

The Letters of Summer Ringing Harry

The Letters of Summer

In from the lake

(Prologue)

And yet sitting here on the edge of the lake, with the terrible weight of grief dragging at him, with the loss of Sirius so raw and fresh inside, he could not muster any great sense of fear. It was sunny and the grounds around him were full of laughing people, and even though he felt as distant from them as though he belonged to a different race, it was still very hard to believe as he sat there that his life must include, or end in, murder . . .

He sat there for a long time, gazing out at the water, trying not to think about his godfather or to remember that it was directly across from here, on the opposite bank, that Sirius had collapsed trying to fend off a hundred dementors

The sun had fallen before he realized that he was cold. He got up and returned to the castle, wiping his face on his sleeve as he went.

Order of the Phoenix, p. 856 (American Edition)

Harry had no idea where he was going. He wanted to get away from the lake; it held too many memories that he didn't want to visit just then. He was too late for dinner, but not yet ready for bed. He was walking the halls of Hogwarts, getting in from the cold now that the sun had fallen, but not yet ready to sneak to the kitchens or go back to the common room. A door opened in the hallway, a familiar voice called to him and a small hand grabbed his wrist.

"Harry, get in here."

Harry slipped into the room without thinking, shutting the door behind him. That was a bit of a mistake – the room was blacker than his mood. He couldn't see his companion, but his ears had already identified the harsh whisper as coming from Ginny Weasley.

"Harry, I'm going to ask you a question, and you are going to answer me, and you are going to tell me the truth, and you are *not* going to answer me 'fine.' Okay?" Ginny's voice was still low, but it was filled with the "I'm not gonna take any guff from you" tone that Molly Weasley used so often.

Harry's eyes had finally adjusted to the light, dimmer than twilight in the room, and were barely able to make out the form of Ginny Weasley leaning against a desk; her wand was pointed at Harry's middle. Harry sat on another desk near the wall, pulling his knees up to his chest and looking down at the floor. Harry knew that the wand pointing at him meant business, although Ginny's hexes were more often embarrassing than painful.

“Okay then, what’s your question?”

“How are you dealing with Sirius being – gone?” Ginny’s voice had softened, and Harry could sense her concern.

“I’m . . .” Harry started to say, “I’m fine,” but stopped himself. “*She deserves an answer*,” he thought to himself. “*We’ve faced death together, first Tom and then Bellatrix.*” Harry drew in a deep breath, exhaled and then breathed in again, normally. “It’s . . . contained . . . I’ve got everything boxed up right now, Ginny. Dumbledore and I had . . . words the night Sirius . . . left us. I was horrible to him, but I think he’s still the same as he always was with me. Sometime soon I’m going to open those boxes up, and I imagine that I’ll get totally unwrapped for a while, and then I’ll go back to living again. I have to, I suppose.”

“I wish you weren’t going back to the Dursleys.”

“Me too,” Harry answered as he thought about the hell he’d endured last summer at the Dursleys.

“Harry, you have friends, you have people who love you. Don’t shut us out again.”

There was a long silence. Ginny wondered if Harry was getting ready to explode, or if she’d managed to make him retreat behind whatever door he shut on his world. In the dim light she saw him look up, locking his glistening green eyes onto hers.

“Keep reminding me, Ginny,” Harry said, with a voice that sounded like he was exhausted.

Ginny exhaled. Only then did she realize that she’d been holding her breath, waiting for some reaction.

There was another long silence, but this one was companionable. Ginny started several times as if to speak, but cut herself off. She looked down at her hands, noticed that she still had her wand pointed at Harry, and put it away, into her sleeve. Harry broke the silence first.

“Ginny, you’ve been a good friend to me this year – thanks for putting up with me. I had no idea that this year would be so hard.”

“I’ve always been your friend, Harry.”

Harry looked down again. Ginny couldn’t tell if he was deep in thought, or just falling asleep.

“What happened to the crush?”

Ginny inhaled sharply, but as far as Harry could tell in the twilight, she wasn’t blushing. She answered in a low, flat voice.

“Last year, after the tournament, I decided that I wasn’t going to wait for you to notice me any longer and I was going to get on with my life.”

“I noticed you, Ginny. Long before Ron figured out that Hermione was a girl, I noticed you. I was just . . . preoccupied.” Harry hoped that the heat that he felt creeping up his neck didn’t mean that he was blushing like a Weasley.

“You never noticed me, you fancied Cho.”

“Yeah, well, I was stupid, too. Your dad was right, though, you don’t go for looks alone.

Cho’s a nice girl, she really is, but Cho wanted something that I couldn’t give her. Every time something started to click between us she’d be going on again about Cedric. I guess I couldn’t get the dead man away from the table long enough. She needs someone who won’t always remind her of how her first boyfriend died.”

There was another long silence. Ginny began to fidget.

“Harry, if I write to you this summer, will you write back?”

“I don’t know how much writing I’ll be doing – owl post isn’t secure. If the Ministry can intercept it, and I reckon that the Death Eaters can too.”

“You let me worry about that, Harry. You missed dinner – would you like a sandwich?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Ginny pulled a thick sandwich from her satchel, wrapped in paper.

Harry unwrapped the sandwich enough to take a bite – roast beef with sharp cheddar and pungent mustard that bit his tongue. After swallowing the first mouthful, Harry smiled.

“Thanks, Ginny. Now, how are we going to get back to the Common Room without getting the usual tongues wagging?”

“Well, Harry, we can do the easy thing, and leave this room in separate directions, or just before we reach the common room, I can set off one of the last of my Dungbombs – I’m sure that Fred and George will stock me up again when I get home.”

“Ginny, you are truly a Weasley, and you are all right.” A smile crept on to Harry’s face, and his eyes were alive with light for the first time that day.

“Let’s go then.”

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Author’s note: Many thanks to my wonderful Beta, the ever-persistent Lissa. I listened to everything you said. I did most of what you suggested. What results is my fault, not yours. Thanks also to Werrf for brit-picking. Again, the errors are mine, not his. Thanks to the legion of pre- and post-Betas for your thoughtful comments, you have made this much better than I could.

Disclaimer: This is my story – stuff you don’t recognize is my own work. The stuff you do recognize from the Hogwarts world is the property of J.K. Rowling and her licensees. This is a non-profit writing exercise under the fair use doctrine.

Ringling Harry – Chapter 1

Petunia Dursley was chewing on her lip, reviewing her list of things to do, now that summer holiday had begun and she had a house with two boys again. Harry had been more silent than usual this year, even more withdrawn this holiday than last summer. He would do his chores, both the regular standing chores and those she’d leave on a list by his plate before breakfast, and then retreat to his room, where he would most often sit on his bed, staring a hole in the blank wall.

The telephone rang, breaking her train of thought.

“Hallo.”

“Hello, Mrs. Dursley, this is Hermione Granger, daughter of Dr. and Dr. Granger at Leeds Medical School. I go to school with Harry.”

“Oh.” Petunia said, remembering with horror the scene at King’s Crossing, just two days past.

“Oh, well, I’ll get him on the phone.”

“Actually, Mrs. Dursley, I wanted to talk to you.”

“All right then.” Petunia began to squirm in her chair.

“Some of Harry’s friends that you met at the train station last week need to visit Harry. Is tomorrow afternoon at 2:00 a good time for your family?”

“I’m sure that we’ll be out of the house, but Harry will be here. Can you please be discreet?” Hermione laughed.

“I seriously doubt that any of your neighbors will notice a thing.”

“All right then, is there anything else?”

“Can I talk to Harry if he’s not busy?”

“He’s staring at the wall up in his room. I’ll bring him the phone.”

Petunia Dursley picked up the cordless phone and carried it upstairs. Harry’s door was ajar – she nudged it with her foot and it silently swung open. Harry was draped across his bed, staring at the ceiling.

“The phone, Harry. It’s for you.” Petunia said sharply. Petunia held the phone out like it was some smelly item that Harry was responsible for bringing into the house. Harry snapped out of whatever reverie he was in and sat up, stretching out his hand to deftly lift the handset from his aunt’s grip.

“Thank you, Aunt Petunia.”

Petunia turned and wordlessly left the room, returning to the kitchen to brood. Harry looked at the phone for a moment and then put it up to his ear.

“Hallo?”

“Hello, Harry, this is Hermione.”

“Hermione?”

“As in Granger. Harry, how many Hermiones do you know? I’ve known you for five years now, surely you recognize my voice.”

“I’m sorry, Hermione, I just wasn’t expecting a call from you, I never get calls from anyone. I’m sorry.”

“Harry James Potter, stop that!”

“Stop what?”

“Apologizing for everything.”

Harry started to say, “I’m sorry” but stopped himself and said “All right then.”

“Harry, someone from the Order will be visiting you tomorrow, bringing you some important stuff and some letters. I phoned to let your Aunt know that they were coming – I think you are to be left home, alone tomorrow afternoon, about 2:00.”

“Oh, okay. Will I be seeing you?”

“I don’t know yet – do you want to see me, Harry?”

“I’m not sure I want to see anyone, Hermione, but if I did, I’d certainly want to see you.”

“Thank you, Harry, that’s quite a compliment, I think.”

“Yeah, right.”

There was an awkward silence, Harry could hear the sound of a lawnmower in the background from wherever Hermione was calling from.

“Are you with Ron at -- Padfoot’s old house?”

