Dearest anyway."

"What?" Lucius asked, choking.

Snape smirked. "Suffice it to say that she's become very close to Crouch Senior, who is pleased to have an audience willing to listen to his pontifications about power and how to get it and keep it. Much good may it do her. I'd keep an eye on her, though. Anyway," he continued, "Jane had the school office prepared for my reception. She had the Time-Turner, two highly illegal portkeys, and a pocketful of potions. She also carried a bag containing a bone and some grave dust."

"I knew you were never in the grave!" Lucius declared, very pleased with himself.

"A million points to Slytherin," Snape congratulated him, rolling his eyes.

"I also had a N.E.W.T. in Transfiguration," Jane remarked. "Severus and I had decided that we did not want to risk contaminating the timeline that existed. Therefore, he would remain dead for the period until his revival. That meant we had to provide credible remains. I portkeyed to the Shrieking Shack, and prepared to treat an injured man there. I transfigured the bone and dust into a simulacrum of a dead Severus, dressed it in a set of his old robes, and took it with

me when I traveled back the necessary months of time to one minute after the departure of Potter & Co.”

The Malfoys were silent, entranced by the story.

Jane smiled briefly. “I left the decoy on the floor and at once returned to my own time, bringing Severus with me. It took only a few seconds. However, he was indeed quite dead in the original timeline, and so his portrait became animate, and everything you remember is quite unchanged and correct. Immediately on returning to my own time, I followed the protocol that Severus had devised: stopping the bleeding, administering antidotes and blood-replenishers. I could then portkey us back to the school to perform the charms that would restart his heart. The results are before you.”

“Well,” Snape shrugged, “it was a little more touch-and-go than that. Jane is a powerful witch, but not a trained Healer, after all. Nagini — that I *do* remember — inflicted quite a bit of damage. I needed a great deal of rest and care. I spent New Year’s day on the sofa in Jane’s office, ingesting potions and broth — with a glass of celebratory champagne. Then we decided that I could manage the trip here.”

“But you could not have apparated!” Lucius objected. “And how would she have — ”

“Of course she had never been to Spinner’s End, and could not have apparated us. There was not enough time for her to scout the area, with everything else she had to do. Considering my condition, and everything she needed to bring along, we decided it would be best if Jane drove me here.”

“In my muggle car,” Jane added primly. “We had a very interesting road trip.”

A longer silence, while the Malfoys digested it all.

A long sigh from Lucius. “And what now? Did you want to collect your Order of Merlin — ”

“ — Second-Class?” Snape finished, with a sneer. “I think — not. I needed time to put my affairs in order, but I am dead to the British Wizarding World, and that is how I intend to remain. I died and there’s an end.”

“But where will you go?” Narcissa asked, wide-eyed. “You can’t intend to stay — *here* — ”

“Yes, thank you for bringing the shortcomings of my childhood home to my attention. I might have missed them otherwise. Of course I’m leaving. I was always aware that there was more to the world than Hogwarts and Diagon Alley and this miserable hole, and now I shall see it.”

“I don’t mean to be insulting,” Narcissa tried to explain. “Of course you must leave. I know Draco would be so happy to see you — ”

Lucius was eager to tell Snape about his son. “Yes! He’s at Miskatonic University, and doing very well there. Arkham is a fascinating place — profoundly serious and scholarly. One can nearly smell the Dark Magic in the air.” He smiled slyly, “I daresay you could smell it with no trouble at all.”

Snape stared him down. “Somehow I knew I would not see the last of England without you making a final reference to my nose. I wish Draco well, and therefore will be certain to give

Arkham and its environs a wide berth. I have spent my life using ingredients from the ends of the earth — the Mato Grosso of Brazil, the Lonely Isle of the Sargasso Sea, the Hidden City of Tibet. Perhaps it's time I saw those places for myself."

Very relieved, Lucius gave his friend a patronising smile. "Do you need any help, Severus? If you need money, I can certainly — "

"Thank you, Lucius." Snape's expression quashed further offers. "I am quite adequately provided for."

"Of course!" Narcissa looked smug. "You found all of Dumbledore's treasures. His Gringotts key, too? I daresay he had a fortune put away."

"Suffice it to say that I have ample funds for the rest of my life. Now I think you know quite enough. Don't let me keep you — *here* — " he snarked, with a sharp glance at Narcissa. "I have much to do. And don't attempt to return. You won't find this place if you do."

Lucius rose, and helped Narcissa to her feet. "Well — then this is — "

"Goodbye," Snape said, with a slight bow.

To his surprise, Narcissa impulsively embraced him. He winced at the feel of the enormous baby bump, and looked at Lucius over Narcissa's blonde head in helpless apology.

"But we haven't had a chance to properly catch up!" Narcissa was protesting. "I'm going to have a baby, and Lucius and I have adopted a child, and I want to tell you more about Draco — "

He slithered free of her grasp, clearing his throat. "I congratulate you on the additions to your family. I am sure your new daughters will be clever and beautiful witches. Just don't spoil them *quite* as much as you did Draco."

"Draco is *not* spoiled — !"

Snape shook hands with Lucius. "Do try to stay out of trouble."

"Severus, you are always welcome at Malfoy Manor. Never forget that. If ever you require a refuge — "

"I shall endeavour not to — "

"Life is full of imponderables, Severus," Lucius continued, still gripping his hand. "One can't predict the future. Draco opened my eyes to the dangers the muggles pose to the entire planet. Someday we'll all have to face the consequences." He relented, and stood back. "I can see that you're impatient for us to be gone. I shall give a book to Miss Rochester here. Perhaps she can find a way for it to reach you. I feel certain that a man of your abilities — "

"Lucius — goodbye," Snape repeated. He showed the Malfoys to the door, ushered them through, and shut it firmly behind them. His silencing spell flickered around the edges of the wall that faced the street. He looked at Jane and took a deep breath. "They were genuinely glad to see me alive. That was — well, never mind. Was that the last of the wine?"

"The last of *yours*, anyway. What was left in the vaults is already packed."

"Just as well. So they think I rifled Dumbledore's vault. As

good a story as any.”

“You do have quite a few of his books and trinkets.”

“As do you. I trust you did not find our division of the spoils unfair?”

“Not at all. I’m glad you got rid of the Malfoys when you did. I thought for certain they would ask where I found the bone.”

A brief, dark chuckle. “They’ll think it over later, and realize that it had to be a rather *special* bone — rather *special* dust — for the enchantment to last long enough for a funeral. I never thought to see the day when my father was of any use to me.” He shrugged. “Pity, in a way, that they didn’t know before this. I could have used Lucius’ help when we were in the Dark Lord’s vault.”

“All’s well that ends well.” She began gathering the empty glasses. “We survived and got the lot, and I for one plan to enjoy that psycho’s ill-gotten gains — and his deceased minions’ too. Oh — your muggle passport is in the pocket of the trenchcoat.”

He rummaged through the pockets and drew the passport out. It was a remarkably good forgery, like all the rest of his new documents, both muggle and magical. There was something to be said for having a great deal of money and commanding the best. He had always fancied the idea of flying first-class. “Severus Snape dies again tonight,” he murmured. “I wonder if Jonathan Prince will find the world more satisfactory?”

“That is entirely up to you, I think. You’re a free man, Severus.”

“Yes.” He did not smile, but his face seemed younger, and his shoulders were no longer braced to bear a crushing burden. “Quite free. And you say you will keep to your contract.”

“I must. I would face some rather unpleasant consequences otherwise. And we both need time. A wizard in the flesh is quite a different matter than his mere portrait, after all. Let me hear from you once you reach Hong Kong. Who knows? At the end of the next year and a half, I too may wish to find my way to the Hidden City, or stand on the shores of the Lonely Isle.”

XIX.

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN:

HARRY AND THE DURSLEYS

“ **ermione, wait!**”

“Just for a minute, Harry! I’ve really got to get back to work.”

“You look tired.”

Hermione was hollow-eyed and irritable, and her hair stuck out in all directions. They moved to the wall, letting other, busier Ministry employees bustle past.

“I *am* tired. ‘There and back again’ to Australia over the weekend rather does that, I’m afraid.”

“You saw your Mum and Dad?”

"I took them some books and pictures. They were pleased to see me, after a bit. It was stiflingly hot, and that wore me out, too."

"Do they like the heat?"

"Not much. Their house is air-conditioned, and they didn't leave it while I was there."

"Then they should come back to England."

Hermione laughed mirthlessly, and rumpled her hair with both hands. "Oh, Harry, don't you think I've tried? They don't even remember England properly. Of course, they point out that they would have to start all over again. After so many months, their patients will have gone elsewhere. It's not easy to pick up where one's left off. I daresay the Dursleys were in a bit of pickle when they went home, for that matter!"

"I hadn't thought about it."

Harry actually had not thought about the Dursleys at all in months. They had ceased to exist for him until Hermione's remark nudged memories. For the rest of the afternoon, he wondered, now and then, how the Dursleys had fared under wizarding protection, and what they would have to say now that they were home and safe.

I suppose a "thank you" isn't in the cards. The thought made him snort his tea through his nose. Still, Dudley had not been half-bad when he had last seen him. *I could drop by Privet Drive, I suppose. Just to see if they're all right.*

Instead of a pint with the lads after work, he apparated to Surrey. The moment he arrived on the well-known lawn, he blinked in confusion.

It was not the same house. It was new, and there was a "FOR SALE" sign just in front of him —

"Ow!"

He tripped, and landed sprawling, face in the grass. He got up, wincing, and brushed himself off. He looked for the house number.

Four.

He turned, gaze sweeping the street. Everything was as he remembered it otherwise. This was, unquestionably, Number Four, Privet Drive.

Mrs. Figg's house was surely still where it ought to be, and Harry set off at a jog for Wisteria Walk, hoping for an explanation.

He knocked. The house had a different atmosphere, somehow. No cats came peering suspiciously at him through the shrubbery.

"Yes?" An unfamiliar, middle-aged man threw the door open.

"Sorry to bother you. I used to live in the neighborhood and I was looking for Mrs. Figg."

"Don't know her." The man made to shut the door.

"She used to live here."

The man paused. A woman, apparently his wife, came to door, and looked around her husband's shoulder at Harry.

"Who is it, Nigel?"

"He's looking for the woman who used to own the house."

"Oh!" The woman shook her head. "We don't know anything about that! We didn't even know anyone had died in

the house until after we moved in.” She stared at Harry in dissatisfaction, as if he were responsible for keeping the unpleasant secret from her.

Harry was still processing her words. “She’s *dead*?”

“Yes. We don’t know anything about it. We’re new here.” The man was impatient and uncomfortable, wanting Harry to go away. “You can ask next door — I can’t help you. Sorry.”

The woman asked, “Were you a relative?”

“Just a friend.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

The door shut in Harry’s face.

He wondered whom he could ask. He had never been exactly popular in the neighborhood. He shuddered at the idea of chatting up Mrs. Polkiss, but maybe the Grants at Number Seven might be all right...

Mrs. Grant answered the doorbell, and her eyes widened at the sight of Harry.

“You!”

“Mrs. Grant, I wanted to know what happened to Mrs. Figg. And what happened to my house?”

The woman backed away, clearly frightened. “Don’t come any closer,” she whispered.

“Look, I just want to know — ”

“Did *you* do it? We knew you were at that school — ”

“I don’t understand, Mrs. Grant. I’ve haven’t been here since the summer of the year before last.”

She glanced behind her despairingly, obviously wanting to

slam the door and run. “It burned down in the night, didn’t it?” she said flatly. “The Dursleys had been gone for a day or two, and then the sky was bright as daylight and everyone rushed out to see the blaze. Some said it looked like it was set *deliberately* — ” she blinked fearfully at Harry.

“Have you seen my aunt and uncle since then?”

She bit her lip, clearly wondering if she would be harming someone if she spoke. “They were back last summer,” she finally admitted. “Trying to get the insurance and all. A time they had of it, too. They didn’t know the house was gone at first, and Petunia was that upset — ” her voice trailed off.

“Do you know where they are now?”

“Last I heard they’d gone to stay with his sister. The insurance company wouldn’t pay until they were done investigating — ” she blinked at Harry again.

“What about Mrs. Figg?”

“She’s dead.”

“I know. I went by the house. When did it happen?”

“Likely the very night Number Four burned. No one saw her for days, until the postman noticed a smell — ” she broke off, looking sick. “Found her lying dead, amongst all those cats. Her heart, they think. No marks on her, anyway.” She began to ease the door shut, eyeing Harry as if she thought he would leap at her. “My husband will be home any minute!” she added.

Harry knew it was time to go. “Thank you, Mrs. Grant. I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

He turned away. The door was locked behind him. From the corner of his eye, he could see the woman rush to the window to make certain he was leaving.



It was shaping up into something of a standard investigation, only this time he was investigating his own family.

He knew where Marge Dursley lived, of course. Presumably they were still stopping with her, or had found a new place to live by now. He thought it over a little more, and then he went in search of the nearest telephone.

A call to Grunnings yielded some alarming information.

"We hev noo Vernon Dursley employed heah," the receptionist declared in an affected, nasal whine.

"No Vernon Dursley?" Harry snapped. "He's worked at Grunnings for years — "

"We hev noo Vernon Dursley employed heah," the woman repeated. "Sorry." *Click.*

Well, Marge is was, then. Harry had to concentrate, and found a quiet spot where he could don his Invisibility Cloak unobserved. He had been to Marge's cottage exactly twice, both times when he was quite young. This was going to be unpleasant, but he was a grown wizard with a wand now, and if she gave trouble, he could throw a discreet cheering charm at her. He scowled. Marge under the influence of a cheering charm was a rather nasty thing to contemplate.

He apparated, and stood perfectly still, making certain

there was no unknown hazard before moving closer to the house. Seen by a stranger, the cottage would have been candybox pretty, save for the kennels and the dog run at the back. There was a pervasive smell of dog droppings. It was full dark, save for the moon and the light by the door. Harry decided to follow Auror procedure and observe before he barged in.

Marge was home. Harry crept close to the house, and hissed through his teeth with annoyance as the dogs set up a wild barking. They might not see him, but they could certainly smell him. Marge came to the window. Harry could see the squat outline, bending over to peer out. Faintly he could hear the coarse, deep voice quizzing her revolting Ripper.

He walked around the house, looking through the windows. No one else seemed to be in residence. He knew Marge's car, but there was no sign of another. There was nothing for it, but to confront the horrid woman. Quickly, he slipped off the cloak and wadded it into his pocket. Then he presented himself at the front door, and knocked.

If the dogs had been noisy before, Harry's knock was the signal for them to go berserk. The baying, howling, yapping was indescribable. Harry kept his wand in his hand, ready to throw a "*Fiscella!*" at any snapping brute that might attack.

A Muzzling Charm might work on Marge, too, he thought wryly. I never thought Auror training would help me deal with the Dursleys!

The door opened.

"You!" a woman screamed at him for the second time that

evening. This one kept a shotgun behind the door.



It took two Stunners to deal with Marge and Ripper. Harry then cast a broad silencing charm over the rest of the dogs. It would wear off in an hour or two. It might drive the dogs absolutely mad, but perhaps the neighbors would bless the silence.

He would have to wipe her memory of his visit, of course. He was an Auror and it was marginally within the law. As long as he did no permanent harm and used a memory charm afterwards, an Auror had a fairly free hand in dealing with muggles. He had hoped to do this with a minimum of unpleasantness, but that was obviously not going to work.

She was angry and venomous when awakened — terrified, too — plainly thinking that Harry was here to murder her. He cast a *Silencio* on her when she screamed, and then bound her magically to a chair. Much as he disliked her, he felt uncomfortable and ashamed as her face dripped with tears and snot, and the chair grew stinking and sodden with the urine she voided in her panic. A calming charm helped somewhat, but her eyes were still twitching oddly.

"Where are Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia?" he asked, wanting to make this brief. "I went to Number Four, but it was gone, and a new house is there on the site."

She stared at him, mouth working. He remembered the silencing charm, and said, "I'll let you talk if you won't

scream. All right?"

A frightened nod, chins trembling. It occurred to Harry that she was not as large as he remembered. "Not as big as you used to be, are you? Not as big as you were when you set your dog on a helpless kid."

Her eyes bulged again, and Harry swore. "All right. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want you to answer some questions."

Cautiously, he ended the charm. "Where are they?"

"Vernon's dead," she croaked. "I don't know where Petunia is."

"Vernon's dead?" He paused. People were dead and he had had no idea. "When?"

She glared at him, hating him. "I know you were behind it, somehow — " She hissed, "What are you? Vernon said they had to leave their house because you were in some sort of trouble. You cost them everything — "

"When did he die?"

"July." She licked dry lips. "July thirty-first. Poor old chap. On the run and then to come back and find everything was gone — "

"His heart?" The idea disturbed him. *Surely not* —

"Stroke," she managed. "Massive stroke. It was all too much. He'd given years to the company and they wouldn't have him back. While he was hiding — because of you — they gave his job away. The house was gone and they still owed on it, and the insurance people wouldn't pay, the foul cheats — said they weren't satisfied he wasn't behind it — " Her eyes closed, and she sniffed wetly. "Too much..."

Vernon was dead. Harry was not much moved. It was too bad he had lost his job, but that wasn't Harry's fault; and no matter what Marge or the neighbors thought, he had not burned down the house. *Death Eaters — and they got Mrs. Figg with a killing curse, too. Why didn't she run? Why didn't she hide?*

"So where are Petunia and Dudley?" he asked, sitting down in a straight-backed chair opposite her.

The terrified eyes hardened. "I'll never tell you!"

"I'm not going to hurt them! I just want to know."

She clearly did not believe him.

"Look," he said. "You tell me where they are, and I'll just — go away. You'll never see me again."