“No, he’s at home, and so am I. I’m going to be spending lots of time at home this summer, as my Mum and Dad seem to think that I haven’t spent enough quality time with them this past year. I don’t mind it, but I do hope that we can all get together before the end of the summer.”

“Yeah, me too, that’d be nice.” Harry’s voice was flat, distracted and dim.

“Harry, you won’t always feel this way. Don’t shut us out.”

“Stop looking inside my head, Miss Granger. Have you been talking to Ginny?” Harry answered peevishly.

“As a matter of fact, she just left before I called. Why do you ask?”

“She said pretty much the same thing before we left school.”

“Well, we haven’t been talking about you, at least not like that. But you would do well to listen to her, since you never listen to me.”

“Hermione, I always listen to you. I just don’t always do what you say, even though you are mostly right.”

“Mostly right?”

“All right, right so often that mankind’s memory runs not to the contrary. Happy now?” Hermione snorted. Harry imagined that she recognized the quotation, which had come to him in a flash. Some Muggle historian she’d read to him in the library during one of their study sessions.

“How are you, Harry?” Hermione’s voice had dropped the tone she used when bantering with the boys, and now swung into the concerned voice she used when hectoring them about their homework.

“I’m hollow inside. If a Dementor were to stroll into my bedroom, other than the darkness and the drop in temperature, I’m not sure that I’d notice. Is that open enough for you Madam Granger?”

“It’s a start, Harry. I’ll write to you tomorrow, after your visit.”

“I’ll write back.”

“Goodbye, Harry, take care of yourself.”

“Thanks, Hermione. You too.”

Harry looked down at the handset, trying to figure out how to hang up a cordless phone. The button marked “off” seemed likely and after pushing it with his thumb, the phone went silent. He walked downstairs and wordlessly put the phone back into its cradle, next to the corded phone. The fog that had bound him all day seemed to have lifted with the call.

“Harry.” Petunia snapped.

“Yes, Aunt Petunia?”

“Mrs. Figg needs her lawn mowed.”

“I’ll go do it now.”

Harry walked out back door of the house without looking at Petunia, coming back shortly before dinnertime. Petunia looked up from the stove, but never turned to face Harry.

“Wash your hands, set the table, take a shower – I’ll call you for dinner.” Petunia’s voice slid from being harsh, like she’d caught Harry in some infraction, to being almost pleasant.

“Thanks, Aunt Petunia.” Harry decided that he’d not question whatever was changing his Aunt’s behavior. Being polite didn’t cost him anything, and seemed to defuse a lot of the tension that ran in the Dursley house, although it was easy to overdo it, which got him the accusation in turn that he was being “smart.”

Dinner was uneventful. After clearing the table, Harry loaded the dishwasher and excused himself to his room, where he stayed until morning.

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The Letters of Summer

The Minder's Visit

Chapter 2

The Minder's Visit

The morning of the next day passed uneventfully. At breakfast, Mr. Dursley read the paper, muttering darkly to himself while eating. Looking at his watch he drank the last of his morning tea, wiped his mouth, stood and kissed Petunia goodbye. He glowered at Harry, which was fairly normal, and said “Stay out of trouble” which was also fairly normal. Dudley disappeared with his mother after breakfast, having been promised a day of shopping. Harry imagined that he’d bring back a clutch of new videogame cartridges as a reward for what passed for good behavior on his part. Having mowed the lawn and weeded the garden already this week, today’s list of chores was fairly short: doing Vernon and Dudley’s laundry (Aunt Petunia did her own laundry, mustn’t let freaks gape at her scrawny undies) along with cleaning all the bathrooms. This was a common enough combination of tasks that Harry settled into his routine: sort the laundry, start the first load, scrub the first bathroom, empty the waste bins, move the laundry from the washer to the dryer, repeat. By the time he’d folded the last of the towels (which were the last items to be washed, as they took so long to dry) and stacked all the clothes at the foot of his bed, Dudley’s bed and Uncle Vernon’s respectively, he figured he had time for a quick shower and lunch.

Dudley’s weight had stabilized, somewhat, now that he was the darling of the Smeltings boxing team, so it was now a bit easier to assemble a decent lunch from what was available in the fridge. Although Harry missed the fresh, warm, brown bread from the Hogwarts kitchens, Italian white bread, cold ham, cheese, pickle and crisps were not too shabby for a peaceful lunch. If he were at Hogwarts he’d pour some pumpkin juice, but at Privet Drive he had to content himself with the remains of a coke bottle that was a bit on the flat side. While eating lunch, he read the Daily Prophet, cover to cover. He’d made the mistake last year of paying attention only to the headlines. Today’s headlines were bland enough. The Chudley Cannons were going down in the league standings, while the Ballycastle Bats were near the top of the league. Harry thought briefly about his deranged former captain, Oliver Wood, now keeper for the Bats. Angelina Johnson, his only slightly less-deranged former captain from last year’s brief (for Harry) Quidditch season was chasing after a reserve Chaser position with either Puddlemere United or the Tutshill Tornadoes now that she’d left Hogwarts.

Harry finished the paper, making sure that it went into the rubbish rather than the recycling (“The recycle man doesn’t need to see evidence of your abnormality, boy!”), cleared the table, loaded

the dishwasher, and watched the clock. He hated waiting. Harry pondered whether he should make up a shopping list for Hermione, who had agreed to help Harry acquire some decent Muggle clothing, or try to figure out the probable lineup for next year's Quidditch team. Normally Quidditch would beat mundane matters like Muggle wardrobes, but Harry's Muggle clothes were both smallish and ratty, and he would rather be hanged than wear any of Dudley's hand-me-downs this summer. Before he left Hogwarts, he'd made arrangements to convert some Galleons into Muggle money, and with Hermione's help, he'd place an order, using a catalog she'd slipped him at the train station. As Harry debated the merits of knit shirts versus plain old t-shirts, there was a timid knock at the kitchen door.

Harry pulled back the curtain on the kitchen door – peering back at him was his dotty neighbor, Mrs. Figg. Instead of her usual string bag, today she was carrying a large carpetbag that matched her tattered tartan slippers. As Harry opened the door, he noticed that a wisp of hair behind her ear was fluorescent green in colour.

“Hey, Tonks. Good to see you.” Harry said.

“How'd yah knows it's me?” Tonks asked.

Harry deftly reached behind her ear and pulled the green strands free. “Mrs. Figg doesn't have green highlights in her hair.”

“Oh.” Tonks said, and with a brief pained expression, she returned to what Harry assumed was her normal appearance.

Tonks pulled her wand from the sleeve of her blouse. Harry wondered briefly if she used a holster similar to the one he'd seen on Sirius when he'd been living at Grimmauld Place. With a loose oval swish and a light blue flash from her wand, the room was now noticeably quieter – the light coming in from the window had an odd hue. Tonks turned away from the window and faced Harry, running her wand sideways over Harry's head and down his front. She motioned to him with her free hand to turn around, allowing her to track her wand along his back as well.

“Right, now, Harry, you can turn around.”

Harry turned around, and before he could sit down, Tonks leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“Hermione says ‘hello’ and wanted me to let you know she wanted to join us today, but it couldn't work out.”

“Uh, thanks, I guess.”

Tonks looked down at her clothes, pulled a quick face and swished her wand again. Instead of Mrs. Figg's usual mismatched clothes, she was now dressed in a snug black miniskirt with a filmy black spaghetti strap tank top that looked like it had been sprayed on. Harry goggled at her briefly, and then began to look intently at the front of the refrigerator. Tonks began to pull

packages out of the carpetbag.

“Holy smokes ,” Harry thought to himself. *“She’s not wearing any underwear. What is she trying to do to me? Mustn’t stare, girls don’t like that.”*

“Uh, Tonks?”

“Yeah, Harry?”

“If you expect me to pay attention to what you’re saying, I think you need to put some more clothes on.” Harry continued to stare intently at the front of the refrigerator.

Tonks looked down at her clothes, starting with the painted toenails peeking out of her sandals, working her way up. Comprehension began to dawn on her face.

“Oh, right.”

With another flick of her wand, Tonk’s skirt became fringed Capri pants and a loose blue floral print blouse covered her tank top.

“Thanks, Tonks.”

“Righto Harry, now, **pay attention .**”

Tonks winked at Harry, breaking some of the tension. Unwrapping two of the packages, she placed two identical tan boxes on the table. The boxes were about a foot square and half a foot high. On each face of the box was a white, flat knob.

“This, Harry, is a Passbox. The Goblins at Gringotts use them for passing letters and small parcels between offices. This one here has some very clever modifications thought up by your lady friend. She’s right sharp that one is.”

“Yeah, everyone says that Hermione is the smartest witch in our year.”

Tonks looked blankly at Harry, straining her eyes. Her hair grew longer, turning from green to chestnut brown and began to frizz out.

“Not that lady friend, Harry.”

Squeezing her eyes slightly, Tonk’s hair grew a bit longer, straightened out and changed from chestnut brown to tomato red. “This lady friend.” Tonks said, winking again at Harry.

“What did Ginny do?”

“She figured out how to make the Passbox secure. Here, let me show you how her Passbox works.”

Tonks stood up and walked to the fruit bowl, snatching an apple. She opened a door on the box closest to Harry, put the apple in the box and motioned that he should shut the door. Harry did so.

“Open it up.”

Harry opened the box, but there was no apple inside.

“Where did it go?”

“It’s a Passbox, Harry, it went to the other box.”

Pulling a door open on the box closest to her, Tonks grabbed the apple, tossing it to Harry.

“Normally, we don’t allow a Passbox inside a secure facility like Hogwarts or a shielded safe house like the Dursley’s, because it’s a hole in the security zone.”

Harry looked at Tonks blankly.

“Harry, you could stuff a dragon through an ordinary Passbox if you can make the dragon small enough or the Passbox big enough. Gringotts found out about this the hard way when some enterprising criminal stuffed a crazed Lethifold through a Passbox and cleaned out the Krakow branch after the Lethifold incapacitated the internal security guards. But your lady friend made a very clever modification that gets around that problem. Harry, give me your hands – I’m going to use a drop of your blood to make it so you are the only person who can send or receive using this Passbox. I need to poke your finger.”

Harry extended his hands to Tonks, who waved her wand over them while invoking the Aseptico charm. Harry felt a brief warming and tingling on his skin. Tonks pulled a small plastic wrapped device out of her bag, unwrapped it and placed it against the pad on the ring finger of Harry’s left hand.

“Little poke, Harry.”

Harry felt a brief pinch, and when Tonks lifted the device from his finger, he saw a bright spot of blood. With one hand, Tonks held Harry’s now bleeding hand and with the other she cast a quiet spell on the box nearest Harry. The white knobs on the box changed from white to a dull throbbing red colour. Tonks moved Harry’s hand to the nearest knob and squeezed a drop onto the knob. The knob flared in colour briefly and became white again. Tonks then spun the box slightly to touch the second, third and fourth knobs in turn. Finally, Tonks held Harry’s hand over his head while fishing a bandage out of her bag, wrapping it with some effort on Harry’s pricked finger.

“I may not be worth a sneeze at the householdy charms, but I did really well on the basic first aid in Auror training. This Passbox is now sealed to you – you are the only one who can use this to send or receive. Watch this.”

Tonks moved the apple to the other box on the table. She then moved round the table and opened

the door on Harry's box. The door opened, but there was nothing inside. Tonks closed the door.

"You try it now, Harry."

Harry opened the door that Tonks had just closed. Inside was the apple that she'd placed in the *other* box on the table.

"This is brilliant, Tonks." Harry beamed.

"This box is linked to four other boxes."

As she spoke, Tonks pulled a marker from her bag and wrote next to each knob.

"This door is linked to a box at Hogwarts; McGonagall and Dumbledore can open that box. This door is matched to a box at the Grangers'; Hermione and her mum are the keepers there. This door is matched to the other box on the table, that's going back to Grimmauld place; Remus and I are the keepers. This last door is matched to a box at the Burrow; Molly and Ginny are the keepers there. Make sure that Ron stays on his sister's good side, or you won't get much mail from him this summer."

Tonks winked at Harry again with the last comment.

"Thanks, Tonks. It'll mean a lot to be able to keep in touch with people this summer rather than being kept in a box."

"Oh, you'll still be in a box, Harry, it'll just be a bit nicer this time."

"Whatcha mean?" asked Harry. If he were a dog, his ruff would be raised now, as he remembered with vivid horror the shunning isolation of the prior summer.

"Things have changed at the Ministry, but not that much. Kingsley and I are still on the Auror payroll, but we're on detail to work with the Order full time, which means that we have lives again rather than working two full-time jobs. The Order is still doing security for you, which means that whenever you are out of the house this summer, someone will be minding you. We're trying to spring you to the Burrow by the end of the summer, but I haven't heard yet when that's happening. Security is pretty good at the Burrow. George would like me to visit so that I can check the security, but between you and me, I think he's trying to convince me that he's worth my attention. He's a nice enough bloke, but he's not my type. Oh, before I go, I've got a package from Hermione, a letter from Lupin, and I wanted to show you something."

"Okay."

Tonks put the Grimmauld Place Passbox back into the carpetbag and pulled out another package and an envelope.

"Hermione sent some clothes and new trainers – said she didn't want to wait for you to decide, like you were going to go all summer dressed like a refugee. Let me go to the next room, then I'll

come back and show you something.”

“I’ll wait.”

While Harry opened the package from Hermione, Tonks slipped into the living room. When she returned, Harry dropped everything. Tonks had transfigured herself into his exact image, from his messy hair to his ratty trainers. The likeness was so exact he was startled when he went to push his hair back and the Harry-morphed Tonks did not act like a mirror and do the same.

“So, Harry, whatcha think? his image asked.

“Really weird, Tonks.” Harry replied.

“Yeah, transgender metamorphing is really, really hard. I’ve been working on this one for about a month now and just got it right. Once I get your voice down, I reckon that I could fool most people for a short amount of time.”

“Has Hermione seen this?”

“I was working on this last night with Hermione and Ginny – they gave me lots of pointers on how you walk and stand. Let me show you something fun.”

Tonks turned her back to Harry, waving her wand. When she turned around again, she was dressed in the black miniskirt and tank top again, but this time she had Harry’s face (sans scar), long black messy hair, and if possible, even more skin showing than before.

“You’d make a great girl, Harry. After I got your basic morph down, I tried you out as a girl. Believe you me, I’ve gotten a lot of attention when I hit the pubs as Harriet Potter.”

Harry pondered the notion briefly and began to laugh, a choked, suppressed laugh that became percussive hisses. *“This is too twisted,”* he thought to himself, *“I’m getting hot and bothered, seeing myself, as a girl, with no underwear. I’m never going to be able to tell anyone about this, ever.”*

“Tonks, stop, this is just too weird.”

“That’s what Remus said too, but then he’d just spent half an hour looking at me in the pub before he figured out who this lassie was who was making eyes at him from across the room..”

Harry goggled at her again.

“You were flirting with Professor Lupin, morphed up like me? Tonks, that’s terrible!”

Harry started laughing again, at first the choked up laugh and then into a throaty full-fledged laugh, gasping and slapping the table.

“I wish I could have seen it,” He gasped.

“That’s what Hermione and Ginny said too,” Tonks replied. Her eyes were smiling, but her mouth was pursed, in the fashion favored by Professor McGonnagall, trying to maintain her composure so as to not join Harry in his laughing jag.

Harry wiped his eyes on his shirtsleeve, picked up his clothes from the floor and stacked them on top of his new Passbox. Tonks transfigured her clothes back into Mrs. Figg’s, and with another twisting of her face, became his dotty neighbor again. She turned around for Harry’s inspection.

“Have I got the hair right this time?”

“All one colour, Tonks.”

“Thanks, Harry. Oh, I almost forgot.”

Going once more to the bag, Tonks dug underneath the Grimmauld Place Passbox and retrieved an ivory coloured envelope.

“This is from Remus, it’s a letter and a notice for Black’s funeral.”

“Tonks, there’s no body, how can they have a funeral?” Harry asked, not really caring about the answer, dreading any recognition that there was a reason to have a funeral.

“Harry, funerals are for the living, not for the dead. I’ve been an Auror for two years and I’ve already been to two Auror funerals with no bodies. We change a few lines in the service, but it’s otherwise the same. Let me know if you’re going – I’ll arrange the details. Maybe we’ll use the Floo connection at Figg’s house.”

“Thanks again, Tonks.”

Tonks stared at Harry for a while and then sat down again.

“Harry, I need to tell you that I’ve been testing you today. I don’t normally dress like a Muggle tart. I was seeing if you were as peaky as Hermione said you were.”

“So, did I pass the test?” Harry asked. He had no idea what she was talking about, but decided to play along.

“You’re not dead yet.” Tonks replied with a deadpan look spread across Mrs. Figg’s face.

“I was pretty down when Hermione called, but the call cheered me up some.”

“Harry, let your big sister Tonks give you some unsolicited advice. Your parents went to great lengths to keep you alive – not so you could finish off Voldemort, but so you could grow up and live life. Don’t forget to do that, OK?”

Tonks stood up, and while picking up her bag, planted a kiss on Harry’s cheek.

“This one’s from me, Harry.”

“Thanks, Tonks.”

“You betcha, Harry – see you soon, eh?”

Tonks slipped out the door, then opened the door again, sticking her wand into the kitchen. There was another brief blue flash and the hush charm she’d placed on the room collapsed. Without saying another word, she closed the door again.

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Author’s note: In America when we care for children while their parents are away, it’s called “babysitting.” On the other side of the pond, the same task is called “child minding.” In police circles, a personal protection assignment is called “babysitting” and it should come as no surprise that on the other side of the pond such assignments are “minding jobs” with the police acting as “minders.” The term is mildly pejorative.

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The Letters of Summer

Letters and Liberty

Chapter 3 – Letters and Liberty

Harry stared at the back door for a while, not because he was expecting Tonks, or anyone else for that matter, to come back through the door, but because he was reviewing his bizarre conversation with the young Auror. Was there anything normal about her? Harry wished for a moment that he were older, or she were younger, before saying aloud:

“Don’t even think about getting on that train, Harry. Aurors don’t need schoolboy boyfriends, even if he is the famous/dangerous/nutters Harry Potter.”

Harry gathered up all of his stuff, briefly considering placing his new clothes inside the Passbox to carry them upstairs. He concluded that if the Passbox door shut while carrying it upstairs, he’d send his new clothes to Hogwarts (Dumbledore’s office?), or worse yet, back to Granger’s house (Hermione’s bedroom?). At the top of the stairs, Harry turned, nudged the door to his room open with his toe, and deposited his load on the very small writing desk that comprised one-third of the furniture of the room. The clothes went into his dresser, except for the trainers, which went onto his feet. The trainers felt marvelous. He’d have to make sure he properly thanked Hermione, not to mention reimburse her. He carefully lifted up Hedwig’s cage and placed the Passbox under the cage, making sure that all the doors were closed. The only thing left on the desk was the ivory coloured envelope, which he snagged before he plopped onto his bed. Harry slid his thumb under the flap and opened it.