Her mouth tightened with denial.

"And I'll make sure Ripper is all right," he said, jerking his head in the direction of the dog on the floor. Marge began to sob.

"What have you done to the others, you murderer?"

That's right. They should be barking.

"They're just asleep — "

"You *poisoned* them?" she roared. Harry got up and loomed over her.

"Shut up! They'll be all right if you just tell me what I want to know."

It took some time. Harry was surprised at how much Marge wanted to protect Petunia and Dudley. Using a tricky combination of charms, he managed to calm her somewhat and get her talking. He had learned in training that muggles really weren't difficult if one went about it in the right way. Marge

gabbled and drooled, but Harry could understand most of it.

When the Dursleys disappeared, Marge had feared that Harry had murdered them and burned down the house. The police were useless. Marge had been immensely relieved last summer when her brother and his family appeared at her door, but they had been in terrible shape. They could tell her nothing much about their long absence, other than that they had been in some sort of police protection program, because of that *Potter*. Because the house fire was suspected to be arson, the insurance company still had not paid Petunia. The investigation was "ongoing." Vernon's job was gone, the house and everything they owned was gone, and the family was hopelessly in debt: mired in overdrafts and unpaid bills and fines. Her brother had come to her house a bewildered, shrunken, beaten man, and only a few days later had dropped dead at dinner.

Petunia, it seemed, now was living alone in a little flat in Lewes, not far from here, and working at a Safeway. Vernon's life insurance had been enough to pay the family's debts and furnish the flat, but not much more. The Dursleys' comfortable middle-class life was over.

Dudley had lost a year of school, and had apparently done nothing but exercise the entire time he was gone. Smeltings no longer had a place for him, and he was not prepared to take his A-levels. Wherever he had been, it had been somewhere without a school or a tutor. He was pale, but fit, and wanted to spend every minute outdoors. He

was too restless to settle down and make up the lost studies. "Said he was ashamed to be a burden on us." To his mother's horror, he had gone to London shortly after his father's funeral and joined the Royal Marines. Marge was only sorry that he would not be an officer.

"Damned fine sight in his uniform, anyway," she muttered defiantly, dazed by the magic. "Out of the country now. Safe from *you*. Couldn't tell us where he was going. 'Ours not to reason why — '"

Harry became somewhat alarmed that he was going to break her mind. This evening had evidently been the worst experience of Marge's life. He wrested Petunia's address from her, and then shrugged on the Invisibility Cloak.

"*Obliviate!*"



He had never been to Lewes, and could not possibly apparate there. It was too late to drop in on Aunt Petunia, anyway. He was not sure the two of them had anything to say to each other. She had had a rotten year, though, and he still wanted to see for himself that she was getting by. Or *maybe*, another part of his mind suggested, *I want to see that she's not getting by?* The idea gnawed at him, but he put it aside until he could fly to Lewes after work the next day.

He found the unassuming block of flats easily enough, and rang for "P. Dursley." There was no response, and after awhile he decided to see if she might still be at work. The

thought of Aunt Petunia *at work* was still pretty funny. She had kept Number Four well enough — but she had been very much a stay-at-home wife and mother. Of course, she was no longer a wife, and Dudley had gone off on his own.

The Safeway was crowded. Not wanting any more screaming, Harry wore his Cloak. It took him some time to find Aunt Petunia, perhaps because he looked at her at least three times before recognizing her.

She had always been thin. Now she looked gaunt and old. Her hair, always so carefully coiffed, was cut short and streaked with grey. She had not bothered to use make-up, and she was dressed in a nondescript jumper and baggy slacks. She was stacking tins of potted meat, while her supervisor looked on, telling her what to do next.

Harry found some magazines and read until she vanished briefly, and then reappeared wearing a coat he recognized. It hung on her shapelessly. She slung her handbag over her shoulder and trudged wearily home.

It was quite a long walk. Harry wondered where she had left the car. She paused now and then, and Harry wondered if she had heard him. She walked a little quicker, and then fumbled briefly for her keys when she arrived at her building. He waited.

The lights on the left side of the second floor switched on. Harry followed her, passing easily through the locked security door. He took a breath, and then knocked.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Aunt Petunia."

The silence lasted over a minute. Harry grew impatient, and was on the point of entering when she opened the door, staring at him as if he were a ghost.

"What do you want?"

"I wanted to see how you were."

"Come to gloat?" She flushed and then straightened, making no further apologies for the cramped flat. Not surprisingly, it was painfully tidy. The furniture was all new and looked decent, if inexpensive. There was a picture of Vernon on the wall nearby, and another of Dudley, looking extremely impressive in his uniform. Other than the pictures, there was nothing familiar here.

"I heard that Uncle Vernon had died — "

"That was over six months ago. Don't pretend you're sorry."

"I *am* sorry, Aunt Petunia. Are you all right — ?"

"Do I look all right?"

"Can I come in?"

"How can I possibly stop you?"

He took that as consent, and eased past her into the tiny room. The kitchen occupied one end of the space, and a counter with a pair of stools divided it from the lounge. Two doors faced him. One was obviously the bathroom. The other must be the single bedroom.

"I heard that Dudley joined the Royal Marines."

She nodded sharply, her gaze shifting to the serious-faced young athlete in the large picture.

"He looks great," Harry said sincerely.

"There was nothing else for him to do, you see," Petunia muttered, half to herself, "nothing to do all those months up in his room but exercise. He had his weights, and he did all these exercises. Hundreds of push-ups and sit-ups and crunches. He knew the names of all of them."

"Where were you? No one told me."

She shook her head. "I've no idea. A cottage, somewhere. There were trees closing us all around. We weren't allowed out the door. There was no television, no radio, no newspapers. No books that we were able to read but a battered copy of *Diary of a Provincial Lady*. I must have read it fifty times." She laughed shortly. "There were no lights nor heat nor proper cooker. Nothing those people would have called 'muggle.' What an ugly word, 'muggle.' Like 'nigger.' How you all despise us."

Harry was a little surprised. "Hestia and Daedalus are decent people," he protested. "I'm sure they didn't mean to make you uncomfortable — "

"I suppose not. They didn't like us, or understand anything about 'muggles.' They looked at us like they would animals in the zoo. Usually they remembered to do their magic to keep the house warm or lit, but sometimes they were away, and forgot. They brought in food and wood, and I cooked in the grate. Vernon sat there, hardly moving. One day I spent hours scrubbing the floor, and then that woman came back and she saw what I was doing. She waved her wand and the rest was done in a flash. Then she smiled, and said 'There

now, isn't that better?' She made me feel like nothing. If I'd had a gun, I would have shot her." She considered Harry, head cocked to one side. "I suppose we should be grateful. We weren't *tortured* or *killed*, after all. Not like dozens of others, I understand. Killed not even understanding why."

"It was Voldemort," Harry told her. "He didn't care what he did."

"Oh — and you other — *wizards* — cared?" Her voice rose a little. "You didn't care enough to warn people — not so they could defend themselves."

"We have to keep our world secret — " Harry began hotly.

"You make me sick," she snarled. "You think you're all so superior, but you're nothing but parasites. You live among us like leeches — no, like *tapeworms* — eating the food we grow, and wearing the clothes we make, and stealing decent peoples' children, and giving nothing in return but pain and misery. What's it all worth — the magic?"

She hadn't changed at all, he decided, except to become more bitter. Harry sighed. "I thought for a minute — when I last saw you, that you felt — "

Another laugh, loud and unladylike. "What do you want? For me to say I'm sorry I was rotten to you when you were growing up? Maybe I was sorry then — but *I'm not now*." Seeing his face tighten, she hissed. "What difference would it have made, anyway? Even if we'd wanted you, even if we'd treated you like a prince, it would all have ended up the same way — with you run away to the fairies and Vernon dead and

everything lost. And you wouldn't have cared a pin more."

"That's not true!"

"It is true! I've seen it all before, when my sister got that letter that led to this! She never had any use for me once she found out she was so *special*. Lily was always ambitious. She couldn't be bothered to talk to a mere 'muggle' anymore. It was all magic books and that revolting Snape boy — "

"He's dead, too," Harry said.

Petunia paused, and then her eyes gleamed. "Good. I'm glad. He was the start of it. At least she didn't marry him, the ugly little freak. She found out that your *father* — " the word was spat out in contempt " — had money, and Lily decided he would do. When we were little, Lily used to talk about marrying Prince Andrew. Once she went off to that school, she wanted to marry well in *that* world."

"I'm not going to listen to this," Harry said abruptly, walking to the door.

"Your mother was a hard-hearted, selfish girl with an eye to the main chance. Once she decided someone wasn't useful to her, she couldn't be bothered — "

"My mother saved my life with her own!"

Petunia put her back to the door and gave him a shove. "Don't you walk away from me, boy! If your mother was such a great witch, why didn't she get away? Why didn't she fight? Couldn't she vanish, like you lot do, or did she stand there, whining and pleading with a madman, begging for mercy?"

— "No, not Harry!" —

Harry, without thinking, slapped her hard. Petunia's head cracked back against the door.

"I'm sorry!" Harry blurted out. Petunia staggered and rubbed her jaw.

"She did, didn't she? She died begging for mercy like a coward. She might have been full of magic books, but she was no good in the real world! When your father and those friends of his tormented Vernon on her *wedding day*, she didn't do anything but simper, 'Oh, James! That's not fair!' I could see that she thought it was good fun. Our own mother was crying, and Dad was trying not to look afraid, and those freaks were *laughing*! She didn't even come when Mum and Dad were found dead in their house. She left me to do everything then, the way she left me to take care of you!"

"Get out of my way."

"Go on, get out, you monster! I'm not sorry for *anything* I ever did to you!" She pushed away from him, and looked at him over her shoulder, eyes glinting green. "Not that I don't have regrets. I never should have let that cruel old devil bully us into taking you. You ruined our lives, whether you meant to or not. You belonged with your own kind. No. The only thing I'd change if I could do it all over again, is that I would have *killed* you when you were a baby. I should have done it. I could have put a pillow over your face and no one would have known. You and your lot don't deserve to live. Someday — someday..."

"Good-bye, Aunt Petunia."


"Go to hell."

He disappeared in front of her without warning: wanting her to be impressed, to be startled, to be frightened. He was home at Grimmauld Place instantly, in the comforting and familiar presence of magic.

XX.

ALTERED STATES:

HARRY, HERMIONE & RON

" **t even tastes good!"** Ron promised.

Customers bustled in and out of the Weasley emporium. It was doing tremendous business, and Ron seemed pleased to have real money of his own at last. Proudly, he presented the latest creation.

Harry eyed the innocent-looking bottle with a certain suspicion. "*Mellow Yellow*?"

Ron waggled his brows. "Guaranteed to spread friendly feelings. Perfect for parties. You and your guests won't stand there with a broomstick up your — Lee! We need another crate of Creams!"

Lee Jordan grinned in passing, headed to the back of the shop. He waved at Harry. "You got to try it, mate. Hearty good fellowship in a bottle, and only twelve sickles!"

"I don't know," Harry said doubtfully. "Isn't it sort of like — well — drugs?"

Ron regarded him blankly. "Like what?"

"Drugs! Muggles take recreational drugs, too. A lot of them are really illegal — and addictive."

"Do they really?" George asked, looking up from a display with quick interest. "What sorts of drugs?"

Not wanting to give the Weasley boys ideas any more dangerous than the ones they were already entertaining, Harry shrugged. "Don't know anything about them, really. Can you really sell something like this?"

"Come on, mate! If we can sell Canary Creams and Skiving Snackboxes, we can sell this!"

"It's mostly a calming potion, with some secret ingredients," George came over and admired the attractively curved bottles, seeming to like the way the frosted glass felt in his hand.

"What would happen if you took it too often?" Harry asked.

"Dunno," George shrugged. "It's probably not addictive, I'd guess." A customer needed help, and he headed back to the counter.

"See?" Ron said, glad it was all settled. He fidgeted, and then blurted out, "It might help with Hermione."

"What?"

Ron's ears flushed dark pink. "I just thought that if Hermione had some we could talk without her going spare. You could be having dinner with her, and I could show up — purely by chance. We could put a few drops of this on her food, and then she'd hear me out."

"You want me to help you drug Hermione."

"No — it's not like that — well — yes. I do. Want you to help me drug Hermione."

"Are you out of your —"

"I can't stop thinking about her!" Ron bellowed.

Every head in the shop swiveled in their direction. George nearly fell over laughing. Ron grabbed Harry by the sleeve and dragged him into the supply room.

"I can't stop thinking about her, Harry," Ron confessed in a half-whisper. "I broke up with Lavender. She's nice, but she's *too* nice — you know? And Mum can't stand her."

Harry blinked. "Why? What's wrong with Lavender? Is it the werewolf bite?"

Ron reared back, indignant. "Come on! Mum's not like that!"

"Sorry."

"I just want to *talk* with her. You've got to help me, mate."

Harry was assailed by a dozen conflicting emotions. He stalled for time. "Ron. I'm not going to try to prank Hermione, or go behind her back, because if we do, she'll turn us into frogspawn. You know that."

Ron gulped. "Reckon I do."

"What I *am* willing to do is talk her into having dinner — just the three of us — and maybe both of you using some of that potion of yours. Maybe we can sort this thing out if the two of you don't start fighting."

Ron nodded slowly, thinking it over. "We won't fight if we *all* take the potion," he muttered.

"All of us?"

"Yeah! All of us! Thanks, Harry — what a great idea!"



Harry trudged down the Alley, wanting a drink in the worst way. Somehow he was going to host a dinner for Ron and Hermione on Friday night. The thought made him slightly dizzy, but the Mellowing Potion might mitigate the worst of the damage to Grimmauld Place.

He honestly did not know what he wanted. He hated his current balancing act, trying to keep both Ron and Hermione as his own best friends while keeping them as far away from each other as possible. He really enjoyed the special times he and Hermione had had together. He really hated it when Hermione nagged him. He felt guilty for what was happening behind Ron's back. Ginny would hex him if he knew that he was sleeping with Hermione. Molly would probably curse him. Every male member of the Weasley family would pile on him until he was as flat as Rita Skeeter under a fly-swatter. And there were other possibilities, if he and Hermione went back to being just friends. There was a delegation from Spain observing Auror training this month. That young witch, Maria Stella, looked like she fancied him. He could ask her out, and have an evening with a girl he hadn't known since the age of eleven. They might even talk about something other than the war.

Did he want to lose Hermione as a lover? Was there a

future for them together? Instantly he realized that there was, but not as a couple. Of course they would always be a part of each other's lives, but Hermione was not what he wanted in a wife. She was so ambitious, so tightly wound, so competitive. What did he want? He wasn't at all sure, but he had a pretty good idea that Hermione would not change with time. Most likely she would always be the way she was now, only more so. That was not what he wanted to wake up to every morning for the rest of his life.

He slunk into the Leaky Cauldron, grateful for the warmth and the familiar smells of bangers and butterbeer.

A tall figure in charcoal-grey was in front of him before he could stop. Harry bumped into the man and mumbled an apology.

"Ah! Mr. Potter, is it? May I buy you a drink, sir?"

Harry looked up into the wise and wrinkled face of John Wellington Wells. The old wizard was garbed in full Victorian splendor: tall beaver hat and caped great coat. It was unusual, even in Diagon Alley, but it suited him. His keen eyes were shadowed by heavy brows. The nose over the luxuriant grey mustache was largish and rather red. Harry was rather pleased to have a chance to speak to the man. He really liked Wells' stories in the *DAILY PROPHET* quite a bit, even though Hermione thought they were made-up rubbish.

"I'd like that. Thanks. I have a table — "

The regulars buzzed and whispered at the sight of two notables in conversation. Wells was amenable to joining Harry is

his private alcove, and shortly thereafter, Tom appeared with two glasses and an ancient bottle labeled “Laphroaig.”

Harry felt very much a man of the world. “Is that fire-whiskey?”

Wells snorted. “My dear boy, this is the real thing — not some raw wizardly imitation enhanced with shoddy spells!” He poured Harry three fingers of the amber liquid with careful reverence. “Now taste the subtle smokiness. My favorite. Always happy to share a true gift of the Gods with the rising generation.”

Harry sniffed and sipped — warily at first, and then appreciatively. “It’s like it doesn’t have any alcohol — ” he wavered — “at first.”

“Yes — wonderfully smooth. Warms a fellow without the ruddy inconvenience of breathing fire. All for show, that.”

“This is really good.” He licked his lips, savoring the mild burning sensation. “*Laphroaig*. I’ll remember it.”

“Do, my boy. It’s muggle, you know. Muggles create some marvelous things, though it’s not always the fashion to say so.”

“Mr. Wells, I’ve been meaning to tell you how much I like your memoirs in the *Prophet*. They’re the first thing I read on Friday.”

“I’m honored to hear it, sir.”

“I mean — you’ve been in — well — you know about danger — ”

Wells assented with a regal nod. “I’ve lived a life of adventure. As have you, Mr. Potter. A great deal of adventure to

be crammed into such a young life.”

“Yes, but your adventures are fun and *interesting*. Mine were pretty horrible to live through.”

“One man’s adventure is another man’s unpleasant experience. I confess, however, that the passage of time softens the worst aspects of mortal peril. Someday, no doubt, you will be able to recount your slaying of a basilisk — extraordinary, that! — with the same distant satisfaction that I feel when telling how I tricked the Ogre of the Forty Wells.”

“I suppose.” Harry took a longer sip. His stomach was blissfully warm.

It was easy to talk to Wells. The old man could listen as well as tell stories. Harry had another three fingers, while he heard about the Wendigo of Baffin Island. He told Wells about the Mirror of Erised. He had another three fingers, while the afternoon shaded into evening, and the draperies surrounding them grew strangely fuzzy. Sometime after eleven, he impulsively blurted out, “Can I ask you about something?”

“Certainly.” The older wizard was holding up his glass, admiring the color of the whisky.

“About women.”

The elderly wizard’s shaggy brows lifted in surprise. Harry was surprised himself, but blundered on. “I mean — you’ve been married — a lot — and I have this friend — ”

“ — And your friend is having a spot of bother with the fair sex?”

“Yes! There’s this witch he’s friends with — and she used

to be with his best friend — but they had a fight — and now I — my friend is with this witch, but nobody knows that they're anything more than friends — ”

Wells looked severe. “You mean to say that — this *friend* of yours has poached the sweetheart of his best chum? Very bad form.”

“Not exactly. She threw him over because he did something stupid and got her upset. Then my friend sort of — ”

“Your friend is feeling guilty?”

“Yes! But that's not all. Now his friend wants to get back together with the witch and he asked my friend to have a dinner — just the three of them — so he can sort out their troubles.” He took another sip. “It's complicated.”

“It always is, my boy.” He set down his glass, and eyed Harry reflectively, steeping his hands before him on the table. “Have you ever heard about my second wife?”

“Don't think so, sir.”

The old wizard smiled dreamily. “Lalage, High Priestess of the Flaming God. I was messing about in the Altynai Mountains. Finding isolated pockets of magic was always a passion of mine. Didn't know the local customs and put the natives' backs up. Found myself Petrified and Bound in Indissoluble Matrimony before I could apparate away.”

“You had to *marry* her?”

Wells waved Harry's dismay aside. “Nothing to it — no trouble in the world, but the witch had the snout of a warthog.”

“A really big nose?”

“No — she had the snout of a warthog. Pretty alarming, I can tell you. Ugliest female I ever set eyes on. But there was nothing for it. It was marriage or be stretched out on the altar with my liver extracted for purposes of divination.”

“So you married her.”

“I did indeed. We were hustled away to the local equivalent of the honeymoon suite, and my blushing bride told me something very interesting. She was under an enchantment — hardly surprising — and I had a choice: either she could continue to be ugly in the eyes of the world and the most beautiful woman in the world when we were alone, or she could be beautiful in public and sport the warthog snout in private. That was a puzzler for me, I can tell you. No man likes to have everybody jeering at him because his lady wife is a fright — but on the other hand, the prospect of marital intimacies at the moment was pretty dismal.”

“So what did you choose?”

Wells looked Harry in the eye, and smiled grimly. “I *didn't* choose. Told the girl I didn't have the right to make that kind of decision for her. I left it with her — told her to please herself, because it was her face and her life, after all.” He leaned forward, and slapped the table lightly. “Turned out that was the right answer. It broke the enchantment — giving the girl the freedom of choice. One minute I was looking at a pig snout, and the next at an Houri of the Prophet's Paradise. We lived happily ever after — for thirty years, actually, until she was killed in a palace coup

and I had to resume my travels rather hastily. The point is, young-fellow-me-lad, the choice should be the girl's. If she decides she likes another chap better than you — than your friend — it's very fit that she should have him. And *your friend* will have done the honorable thing."

Harry knocked back the rest of the whisky. "That's a pretty cool story."

"Yes, it is," Wells agreed. "Make of it what you will."



The potion made Hermione smile. Actually, it made them all smile. It was a pleasant change from the awkwardness of their greetings. At first, Harry had looked from the grim straight line of Hermione's mouth to Ron's red face and had despaired of the evening.

Nonetheless, he held to the pre-arranged plan. He poured them all a crystal glass of the Amontillado recommended by John Wellington Wells, and then two drops of the Mellowing Potion in each. Hermione had quizzed him mercilessly about the potion, but had finally agreed that they would all take exactly the same amount. It had not appreciably affected the taste of the sherry, which Ron bolted in a single gulp. Hermione rolled her eyes, but allowed Harry to lead her into the dining room.

Harry took the chair at the head of his table, and placed Hermione to his right and Ron to his left. Together, they sat down to another example of the finest early twentieth

century cookery had to offer: Lobster Cream *en coupe*; Sole Colbert; Saddle of Lamb with red currant jelly; the tiniest of boiled potatoes, brushed with the best of best butter; sweet little green peas; Black Peach, a Black family specialty; and an enticing board of Harry's favorite cheeses. The food was delicious, the wines perfect, and the conversation grew pleasanter as the meal progressed.

Ron was won over from the soup. He tasted it, and then had not a moment for speech until it was gone, all gone, and his spoon hunted wistfully for a last drop.

"How's business, Ron?" Harry asked, trying to get the conversation launched.

"Great," Ron answered feelingly, gazing at the next course. He gave himself a little shake. "I mean — great. We may need to open a branch in Hogsmeade. We're starting a whole new line in Daydreams. Those videos gave us some brilliant ideas. People like the happy ones. Cheers them up a bit after all that's happened."

They talked a little — haltingly — about work. Harry's training lasted them through the fish course. He could feel the potion working on him, and he relaxed, chatting about the amazing things he was learning, describing the observers from Spain and their curiosity about wizarding Britain.

Hermione had much to tell about her meetings with the governors of the Albus Dumbledore School. She had news of Hogwarts, too, from Professor McGonagall, who was having a very hard year.

"So many families have pulled their children out of Hogwarts. Some of the new Slytherins have left in the middle of the year. McGonagall tries to stop the taunts and bullying, but she can't be everywhere. She still feels guilty about throwing all the Slytherins out of Hogwarts before the battle. A lot of them would have fought for us, but she was too angry to see anything but their house colors. She worries about that girl — I think it was Jenet McDougal — who asked after Professor Snape. She wasn't even a pureblood, and her family hadn't anything to do with Voldemort, but she was thrown out with the rest, and she never came back."

Ron smiled, at peace. "Hogwarts will get by just fine without them."

Harry wondered, "Will they be tutored at home?"

"Not all of them," Hermione said. "You know that the Greengrasses and the Notts left for America. The goblins didn't like it when they took everything they had out of Gringotts. They're in Arkham now, and put their children in the schools there —"

"Regular nest of dark wizards, from what I hear," Ron commented, scooping up buttery potatoes.

"— but most of the old Slytherin families — the ones with any money left — have transferred their children to the Irish school at Tara."

Ron snorted contemptuously. Harry said, "I didn't even know there was an Irish school."

Hermione was glad to enlighten him. "Oh yes — it's very

small, but older than Hogwarts. It nearly closed altogether during the Famine in the nineteenth century, and only had a handful of students for the longest time, but they've been growing ever since the sixties. Professor McGonagall is concerned about such a large group of disaffected students. It's not supported by the Ministry, of course, other than to send out O.W.L and N.E.W.T. examiners. I think it's very expensive. Their Headmaster, Eamon Plunkett, told Professor McGonagall that 'Britain's loss was Ireland's gain.' She thinks he has Separatist views."

Ron looked blank. Harry told him, "In the muggle world, Ireland is this whole separate country. I was sort of surprised when the British Minister picked up the trophy for the Irish team at the World Cup."

Ron still looked blank. "They have their own quidditch league. What more could they want?"

Hermione tutted gently, and Harry only grinned. Politics was dropped, and Kreacher brought out the dessert.

Hermione was entirely seduced by Kreacher's killer confection of fragrant ripe peach, creamy vanilla-laced iced pudding (for ice-cream was too commonplace a word for the marvel), and the planet's most voluptuous dark chocolate sauce. Later, she could not have told anyone whether it was potion or pudding that rendered her so unruffled when Ron asked about her parents and their house. Ordinarily she would have been defensive, but instead she talked very composedly about the drawbacks of living among muggles.

"I have to keep the house, of course. I couldn't possibly sell it. My parents may want it someday, and it's a handy place to store things. I have to be terribly careful, of course."

Ron agreed that living among muggles would be inconvenient. "Now that George has taken up with Agelina Johnson, living above the shop is getting to be a squeeze. Mum would like me back at the Burrow, but it's time I found my own place."

Eagerly, Hermione declared, "I was reading in the *Prophet* about that new development in Sussex. It seems ever so nice, and it's just what's been wanted. You might take a flat there."

Harry, mellow but not dim, did not disclose that Cloud Hill was a Malfoy venture. Mr. Malfoy himself had mentioned the project to Harry.

"There's no more room for Hogsmeade to grow, and Diagon Alley is hemmed in on all sides by muggle London. It's time there was a new, safe place for our people."

Lucius Malfoy had purchased, through his many contacts, a dilapidated muggle farm. In fact, any muggle passing by would still see nothing but stone walls surrounding green fields dotted with sheep. Once past the wards, however, there were four square miles of planned community: blocks of flats, terraced houses, cottages with space for gardens, two quidditch pitches, three play parks, and room for a few businesses — including a pub. It was intended primarily as a bedroom community, from whence residents could floo or bus or apparate where they liked, secure in the knowledge that no snooping muggles were watching. New hous-

ing had been needed for years, but Lucius Malfoy was the one who had conceived it, and was the one likely to make yet another fortune from it. Wisely, he had not attached the Malfoy name to the development. He had even persuaded Harry to put some of the Potter money into it. It was proving a wise investment.

Ron, not knowing of the Malfoy connection, liked Hermione's idea, licking the chocolate from his spoon with a contemplative air. "Yeah, that sounds great. I could take a look. Lee's getting a place there, and he really likes it. A bloke could play Quidditch whenever he liked."

"And the bus for the schoolchildren can pick them up right there," Hermione added. "It's not even that far from the Albus Dumbledore School." She looked at Ron rather fondly. He was talking so reasonably this evening — like a mature young man. He grinned at her, and her heart caught, remembering all they had lived through together. Hesitantly, she smiled back.

Harry watched his two friends rediscovering each other. It was a relief to see them reconciled, but a little bittersweet all the same. Maybe it was the way things ought to be. His friends might become a couple again, but he was still there, right in the middle. It was a comfortably familiar feeling.

"Serve the cheese, Kreacher," he murmured. The elf appeared, watching them with huge eyes. At a glance from Harry, he vanished.

"How are your Mum and Dad, Ron?" Hermione asked softly.

"Fine. Mind you, they complain about not seeing you."

Percy's always going on about how well you're doing at the Ministry. Mum started wondering about you and *him*."

"Percy's always been very nice to me, but he's not my type." She smiled at Ron again, and then said to Harry, "This was a wonderful dinner. At least Mrs. Weasley will know Ron got a nice, home-cooked meal tonight!"

It was said without rancor. Ron agreed enthusiastically. "Mum fusses, but she doesn't understand what it's like when you're at work all day. There's no time for fancy cooking. Sometimes I think about getting one of those displaced elves."

Harry glanced quickly at Hermione, to see how she would react. She was neither upset nor indignant. "That might be a good idea, Ron. If I had to worry about anyone else, I might too, or I might take on one of the elves from the school. House elves have to be treated kindly, of course. I don't have time to cook myself, but proper nutrition is very important."

"Too right!" Ron was blushing, looking at Hermione adoringly. Harry wondered if he should leave them alone.

He remarked lightly, "I guess the potion is a success then."

"What?" Hermione wondered. "Oh — the potion. I'd like a sample to analyze, Harry. It's very interesting. I feel very relaxed, but not sleepy or stupid. It wouldn't do to take it all the time, but it seems very effective in the short term."

"Do you reckon you'd want to move to Cloud Hill, Harry?" Ron asked, still looking at Hermione.

"No, Ron. Grimmauld Place is home now. It's got a lot of memories, and some of them I want to keep."

" — But you wouldn't mind coming out to see the place with me, would you? Tell you what — let's all three go this Sunday and have a look. I might want a bigger place than just a flat."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "Some of the detached cottages are quite lovely. There would plenty of room for a house elf."

"Maybe even a library," Ron added generously.

Hermione smiled again.

Harry finished off his Double Gloucester in two bites. He felt a little sad, but he was, after all, doing the honorable thing. "Don't you have an early day tomorrow, Hermione?"

"Yes — " she answered, distracted. "I can't stay too late tonight."

"I'll see you home," Ron offered.

"Ron!" Hermione was surprised and softened. "That's very gentlemanly of you."

Harry nearly sighed, but stopped himself. Instead, he smiled, and then poured them each a glass of champagne.

XXI.

THREE YEARS LATER:

THE NEXT BEST THING

"**And WEASLEY!**" shrieked the announcer, his voice shrill with excitement. She shot out up into the burning blue of the October sky, at one with

her broom, hair bound down in her hallmark style of intricately interlaced braids. Below, her teammates ranged themselves for the beginning of play. The quaffle was theirs, and Chasers whipped past Beaters, past the puny defense of the Keeper. She was above it all, soaring higher than the rest, above the crowd and its noise, alone among the winds. The opposing Seeker was trying to mark her, and she veered away effortlessly, in a slantwise curve that turned into an elegant downward helix. It forced her speed faster and faster, until she snapped out of it with a jolt that would have swept a lesser flier from her broom. A faint roar from the crowd echoed her own scream of ecstasy. She had no thoughts to spare for them. At the moment, she was hardly aware that there were spectators at all.

Looking back, she saw her opposite number had not quite managed the maneuver. He was out of control, heading towards the stands, broom fishtailing as he fought to slow down. He did, just in time to avoid disaster. She waved an ironic salute, and rocketed away, chasing the elusive flicker of gold past the melee below.

Time passed, in the way she liked best: a search for the Snitch, and mind games with the opposing Seeker. She looped carelessly over the pitch, leading him on, leading them all on, making it look easy. Today it was.

Wings aquiver, the Snitch appeared in the corner of her eye. It was no good to turn her head. That would startle the thing. She executed a quick turn, and blazed after it, hand outstretched to capture victory. A slam, and a bludger was sent her way, arcing

up to intersect her, if she were fool enough to let it.

A bob and weave, and she dodged the bludger easily, hand still outstretched. This Snitch was a tease, and darted left, then down. Their own Beater was smashing another bludger, with a tremendous crack. Ginny was intent on the Snitch, and did not hear the crowd's "Oooo!" of wonder when the bludger exploded in midair. It was a rarity, something for the obsessive fans. Spectators crowded to catch a piece as a souvenir. The largest chunk flew straight up, trailing the remnants of enchantment: a dark blur that made Ginny glance straight down for a moment.

Not a moment to escape, to react, to reflect. "*Oh, no —*" was cut off sharply in a white bolt of bone-crackling agony.



"Do you suppose she'll come down to dinner *today*?" Harry asked anxiously. "It's been weeks since I last saw her, Mrs. Weasley. Ask her one more time, *please*."

"Oh, Harry dear, I'll try. Ginny is so depressed. There's nothing more the Healers can do. At least she can hear out of both ears now. Her face is fine—no one would even know that it had to be rebuilt. She's walking, and using her hands perfectly well. Her balance is just a little off. It doesn't matter, really, unless —" she broke off, with a sigh.

"— Unless she tries to fly," Harry said flatly. "But you see, that's the one thing she wants to do."

Ginny heard it all, as she lay upstairs in her room. She

turned her head on the pillow, gazing at the cloudless sky. Outside, a sleek black swallow took wing, mocking her. Ginny could almost feel the bird's flight, the chill air rushing past, the ground growing small beneath it...

She turned her head away. Ginny had moved out her very first month with the Harpies. Success, sweet personal success, was within her grasp. She had seized it, playing her first game with everything she had in her, and woke the next morning to find herself famous.

She sighed. It had been a glorious three years. Money, men, marriage proposals — she had traveled with the revitalized Harpies, winning the league, playing exhibition games all over the world. Next year would be the World Cup, and everyone had said that Ginevra Weasley would play for England. It was not a dream, but a certainty. Talks had already been underway to build a powerful English team that would dominate the skies. One day Ginevra Weasley would play for England — and then, quite suddenly, Ginevra Weasley would never play for anyone ever again. *What do you do when your dreams are bludgered into nothing?*

Her eyes focused on the wall inches away. While the Burrow had been nearly entirely rebuilt, it had been rebuilt and decorated to her mother's taste, and the pattern of pink daisies on the walls of Ginny's room irritated her. How dowdy it looked. Not at all like her darling little flat in Unicorn Circle. How proud she had been of it, her own place: very posh, very modern, very *new*: everything chosen by herself, everything

paid for by herself. It had been a squeeze, at first, but how she had loved her independence. For the first time in her life, she could afford the pretty things she liked. She explored her preferences, and discovered that she had good taste. Visitors to her flat always told her how charming it was, but no one had ever admired it more than Ginny herself.

That was gone too. There had been no income during her months of rehabilitation at St. Mungo's. While she lay there helpless and unconscious, her parents had taken charge of her affairs, and had done the sensible, thrifty thing. The flat was given up, and all her carefully chosen furniture and accessories shrunk and stored away.

"It's for the best, Ginny dear," Mum had said later. "You'll still need to be looked after, even after you leave hospital. We'll take you home to the Burrow when you're released."

Home. It was impossible to make her parents understand that she had made herself a new home. The Burrow was her past: secure, warm, crowded, teeming with life, a little musty, smelling of sausages and men's socks. Even with all the boys out on their own, it was always filled. Bill and Fleur's little girl, Victoire, was there nearly every day. Her parents had jobs, and while Mum disapproved of working mothers — and disapproved of Fleur in any case — she was delighted to have another baby to cosset. Mum had tried to involve Ginny in caring for the toddler, telling her it was "good experience." Ginny had not refused, exactly, but had gone to her room without a word. Victoire was such a *perfect* child, after all — hair of strawberry

blonde, eyes huge and blue as the October sky...