Dear Harry,

I have so much that I want to say to you, but I don’t know how much I can reduce to writing in this letter. Knowing Tonks as I do, I’m sure that she has changed shapes several times by now and no doubt has shown you her version of “Harriet Potter.” The story is true. I couldn’t keep my eyes off of her for several reasons, the first being that I thought she was related to James, and the second being that she really is fetching in most of her forms, except for the times when she is deliberately making herself look odd. (Kindly keep to yourself my observations about Tonks, as I have to work with her for the foreseeable future.) She’s shameless, a klutz, and she makes me laugh, which I haven’t done enough of for many, many years. Many people underestimate her, to their detriment. She is a powerful witch, and her grasp of Auror field craft is superb, provided that she doesn’t have to go anywhere quietly.

A quick note about the Passbox: the door must click shut to activate the pass magic. You’ll hear a brief sucking sound when you send items and a brief popping noise when you receive.

About one hour after the doors have been sealed with your blood, the knobs will glow after you receive anything. This is a right clever bit of magic, and I hope that it will allow you to keep better connected with our world while you are doing time at the Dursley's. Now, on to more unpleasant business: Sirius wrote a will before he died. He made a few specific bequests to you that I will deliver the next time I see you. He also asked that I be appointed to serve as your guardian, which I have accepted. Given the unique circumstances of your life (and mine) I expect that we may experience some resistance from the Wizengamot in approving me as your guardian, but I believe that Dumbledore may be able to exert some influence here. Enclosed in this envelope you will find a notice for Sirius' funeral. I would be honored if you would accompany me to the service and to the wake afterwards. The service occurs on the day the moon breaks full. As I am currently taking Wolfsbane Potion, if we tarry too late, you may get a chance to see the tame wolf. We can talk about the details in another post, or on that day if you wish. If possible, drop me a line so I can confirm that the Passbox at Grimmauld Place really works.

Very truly yours,
R. Lupin

Harry smiled at the signature. It was not lost on him that he did not sign as "Professor Lupin" but by his initials. At last, someone was treating him like he something other than a first year! Harry peeked inside the envelope. There was a small card still inside. It stated:

Remembrance Service

Sirius L. Black

Saturday, 2:00 p.m.

St. Simon's Church

Wake to follow in the parish house

The back of the card gave a string of numbers, which Harry presumed were Apparition coordinates, followed in parentheses with what might be a Floo network address. Harry rose from his bed, put the letter and notice back in the envelope, and put the envelope safely into his trunk. Turning to his desk, he pulled out pen and parchment and wrote four quick notes. The first note took an inordinate amount of time, as Harry could not figure out the salutation. After dithering for a while, he finally wrote the first note in one sitting.

Dear Remus,

Thanks so much for your note. Yes, my visit with Tonks was memorable. She makes me laugh too. I will ask my aunt about the service this Saturday. Assuming that they don't have to do anything to get me there, I'm sure that they will say yes. Any day that they can rid themselves of me is regarded as a good day. Tonks said something about Flooing from Mrs. Figg's house. I don't like to go anywhere by Floo, but I'm sure it would be less fuss than the flying escort I received the last time I left Dursley's. Hoping soon to be your ward.

Harry

Dear Hermione,

It was so good to hear your voice yesterday. You were lucky to catch Aunt Petunia, who will sometimes acknowledge that I'm here. Uncle Vernon would have denied that I live here and hung up on you. I've got to figure out how to get a cell phone and get around this, but I'm not sure that it's very practical, as you are the only person I want to talk to that has a phone.

Talking to you cheered me up a lot.

Has your house been connected to the Floo network yet? Getting this Passbox has done a lot to make me feel better about this summer – anything would be an improvement over last summer. Do let me know how much the clothes cost – the trainers are wonderful by the way.

Thank you. You did a very good job on colour and size.

I'll write more later.

Your friend,

Harry

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

First, I want to apologize for my behavior the last time I was in your office. I was acting like a foul brat. You deserve better than I gave you that night. Please forgive me.

After thinking things through, I'm concerned that I've not made more progress in Occlumency. Is there any way that I can work on this over the holiday?

Life with the Dursleys is about normal. Aunt and Uncle thus far are ignoring me and Dudley seems quite motivated to stay out of my way as well. I won't ask what the Order is doing this summer, but I can't help but think that Wormtail was involved in breaking the Death Eaters out of Azkaban. Sirius said that the Dementors were less able to affect him when he was in his Animagus form. I hope the Ministry is taking special care to guard the Death Eaters left in Azkaban, but that's beyond what I can do anything about.

Yours truly,

Harry

Dear Ginny,

According to Tonks, you are the mastermind behind the Passbox. Well, George always said that I should never confuse size with power – you are quite a witch. I'm glad a) that you're on our side and b) that you are my friend. I want to stay on your good side for the next sixty or seventy years.

I've thought about our last discussion. Hopefully I can emerge at the end of the summer less the hermit and more the well-connected fellow. But then again, maybe the Canons will win the pennant this year too. (Don't tell Ron I said that!)

Hermione called yesterday – it did a lot to cheer me up. Will I see you at the service for Sirius this Saturday? I have a longer letter that I started when I was at Hogwarts, but it's not done yet. I need to put this in the Passbox quickly, as I think that Aunt Petunia and her ickle Duddykins are finally home.

I'll write again soon.

Your friend,

Harry

~+~

Harry was correct, his Aunt and cousin had arrived. Harry stuffed the letters into envelopes and

put them into their respective chambers in the Passbox. Lupin was correct; as the doors clicked shut, there was a hissing sound similar to what Dudley made when he inhaled prior to exerting himself. Harry was surprised that he hadn't noticed the sound when Tonks was demonstrating the Passbox. Maybe she was talking over the faint noise, or maybe he just wasn't "paying attention" given the flirtatious company he'd been keeping. Harry wasn't willing to make a wager either way. After posting the four letters, he ran down the stairs to see if Aunt Petunia needed any help unloading from her shopping trip.

Tuesday was cheap milk day at her favorite supermarket and there were indeed groceries to unload in the back of her car. After putting the groceries away, Harry asked if there were any more chores before dinner. Petunia replied that there were none and Harry disappeared from the kitchen. His destination was the bicycle shop, which required a bus trip into town and back. At the end of last summer, Dudley had claimed that his bicycle was broken and demanded a new one. The old bicycle was still in the garage and Harry had cleared it with Dudley that if he could get the old bicycle fixed, it was his to use for the summer. Dudley's fantasy was that he would begin to drive an automobile this summer, but thus far all that had happened was that he had received a new bicycle with more gears than last year's model. Harry was fairly certain that with pliers, a screwdriver and a new brake cable that the old bicycle would be back in commission, hence the trip to the bicycle shop.

Harry mused while catching the bus that he was probably being followed; most likely by someone he'd met from the Order of the Phoenix. Harry couldn't spot any minders. If they would bother to show themselves, he'd tell them where he was going and save them some trouble, but if they wanted to play secret games, he'd play along too. It wasn't the security that he minded; it was the fact that even after last year, no one would tell him anything. "*One more thing to be peeved about*," he thought to himself.

The bus ride was uneventful; Harry made it to the shop before it closed, picked up his cable and a bag of dark chocolate from the quick shop next to the bicycle shop. While coming out of the quick shop, Harry noticed a familiar figure across the street: what appeared to be Elphias Doge in Muggle attire, looking intently into the window of a woman's lingerie shop. Harry carefully crossed the street and came up behind Mr. Doge, speaking softly.

"I'm going back home now, on the bus. I don't think anything in that shop would really look good on you, but then I'm only fifteen."

"Thanks, Potter." Elphias replied without moving his lips. "It's not for me, it's for the Missus, who happens to have a birthday coming next week."

"Wish her a Happy Birthday from me."

"I'll do that, Potter, now don't miss your bus."

Harry returned to Privet Drive the way he'd come, paying attention to the time it had taken. He'd figured that he could make it into the retail district of town and back within an hour. He was pleased that his estimate was correct. Once he had access to a functioning bicycle, he intended to

extend his reach into Surrey beyond Little Whinging.

Upon his return, Harry had hoped to check his Passbox for new mail, but was stopped by Aunt Petunia who handed him a peeling knife and said, "Peel these," while pointing to a small mound of potatoes and carrots.

Harry could smell the chicken roasting in the oven. Six potatoes and eight carrots later, Harry presented a filled glass baking dish to Aunt Petunia. Aunt Petunia looked at the offering with a sneer on her face that reminded Harry of Narcissa Malfoy. Other than the fact that Narcissa probably disliked Muggles as much as Vernon Dursley disliked Wizards (and anything magical), he was sure that they'd get along just fine. Petunia dismissed Harry, who disappeared up the stairs.

To Harry's delight, three of the knobs on the Passbox were lit, a pale blue colour, Harry noted. With all the gusto of ripping into packages at Christmas, Harry opened one door after another, pulling an envelope out of each. Harry considered briefly saving all of the letters for after dinner, but then decided against it. Each envelope had his name on it, but in all the excitement of pulling the mail from the chambers of the Passbox, Harry had forgotten which envelope came from which chamber. The only handwriting he immediately recognized was Hermione's handwriting. Harry ripped open that envelope first, putting the rest on the desk.

Dear Harry,

To answer your direct question, no, my house is not connected to the Floo network. Apparently it is authorized, and my parents have put in a request, but there appears to be a bit of a backlog in the office that does that sort of thing. Ginny arrived at my house in a perfectly Muggle way: riding in the back seat of Mum's car. Mum determined that I'd start this holiday by learning to drive, so this was my first time behind the steering wheel since I got my learner's permit. She'd sent me the book "What every driver must know" after Christmas, but to be honest, I didn't crack it open until after we'd finished O.W.L.s. Driving is a mechanical skill, which means that Ron would probably do quite well, without any instruction at all. I, on the other hand, am frightened out of my wits whilst behind the wheel. Of course, seeing my Mum slam her foot down on the floorboard every time I need to be applying the brake pedal doesn't do much for my serenity either.

This summer, Mum's working two days a week in the clinic and taking one Saturday a month, so I guess I'll be driving a lot as she's quite determined that I'll have my license before we return to school in the fall. It's a good time to talk, so I guess I'm being very efficient, recharging my relationship with Mum whilst learning a new skill. Mum got a bit frosty with me when she found out that I'm still taking potions for the injuries I sustained that night in the Department of Mysteries. **DON'T YOU DARE APPOLOGIZE OR THINK THAT THIS IS YOUR FAULT, HARRY!** If it hadn't been for your coaching at all the D.A. sessions I would probably have been dead instead of wounded. I'm not sure that this bookish girl is cut out for the life of an Auror, but given the current circumstances, I'm willing to learn all the combat skills I can stand. I'm down to three potions now, all of which I take at night before bed. Mum wanted the full story, but got quite upset when I told her the briefest outline of what happened. She may write or call you. If she does, tell her the truth, but be careful. If she freaks out

completely, she may do something horrid like pull me out of Hogwarts.

I had to put this letter down and stop writing, as the last sentence made me so mad. I'm not asking Mum for permission to go to the funeral this Saturday, as she'd ask too many questions, and I don't want to lie to my Mum, but I don't want her to flip out when she finds out the full truth either. I suppose that I'll have to add this to my list of "things that really stink about being a Muggle-born witch" but I'm not quite certain which category it falls into. I really do have such a list, but I only write in it when I'm really feeling sorry for myself, which thankfully is quite rare.

I don't like the tone of this letter, and will try to write you a better one tomorrow. I've promised myself that I'll write Ron (you remember Ron, don't you?) as my box, like yours, is also a four-way Passbox. Ginny and I worked out all the magic necessary and then had Bill and Mrs. Weasley do the actual spell work, as we are in that rotten time of the year when we CAN'T DO MAGIC! If I could do magic, right now I'd do a Cheering charm, but instead I'll see if I can find some chocolate in the house. Mum and Dad are great, but there are drawbacks to living with dentists.

Love from
Hermione

Harry picked the other letters up from the desk and put them, along with Hermione's letter, into the cubbyhole under the loose floorboard. He then looked briefly at the bag of chocolate and figured that Hermione needed it more than he did. It went into the Granger chamber of the Passbox, and with a click and a whisk sound, was gone from Privet Drive. Harry looked at his watch, and figured that it was time to set the table. He really didn't care whether his Aunt and Uncle were happy with him or not, but had resolved at the beginning of the summer that he'd be super polite as a way of manipulating them into leaving him alone.

Aunt Petunia was coming towards the base of the stairs (probably to yell at Harry) when Harry appeared at the top of the stairs. A sour expression passed her face and she addressed Harry.

"Did your minder come?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Which one?"

"The lady."

"Do you mean that girl with the horrid coloured hair from the train station?"

"Yeah, that's the one, but her hair was normal coloured today."

"What did she want?"

"To talk about stuff."

"What sort of stuff?"

Harry paused, looking at the steps, then looked back to his Aunt.

“Magic stuff.”

“Oh. Set the table.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

After setting the table, Harry figured that he was on a roll, so he cornered Aunt Petunia in the kitchen.

“Aunt Petunia?”

“What do you want, Harry?”

“I’ve been invited to go away with my minders this weekend.”

“What for?”

“For my Godfather’s funeral.”

“Sirius?”

“Yes, that Godfather.”

“I’m sorry to hear that he died. I met him at your Mum’s wedding. He was the best man, I was the maid of honor.”

“I didn’t know you’d ever met.” Harry lurched inside like he’d just fallen into a hole. He didn’t know that she’d been part of the wedding party, and now she was acting like he was someone deserving sympathy, rather than a constant source of dirt and annoyance. Harry kept his swirling emotions masked.

“It was a long time ago. Was he killed by your Ministry police?”

“No, he died in a battle with Death Eaters.”

“Oh. When will you leave?”

“Saturday morning.”

“When will you get back?”

“I’m not sure, maybe Sunday morning.”

“Make sure that the lawn is done by Friday and you can go. Don’t mention it to your uncle; I’ll deal with him. Call Dudley for dinner, please.”

“Yes, Ma’am” Harry said, stepping out of the room. As he went looking for Dudley, he tried to figure out his aunt. “*What a twisted day, first I have Tonks the tease and now I have my dragon Aunt, trying hard to be civil to me,*” he thought.

Dinner was blessedly boring, and by local standards, fairly tasty: roast chicken, potatoes roasted with carrots, steamed broccoli with brownies for dessert. Dudley got a small scoop of vanilla ice cream on his brownie, while Harry’s brownie was plain. As Harry was not particularly fond of this combination, and in fact didn’t like his Aunt’s brownies much either, he ignored the slight and complimented his Aunt on the meal. Dudley excused himself from the table, having concluded that he wasn’t going to get seconds on dessert.

“So, Boy, did your minders visit today?” Uncle Vernon asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Did they check how you are being treated?”

Harry thought back to Tonks running her wand over Harry’s front and back.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, what did they find?”

“She said I’m not dead yet.”

Uncle Vernon blew air through his mustache and looked at Harry.

“Clear the table, Boy, and then get out of here.”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon.”

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Standing on a paint can in the garage, Harry was able to retrieve Dudley’s old bicycle from its hook. Its tyres were squashy, and the cable to the rear brake was missing. The first problem took all of three minutes to solve once he’d found the tyre pump. Replacing the brake cable was not a simple task, however. Harry observed that this was either a two-person job, or one best accomplished by men with three hands. The thought of using magic to finish the job crossed Harry’s mind ever so briefly, but after Harry’s previous scrapes with the Improper Use of Magic Office, he determined that improvised solutions based on duct tape would have to suffice instead of an improvised third hand charm.

Nearly an hour later, the bicycle was again operational and Harry had bandages on the cuts on his hands from finishing this job. Harry inspected the remainder of the bicycle, tightening a few nuts here and there. He was now ready for his test ride.

Harry had never ridden a bicycle before, but as Dudley had managed the feat, Harry figured that it

couldn't be that difficult. Opening the side door to the garage, Harry wheeled the bicycle out onto the driveway. Looking both directions on Privet Drive, Harry figured that the coast was clear, both of cars and any witnesses to his maiden voyage. To Harry's surprise, he mounted the bicycle, put his feet on the pedals and proceeded down the street without mishap. Years of broom riding had given Harry both balance and confidence. Braking was a bit odd, and Harry soon discovered that it was a good idea to use both front and back brakes, as using only the front brake had almost flopped him over the handlebars.

It wasn't a Firebolt, but it was fun, especially coasting after a burst of pedaling and then swooping from side to side, leaning into the turns and righting the bicycle again. Yes, this indeed had promise for Harry's plans for holiday mobility. Harry began to figure whether or not it was possible to ride to Hermione's house or the Burrow as a day trip. He'd have to consult some maps when he returned to the Dursleys'.

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Slipping up the stairs like a thin, black-haired shadow, Harry entered his bedroom and noted with some satisfaction that two of the knobs on the Passbox were lit. Harry pulled the Hogwarts door open and extracted a small envelope marked with what he now recognized as Dumbledore's personal seal. The other lit chamber on the box was Hermione's. Harry found it odd that Hermione should write back so suddenly, but was gratified to pull an envelope from that chamber as well. Before sitting down on the bed, he pulled up the loose floorboard and retrieved the two unread letters from his hiding hole. Harry recognized the handwriting on one of the envelopes – it was from Lupin. The second envelope was written in an erratic feminine scrawl. Lupin's envelope got opened first.

Dear Harry,

As we will no doubt be seeing a great deal of each other, we should figure out how you will address me, as I am no longer entitled to the honorific of "Professor." Your Mum used to refer to us as "Uncle Padfoot" and "Uncle Moony" when we would be engaged as child minders before your parent's demise, so if that is acceptable to you, it would bring me some measure of comfort. I've taken the liberty of booking an appointment with Sirius' solicitor on Saturday morning before the service. Tonks will pick you up from your Uncle's house at 9:00 a.m.. You will indeed be Flooing from Mrs. Figg's house to Grimmauld Place, and we will start our day together after you arrive there. I will be engaged in other business until that time, so if you write a reply to this note, I will not see it until Saturday morning, if then.

Until that time, I remain your

Uncle Moony

Harry snorted at the signature, trying to imagine the somber professor playing with a toddling baby Harry or changing his nappy. He figured he'd ask Moony (Uncle Moony?) about that if the opportunity presented itself on Saturday. Harry tackled the unknown writer's letter next. As Harry lifted the flap, he noticed a faint smell like that of baking, one of the scents he associated with the Burrow. Looking to the tail of the letter, he saw what he recognized as Ginny's signature. Turning the page over, he began to read at the beginning.