Percy and George were often there. Ron and Hermione came every week to Sunday dinner. Every single week. At times, Ginny wondered if Hermione resented it, but Hermione was very cool and collected these days, very calm and mellow. She and Ron had married two years before, and the wedding had tested everyone's patience. In the end, Hermione had mostly had her own way. The wedding was held on the grounds of the Burrow, but in a magnificent rented pavilion. Everything was done with unobtrusive elegance — the kind of elegance that costs more than mere show. With Ron's business, and Hermione's rising reputation at the Ministry, there were a lot of guests, and some of them were not people who were welcome inside the sacred precincts of the Burrow.

"We have to invite the Malfoys!" Hermione had declared, voice rising imperiously. "I'm inviting all the Governors of the Albus Dumbledore School. I have to invite them!"

It was now so well known that Hermione was the daughter of Bartemius Crouch that no one seemed surprised at the absence of Hermione's muggle parents. Ron told Ginny that he had asked Hermione if her parents would be attending. She had said that they hardly knew her now, and it would only complicate things.

Ron and Hermione lived in a very nice cottage in Cloud Hill. Spellcaster Lane was not far from Ginny's flat in Unicorn Circle, but far enough to give everyone their privacy. A freed house elf cleaned and cooked for them. Marriage had

not domesticated Hermione, who was deeply involved in her career. Ginny had come to dinner there often, each time expecting the young couple to tear themselves to pieces with their eternal bickering. It never happened. Ginny was surprised at how relaxed Ron was in his own home, especially after a nice cup of tea or a good dinner. They seemed to get along quite happily, though Ginny sometimes wondered if both of them were Polyjuiced.

Hermione had persuaded the MLE that an expert in muggle law could be of tremendous value, and Hermione had spent the last two years reading law at University College London. Mum and Dad would ask questions that even Ginny knew must be idiotic.

"It's nice that your muggle school includes cooking, Hermione," Mum approved. "But why just 'torts,' and not other kinds of cakes?"

Dad wondered how anyone could rely on a jury, and anyway, why jurors should bother to be objective or impartial.

"Don't you think you could serve honestly on a jury?" Hermione asked. "Don't you think you could make a judgment based on the evidence?"

"Of course, I could, Hermione," Dad answered, eyes wide and ingenuous, "But there are other things that matter besides evidence. I'd have to consider what I know about the person myself — and what I know about the family, the friends —"

"But you're not supposed to judge someone by his family!" Hermione protested. "You're supposed to approach the case with an open mind!"

Dad would shrug. "It's hard to have an open mind when you already know everybody. It's a small world. By the way, just what does 'pupillage' mean?"

And from Mum there was always, "How much longer is that school of yours going to take, Hermione dear? You ought to be starting a family soon. You're neither of you getting any younger!"

Hermione would blow out a breath, and sometimes, when very frazzled, would step away for a drink from the little flask she carried. Hermione thought no one noticed, but Ginny certainly had. It was not firewhiskey, certainly: no one ever smelled such a thing on Hermione. Whatever she was drinking, it made her calm and pleasant-tempered. She still might not agree with the other person's point of view, but she was very nice about it.

And Harry came, too, just like today. They had been dating fairly regularly before — before — She stirred restlessly. Harry was around pretty often these days, wanting to comfort Ginny for the loss of the one thing she had ever wanted just for herself. She hissed through her teeth angrily, hating being pitied. Harry might think he understood, but he didn't. He could have had a Quidditch career, and had passed on it without a regret. He was the famous Harry Potter, Pride of the British Aurors, and so determined to be open and approachable and *normal* that Ginny thought it sometimes made him seem simple-minded. He wasn't, of course. Or at least she hoped not.

They were all gathering for yet another wake — oh,

excuse me, she thought cynically, *I meant to say another family dinner. The "Let's all be cheerful for poor Ginny's sake" kind of dinner.* Mum would knock and hover, and then send everyone up by ones and twos, knocking tentatively, or rapping loudly, some with pleading whispers, and some with bad jokes, trying to jolly her downstairs. It might not stop until she hexed them all — not something she genuinely wanted to do — or gave up and joined them. Then they would all be so pleased.

And so they were, when they saw her coming slowly down the stairs. Conversation at the table was bright and brittle. Molly cooed over perfect little Victoire, who ate her dinner neatly, blue eyes wide and innocent, singing softly to herself.

No one at the table had quite mastered subtlety, not even Hermione — though she could make a good showing at work, rather than in more personal situations. Ron mentioned that he could really use help at the shop. Percy told them that the Head of Magical Weights and Measures — "a very sound chap" — was looking for a personal assistant. Bill seemed about to say something about a position at Gringotts, but at a look and a slight shake of the head from Fleur, he desisted. Ginny knew that Fleur did not consider her academically distinguished enough to be recruited by the goblins. Ginny gave her sister-in-law a level look of comprehension and dislike.

Mandy Brocklehurst — now a dignified and married Amanda

Sloper —was expecting, Hermione then announced, and would be leaving the Albus Dumbledore School at the end of term. Headmistress Praetorius was at her wit's end, trying to find a replacement. It was a brilliant opportunity, and the seven-year-olds were lovable, well-behaved children. Not that there were many — it was a very small class of only ten.

"Is there any more cider?" Ron mumbled through a mouthful of roast beef.

Ginny scrambled out of her chair, needing to get away for a little while. "I'll get it."

"I'll help you," Hermione offered, rising quickly herself. The two of them went to the pantry off the kitchen to fill the pitcher from the keg. Ginny's hands were shaking from stress. Hermione took the pitcher from her and lowered her voice. "I don't mean to be bossy, Ginny. It really is a good opportunity, and probably a lot nicer than waiting on customers or trying to please Balbus Marchbanks. Rowan is such a nice Headmistress — she lets the teachers have a lot of independence. The hours are good, and you'd get the summer off. I know the children would love you."

"I can't stand it when you all pile on me," Ginny muttered. "You're all so well-meaning and overbearing. I won't make enough at any of those jobs to move out for at least a year, and I don't want any of them, anyway. I hate everyone trying to *fix* me — as if I'm broken. It makes me feel like smashing plates and throwing hexes."

Hermione gave her an appraising look. "You know, some-

times I feel like that, too — like when your Mum starts asking when I'm going to have a baby. That's why I keep this — " she pulled her little flask from a pocket — "with me." She filled the little silver cup that also served as a stopper, and handed it to Ginny. "Your brothers sell it under the name 'Mellow Yellow,' but I analyzed it and make my own. Try it. It really helps."

Ginny shrugged, and accepted the cup, studying the golden liquor. "It looks like piss."

"It does not!" Hermione objected gently, her voice modulated and controlled. "It tastes lovely. Smell it. I added verbenas and Forbidden Forest honey."

"Nice," Ginny agreed grudgingly, and swallowed it down.

"You'll feel better," Hermione assured her. "In a just a few minutes, no one will be able to make you upset. You'll be able to hear all our suggestions and listen to them objectively."

Comfortable warmth trickled through Ginny's middle. A soothing herbal fragrance filled her throat and drifted up behind her tongue. She licked her lips, testing it, and studied the bottle, rather impressed. "'Mellow Yellow.' What is it?"

"Mostly a Calming Potion — a valerian infusion, of course — but some ginkgo and St. John's wort as well. And some mandragora," she added, looking triumphant and a little abashed. "It's an absolute lifesaver."

Ron's voice rose querulously above the hum of family talk. "Where's that cider?"

Ginny stifled a giggle, and sprinkled some of the potion into the pitcher. Hermione's lips quirked in a conspiratorial

smile. "Well done."

It was nice to sit among her family, not on tenterhooks, not waiting for them to say the things that hurt her, that drove her mad. Ginny felt as if nothing could touch her, and applied herself to her pudding with something resembling her former good appetite. Molly beamed, and caught her husband's eye. The two of them exchanged looks of relief.

Arthur cleared his throat and asked, "How was Ireland, Harry?"

"Wet. Green." He snorted. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that half of magical Ireland is under the Fidelius, and the rest of it under a Silencing hex. Nobody was very cooperative."

"Passive resistance," Hermione commented. "It's better than outright terrorism."

"Bog-trotting nutters, if you ask me," Ron shrugged. "I mean, what do they want a separate Ministry for? I thought all Irish wizards wanted to do was watch Quidditch and drink firewhiskey."

"No, Ron," George quipped, "that's all you want to do."

Even Ginny smiled. After the laughter died down, Bill said, "I saw in the *Prophet* that the expedition to Pal-ul-don sets out in May."

Beside him, Fleur stiffened.

George seconded his brother enthusiastically. "Who would have thought old Wells was up to another African adventure? It should make smashing good reading when he gets back."

Percy shook his head in reproof. "It's not a mere adven-

ture, George. It's a very serious research expedition to see if a pristine magical land is still hidden and intact. If it exists at all," he added skeptically.

"Lucius Malfoy must believe Wells, or he wouldn't have financed the expedition," Harry said. "I heard he wanted to go himself."

"He did," Hermione declared decisively, "but with two little girls at home Mrs. Malfoy put paid to *that* notion. I could see that he was disappointed."

"He wasn't the only one," Bill muttered, glancing briefly at the lovely, scowling witch beside him.

"Anyway," Hermione said, "Draco's going, and they say he's very keen. And one of the Greengrasses — Asteria or Astoria, I can't remember the name. She's supposed to be a good photographer and something of an artist."

"Neville's going, too," Harry put in quietly. "He owled me. He's going as the Herbology expert. Professor Sprout told him it would count toward his Mastery. And Luna. She wouldn't miss the opportunity to see a live gryf."

George snickered. "Wells will have his hands full dealing with those four. The hexes will be flying before they leave England!"

"I think you'd be amazed at what John Wellington Wells can do," Arthur commented mildly. "I'm only surprised that you weren't approached, Harry,"

"Oh, I was," Harry confessed. "I said no." Seeing the surprised faces around him, he laughed. "I'm done with playing the hero. All I ever wanted was a normal life. A comfortable home. Friends. And a family," he added, fixing Ginny with a

sudden, intensely green gaze. She looked away.

Molly smiled, pleased with him. "That was very sensible of you, Harry." Dinner was winding down, and she suggested, "Why don't you get out for a bit, Ginny dear? You could use the air. Hermione and Fleur can help me with the washing up."

Hermione rolled her eyes with serene good humor, raising her brows meaningfully at Ginny, who nearly burst out laughing. It was a nice day...

Harry got up, saying "I think I'll join you."

Ginny suppressed a grin, knowing that this would delight her mother no end. The thought did not irritate her as it usually did. "If you like," she answered carelessly, already strolling out into the twilight.

The soft grass of early spring cushioned their steps as they headed north, away from the house and the makeshift quidditch pitch. Ginny paused, admiring the view.

Harry asked softly, "Are you feeling all right? Your Mum says you are, but how do you feel?"

She inhaled the cool breeze deeply. "Pretty much myself. My jaw doesn't hurt anymore, anyway. It's mostly just malin-gering on my part. Mum's always wanting me to do some-thing. She drives me mad. I got used to my own company. It's so crowded here, and everyone seems to think they know what I ought to do better than I do myself."

"Well," Harry pointed out, "a job *would* get you out of the house."

She laughed, unoffended, feeling very much at peace.

"True enough. Between us, the one thing I'd like wouldn't pay much, and wouldn't get me out every day."

"What?"

"The editor of *Quidditch Britain* asked if I'd give them a monthly analysis of notable games. I'd have to travel some, but I'd write at home and owl them."

"Would it be too hard on you to —?"

"At first I thought it would. Not now. I always loved going to games, even before I started playing. I think I could find a lot to say. They told me they'd even pay my expenses to the next World Cup in China."

"That would be amazing!"

"Not as good as playing in the Cup myself," she shrugged, her smile faltering, "but the next best thing, I suppose."

"You'd be brilliant at it — Ginny Weasley, member of the press!"

"Mum won't think much of it, I'm afraid. It won't sound like real work to her."

"Look, Ginny — " he paused, and shuffled nervously. After a moment he glanced up, green eyes serious behind his glasses. "Why stay here?" he asked. "You know I — oh, bugger — " He took her by the shoulders and said urgently, "Marry me, Ginny. It's not crowded at Grimmauld Place!" He saw her skeptical smile, and shook his head. "I'm serious, Ginny. You know I love you. We could have a great life together. If you want to be sports reporter, that's great. You won't have to worry if it pays much or not. You'll be able to

do what you want to do, and that's important."

"Do I know that you love me?" she teased.

"Well, I *said* I did. I don't know what else I can say — " he spread his arms in an expansive, helpless gesture. "I know I'm not the smoothest bloke. Do you think I go around telling other women I love them?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"No! I've never said that to anyone else, and I've never asked anyone else to marry me. You're the one."

She did not feel like showing any mercy, at least not yet.

"Why am I the one?"

"Because you're beautiful and brave. Because you don't giggle and tell me how much you paid for a pair of shoes. Because you'll sit with me through a Quidditch game and not tell me it's a waste of time — "

"Honestly, Harry!" Ginny scolded him, in a passable imitation of Hermione.

He laughed, and then became serious again. "Because of everything we've been through together. Because the Weasley family is the only family I want for in-laws. Because you understand what my life is like. Because — " he took her hand in his "— because I rescued you from a *monster* — with a *sword* — "

Ginny laughed, and struggled to get her hand back.

Harry held her fast. " — and that means we have to live happily ever after. Together."

"Kiss me, you idiot." Her voice softened. "And this had better be good, Potter."

She thought it a very commendable effort. It wasn't the first time he had kissed her, of course, but he had made considerable strides.

"Mind you, I'm not going to be popping out a baby a year like my mother," she told him afterwards.

His goofy grin was endearing. "I'd like to have kids," he confessed. "At least two: a boy and a girl. I'd name them James and Lily, after my parents."

In her calm state, she mentally took note of what a bizarre idea that was. *Harry really does have all sorts of unresolved issues*. He had gone out with other girls, but always returned to her. In the continuing Potter psychodrama, she knew she was his first choice for helping him reenact *The Life of James and Lily Potter as It Ought to Have Been*. "If it's important to you, it's fine with me."

"I suppose your Mum will want us to have a big wedding. How long would it take to put one together?"

How relaxed she felt. It was no trouble at all to give Harry her honest opinion. "I don't want a big wedding, Harry. I don't want a wedding at all. I don't want Mum carrying on the way she did over Bill and Ron. Let's just go to the Ministry and get married. Otherwise we'll be hounded to death by people who want to come, and those we don't invite will probably curse us."

"That makes sense," he agreed. He grinned again. "So when do you want to do it?"

Everything was very slow and peaceful. Ginny collected her thoughts. "Tomorrow. I'll pack up tonight and meet

you at the Ministry at nine — no, eleven.” She decided she would sleep in tomorrow, take a long bath, have a leisurely breakfast, and then make her escape from the Burrow.

“I’ll have to have a talk with your father tonight.”

“How feudal of you. Make him promise to keep it a secret. I want our marriage to be a surprise.”

“I’ll have to get you a ring.”

“Let me go with you, so I can help pick it out.”

The first stars were shining by the time they returned to the Burrow. Ginny gave Harry’s hand a discreet squeeze, and said to the room at large, “Goodnight, all. I’m a bit tired.”

She did not go to her room directly, but up to the attic. It was new and clean, and the ghoul had long departed. She made her way to a box marked “Ginny’s Flat,” and opened it.

That black leather sofa. She picked it up, feeling it small and toy-like in her hand. She had fond memories of that sofa. There was the little glass-topped table, the comfortable bed. Harry’s house was completely furnished already. He would not need her things. She might as well be going from her father’s house to her husband’s with only her clothes. Ginny began to close the box, and then thought again.

The surviving toys of the Weasley clan were gathered in a corner by the little window. Her old dollhouse was singed in places, and a corner was broken, but it took no time at all to repair it. Transfiguring it, however, into a semblance of her old flat — if her flat had had two stories instead of one, took rather longer. The color of the walls, the propor-

tions of the rooms — she shaped them carefully, enjoying the remembrance of her life as an independent witch. The crude toy furniture was cast aside, and Ginny amused herself with furnishing the remodeled house as she liked, with her own things. It was a labor of hours, adjusting sizes, placing pictures and mirrors just so. She began sniffing as the potion gradually wore off. Her eyes burned and her nose was running, but just after midnight she was finished.

Grimmauld Place is big. Harry won’t mind if I take a room for myself, and call it my office. I can put my things there — my dollhouse and my Quidditch prizes and everything that is just mine. I can even put some very discreet wards on the door, so it won’t occur to him to go there. He’ll be at work quite a bit — it won’t be like having Mum underfoot constantly. I’ll have time for myself, and with Kreacher there I won’t have to be a household drudge. I’ll never have to worry about money, either. Harry is sweet, after all, and I’d quite like having dinner with him everyday, and sleeping with him every night, and all the rest of it. I really don’t care if he wants to name our children after his parents. Before I go to the Ministry tomorrow, though, I must stop at the shop and buy some more of that potion. Then I can get on with being Mrs. Harry Potter.

It would never be as glorious as playing for England, but after all, it was the next best thing.



XXII.

AFTER THE EPILOGUE:

HARRY POTTER AND THE MID-LIFE CRISIS

Head Auror Harry Potter frowned at his handsome young godson's news. He took off his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. Only last year his life had been everything he could have wanted: a happy family and the wizarding world at peace. He should have known it was too good to last. What galled him the most was that the lessons he had learned fighting Voldemort were nearly useless in the present situation. *It was easier then: the Dark was Dark and the Light was Light. Now it's all politics and legal jurisdiction and point of view. I'm just an Auror, after all, not a diplomat.* Harry Potter had to admit that all was not well in the wizarding world.

"You couldn't get a statement from *anyone*?"

Teddy Lupin — no, *Ted* — he hated being called Teddy — shook his head. "Nothing but one old wizard telling me it was an *Irish* matter, and to get out of his country."

"It's a bloody criminal matter!" Harry got up, and paced the floor of his office restlessly. He gestured a dismissal to Ted, and looked out his window, wondering how it had all come to this.

Silence and indifference had turned into open hostility

and suspicion. It had taken a generation to fully develop, but what they were confronted with now was nothing less than rebellion. The Irish Separatists and the Pureblood Recusants had made common cause together, and were rallying against what they called "British Oppression and Muggle Devastation." They had declared themselves independent of the British Ministry of Magic, and claimed that Ireland was now answerable only to the Provisional High Magical Council of Eire. There were threats against muggles who knew too much about the wizarding world. There were rumors that newborn witches and wizards had been spirited away from their families at birth, and replaced by squibs. Some of these "Changelings" had been discovered, for the muggles now had the means to determine if a child was really related to its supposed parents or not. The Irish were bent on a more complete isolation from the muggle world than anything the British had ever imagined, save in cases of direst emergency.

Worse yet, there was a great deal of sympathy for the Irish point of view. One child's death a year ago had sparked a sweeping change in wizarding opinion. Anti-muggle paranoia was at an all-time high, fueled by the particularly heinous and heavily-publicized murder-by-exorcism of a five-year-old Irish witch by her fanatically religious parents. Oonagh O'Flynn had been starved, beaten, scalded, and strangled, and then held in a fire until her hair burst into flame. All the while, her family prayed for her and jeered at her by turns. "*Fly, fly! Why can't you fly?*"

THE DAILY PROPHET had printed pictures of the living child—enchantingly pretty—and of her corpse — unrecognizable as human — along with a transcript of her unspeakable last hour of life. Every pitiful moan, scream, and plea for help was recorded for all to read. Harry had hidden those issues from Lily. The child's last intelligible words — (“*Please! Mummy! I’m going to die!*”) — still haunted him. Within a week of Oonagh’s funeral, her entire family had been slaughtered — presumably by wizard vigilantes — and Harry’s Aurors were still unable to crack the code of silence protecting the killers. It was difficult to estimate the magical population of Ireland. The Irish had not registered their births, marriages, or deaths with the Ministry in over fifteen years. The Ministry did not even know where they were getting their wands. It had been a joke, even as recently as last year, but now it made investigative work nearly impossible.

Harry had been refused a meeting with the High Council. He had seen the Headmaster of the School of Tara instead, and had been treated with distant courtesy, like a foreign visitor with neither power nor influence. When Harry had threatened Plunkett and his staff with arrest, he had been informed coldly that he could try it, but that such an attack would be considered an act of war. Harry had owled for further instructions, and had been told to return to London.

Nor was the news farther afield very encouraging. Young muggleborn witches and wizards were being massacred throughout Africa. Nigeria had even created a cabinet post of

Witchfinder General. Wizarding Secrecy had been breached there, and despite all that could be done, there was real fear that credible news of the wizarding world was on the brink of publication in the muggle mass media.

Researchers at Miskatonic University had reported that muggles seemed to be developing a means of detecting magical energy. Draco Malfoy’s name had been on the report, which had made Harry inclined to dismiss it, but Hermione had read it and been very alarmed.

And of course the Magical Planet movement was gaining strength internationally. Lucius Malfoy had made himself a key leader, raising funds to purchase huge tracts of lands from the muggles. Teams were sent out to ward these preserves, following in the historic footsteps of John Wellington Wells. In England, Magical Planet was buying up farmland, encouraging wizards and witches to return to the soil, to free the wizarding world from its dependence on muggle foods. These efforts were being subsidized by the Ministry as well. The whole concept of magical stewardship of the earth’s fertility was very much publicized and romanticized in the new plays at Diagon Theatre and in many of the most popular Weasley Daydreams. Classes in Agriculture and Animal Husbandry were even being taught at Hogwarts now.

Harry winced, not wanting to think about Hogwarts. James was in disgrace, and serving detentions for the rest of term. A harmless prank had gone horribly wrong. Headmistress Goshawk had been unimpressed with this view

of the matter, and had very angrily told Harry that he was lucky that Skylar Schultz's parents were muggles, because anyone else could have made real trouble. As it was, they had threatened to go to the muggle police, until warned of the consequences. The Schultz girl herself, a first-year Hufflepuff, was recovering at home, and her parents had not given a definite answer as to whether she would return. If she did not, of course, the Ministry would have to Obliviate the family, and then snap the girl's wand.

("If she just hadn't panicked, Dad, it would have been all right!" James insisted.)

Harry had made him write an apology, but it was unclear if it had helped. The Schultz family was American. The father had been transferred to his company's head office in London just before Skylar turned eleven. She had thus arrived at Hogwarts quite ignorant of the wizarding world, since she (unlike nearly every other student in her year) had not attended the Albus Dumbledore School. If she had, she might have fit in better, and not found herself an outsider, and the butt of jokes and pranks.

Being summoned to the Headmistress' Office at Hogwarts called forth a host of memories, some of which Harry found very distressing. Dumbledore's smiles and twinkles seemed in bad taste under the circumstances. There was no bracing dose of sarcasm from the silent portrait of Snape. Harry had done a double take at the sight of the picture, for Snape was visibly older than he had been originally painted. The hair was

streaked with grey, but the face was curiously relaxed. Harry would have wondered at the changes, which were probably too gradual for a regular visitor to notice — but he was too distracted by James' predicament to dwell on them.

He had taken time to speak to his other son, and puzzled once more over the boy's House placement and choice of friends. Rose — now *that* wasn't such a surprise — except for her Sorting, of course, which had made Ron furious. The third member of the trio, however —

It wasn't a total disaster, admittedly. Now a second-year, Albus Severus was thriving, and his grades were at the top of his year, as were those of his two inseparable companions. Albus was even on the House Quidditch team, something that Harry would never have expected. The boy was a mystery to him. Ginny did not pretend to understand him either, though she serenely declared that he was fine — like the rest of the children. It would probably help, he thought in irritation, if Ginny were not gone two or three times a month, reporting on Quidditch games. She had a whole network of colleagues he barely knew, like that muscle-bound idiot Thorsten, a Danish wizard who called and owled regularly, and always covered the same games as Ginny.

He scowled at the thought of Thorsten, he of the golden curls and gleaming teeth, and considered calling Ginny himself. *A bad idea. She hates to be bothered when she's working.*

Noise erupted in the outer office. Harry straightened, alert to the sounds of his secretary's protests.

"But Madam Weasley! He said he wasn't to be disturbed!"

Without ceremony, his office door slammed open. It was Hermione.

"I've got to talk to you!"

His secretary was apologizing. "I'm sorry, sir, but —"

"Never mind," he said at once. "It's all right." He waved the young secretary away, frowning at her when she peered at Hermione too curiously. The girl blushed and retreated from view.

Harry focused on his visitor. She was in an appalling state. Harry looked at the figure in the open doorway, and could hardly take in the staring, reddened eyes, the wild, straggling hair, and the rumpled robes. He pulled her inside, and shut the door.

"Hermione? What's wrong?"

"Oh, Harry!" Her voice broke, and she fell into his arms. "It's all over!"

He staggered back, trying to keep them both from crashing to the floor. Hermione clutched at him, sobbing.

"What's happened?" he asked, trying to comfort her. "What do you mean, 'it's all over'?"

Feebly, she displayed a soggy, tear-stained, official-looking document at him. He took it from her, and glanced at it briefly. *It couldn't be —*

"Ron wants a divorce?" he asked, his jaw dropping.

"No!" Hermione screamed, falling to her knees. "No! He can't do this to me!" She pounded her fists against the floor, *"I call upon you, Hecate and Persephone, keepers of oaths, goddesses of the Lower World! I call upon you, Artemis, protector*

of women who have born children! I call upon you, Hera —"

Harry dropped beside her, and clapped a hand over her mouth. "Hermione! Stop it! You can't curse him with that! Stop! Ouch! Bloody hell!" He winced at the pain of the bite. "*Stupefy!*" The wandless spell dropped his hysterical friend at once. Harry caught her head, and eased it to the floor. He rubbed his palm on his knee and sat back on his heels, thinking about what to do.

"*Ennervate!*"

Hermione whimpered, and then sat up and screamed, "He wants a divorce! He expects me to sign this! That cheating, miserable, bastard wanker! He can't do this to me!"

"*Silencio!*" Harry roared. Hermione blinked, shocked that he would hex her into silence. He gave her shoulders a shake. "Pull yourself together, Hermione! Everyone in the outer office can hear you!"

Hermione's face was blotchy and strained. Harry felt terrible for her, and said softly, "I'll take the spell off if you can talk quietly, OK?"

She sniffed and nodded. Grief had thickened her voice. After he removed the hex, she began coughing. Harry conjured a glass of water for her. She took a sip and then told him the rest in a hoarse whisper.

"He must have planned it this way to humiliate me! It came when I was in the middle of a meeting —" she waved the paper, now very tattered, and then her arm dropped with a thud. She fell back, and lay there, exhausted.

Harry sighed, and brushed the hair back from her hot face. "Have you talked to him?"

"I flooded him at the shop from my office," she moaned. "He was there, and told me he wasn't coming home, and then he called *her* to join him —"

"Who, *her*?"

"Ariel Wo-o-ood!" Hermione sobbed out the last name. "Ron's in love with her!"

"Oliver's daughter? The one who started working at the shop a few months ago?"

Hermione shut her eyes and nodded.

Harry shouted, "She's just out of Hogwarts!"

"They're in love," Hermione moaned again, "and they want to get married. Ron kissed her in front of me, and said she makes him feel young again — and powerful! They'll be staying in a flat he's taken in Cloud Hill. He said I can keep the cottage — he's going to build that monstrosity he's been talking about, and they'll live there."

"Ron really had his heart set on it, Hermione." Harry refrained from adding, "I told you so." He knew that Hermione never should have dismissed Ron's plans to build a huge country house of his own as "silly and wasteful." Ron had turned red and clamped his mouth shut, but he was a rich and famous wizard now, and Harry had suspected he would get his way eventually. He had just not expected something so drastic.

"Did he say anything about the kids?"

"Oh, my God!" Hermione wailed. "Oh, my God, he's

demanding custody of my children — or Hugo, anyway! He's still so angry about Rose — so completely unreasonable. But Hugo! Ron's going to have a wife at home, and you know how —" she groped toward a pocket in her robes, "Where is it? I can't find it!" Frantically, she caught at Harry's arm and asked, "Do you have any Mellowing potion here, Harry? I can't find mine, and I didn't have time to brew more — I really need some now." She ripped off her expensive, tailored robe, and stood there in her sensible undergarments, rummaging through the pockets.

"Here it is!" she gasped, and guzzled directly from a heart-shaped bottle. Harry watched her in disbelief. She saw him looking as she emptied the last drop and wiped her mouth. "I'm sorry. I needed that so badly. Now I can think straight."

"You shouldn't be taking that much, Hermione, and you shouldn't *need* it."

"It's just to help me be calm. I've had a shock, and I do *need* it," Hermione defended herself. "Ginny takes it all the time. She has bottles and bottles in her study. Let me think, Harry."

She threw her robe back on, slumped into a chair, and was silent. After a few seconds, she growled, "I put all my money in our vault — our *Weasley* vault. When the divorce goes through, I won't be able to access it any more. Bastard!" she hissed furiously. "All right. I can deal with this. He won't know what hit him! I'll call in some favors. Ron won't get his divorce until his renounces all claim to Rose and Hugo —"

"Ron is still their father —" Harry protested.

"They're *mine!*" Hermione snarled. "And no little no-NEWT tart is going to raise them! I've got to get to Gringotts afterwards, and clean out all my inheritance and all the money I got from selling my parents' house after they died. That's mine, too. It all goes back into the Crouch vault. That slimy, ginger bastard. He may *think* he's starting a new family —"

"Hermione —" Harry said gently, "— just don't do anything illegal."

"You never wanted to choose, Harry," she told him bitterly. "You never would, but now you'll have to. Whose side are you on?"

It took only a split-second to decide. "Yours. I'm on your side. I'll help you, but within the law. Make your calls, and I'll go with you to Gringotts. Do you need to make arrangements for Hugo?"

"He'll come home on the AlBus," she told him, thinking hard. "And Peri will be there."

"I'd better tell Molly I'll be late fetching Lily."

"No! She'll want to know what's happened, and *she'll* tell everyone!"

"All right. I'll send Kreacher for her. He called into the floo. "Kreacher!"

The elf appeared, shrunken with age but still spry. "Master Harry?"

"Fetch Lily from her grandmother's at half-past four."

"Kreacher is always delighted to care for His Little Mistress Lily."

It was true. Harry's two younger children had always been Kreacher's favorites. James was too fond of pranks, and Kreacher's sense of humor was not quite equal to some of them. Sometimes it seemed as if his younger children agreed with the elf. James was a particularly high-spirited boy, and Harry hated to repress him. Albus and Lily, home schooled as they were, needed the give-and-take of sibling rivalry.

Now *that* issue had been a thorny one in the family, and was still a source of resentment. Molly loved having her grandchildren about her, and was terribly unhappy when Bill and Fleur had gone to live in Paris, taking their three children with them. Hermione had suggested that Molly might like teaching at the Albus Dumbledore School, but Molly was quite offended at the idea that she would have to attend the usual two-month training course. She clearly expected to be given her grandchildren to educate at home.

When James was old enough for school, there was no longer any avoiding the question. Ginny had insisted that what had been good enough for her and her brothers was quite good enough for her children. Harry was swayed by the argument that they could protect the children from their father's fame in a more sheltered environment. Despite Hermione's private appeals to Harry, James had duly gone to spend his days with his doting grandmother. She had spoiled him a little, Harry supposed, but James had had such a good time, and was a very bright child. Quiet, sensitive Albus Severus had joined him a few years later, and grew even qui-

eter. Lily was the last of Molly's pupils, and her special pet.

But the other siblings had not acceded to Molly's wishes. Percy had obviously been terribly torn. His eldest daughter was named for her grandmother, after all. However, Percy had always been Hermione's most reliable ally within the family, and his principles demanded that his children be given the best education available. Then, too, his wife, Audrey, did not get on particularly well with her mother-in-law. Audrey was a few years older than Percy, and a respected Healer at St. Mungo's. She was very close to her own family, and felt that her mother, a retired Mediwitch, was at least as good a child minder as Molly Weasley. Thus, young Molly was followed to the Albus Dumbledore School by her sister Lucy, and then by George and Angelina's Fred and Roxanne.

And of course there was no way that Hermione, as a governor of the Albus Dumbledore School, was going to send her children anywhere else. Her rows with Ron on the subject were explosive and prolonged. They always ended the same way: Hermione would storm out of the room, and then come back, perfectly calm and collected, and tell Ron that her decision was final. *"I only want what's best for our children, Ron. Besides, your mother already stuffs them with sweets whenever she sees them. They'll go to school, and if we need to work late, they can stay for the after-school activities."*

Harry wondered what Hermione's news would do to the Weasley family. He wondered what it would mean for him personally. Harry walked to the far side of the room, not wanting

to eavesdrop on Hermione's conversations. They were brief and fierce, and he was glad she was not angry with him.

She stood at last, and said brusquely, "Let's go." They flooded to Diagon Alley, and Hermione strode quickly to Gringotts. She refused to turn her head as they passed the expansive front of Weasley's Wizarding World, but she uttered a low, feral growl. Hermione dealt with the vaults with grim dispatch, taking everything to which she felt she had a reasonable claim. Most of the Crouch treasures had long since been removed to this vault, as the school expanded and more classrooms were needed. She paused before a painting, and then took that, too. Harry peered at it quickly before it was put in her bag, and flinched at the sight of a glaring Barty Crouch, Junior.

"I shouldn't think you'd want that!" he muttered.

"It's mine. He was my brother. It's not like I've ever made anyone else look at it."

Once her possessions were safely in her own vault, Hermione shook back her hair.

"My father's portrait is at the school, of course. He likes to see what's going on."

"I know you talk to him sometimes," Harry answered quietly.

"I do. He's always given me good advice. He'll be so disappointed in me now —" She bit off telling Harry how this divorce could harm her career. Harry wouldn't understand. Her father would, though. All too well. It would put her career back for years. The disgrace and failure of this

divorce would be hers in the eyes of the British wizarding world. She had been so close to capturing a seat of her own in the Wizengamot. Harry was there already, and Arthur, and Neville, and even Lucius Malfoy. Now she would have to wait, and bear the whispering and smirks.

She whispered, too low for Harry to hear. "I'll never be Minister of Magic now."

But the Ministry still needed her — now more than ever. These were troubled times, and worse trouble was brewing. Everyone knew it but the idiots with their heads in the sand — like Ron.

As they returned to the Ministry, Hermione asked. "Any news on the O'Flynn case?"

"Ted couldn't even get close. They're all stonewalling."

"Or worse."

He nodded. "Lucius passed on some gossip from his Recusant contact. Radicals in the High Council may have hired some renegade researchers to develop a new anti-muggle weapon. They're not interested in random terror, like the old days. They may be looking for a way to kill lots of muggles with no explosions and no witnesses."

"What? Poisoning water supplies? We'll have to warn the Irish muggle government."

"No — not the water. Lucius' contact didn't quite understand it herself. Something in the air that's *'engineered'* to affect only muggles —"

She stopped and stared at him, horrified. "Are they

insane? A biological weapon? If they use it in Ireland, it could spread to us in less than a few hours! It could spread all over the world! It could kill millions! Harry, do you know how dangerous biological weapons can be? What if it mutates? It could kill us all! You've got to go after the source of that rumor right away. Tell Lucius to arrange a meeting and get every shred of information you can!"