Dear Harry,

Mastermind, I like the sound of that. Keep up the flattery, and you may stay on my good side for the next year, but it's too soon to chart out who's going to be on my good side further out than that.

I was glad to figure out the Passbox for you, Harry, as I went a bit mad when I thought of how your last summer went, much less the events of last year at Hogwarts. Yes, I'll be at the service on Saturday. As I am of school age, you'll see me (or not as the case may be) wearing a half veil. If I were a close family member or Sirius' wife (don't laugh, I'm sure he'd have been married to someone by now but for his dozen years in Azkaban) I'd be wearing the customary full veil, which I last saw when Mum attended her Mum's funeral, two years before I started at school. Under Wizarding custom, Tonks has the option of going with the half veil or the full veil, but I suspect that she'll opt for the half veil as the full veil is a real pain. I haven't told Ron about the Passbox yet, as he was a massive prat when we got home. If he would stop trying to pull rank on me and return to being the loveable git I grew up with, we'd be getting along loads better. The issue *du jour* is Dean Thomas. PLEASE! I look forward to seeing your longer letter. According to Hermione, you are the King of the short letter writers – she was referencing the length of your letters, not the size of the shadow you cast. As the shortest Weasley in several generations, I cannot go around making short jokes, although Hermione did play a very funny Muggle tune for me about “short people” that was popular when her parents were younger.

Well, I need to wrap this letter up, as Mum'll expect my chores to be done before dinner (imagine that!).

Your Mastermind,
Ginny

Harry opened Dumbledore's letter next.

My dearest Harry,

Your apology is accepted; please consider yourself forgiven. Having lived a long, long life, battling Grindelwald and Voldemort, I have lost many friends and outlived many others. I know what it is to lose loved ones.

I, too, am concerned with your progress with Occlumency. In retrospect, it is obvious that Professor Snape was not the best teacher for this subject. Perhaps I should consult Firenze for my next appointment? It couldn't hurt I suppose. Remus is attempting to renew contact with a suitable tutor for this most rare subject. For obvious reasons I cannot advertise that I am seeking this assistance, so it is thus far proving to be as elusive as my ongoing search for a fit instructor for Defense Against the Dark Arts. I would encourage you to consider what you would like to cover should the D.A. club continue this next year. I'm most impressed with the progress you made this year under difficult circumstances.

I am advised that you are now riding a Muggle bicycle – a most worthy endeavor. I rode a boneshaker myself many years ago and spent many a pleasant afternoon in the country, courtesy of my improved mobility. Once I learned the art of broomstick and Apparition, I'm afraid that I rather neglected transportation on two wheels, but nonetheless, I remain very fond of those memories. I implore you to obtain a Muggle bicycle helmet to carry on with this pursuit. Miss Granger will no doubt know how you may obtain one, should you not have one

readily on hand.

I will be away from Hogwarts for the balance of the week. My incomparable Deputy will attend to any mail you send.

Make the most of your circumstances, no matter what they may be.

Your friend and Headmaster,

A.P.W.B.D.

Harry saved Hermione's new letter for last, but to his surprise when he opened it, it was not from Hermione, but from her mother. Her Mum's handwriting was very similar, which had caused the confusion in the first place. There was enough of a difference, however, that he turned the letter to the end where he found a signature that was definitely not Hermione's. Having routed the confusion, Harry picked the letter up again for a fresh look.

Dear Harry,

I've heard so much about you, although I've not had the pleasure of meeting you beyond brief exchanges in the lobby of Gringotts or on the platform at King's Cross Station. This letter is a first in many respects; I've never had occasion to use a magical device before, and I've never had occasion to write to someone in my daughter's other world, the magical world where she apparently belongs.

I have two questions, both of which are somewhat indelicate, so I will not beat around the bush. The first concerns your relationship with Hermione. I see in her all the signs of a young girl separated from her boyfriend, and I'm wondering, are you the one that she's endlessly mooning over? There, I've asked it. Now, on to the more difficult question; is Hermione safe at Hogwarts? Sometime last year she was injured to the point that she's still taking medicine for her injuries. I will not ask you to tell me what happened, but I do want to know what sort of risk she is taking when she returns to your world in the Fall. I am not asking that you keep my inquiry from Hermione, but I would appreciate the courtesy of a reply before you write Hermione again.

On a more pleasant note, I'm hoping that we can invite you to a family picnic later this month.

Sincerely yours,

Monica Granger

Although Hermione's handwriting took after her Mum, Harry figured that she must have taken after her Dad in the tact department, as Hermione was usually diplomatic to the point of being hard to follow. Harry knew he had to answer this letter. Answering the first question was easy, but the second was hard, and potentially dangerous. He paced in his room for a while, trying to compose a reply. As nothing came to him, he wrote a short note to Ron, which he sent by Hedwig, both to needle Ron and to give Hedwig an opportunity to visit Hermes.

Dear Ron,

The Muggles are on their best behavior thus far, but the holiday is young, and Uncle Vernon has loads of practice being a prat. I've learned how to ride a Muggle bicycle (a bit late, but better late than never) which is not as good as playing Quidditch, or racing my broom flat out, but was still really satisfying. Anything that will keep these walls from closing in on me is a good thing. I'm assuming that I'll see you at the service for Sirius. Let me know if you hear of any news, including when I can get out of here.

Yours,

Harry

Writing this note had not had the desired effect; he knew that he could finish the letter to

Hermione's Mum if he could just start it, but he couldn't start it. He tied Ron's note to Hedwig's leg and after sending her off, decided to turn in for the night and try again after breakfast.

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Breakfast and chores being done, Harry trudged back to his room with all the enthusiasm he'd had when appearing before the Wizengamot. Once he sat down to write, however, the words began to flow, and he didn't have to do too many revisions before he had an acceptable letter.

Dear Mrs. Granger,

It was a bit of a surprise to receive your letter. When I first opened it, I thought I was reading a letter from Hermione, as your handwriting is so similar to hers. As you were direct in your questions, I will be direct in your answers. I have two very close friends at Hogwarts;

Hermione is one of them. Because I am somewhat famous in the magical world, Hermione has often been paired romantically with me in the tabloid press, but as is the case with most things that are printed there, it's not true. Although I am a boy, and I am Hermione's friend, I'm not her boyfriend. Hermione is a wonderful girl, and I hope to be a part of her life as long as possible. I'm fairly certain, however, that she's mooning over someone else. If you need a hint, I suggest that you pay attention to boys in Gryffindor in her year.

As to your other question, this is not easy to answer. There is evil in the Muggle world and there is evil in the magical world. Because the magical world is a bit smaller, it's sometimes harder to avoid. For the last year, a particularly evil wizard named Voldemort has been active in Europe. He hates Muggles, witches and wizards who are born into Muggle families, and witches and wizards who are friendly to Muggles. Voldemort killed my parents when I was just a bit over one year old. He tried to kill me too, but something went wrong, and he lost most of his power while I grew up. A year ago, he came back into his powers. Our Ministry of Magic tried to deny this over the last year, but by the end of the year, denial was no longer an option. If it's any comfort to you, Voldemort has tried to kill me four times and failed. The only wizard that Voldemort fears is our Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore.

Hermione is a powerful witch in her own right, and under Dumbledore's care I believe that she will be safe. If she keeps studying as she has been, in a year or so she will be more than able to defend herself from any one or any thing. I am assuming that Hermione will have earned a record number of O.W.L.s this year, which will qualify her, once she turns seventeen, to take her place in the magical world as an adult. Before she attains majority, however, she is not allowed to use magic. Apart from Hogwarts, the safest place for Hermione over the summer is either the Burrow, or the place she stayed last summer. If you are concerned for your family's safety this summer, I suggest that you write to Professor Dumbledore, who will be able to take measures to protect your home and family. In the mean time, make sure that Hermione always has her wand, at all times and places.

If Hermione were to withdraw from Hogwarts, she would be in the worst of all possible worlds, as she would be unable to use magic, but she would still be a prime target for Voldemort and his followers as she is a very well known Muggle born witch. I hope that this does not unduly frighten you, but frank questions deserve frank answers.

I never had any brothers or sisters, but if I did, I could not love them more than I love Hermione. I would go to any length to protect her.

I would like very much to see you and your family this summer. Apart from this weekend, when I will be away, I'm free all summer.

I am very truly yours,

Harry Potter

Harry slipped the letter into the Passbox chamber marked “Granger” but paused before he closed the door. He thought back to every line in the letter, wondering if he was saying the right thing. He finally thought to himself, *God hates a coward*, and snapped the door shut. When he’d heard the sucking sound, he knew that for good or for ill the letter was gone. He scrambled down the stairs, through the kitchen and into the garage. He snatched Dudley’s old helmet from the closet and pulled the old bicycle from its hanging hook. He needed to ride.

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Author’s note: see the usual disclaimer in the Prologue. In the UK, teens learn to drive when they are 17. Werrf pointed this out to me after I’d written seven and one half chapters. If I was a perfectionist, I’d go back and rip out all of those references, but I’m not. For those UK subjects who can’t take a joke, just consider as fact that Monica got a special permit for Hermione through the Magic/Muggle liaison office. If you can’t believe that, why are you reading a story premised upon teenagers practicing magic?