"I'm already on it, Hermione."

He walked her back to her office, ignoring the whispers and the furtive glances. Hermione asked Harry to come in, and shut the door.

"Ron couldn't have picked a worse time. I've got to get him sorted out, and then I'll be able to concentrate on my work. Here." She flicked her wand at her desk, and instantly a quill was filling out a standard form. Hermione summoned it and handed it Harry, with a bitter smile.

"You want her *arrested*?"

Hermione face hardened. "Yes. I want Ariel Wood arrested for Criminal Corruption of a Marriage Bond. It's punishable by a year in Azkaban and a fine of one thousand galleons. I have witnesses. She shouldn't have flaunted her adultery in front of my entire staff. Unfortunately, the law still being as imperfect as it is, Ron hasn't committed a crime."

"The girl can't pay that! A year in Azkaban?"

"She shouldn't have taken up with a married wizard," Hermione said, unmoved. "If, of course, Ron renounces all claim to the children, I may be persuaded to withdraw my complaint."

Hermione undoubtedly had the law on her side, and she was in terrible pain. Harry embraced her, and left her to her work. There was nothing he could do but dispatch a pair of his Aurors to Ron's shop. His assignment caused some smothered excitement. After a few minutes, Ted asked to speak with him.

The young Auror was shocked. "I thought they were so happy!"

"Apparently not."

"Thanks for not sending me! I wonder if Victoire knows?"

"No idea. I'm going to floo Ginny at her hotel and see if Ron said anything. I can't imagine what Sunday dinner at the Weasleys is going to be like this week."

"Better you than me, Harry. Do you reckon that Ron and Hermione will both be there?"

Harry shuddered.

When he was alone, he rearranged his desk, putting off the inevitable. Ginny might be out, of course, but he could try.

"Ginny?"

"Who is it?" A flash of teeth, and a loud, masculine voice.

"Is Ginny there? I have to speak to her."

Ginny appeared in the fire, looking annoyed. "What is it, Harry? I'm really busy right now."

"Ron wants to get a divorce!"

She looked back, calm and unsurprised. "He's been unhappy for a long time. Oh, that's right — he said he'd tell her today."

"You knew?"

"Of course."

"And you didn't tell me — or Hermione?"

"Ron is *family*, Harry. Hermione is just my sister-in-law, and soon she won't even be that. Of course I wouldn't tattle to Hermione. Ron told Mum and Dad yesterday, but made them promise to let him tell Hermione himself in his own way."

A cold trickle of anger stiffened Harry's back. "I see. Sorry to bother you with old news. My best to Thorsten."

"Harry —"

He didn't want to hear any more, and cut her off. When he went home, he would see just how much of that bloody potion she had. He kicked his way back to his desk, and then wrote a note to Hermione.

Dinner. Tonight. My place. You, Me, Hugo, and Lily? OK? H.

He fired it off, and then settled down to making notes about the Irish Problem. He would give Lucius another call. Perhaps they could put a tracking charm on his informant — There was another stir outside, and Harry looked up, hoping it was Hermione's reply. Instead, there were raised, frantic voices, and his secretary burst in, a newspaper in hand. She threw it on his desk, unable to speak.

It was a muggle tabloid, *THE SUN*.

MAGIC IN OUR MIDST!

ABUSED STUDENT AT SECRET MAGIC SCHOOL

REVEALS THE SHOCKING TRUTH!

OTHER VICTIMS OF WITCHCRAFT COME FORWARD!

"THEY INVADED MY MIND AND STOLE MY MEMORIES!"

ARE ANY OF US SAFE?

The face in the picture looked familiar. Harry gaped at the plump and homely face of Skylar Schultz. Her wand was in her hand, and her owl perched on her shoulder. She was holding a copy of HOGWARTS, A HISTORY. She was not smiling.

Harry scanned the article — no, the *articles* — with growing horror. He looked up at his secretary, knowing he must look as utterly gobsmacked as she.

He, however, was Wizarding Britain's Head Auror. He pulled a red folder from his desk and stood up, curiously energized.

"Call in everyone — whether they're on holiday or retired — even the dead, if you can contact the ghosts." He handed her the red folder. "Make copies of these instructions for all the Heads of Department. I'll inform the Minister that we'll have to execute the Emergency Vanishing Plan."



XXIII.



THE UNICORN IN KENSINGTON GARDENS

I. MIRROR OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD

The faintest echo of booted feet whisper down the dark and deserted hall. They are coming stealthily, full of fear and anger. Helmets and body armor give the impression of war machines, rather than human beings. The leader, with silent hand signals, motions a team forward to the stairs. Their heavy weapons are at the ready, their strange torches paint circles of light on the stone walls, as they guide the way to the dreaded enemy. A soldier takes a deep breath, and pushes the door open.

Silence. The monsters are asleep, just as promised, and the soldiers ease into the room. The marksman in front takes aim —

But a torch has shone into the eyes of one of the creatures. It blinks, and suddenly sits up, uttering a shriek like a tea kettle. Instantly the marksman fires. There is a muffled thud, and the thing flops back, silenced, but too late. The others have awakened, and are screaming in their turn, some of them darting about the room, small and agile. Firing into this confusion could be dangerous to themselves, so the soldiers draw their commando knives to take them down.

One of the targets stands wide-eyed and frozen, illumined by the seeking torches.

"Scorpius! This way!" Albus Potter grabs at his friend's arm. Spurred into motion, the terrified little boys duck out of the light and take to their heels. Heavy boots are pounding after them, but there is the other way out of the Slytherin dormitory, through the tapestry —

They are through, running. Their pursuer is halted by the magical barrier. Baffled, he crashes into the wall, cursing and kicking.

"Who are they?" gasps Scorpius.

"MUGGLES!" Albus screams at the top of his voice. "MUGGLES IN THE CASTLE! Peeves! Baron! Anyone! THERE ARE MUGGLE SOLDIERS IN HOGWARTS!"

"We've got to find the Professor!" Scorpius clutches at his wand, grateful to his father for the holster. (*"Remember, Scorpius, you must always keep your wand on you. You must always be very careful —"*)

Deep voices rumble through the hallways like the challenge of a distant Minotaur. *"After them! Second Platoon! Go! Go!"* There are other voices, farther away: shouts, screams, a rattle of what sounds like fireworks, and then a series of muffled explosions. The stone floor shudders under the small bare feet. A kneazle flashes past them, a blur of speed. Rats scurry in the walls. Portraits on the wall spread the alarm, their voices rising in horrified confusion. A door slams open, and their tall Head of House is there,

dressed in black, wand in hand.

"Muggles!" the boys call out.

"Get to the Room of Requirement!" the wizard orders them. "The cabinet is there! Use it! Take anyone you find along with you!" Grimly, he stalks away, robes billowing, back in the direction of the dormitory.

"But aren't you coming with us —?"

"Go!" the commanding voice hisses. "I can't abandon them! Cast a Notice-me-not on yourselves!"

The boys watch him disappear into the darkness.

"He's going to die for us," Scorpius whispers, as he stumbles away.

"He swore an Unbreakable Vow. He has to try to save us. Hurry! We need to find Rose!"

Rose is there, behind a statue, and squeaks with fright at the sight of them. Her two dorm mates are behind her, weeping softly. "They've come to kill us! We've got to hide!"

"Everyone cast a Notice-Me Not! The Professor said to get to the Room of Requirement. We can escape through the cabinet!" Scorpius herds the witches along, and Albus is in front, wand at the ready.

They pass through crowded halls, full of faceless muggles in battle armor. Strange devices are being hauled into the castle. There are other people with them — and Scorpius recognizes the grinning, grizzled Filch, talking to a big muggle with a loud voice. A door disintegrates with a crash, and there is Neville Longbottom, fighting for his life, sword

of Gryffindor in one hand, and wand in the other. He is conjuring a series of shields, lips moving. He looks radiant and unafraid. It will take the muggles some time to get past him. Two muggles have weapons that spurt fire, and spew it at him in roaring jets of orange flame. While the muggles are distracted, the children edge past, clinging to the far wall.

Two students on brooms zoom overhead, evading the crackle of the muggles' weapons. In a moment, they escape through a window, their mocking laughter trailing after.

At last the children reach the upstairs hall. Why does it take so long? The Room seems to be considering their request forever. Running feet are on the stairs —

The door appears, and they run through.

"Close! Close!" Scorpius begs the door frantically. The door ripples into smooth wall and they are safe. Before them is the cabinet. "Through here! Time to go!" he shouts, opening it.

Bare wood confronts him. "No!" he screams. "It's broken!" He slams his fists against unyielding oak. "Let me through! Let me through!" Behind him, the girls are screaming.

Albus thinks he's betrayed him. "You said you could fix it! You promised!"

Something is dropping from the ceiling. The tumbling cans burst open, and a heavy mist spreads through the room. It is green and glowing: the color of the killing curse, the color of Albus' eyes, and Scorpius pounds uselessly on the back of the broken cabinet, already choking...



"Draco! Draco! Wake up!"

Asteria's dark eyes were looking into his. She was shaking him awake. Draco stared at her, shivering, still in the grip of the nightmare.

His wife's voice broke through his terror, warm and soothing. "You were dreaming again, Draco. I shouldn't have let you sleep in so long. It's half-past nine. It was just a dream —"

"I've got to go! Scorpius is in danger —" he croaked.

"Scorpius is fine. We had an owl from him yesterday. He is fine and so are we. Come and have some breakfast."

"Breakfast?" His teeth were chattering, making it hard to speak coherently. It had seemed so real. His limbs were terribly heavy. If armed muggles were to burst through the door at that moment, he wasn't sure he could draw his wand —

"Yes — have a nice hot shower and then come down to breakfast."

Reluctantly, Draco struggled up on his elbows, and managed to sit. His mouth felt as if it were full of glue. He tried to swallow, and then stumbled into the shower. A muttered command, and stinging hot jets of water massaged him into rationality. "Gods, that's good."

Judging himself presentable at last, he joined Asteria downstairs. She was sipping her tea, eyes shut in enjoyment. The table still seemed empty without Scorpius. He hoped Asteria was serious when she had proposed having

another child. They had been too busy for it while traveling and researching, but now he had contracted to stay at Miskatonic University for a minimum of three years, and it seemed an optimum time —

She asked, “What was the dream about?”

“Muggles!” he groaned. “I dreamed that muggles had gotten into Hogwarts and were killing the children.”

Asteria set down her cup, and put her hand on his arm. “That’s horrible, Draco, but it was only a dream. Muggles can’t get into Hogwarts.” She gave him a pat, and set about dissecting her grapefruit.

“Filch was there. You know the Irish put out that warning about disaffected Squibs, and then there was that muggle family who killed their little girl —”

“Draco, there are wards!”

“You read my research! Muggles can use our muggle-repelling wards to chart the position of a magical area!”

“It was that film, wasn’t it? A silly piece of muggle fiction. You shouldn’t have watched it again.”

“The X-Men films have real value as metaphor, Star,” he answered, earnest on the subject, as always. They had debated this for years. Draco’s first experience of muggle cinema — right here in Arkham in their student days — had been an intense one. “Too many muggles know about us.”

“The dream couldn’t have been *that* real. Think about it, and tell me some things that couldn’t be true.”

“Well —” Draco paused, teaspoon in hand. He had been

a coward, all the through the War. Escaping to America had given him a second chance in a new world. Then Asteria had come into his life and helped him find his courage. Even in Africa, when it had looked like the end, she had stood by him and believed in him. If he had become a man, it was her doing. His heartbeat was slowing now. He huffed a rusty laugh. “Snape was Head of House instead of Zabini. He was going off to fight the muggles, cloak billowing in that way he had.”

“There you are — a dream, full of all sorts of random things that worry you or make you sad.”

“The Weasley twins escaped through the window on brooms the way they did my fifth year.” He grunted and reached for his teacup. “And the cabinet —” He stopped, not wanting to talk about that.

“A dream.” Asteria said firmly.

“A dream,” he agreed reluctantly. He took a long swallow of tea. and then asked, “Have we made a terrible mistake, sending Scorpius to Hogwarts?”

“Oh, Draco, not *that* again!” His wife shook her head. “Stop all this second-guessing. If it gets bad, we’ll bring him home and put him in the Miskatonic Lower School. It really means a lot to your parents to have him at Hogwarts, and he’s made friends there.”

“Yes,” Draco agreed sourly. “Potter and Weasley. I told him to have the hat put him in Ravenclaw, but he claimed that it refuses to listen to students these days. And most of the old Slytherin families are gone. Father says there are

hardly any purebloods in Slytherin other than the poorest of the poor, using the House scholarships to better themselves. The rest are a pack of hypercompetitive mu — Newbloods. They wouldn't even be able to field a Quidditch team if it weren't for Scorpius and Potter's boy." He shook his head. "You know Father. He always says that 'things had to change, so they could stay the same.'"

"Your father is very sensible. Besides, I doubt that he cares about the rest of the old families, as long as there are still Malfoys. But really, darling, Albus Severus and Rose are nice children. The boy was so shy at first. You know that Potter's children were homeschooled by his mother-in-law. Young Albus had hardly met any children outside the family before he went to Hogwarts. I think extending an invitation to him for a few weeks this summer would be a good move. Albus would jump at the chance to get away from that brother of his."

"I'll think about it."

"Draco —"

"I'll think about it, Star! He just — looks so much like his father. I can't see Potter allowing it."

"All the more reason to invite him. If his father refuses, then *he's* the spoilsport. And having a Potter and a Weasley in Slytherin has made a difference. Blaise tells me that none of the newly sorted Slytherins withdrew from Hogwarts this year. That's the first time since the War." Her dark brows knit in thought. "I'd like to invite Rose, too. She's a clever thing,

and her mother talks the talk about reconciliation —"

"Her father doesn't, from all accounts. At least she's not a redhead."

Asteria smiled to herself. "Her sorting put her at odds with her father, and she likes us. Our Christmas present went down well, since it was something no one else would have thought to give her. She thinks your parents — and your sisters — very glamorous. We're forbidden fruit, in a sense, and she's just at that age —"

Draco smiled at last, and applied himself to his breakfast, thinking about the recent gossip from England. "Ah, yes —trouble in the Weasley paradise. It's better than a Cheering Charm."

An owl rapped on the window. Draco recognized it.

"There's the *Prophet*. I wonder that Father still insists on sending it."

"He likes us to keep up with events in the Old Country." She paid the owl and opened the paper.

Draco had not quite finished his sausages when he looked up and saw her face.

2. WHISPERS BY THE DISTANT SOUTHERN SEA

He knows this is a dream, of course.

He always knows. Long ago, he mastered the discipline of lucid dreaming. The horrors that once assailed him nightly are part of the blessedly dim past. Shadows and vapors parade before his mind's eye nightly, sometimes amusing him, sometimes causing him to remember forgotten pain. If it becomes

too distressing, he can remind himself that it's only a dream, and either wake or change the events to suit himself.

Often he hears conversations in which he plays no part. He is in darkness, and sees nothing. He is a silent eavesdropper as voices discuss school business, the schedule of daily classes, the assignment of points and prefectures. Sometimes the voices are those of children, being rebuked or rewarded. Years ago, he heard Minerva's voice a great deal, but after awhile it was another voice, one he did not know, a brisk English voice roughened with age. Others call her Headmistress, or Professor Goshawk. Sometimes he still hears familiar voices, but they are growing fewer every year. Sometimes these whispers fade into normal dreams, sometimes they are a part of them, sometimes he cannot tell one from the other.

Once two young girls stand near to him, the elder recounting a favorite bit of local folklore to the younger.

"He's the One-Who-Never-Died. He was the bravest of all, and everybody was against him. Nobody knew he was fighting to save them, and they all said terrible things about him, and then they left him to die, but he didn't."

"Where is he, then?"

The older girl whispers, "They say he's still here, down below, in a secret laboratory beneath the Chamber of Secrets. They say he'll come back if Hogwarts is ever in danger."

It is a more interesting conversation than most. He suspects that these conversations are actually taking place on

the other side of the world. So much of the time there is only silence, or the faint scratching of a quill, or a muffled snore.

Not long ago, the old witch speaks to a boy.

"I understand you wanted to see the portraits, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, please, Professor. I've seen Professor Dumbledore on chocolate frog cards, but I've never seen Professor Snape at all. He has a card, but it's really rare."

"There is a portrait at the Dumbledore School, but you were educated by your grandmother, I understand."

"Yes, Professor." The voice is young and hesitant. It does not sound at all like Potter. "I just wanted to see him. He doesn't look like I thought he would. My father — I mean — he doesn't look all that mean or scary."

The listener is faintly indignant.

The boy goes on, rather wistfully, "I wish I could have met him. I heard so many different things. I like to be able to make up my own mind about people."

"Very commendable, Mr. Potter," the witch replies.

The whispers tonight are different. There has been silence for a long time, and then a murmur of many voices. These are shockingly familiar, and he stands uneasily, wondering what is going on.

"Severus," calls a voice he knows better than his own. "Severus, open your eyes."

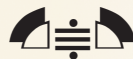
It is difficult, but he obeys the voice, as he always has. The light is painful, but he cannot turn his eyes away, once they are open.

Dumbledore is standing before him, arms out as if to embrace him, beaming at him affectionately. Behind him stand a crowd of companions. Minerva is there, smiling tentatively, somewhat shame-faced. Moody peers at him, glowering; but as Moody always glowers at everyone he does not take it personally. Emmeline Vance raises a dignified eyebrow, and Charity Burbage's eyes are swimming with tears. Remus Lupin is there, nodding to him politely, and Tonks grins and gives him a wink. A little further away stand Sirius Black, pretending to be indifferent, and James Potter, conscientiously pleasant. Lily is there too, looking very pretty, her hand on her husband's arm.

He is surprised for a moment that his heart does not thrill at the sight of her, but he is older and wiser, after all; and the expression of tender forgiveness on her face irritates him. He does not wish to be condescended to by a chit barely out of Hogwarts. He looks instead at the Headmaster, wondering what the old wizard wants now.

"Severus," Dumbledore says gravely. "If you are ready — if you are prepared —"

A phoenix flashes into the sky above in a burst of ecstatic song, higher and higher, until the last plangent note dies away.



He sat up, listening for the phoenix. The room was silent, save for the soft, regular breathing of his wife and the sound of the ocean, less than a mile to the south. At this distance,

the ebb and flow of the tide was softened to the confidential hiss of a mighty serpent. He looked at the time.

Half-past midnight. He lay back down. There had been no Dumbledore and no Fawkes. Just a dream —

It was hard to sleep again, with his mind set astir by memories. *"The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures..."*

Yes, they were all dead now. He most regretted Minerva. The Stunners fired at her by those Ministry stooges had weakened her heart, he had heard. Her tenure at Hogwarts had been all too brief. She had made changes, most of which he approved, and some of which had lasted. As for the others, he had long since made his peace with his past.

Had that portrait connected him in some way to Hogwarts? He was not entirely pleased at the thought. His feelings about the place remained ambivalent, nostalgia and loathing combined. The life he had now was what he wanted: work that interested him, a companionship of respect and affection, two bright boys unshadowed by his past.

He listened more carefully. There was no sound from that quarter, so they must be genuinely asleep and not shamming. The point of the day school in Melbourne was to allow his sons to live at home while getting a decent education. His own experiences had given him no illusions about boarding schools. He sometimes thought the curriculum at the boys' school a little soft, but his wife said he sounded like an old coot when he complained.

"In my day," she teased him in a quavering, nasal whine,

"we studied Runes, Astronomy, and Potions simultaneously, with only burnt porridge for dinner and flogging on Sundays!"

Dumbledore had called him Severus. No one had called him that in twenty years. The name no longer elicited a response from him. He had been Jonathan Prince for the best years of his life, and was content to let Severus Snape go. He was not worth a regret.

Now and then he had news of Lucius and Narcissa. He was cautious about it, avoiding situations that might lead to exposure. He wrote books, but made no public appearances. He traveled, but did not visit places where he might be recognized. He had nearly been caught out early on, when he had gone to Chicago to track down a rare manuscript. He had had no idea that Perdita Robinson was serving an apprenticeship there. She had been his student, and certainly would have known him. He had glimpsed her briefly, and made good his escape with seconds to spare. He had smirked then, thinking over a half-forgotten article from the Prophet, which had revealed her relationship to Lucius. He should have guessed...

Thinking of Malfoy's byblow led him to remember Hermione Granger. It had transpired that she was the child of Barty Crouch Sr. He had been oddly unsurprised when he read that, thinking it fitting that such a smug and irritating know-it-all should be the child of that hypocrite Crouch, and the sister of that clever and fanatical lunatic, Barty Jr. There wasn't a member of that family who didn't think that he or she had a monopoly on the Truth. Granger was apparently

some sort of drone in the Ministry of Law Enforcement now, which did not much surprise him, either. He had considered her a born follower, first of her teachers and then of Harry Potter. Later she married that half-witted Weasley boy, and that was the end of any possible respect for her. It was just as well that she had few international contacts with the foremost creative minds in research and experimentation.

He had had many invitations to speak at Miskatonic University, but had declined them all. Recently he had begun to reconsider. He ought to have a look at the place. Miskatonic might have a great deal to offer his sons. Draco was there, and perhaps it would not be such a terrible thing to see him again. Draco had made himself respected in the States. Lucius and Narcissa, too, had successfully reinvented themselves. Perhaps a discreet message —

He looked at the clock again, feeling that there was something he ought to be doing. He remembered this uneasiness from years past, but he could not recall anything left undone. It nagged at him, the sense that something was about to happen — something terribly important — but he could not imagine what it might be.

With a scowl, he shut his eyes again. Whatever it was, he would deal with it in the morning.

3. THE UNICORN IN KENSINGTON GARDENS

They have been wandering for months, searching for the Lost Ones. Hermione's face is gaunt and drawn, her robes

bedraggled and unclean. They desperately need hot food and rest, but dare not return to Hogwarts for fear of spending weeks in quarantine. There are so few of them, so pitifully few willing to step outside the safe areas and join the hunt for those left behind.

Hermione has detected a weak magical signal. "It's coming from the west — possibly somewhere north of Hyde Park."

"Impossible. A team went over that part of London only three months ago."

"It could be a newborn. Neville said that the Hogwarts Quill made two entries this year. Someone's still having babies."

"How? Why?" he wonders in a mutter. "If Snape doesn't come up with something soon, we'll all be dead."

He feels very hot. His head swivels, hardly able to comprehend the horror about him. The newest buildings are the first to crumble: a lightning strike, a strong wind, and the acres of glass shatter, leaving the structure exposed to the insidious power of rain. Most of the bodies are gone now. As the Red Death took hold, muggles would drop dead on the streets, their limbs splayed, blood pouring from nose and ears; from eyes and rectum. For a brief period, while such things survived, muggle media speculated hysterically about Hanta Virus and radiation poisoning. Carried on the chilly breeze, a single page of a muggle newspaper blows down the street and clings to his leg like a lost child. He kicks at it, trying to escape. It detaches, slowly, and he reads the headline.

THE END? it asks.

They are instructed to immolate any human remains they find. Not everyone has died of the Red Death. Around five percent of muggles appear to be resistant to the disease, perhaps due to some genetic heritage from a magical progenitor. That hardly means that five percent of muggles are surviving the epidemic. There are old people in nursing homes, helpless without caregivers; isolated people unable to find food or clean water; people with other, muggle illnesses, deprived of needed medicine; appalling instances of infants found starved to death, surrounded by their dead families. Surviving the Red Death does not guarantee surviving this catastrophe.

Some do not choose to survive. Harry can no longer count the times he has entered a house and found a suicide, a poor soul who has given up when his world ended.

Witches and wizards, when they are found, are to be taken at once to the Quarantine Ward at St. Mungo's. So far only a few have shown signs of the disease, but the Healers are frightened. Muggle survivors are to be cared for in the nearest Reclamation Camp. It was an afterthought at first, but now there is more and more anxiety to save all those who can be saved.

The world is changing. Proud in their power and their isolation, the wizarding community is now awakening to the coming crisis. The world will be a thinly populated planet, devoid of many things previously taken for granted. No one quite understood how much the muggle world had contributed to their existence. Muggles may not have magic, but

they can be of great use as laborers and clerks, as farmers and servants, as hewers of wood and drawers of water. And they still greatly outnumber wizards.

Western Europe is in chaos. Of the lands beyond, there is almost no news. The last word from the States was of a Civil War raging between muggles and wizards, between wizards and wizards. The Confederate Mages have never made peace with their northern counterparts, and hold a bitter grudge against their old enemies in Arkham for the hurricane and flood that nearly destroyed their capital in New Orleans.

While wizards ponder uneasily over this lonely new world they imagined they wanted, the true winners appear to be the other magical creatures. Even before the muggles were gone, they began trickling into the world outside the Forbidden Forest. Indeed, Britain seems to have become one great Forbidden Forest, dotted by a few human settlements. Free of old constraints, the centaurs gallop across Salisbury Plain. There are acromantulae in the Fens, and Harry has heard that Welsh Greens are breeding in Snowdonia. A colony of fairies flutters past Harry and Hermione as they trudge along the deserted streets. Hermione recognizes them as the ones who are living in Harrod's. At night, faint lights dance in the display windows, an exquisite show in an forsaken city.

A scrawny white cat peers at them timidly from beneath an abandoned bus. It has a collar. Harry supposes it was lucky not to be locked inside to starve like thousands of others. They are sorry for the dogs and cats. The teams

are warned to be vigilant for feral animals — even the non-magical ones. Packs of wild dogs can be vicious, and one particularly large pack is responsible for killing a muggle boy who tried to run away from his Reclamation Camp near Exeter. Werewolves, anxious to prove their usefulness, have been assigned to deal with this danger.

They are walking up Exhibition Road. The Royal Albert Hall's roof has collapsed: the jagged tops of the walls resemble dragon's teeth. Hermione is making notes in her diary. They will give Kensington Palace a wide berth. Something strange is living there, something neither muggle nor wizard, and Harry does not want to know what it is. Rescued muggles babble about "The Lady." Hermione thinks a muggle ghost has manifested exceptionally strongly, its power fed by the dying city. Green coolness ahead draws them into Kensington Gardens.

They are by the Long Water. Harry is so hot that he kneels down to splash his face. A grindylow snaps at him, and he jumps back, startled.

Hermione only smiles. They walk on, and stop near the statue of a young boy. He is a cheerful figure in the silence. Harry thinks he should know who he is, but cannot recall the name. Hermione draws white bread from her beaded bag, and hands it to Harry. He says he is not hungry, but she insists that he take it.

"You'll feel better if you have something to eat." She offers him a golden cup of chilled red wine. "It's from my

father's house."

They eat and drink in silence, sharing the cup. There is a rustle and an echo of hoofbeats. Harry should raise his wand, but he is hot and hungry. The pure white bread is much better than anything the Dursleys will give him.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione breathes.

A unicorn is trotting toward them. It is a shimmer of whiteness surpassing that of pearls and lilies, and it glows as if illuminated from within. Harry's heart breaks to see something so beautiful, but he wonders if it will want his bread, so he eats faster. Hermione goes toward it, offering her own food.

She turns back to Harry, looking very young: robed in blue, crowned with a diadem, a golden locket shining at her throat. "I can still touch a unicorn! You poor thing," she murmurs to the unicorn. "There are no roses here for you. Have this instead." She offers the white bread to the creature, who sniffs at it suspiciously and then snorts in alarm at the drops of red, red blood spotting it.

"Hermione!" Harry screams.

Blood is running from her eyes and nose, trickling from the corner of her mouth. "Go on, Harry!" she cries. "You're a great wizard!"

The unicorn draws back, angered at the witch, and rams its horn through her chest. It tramples the bread underfoot.

"Hermione!"



His eyes opened suddenly, looking at the paper on the desk where his head was resting. With a disgusted grimace, he sat up straight, noticing that he had drooled on his notes. His glasses were askew and he fumbled with them, blinking.

I must have fallen asleep. I hope no one saw me. A fine thing for the Head Auror to doze off in the middle of a crisis!

He shivered at the vividness of the nightmare. He hadn't had such a detailed dream in years.

Not since —

He refused to pursue that memory, and forced himself to think about work. He had been awake since yesterday. *It must be —*

Half past two in the afternoon, he realized. Everything had been mad since yesterday afternoon. After some debate, it was decided that simply Obliviating the Schulztes would not be sufficient. Skylar Schultz might be easily coached into a display of accidental magic for the benefit of muggle investigators. He had gone personally to arrest the Schulztes in their home, to find every bit of documentation about the wizarding world they possessed, to question them under Veritaserum to find out exactly what they had told to whom. Those individuals were visited and Obliviated. The father was taken to every place he had stored evidence and the evidence disposed of. Under glamours, some Ministry employees were sent to Heathrow with the family's passports to create the impression that the Schulztes had hastily returned to the States.

The tabloid's offices had been rifled by Aurors and every available copy of the damning paper had been destroyed. The Schultzes' floo had been disconnected, along with the floos of every recorded squib in Britain. The families of muggleborn students at Hogwarts and the Albus Dumbledore School were being rounded up and put in protective custody. Any students whose parents did not live with a wizarding family in a secure location would board at hastily created facilities at the school for at least the near future.

Volunteer Aurors had been deputized for the duration of the emergency. Security had clamped down at the Ministry, Hogwarts, the Albus Dumbledore School, St. Mungo's, Hogsmeade, and Cloud Hill. No one could enter them save by floo or apparition. Roads that muggles might utilize were under guard. All owls and all brooms were to be grounded until further notice. No one was to speak of the wizarding world, or magic, or *anything* secret by telephone or computer. A few powerfully warded old wizarding homes, such as Malfoy Manor, had been opened as refuges for frightened wizards and witches and their families. Others were camping out in the Ministry.

Diagon Alley, which Harry felt was the most vulnerable site, was closed down as well. The Leaky Cauldron could no longer be seen or accessed from Charing Cross Road. The Schultzes had come through the pub, and entered by means of the brick wall, and that means of entry was now gone. No muggles were to be permitted within Diagon

Alley. If students needed supplies, a teacher or approved wizard or witch would obtain them.

It would not be enough, of course. Even if every copy of that newspaper was destroyed, the story was posted on the Internet, and could not be stopped. Harry had only a pair of witches in his office techno-savvy enough to monitor the traffic, and only one attempting to listen in on phone calls. They simply had no idea how many muggles knew about them. The secret was out, and furious messages were arriving from wizarding governments around the globe.

Very luckily, Skylar Schultz had only a first year muggleborn's knowledge of the wizarding world, and she had not had Hermione's inquisitive mind. She had never been to Hogsmeade, and only knew the bare fact of its existence. She knew that the Ministry was in London, but had no idea where. She had heard about the Dumbledore School and that it was in Sussex. Harry and his team had retrieved the girl's books, and believed they had found all the copies. One of the tabloid reporters had started scanning HOGWARTS, A HISTORY into his computer, but the device was seized as well. As far as they could tell, the muggles involved with the SUN had no clear idea of Hogwarts' actual location, and did not know that St. Mungo's and Cloud Hill even existed.

Others did, of course. Harry shuddered. He had sent someone to deal with his aunt. He could easily imagine her coming forward, spewing every detail about the "freaks." It had not been reassuring to be told that she was not to be

found at her old address at Lewes. The people now living in Marge Dursley's home knew nothing. Marge herself had been dead over seven years. Harry had absolutely no idea where Petunia and Dudley might be. Petunia knew about Azkaban, and who knew what else?

Justin Finch-Fletchley, their liaison with the muggle Prime Minister, had had a difficult and unsatisfactory conference with the man. The whole concept of Memory Spells had very much alarmed him, and his remarks to Justin were evasive and insincere.

"Something's going on there," Justin reported. "You should request a warrant for full Legilimancy."

On top of all this, The Irish were publicly accusing the British of deliberately exposing the wizarding world. A shower of pamphlets from the High Council exploded in every wizarding street, describing them with a term not used since the War.

"Blood-Traitors."

The brief document was blunt and inflammatory:

"... Our right is manifest to protect our lives, our families, and our ancient culture... That careless arrogance that has been the hallmark of British dealings in Ireland has now born poisonous fruit... Heedless disregard of inherently inferior but crafty muggles... We demand that the British wizarding community show evidence of an effort in good faith to protect the magical world they have so recklessly revealed, or others will undertake the task as they see fit... Let the teeming multitude unblessed by magic beware..."

Harry grimaced at his own copy of THE IRISH MANIFESTO.
If the muggles ever saw that!

He grimaced again, wishing for some tea, remembering bits of his dream. It must have been that rumor passed by Lucius that had set him off. No one was likely to loose a murderous plague on the muggles. As Hermione has said so sensibly, it would obviously be insane. It was only a nightmare, Rationally considered, the upshot of the current crisis would most likely be that they would simply have to be very, very careful until the muggles were distracted by the next exciting scandal or rumor. In fact, he should ask Hermione to get some of her people to cook up something of the sort —

Hermione herself bustled through the door, and tossed a bag of takeaway onto his desk.

"I daresay you missed lunch. You'll feel better if you have something to eat. I'll make us some tea."

Her words disturbed him, recalling his dream. "You've been out, then."

"A brief stroll, taking the measure of the muggles. So far it's just another news story. And I felt like Chinese."

"Thanks."

He did feel better for the food. He had another meeting with the Minister at four, and must pull himself together.

"Did Ginny get home all right?" Hermione asked. She seemed a bit edgy, and blew on her tea to cool it. Harry wondered if she had taken any more of her potion. When there was time, he must sit down and talk to her about it seriously.

But this was obviously not the time. Recalling Ginny's frantic floo calls made him sigh heavily. "I pulled some strings and they finally gave her an International Portkey. Most of Europe is locked down. She's at Grimmauld Place with Lily now. I already asked her to fetch Hugo after school. She'll take care of him."

"I appreciate it. I've no idea when I'll be able to go home."

"No more have I. It's bad, Hermione: there's no use pretending."

"The Wizengamot is holding another special session tonight. Are you going to be able to make it?"

"I don't see how. I'll give permission for you to be my proxy."

"Try to come if you can. It's very important."

"A vote of no-confidence?"

"I think it's inevitable. A lot of people feel that whatever we're doing to keep ourselves safe — well, it just hasn't been enough. We can't track down all the people who know about us. We don't even know the names of all the people who know about us. I think the Isolationists feel their case has been made for them. We've got to make radical changes, and we've got to make them now."

The food was good, but he was too preoccupied to really taste it. He admitted that he was a perfect fool at politics, but even he could see who would profit the most in this situation. "It's Lucius, isn't it? Malfoy is about to have a go at becoming Minister of Magic."

"We should have seen it coming, Harry. There are so few of his generation left, and he's been out there for years and years, making himself a leader, drumming up public support for his impeccably just causes. The Irish will talk to him, too — and not many can say that."

"Maybe I should have —" It occurred to Harry if he had done even a little to publicize himself, to capitalize on his fame, then he would be looked upon as the natural leader in this crisis. The thought revolted him. He still hated fame. He loved his quiet, normal life, and hoped it would survive this crisis. If Malfoy wanted the name and influence of Minister, he was welcome to them. Harry thought he could work with him. In fact, he had been working with him for years. Either Malfoy's views had changed a great deal, or Harry's had crept closer to them. One never heard Malfoy ranting about blood purity these days. That was old news, and the world had moved on.