The Letters of Summer

Ride and remember

Chapter 4 - Ride & Remember

In a perfect world, on a day like today, Harry would be riding his Firebolt; but summer with the Dursleys' was, in all respects, less than perfect. Harry rode his second-hand bicycle that morning, through the streets surrounding Privet Drive, through the suburbs, into the country. Out in the country, there were fewer intersections, no pedestrians, and no cars to speak of. Harry honed his new skill, and emptied his mind of everything but the ride. He didn't have a destination in mind, just escape for another hour from Little Whinging, the Dursleys and the isolation he'd suffered last summer. Harry wasn't sure how long he'd been riding; his watch was in his pocket, and pulling it from that pocket was just more trouble than it was worth. Judging by the height of the sun in the sky, he reckoned he'd been on the road for about an hour and a half. He was coming into a town he'd never heard of, passing by what he assumed was the comprehensive school, coasting into a small public park. The park had shade, a set of tennis courts, and a drinking fountain. After drinking his fill and rinsing out his water bottle, Harry sat in the shade and watched two girls play tennis. One of the girls had a passing resemblance to Cho Chang, his crush of the past two years. Harry sat in the shade, sipping water, paying brief attention to the tennis game before becoming lost in his thoughts. By the time he looked up again, the game was over, the girls were gone and his water bottle was empty. He'd been rehearsing in his mind what had gone wrong with Cho, concluding that there was a great distance between infatuation and friendship.

"Harry, old man, that ship was never meant to sail," he said to himself. He picked up his bicycle, refilled his water bottle, and turned around for the return trip. The sun was higher now, his face was glistening with sweat, but as he was making his own breeze, he was quite comfortable as he pedaled back to Little Whinging. On the return trip he began to plan the remainder of his day. Having finished his O.W.L.s, there was very little holiday homework; the teachers (and students) were uncertain which classes they would be taking in the fall, as many classes required high O.W.L. scores as a prerequisite. As much as he never wanted to see Snape again, Harry was hoping for a high pass on his Potions exam, allowing him to take the advanced class. The only motivation for this punishment was the knowledge that a high score on the Potions N.E.W.T. was required for acceptance into Auror training. Harry smiled as he remembered Professor McGonagall's solemn pledge to tutor him every night to qualify him for that program. Harry wasn't sure whether this indicated that the Head of his House really believed he belonged in the program, or that she merely wanted to spite Dolores Umbridge, the now disgraced and sacked Ministry employee who had tormented him that year. He'd take the help either way, but he

doubted very much that he'd have to take her up on the offer. Harry's feelings about Auror training were mixed: in a world without Voldemort, Harry would never consider the job. In a world with Voldemort, Harry wanted to become as dangerous as possible. On the distant day that Voldemort was eliminated, should Harry survive, he figured that he could always quit the Auror service and return to something more suited to his temperament, like Quidditch, teaching, or perhaps breeding Hippogriffs.

Waiting for him upstairs were several texts he'd taken from the Room of Requirement when it last had held a D.A. meeting: *More Jinxes for the Jinxed*, *Advanced Shieldwork* and *Combat Cures and Countercurses (a field book for Magical First Aid)*. Harry hoped that the knobs on his Passbox would be lit, but if there were not, he had plenty of work to occupy him until evening. In addition to the self study D.A. homework and his letters, he always had Ron's chess kit.

When Ron had last been in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts after the ill fated rescue mission at the Ministry of Magic, he'd been visited by Fred and George who had given him a prototype of an item they'd been tinkering with: a self-playing wizarding chess set. The black pieces had been charmed to play a very spirited game in response to the moves made by the white pieces. Ron had played it for hours in the Hospital, but once out of Madam Pomfrey's care, he'd put the Wizard Wheeze set away, claiming that it was not as satisfying as playing a live person. The night they packed to leave Hogwarts, Ron pulled the Wizard Wheeze set from his trunk, placing it on top of Harry's folded robes.

"You need it more than me, mate, as I can always play with someone at the Burrow," he'd said.

That night Ron had challenged Harry to one last game in the Common Room. Harry had a brilliant opening game and a strong mid-game. For about an hour he was convinced that for once he'd beat Ron at chess. Then the game turned to worms for Harry as Ron's pieces obliterated Harry's. By the time "check" had been called, Harry was down to one pawn, his Queenside bishop and his King. Ron looked through the Common Room as they put the pieces away, checking to see if anyone were listening to their conversation.

"You know what your problem is, don't you Harry?" Ron asked.

"Aside from the fact that I keep playing you?" Harry replied.

"Yeah, aside from that. You're brilliant at tactics, when you have to respond to things on the fly. That's why you're such a natural Seeker, and why you are so bloody good at combat and wizard dueling. Your problem, Harry, is strategy: you fall to pieces when you have to think beyond the next five moves to the end of the game." Ron whispered the last sentence.

"Ron, most people can't see beyond three moves." Harry said.

"Yeah, that's why I beat most people." Ron replied with a smug look. He continued. "You need to see the end of the game and figure out how you get there, rather than just responding to the other bloke's move."

Ron finished this bit of advice by nicking Harry's last chocolate frog and going to bed. Ron had never ever mentioned this chat, but Harry had pondered it time and again. "See the end of the game and figure out how you get there." It was easy to apply this to some areas of his life – snatch the Snitch and the game was over, so long as the team wasn't down by more than 150 points, you've won the game, but win, lose or draw, the game was over. School, work, girls, the rest of the things in his life were harder to see things through to the end because all roads led to Voldemort.

Harry pedaled in silence all the way back to Privet Drive, looking up from time to time to check the traffic in front, behind and from side to side. Aside from a blue helmeted bicycle rider way behind him, there was nothing to see. It had been a brilliant day for a refreshing ride. When Harry returned to the top floor of Privet Drive, he found Pig bouncing around his room like a manic Snitch. Ron's note, attached to Pig, acknowledged the existence of the Passbox, so Harry sent his brief reply by Passbox, rather than bothering Hedwig, who was hunting for food. Pig was sent on his way after an Owl treat was pressed upon him.

~+~

The next day was much like the day before: breakfast and chores, followed by an even longer bicycle ride. Harry's goal, apart from spending as much time away from the Dursleys' as was humanly possible, was to build up his endurance to the point where he could visit Ron or Hermione as a day trip. He'd plotted out the bus routes to Hermione's house, but it was Ron that he was keener to see, so as the buses did not pass anywhere near Ottery St. Catchpole, he was working out the details of the bicycle route. As was his practice, he checked again, traffic in front, in back and from side to side. In his mirror, he saw a lady, perhaps Tonks' age, pedaling behind him, wearing a blue shirt that matched the colour of her helmet. He'd seen the same blue helmet the day before on his return trip. Was he being followed?

Harry changed directions a few times, checking his mirror. After a while, he saw the same blue bicycle helmet in the distance. He was being followed. Harry reviewed in his mind the local geography, as he was still within the limits of Little Whinging, which he knew quite well. Next he checked to see that his wand was still securely inside his shirt, changing directions a few more times. He stopped his bicycle in a safe place after a brief sprint. The lane ran into what was for all intents and purposes a dead end. Harry stashed his bicycle behind a large rubbish bin and waited. If he truly were being followed, he'd know soon.

He heard her before he saw her. First the clicking of her derailleur followed by labored breathing. She burst around the corner, looking to see which way Harry had gone, but there was no boy on a bicycle, just a fuming black haired boy on foot, holding his wand outstretched. The woman slammed on her brakes, skidding in a circle to a stop. Harry eyed her coolly. She slowly took her hands from the handlebars, holding her palms out to Harry. She dismounted her bicycle, letting it clatter to the ground, keeping her hands out at all times. She touched the buckle to her helmet, tossing it softly on the ground, removing the wrap around sunglasses, revealing a pretty young woman in her late twenties, wearing a dark blue eye patch that matched her shirt and helmet in colour. The face was faintly familiar.

“I work for the Ministry.” She said, as if this was a complete explanation.

“Yeah, so did that Umbridge woman who tried to kill me last summer,” Harry replied. There was a wobble in his voice as he tried to keep it under control. His mind was tingling, trying to recall where he’d seen her before. How many one-eyed witches had he met in the last five years? At last, the connection was made.

“You work with Kingsley Shacklebolt?” He asked

“Right in one. I’m an Auror. If you use that wand, you know that you’ll be getting another letter from Malfalda Hopkirk.”

“Yeah, but I have to be alive to receive the letter, don’t you know. Constant vigilance and all that,” Harry panted as his hand shook, holding his wand.

“Harry, I’ve got a pocket in the back of my shirt where I’ve got my wand. I’m going to turn around, keeping my hands where you can see them. You’re going to take my wand, then I’m going to turn around again, and you’re going to stop pointing your wand at me, ok?”

The woman clasped her hands over her head and then slowly turned around. A pocket had been sewed into her shirt that ran between her shoulder blades. Harry pinched the wand handle with one outstretched arm, keeping his wand pointed at her middle. As Harry pulled the wand free from its pocket, he saw the woman exhale and relax. She must have been holding her breath.

“I’m going to turn around now, Harry.”

“All right then.”

“This is the part where you stop pointing your wand at my navel, Harry.”

Harry nodded at the woman, slowly pointing his wand to the sky. Keeping eye contact, he spoke.

“What’s your name?”

“You can call me Moey,” she answered.

“Why were you following me?”

“It’s my job, I’m part of your security detail.”

“The Order does my security, Tonks told me that.”