He considered his words, and asked outright, "Are you going to support him?"

Hermione nodded. "I think I'll have to. He's the only one who has a thorough, consistent design for our security that doesn't absolutely trample on the muggles and the families of the muggleborn. At least he talks about "co-option" rather than outright kidnapping and oblivation. He grants the need for a constant influx of fresh blood into our population, though he would put rigorous controls on information leaks. I always thought him too conservative, but

considering the current situation, maybe he's been right all along. He's responsible for a new movement that will supply us with some of our food without going through muggle middlemen. He gets all the credit for Cloud Hill — I know you were involved, Harry, but you never went public — and Cloud Hill gives us a second secure wizarding village that is virtually unknown to the Muggle world. Narcissa fronted for him at the Dumbledore School, and now Willow is teaching there. He's back on the Hogwarts Board of Governors and on the Wizengamot as well. Over the years he's built up a great deal of support, without crassly paying off the Minister of Magic this time."

"Older and smarter," Harry sighed. "I heard about the animagus stunt."

Hermione bit her lip. It had always vexed her that she could not master the animagus transformation. "I suppose it's very laudable for a mature wizard to take up a new study like that and succeed," she said grudgingly. "It's just a stunt, as you say, but he uses it with the environmental people to present himself as At One With Nature. And the form is very — cute."

Harry snorted. "A silver fox. Appropriate, I guess. I always thought that you would be Minister of Magic."

"One day, possibly. Maybe when all of those children at the School who know me grow up. Let's be honest: my own peers never cared that much for me, and I can't charm people the way Lucius does — or the way you do. I thought that the War would give us a base, but when I really think about it, I

realize that not that many people actually were at the Battle of Hogwarts on either side. Most of wizarding Britain was either passively supporting Tom Riddle, or passively enduring him, or lying low, hoping it would all go away.

"A lot of the Muggleborns we rescued left the wizarding world, and are out there, mixed up with the general population. A lot of the Muggleborn students from the war years never finished Hogwarts. We never tracked them all down. Who knows what they've been doing with their magic, or how many people were told about what they went through? I've asked the Hogwarts staff for a list of all living former students, and we'll have to figure out where they are. Some of them could pose a problem."

Harry leaned back in his chair. "I thought it would be all right — forever," he admitted. "It seemed at the time that getting rid of Voldemort would solve all our problems. It's pretty clear that it didn't."

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione got up and paced restlessly, rumpling her hair. "I think we've done very well! Yes, wizarding Britain isn't perfect, but I can see real improvement: laws are more just, and administered more honestly; nobody cares much about blood status any more —"

"In public," Harry put in, a little doubtfully.

"Well, no one says anything about it to *me*," Hermione shot back. "And the muggleborn have more opportunities than ever before. House elves are protected. Werewolves can hold jobs. Wizarding education is so much better than it was

when we first went to Hogwarts — I could talk about that for hours —” she saw his expression, and laughed. “—but I won’t.” She sat down and looked at him ruefully. “It might have been a brief Golden Age — only twenty years — but I’m sure that someday we’ll look back and call it just that.”

“Everything’s going to change now,” Harry muttered. “It was easier when my scar hurt: I knew something bad was about to happen. Even that stupid prophecy gave me a clue. Now — the future is just a blank. I can’t begin to guess what comes next.”

They were silent for a long moment. Then Hermione rose briskly, brushing off her robes. “Well, I know what I have to do next! I’ve got to decide what to recommend for that wretched Schultz girl. The parents broke the law and we’re going to prosecute them — there’s no doubt about that. The girl is too young to prosecute as an adult, though, and I suspect she’ll have a hard time if she goes back to Hogwarts. I’ll come up with something. You’re a great wizard, Harry, and we’ll get through this together. Later.” She leaned over the desk and planted a light kiss on his brow. He caught quickly at her shoulder, and gave her a squeeze.

He was left with his thoughts only briefly. His secretary peeked in to tell him that Mr. Ron Weasley was still demanding to speak to him.

“I don’t have time for this,” Harry growled, “but put him through.”

Ron appeared in the fire, mouth open, and Harry inter-

rupted him before he could say a word.

“Listen to me. You tried to play legal games with the Ministry’s best legal mind. It was a bad idea. Kissing your girlfriend in front of Hermione and her whole staff — also a bad idea. Sign the custody papers, and Hermione won’t press charges. Got that? Sign papers, get girl out of holding cell. Then move on to really important things, like checking the wards at your parents’ house. Make sure your girlfriend is in a safe place. The muggles know about us, and I think it could get ugly. I’ve got to go, and I’ll try to talk to you in a few days.”

He needed to get away, to get some air. He threw off his robes, holstered his wand underneath the sleeve of his jacket, and found an emergency exit that permitted him to step outside using an inconspicuous door. There was something he needed to see.

Apparating would be reckless. A few minutes in a muggle taxi served his purpose just as well.

“Kensington Gardens.”

The whirlwind that was muggle London engulfed him. After the driver let him out near the Albert Memorial, he tried to make sense of his surroundings. This was nothing like his dream. The Royal Albert Hall across the road was massive and intact. There were crowds of people everywhere. There were no horrors lurking in Kensington Palace. He turned, and walked into the gardens with a quick step, passing the dawdling tourists. A man was reading a paper — not *THE SUN* — and the front page caught Harry’s eye.

THE SECRET LIVES OF WITCHES

MORE REVELATIONS!

He ground his teeth together. Other papers were taking up the story. Not a good sign, but it was still just the tabloids.

If it appears in THE TIMES, though —

He moved on, head down, glad of the exercise after a day spent underground. The Gardens were nothing like his dream, after all. They were much bigger and not quite so green. The Long Water glinted through the trees. Harry paused, and took the path along it. Ahead, children were climbing on the familiar statue. He slowed as he approached it.

PETER PAN

He had never read the book himself. It was hardly something that Petunia would have bought for Dudley. He watched a tiny girl as she clung to the plinth and giggled.

Her mother called out to her, “Clap your hands if you believe in fairies, Emma!”

The girl jumped down instantly and clapped her hands, “I do! I do!” Brown curls danced in the light breeze.

“Come on now, we have to meet Daddy.” The mother’s hand found the daughter’s, a moment of everyday tenderness that made Harry’s throat ache. He tried not to stare like a stalker as they walked by him.

“Look! Mummy!”

Harry glanced up, alarmed to see the excited child pointing. Was there something odd about his appearance?

She was not pointing at him. Her mother looked, too,

but seeing nothing, gave the little girl’s hand a tug and went her way. The child’s eyes were huge, disbelieving. She turned her head, trying to catch another glimpse until she was pulled around a corner.

A rustle, an echo of hoofbeats, a shimmer of white surpassing that of pearl and lilies. Harry waited until the unicorn slipped back into the shelter of the trees.





NOTES

FROM THE AUTHOR



Chapter 1: In another story I estimate the wizarding population at about 12,000. Based on a rough guesstimate of the casualties throughout the HP books, I'd guess that well over a thousand have been killed or have emigrated to a safer place. That would be like the U.S. losing twenty-five million people. Since the wizarding world is already tiny, the casualties would be traumatic.

Chapter 2: This grew from a little plot bunny in my story *THE PREFECT'S PORTRAIT*. It was |Odel who came up with the most logical suspect.

In a recent interview, |KR has said that Harry and Ron became Aurors, and that Hermione rose to a high position in the DMLE. I am aware that later she changed her mind about Ron. After that I'm done with trying to keep track of |KR's constantly changing statements about her characters.

I'm indebted to excessivelyperky's story *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY* for the concept of blood that is *too* pure.

The one in ten figure of misidentification is from an actual recent study.

Chapter 5: I base Ron's career at WWW on an interview JK gave. Since she changes her mind every time anyone asks her a question, I am now done trying to keep up with her.

Yes, I know it was Hermione Jean in DH. It was always Hermione Jane before.

Chapter 6: Disagree with me if you will, but I've always found it impossible to believe that Lucius Malfoy understood that the diary was a true horcrux. If he had known, that object would have been locked away in the deepest recess of the Malfoy vault at Gringott's. I believe that he thought it was some sort of cursed object that would embarrass the Weasleys in some way. He probably thought that the most likely scenario would be for the little girl to tell her parents that she had an extra book, and then the Weasleys would have to explain how they come to be in possession of Voldemort's diary. Anything else presupposes an in-depth knowledge of Ginny Weasley's thought processes. It's also fantastically careless. I can't believe that Malfoy would be party to unleashing a basilisk on the school his son attended, and that basilisk controlled only by a schoolgirl who was being controlled by a cursed object of the Dark Lord.

Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that Lucius Malfoy was a true follower of the Dark Lord, and that he knew that the diary was a horcrux. In that case, he could have raised Voldemort immediately, and the first war would have gone on without hiatus.

Chapter 7: The epilogue shows that there was considerable time between the end of the war and the birth of the next generation at Hogwarts. I don't see any reason not to play with the intervening time. And I still can't see Ron and Hermione living together, unless she had given up and settled for him because her biological clock was ticking and she wanted children. Maybe by then he had learned to respect her books. Dunno.

However much JK loves them, I hate pranks. I think they're sadistic, in a "who-me? You have no sense of humor!" style.

Chapter 8: Yes, I know this Ginny seems miles away from the Stepford!Ginny of the Epilogue, who does not participate in naming her children. That, however, is many years later. JK said that Ginny played Quidditch for a few years before marrying Harry. Any theories? A mid-air collision that ended her career and limited her options? Speculate all you like!

Chapter 11: John Wellington Wells was played by the late great Sir Ralph Richardson.

Yes, Jane is the last descendant of two fictional characters who have never disappointed me. The Rochester family was ruined during the Slump after WWI, and lost the remainder of the estates and fortune to death duties after WWII.

Thanks to all who have reviewed/read. I seem to have largely exorcised my misery over DH and my general feeling of being had. If you are tired of HP, but still want a dose of British Magic, I recommend that you read JONATHAN

STRANGE AND MR NORRELL, by Susanna Clarke.

Chapter 11: In response to questions about Marietta's permanent mutilation, J K Rowling states, "I loathe a traitor." I'm not making it up.

For more about Pal-ul-don, you might be interested in the adventures of John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, some decades later, in *TARZAN THE TERRIBLE* by Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Chapter 12: Thanks to all my readers and reviewers. Special thanks to jodel, excessivelyperky, and textualsexphinx for their inspiring ideas. And thanks to duj, for the perfect word to describe Neville's early Hogwarts persona.

Chapter 13: Crouch quotes from Christopher Smart's *JUBILATE DEO* — the section beginning "*For I will consider my Cat, Jeoffrey...*"

Chapter 14: *SPELLBOUND IN DARKNESS* is a wonderful book about the movies by Pauline Kael. I always thought it would make a great title for an HP story.

If you have ever seen *BRIEF ENCOUNTER*, it might be easier for you to judge the degree of Crouch's truthfulness to either Hermione or his wife. I respectfully acknowledge Noel Coward for the lengthy direct quotes. The music Crouch mentions is Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, making the film's score the most romantic ever.

I have received a number of very interesting anonymous

reviews. I think at least two of these issues are of general interest and I will be brief.

Anonymous asked: "*How smart is Hermione? My impression from the books is that she is great at book learning and studying but not particularly creative or inquisitive. She pursues knowledge not for the sake of knowledge but to further her own goals. What do you think? Also how does Hermione compare to other witches and wizards. I know she is not as good as Dumbledore and Voldemort, but how about someone like Snape. I don't think she could have independently create the things found in the half blood prince's potions textbook.*"

My short answer: Yes, I think Hermione is very bright. There are many different kinds of intelligence. Hermione has a superb memory and a gift for adapting others' work. That is a valid form of intelligence. I agree that we see little sign of independent creativity, and her social intelligence appears adequate (but only because it is so often made to look good in comparison to her usual companions, Harry and Ron. All three of the trio are very badly socialized, and if Harry had not been The Boy Who Lived, they would have been outsiders throughout school.)

Textualsexphinx said: "*I'm giggling madly at the thought that Hermione might end up following her Dad's prompt about the Wizard world needing a larger population to produce geniuses and come up with her very own version of the Marriage Law.*"

My answer: That made me smile. Something of the sort crossed my mind. While I have read many good Marriage

Law fics, they are often only an excuse to force Hermione and Snape to have sex. If Hermione were in a position of authority, and decided that the wizarding world needed to be larger, there are all sorts of ways to reward marriage and parenthood. I like to think she would be capable of persuasive subtlety by the time she is at the wheel.

Chapter 16: In current interviews Rowling has changed her story yet again, and now Ron and Neville work for the ministry. I don't care. I believe that there's a limit to how much rewriting an author should be allowed once she's committed her words to publication. Yes, I think Rowling should actually sit down and create an entirely new version of DH. Until she does that however, I don't care to allow her to tell me how I should interpret it, or tell us about scenes that she seems to believe were in the book — but weren't, really. As for her epilogue — well, I'll say no more.

Thanks to Jodel for a number of ideas, including the one about Ron's input to the Weasley "Day Dreams." As to THE PRINCESS BRIDE — I admit that I'm still charmed by the use of that film in the fic, THE FIRE AND THE ROSE. *"My name is Harry Potter. You killed my father: prepare to die!"*

The "little cheesy bites" were suggested to me by John Mortimer's Mrs. Rumpole.

Chapter 18: Acknowledgements to Chapter 2 of the HARRY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE, and to Monty Python's Dead Parrot Sketch.

Chapter 20: Was anyone else noticing when the British Minister of Magic picked up the trophy on behalf of the Irish team at the World cup? There aren't a great many Irish names among the Hogwarts students — not as many as might be expected statistically. There aren't many among the names of Ministry employees, either. Apparently the Irish wizards are still subject to the British Ministry. I wonder how they like it.

No, I'm not happy with Hermione/Ron either, but as this story is a commentary on canon, I have to stick to canon, and Rowling has decreed that Hermione and Ron did in fact marry. Since there is no rational basis for Hermione and Ron to be a couple, I have to look for irrational motivations, such as mindless physical attraction, incomprehensible to the objective outsider.

Chapter 22: When I placed this story in the Harry and Hermione category, I was not leading people on. I am too old to imagine that nineteen years means forever.

Oonagh O'Flynn's gruesome death was inspired by the murder of Bridget Cleary in 1895.

*"Oh, are you a witch,
Or are you a fairy,
Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?"*

In a review of this chapter, the excellent writer Mathias Granger asked: *"Understandable that 19 years isn't the rest of their lives, but why insult Hermione's intelligence by having her marry Ron in the first place? I mean for someone supposedly intelligent she should see this happening from a mile away."*

This question highlights one of the reasons I wrote this story. You raise very valid questions — so valid that I wanted to respond right away. Yes — why insult Hermione’s intelligence? I think that’s the question many of us had for Rowling, when reading DH (and HBP too!). I wrote this story as a response to canon, which I’ve tried to subvert as far as possible. Had the awful epilogue not been added to DH, I never would have considered a marriage between Hermione and Ron. Most of us wonder how Ron can be a suitable husband for Hermione. And that issue begs the additional question: how can Hermione possibly be what Ron needs in a wife?

Rowling shoved them together by authorial fiat, and since I wanted to stick to canon, I had to (as one very nasty Ron/Hermione shipper put it) “deal with it.” All right. As I’ve said before, the only way to explain the relationship at all is by an intense physical attraction. Hermione wouldn’t be the first brilliant person betrayed by hormones into an unsuitable marriage. However, in a few years, after the attraction fades and everything is a matter of routine, I can see someone with a fragile ego like Ron being ripe for a mid-life crisis, complete with young trophy wife and the equivalent of the little red sports car. That’s why I see Rowling’s neat couples falling apart once the children are mostly at school. I threw in the drug issue because the wizarding world in fact teaches schoolchildren to make their own drugs and Rowling never does enough with the implications of that. Besides, if Ron and Hermione, once

married, fought as much as they do in canon, the marriage wouldn’t have lasted more than four years.

Chapter 23: Yes, all three parts of this chapter take place simultaneously.

Thanks to all my readers.. Thanks to my reviewers for their always interesting remarks and ideas. Special thanks to |Odel for her help with the direction and concepts of this story.

In Rowling’s handwritten marriage/birth chart, it is difficult to tell if the Greengrass Draco married is named Astoria or Asteria. I have plumped for Asteria, since it contains the Greek root for star (very suitable). Astoria is a made-up name in honor of the wealthy Astor family, and I can’t see that wizards would have any reason to celebrate rich (mostly American) muggles.

Lucius Malfoy’s observation that “things had to change to stay the same” is stolen shamelessly from Lampedusa’s *THE LEOPARD*, a great novel about aristocrats in a time of change.

“The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures.” *MACBETH*, Act II, Scene II.



COLOPHON:

The layout and typesetting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign. Cover and interior graphics were created in Adobe Photoshop. Clip art is from JupiterImages, formerly Dynamic Graphics of Illinois.

Fonts used in the project are: Body text; the Priori Sans family, by Johnathan Barnbrook, distributed by Emigré foundry. Titling is set in FLF's Right Bank. The Drop Caps are set in Fireside Chat from Nick Curtis. Emigré's Journal family has also been used in this project as well as Bill's DECOrations, Bill's Tropical Decorations and P22's La Danse. Cenizas and Dear Sarah Pro from Veer, as well as Handscript Upright and Jane Austin from unknown foundaries were also used.

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

Graphics design by J. Odell (J0del@aol.com)
<http://www.redhen-publications.com>