“Yeah, well they did, until the middle of this week when I got detailed to work with the Order on this job.”

“Why’s that?” Harry asked.

“Because I’m Muggle-born, Harry, I’m the only trained Auror who knows how to ride a bicycle.” Moey began to giggle, Harry broke into a smile. Moey continued.

“Dumbledore’s the only member of the Order who knows how to ride a bicycle, and he’s not exactly a suitable candidate for being part of a protective surveillance team.”

“Is that what this is, protective surveillance?”

“Harry, I told them that this was a bad idea, but in the end I was outvoted and I had to follow orders.”

“How can I get someone to vouch for you? You must understand that I have a very low view of Fudge’s ministry right now.” Harry said, trying to keep the bristle out of his voice.

“Yeah, I can see that. Tonks, she can vouch for me.”

“She’s not here.”

“Yeah, but I can call her – or maybe you can call her.” Moey was silent for a moment, closing her eye, concentrating. She then continued. “Ok Harry, here’s the drill. I’m going to turn around again. You’re going to lift up my shirt and pull my mobile phone off of my belt, then you’re going to call Tonks.”

“Lift up your shirt?” Harry asked with some alarm in his voice.

“Just enough to get my phone out, Harry. You’re not going to see anything you haven’t seen before. No tattoos or exotic birthmarks on my middle. Think of it as your first Auror field exercise, frisking female subjects at wand point.” She flashed Harry a smile and flexed her arms a little while turning her back to him. When she did so, the hem of her shirt popped up over her waistband, exposing a bit of midriff.

“Ok now, Harry?” Moey asked.

Harry didn’t answer, but he did bring his wand down again so that it was pointed at Moey’s spine. As Harry reached out towards the hem of Moey’s shirt, she began to slowly sway her hips.

“Stop that!” Harry commanded.

“Yes, sir,” Moey replied. “I love it when a man takes charge.”

Harry silently pinched the hem of Moey’s shirt with one hand while keeping a firm grip on his wand. He gave it a series of delicate tugs until it was north of her waistband, exposing a thin, black leather belt and a slender blue cell phone. Harry plucked the phone from her belt and tugged the shirt south again.

“Turn around, Moey.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied.

“Don’t even think about it, woman.”

“Dial 07287-674-777, then press the middle button below the screen,” she said, repressing a giggle.

“I’ve got a better plan, you dial, I’ll watch carefully.” Harry said, extending the phone to Moey.

Moey unclasped her hands and slowly took the phone from Harry, who stepped back two steps. Moey thumbed the “on” button and punched in the number she knew by heart. Harry heard a click, two rings, and the unmistakable sound of Tonk’s voice saying “Hey Moey.”

“Tonks, I need you to talk to one of your friends,” Moey said, handing the phone back to Harry.

“Hello, Tonks.” Harry said flatly, trying to split his attention between listening carefully to the phone to see if this was really Tonks, and watching Moey for sudden moves. Moey, reading Harry’s unease, returned her hands to the clasped over her head position.

“Harry, how nice to hear from you.”

“Yeah, Tonks, it’s corking to hear you too. Tell me something that only you know about me.” Harry hissed.

“Okey dokey, Harry. Let’s see . . . the last time we talked, you asked me to put some more clothes on, and I asked you to pay attention. That do, Harry?”

“That’ll do, Tonks. Now, tell me something about Moey.”

“She’s about my size, don’t laugh, my real size, just a bit older than I am, she’s got just one eye, pretty dark hair down to her shoulders.”

“That fairly describes the woman I’m holding captive right now – now give me a question that only Moey can answer.”

“All right, ask her where she broke up with her last boyfriend.”

“Moey, where were you when you broke up with your last boyfriend?”

“At the paintball parlour.”

“She says the paintball parlour.”

“That’s Moey, all right.”

“Can I trust her, Tonks?”

“With your life, Harry. Now, can I ask what this is all about?”

“Maybe later, Tonks. Thanks, I gotta go.”

Harry thumbed the phone off and handed it back to Moey. Next he pulled her wand from his waistband and proffered it to her, handle first.

“I’m really sorry, Moey, I’m really sorry. But these days I expect the worst when I find out I’m being followed by people I don’t know.”

“That’s quite all right, Harry, I’d be disappointed if you acted differently. So, other than the last five minutes when you were wondering which of us was going to die, have you had a nice ride this morning? Moey asked, putting on her best Stewardess smile.

Harry stared at her for a while, and then began to laugh – a suppressed hissing laugh at first, followed by throaty guffaws. He wiped a tear from his eye.

“Just ducky, Moey. I love to go from daydream riding to ambushing unknown Death Eaters – it does so much to keep me on my toes. So why are you following me?”

“I told you already – I’m on your security detail when you’re on two wheels. So, where were you heading this morning?”

“Not a clue. I was heading south, seeing where the roads end up.”

“Well, I checked out the maps this morning. If we take that road over there for about half a mile, there’s a nice road that follows the river for miles and miles. Care to see it?” Moey asked.

“It’s a plan – lead on, Lady Auror.” Harry replied. Harry mused that either Moey was incredibly good at hiding her feelings, or she really didn’t mind being held at wand point by frightened schoolboys. Moey tucked her phone and wand away in their respective places, put her helmet back on and mounted her bicycle. Harry retrieved his bicycle and after a nod of helmets, they began to ride. At first, Moey was pedaling like mad, hunched over in the bent down position, until they reached the river road. Once they reached the river road, she shifted positions, sitting straight, coasting. Harry pulled alongside, coasting as well.

“You ride well.” Harry said.

“You ride amazingly well for someone who’s been riding less than a week.” Moey replied.

“I’m sorry about how we met.” Harry said with a hangdog expression.

“Well, I’ve always wanted to meet you, Harry, especially after Tonks told me about you, but I never imagined that we’d meet under quite these circumstances. If you say that you’re sorry one more time, though, I think I’ll put away my restraint and hurt you.”

“Oohh, witches with wicked streaks, I like that.” Harry exaggerated, wiggling his eyebrows in

what he imagined was a leering manner.

“Stop it, Harry – it’s bad enough that I do it, you shouldn’t start.” Moey chided.

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Howdja spot me?” Moey asked.

“Helmet – it’s a very pretty blue. I didn’t think anything about it yesterday, but when I saw it today, I figured out that I was being followed.”

“Damnation. It’s always the little things. I’ll have to write this up in the logbook – ‘change helmet colour every hour when trailing the boy who lived.’ Oh boy, am I gonna take heat on this back at the squad room. Tell me, Harry, whydja ask me to dial Tonks on my phone?”

“I read a story once about how some spies used a mobile phone that blew up on command.” Harry replied.

“Yeah, I know that one – the Mossad special service mobile phone. We don’t do that in the Auror service, but I will mention it to the boys in the toyshop. There’s just a handful of us Aurors who use mobile phones anyway, but you can bet your wand that criminals aren’t shy about using Muggle technology when it suits their purpose.”

“Is there a place around here where we can get lunch?” Harry asked, hoping to change the subject.

“About two more miles, there’s a cross-road that takes us to the village of Hopper, nice little place for sandwiches there. My treat, ok?”

“I’ll pay you back after this weekend – I’ve got to get some money changed at Gringotts, I’m almost out of Muggle money.”

“Don’t you have a Gringotts ATM card yet?”

“What’s that?”

“Works just like a Muggle ATM card, you can use it at Muggle Auto Teller Machines – the money is Muggle, but the transactions all hit your Gringotts account at the daily exchange rate in sickles, knuts and galleons.”

“That would be right useful.”

“I love mine. Gringotts rolled it out at the beginning of this year.”

“Well, that would explain it, I was boning up for the O.W.L.s then, I didn’t follow much of what was happening outside of school,” Harry replied.

They pedaled into the village and stopped in front of a pub. Moey must have been there before, as

the barmaid with curly dark hair greeted her by name and asked if she wanted ‘the usual.’ Minutes later they walked out of the pub with a large bag of crisps, two sandwiches, two bottles of water and some apples. They got back on their bicycles, and pedaled back to the river. After Harry had secured their bicycles against a small tree, Moey walked a short distance away, pulling her wand to cast some spells in a number of directions.

“So, what were those spells?” Harry asked.

“A right nasty combination of spells that will ruin the day of anyone who tries sneaking up on us during lunch. A mild *Confundus* jinx will make most Muggles forget where they were going and return to where they started. Witches and wizards who come any closer break a Gossamer ward which in turn triggers an alarm and sets off a nasty Fire Rain, then the fun stuff begins.” Moey smiled again, but this smile hinted of steel and blood, rather than fun and games.

“So I’m not the only paranoid person out riding today?” Harry quipped.

“Not on a long shot, Harry. Moody trained most of the Aurors who are in the field today, and he made damn sure to weed out the impulsive ones. The ones who stayed on the job tried to plan ahead when they can,” Moey answered. “I’m tired, hungry and thirsty. If you don’t give me half of what you’re holding, I’m not going to guarantee my ongoing good behavior.”

“Oh, so this has been good behavior?”

“Stuff it, boy, give me that sandwich.”

Harry tossed a sandwich, water bottle and apple to Moey. He next opened the bag of crisps and set it on the ground between them. Moey was leaning up against a moderate sized willow tree, Harry against a smaller one. They ate in relative silence, although Moey gave little gasps of pleasure as she downed her sandwich – evidently Jenny, the barmaid, had spread the pungent mustard unevenly, so that some bites were more piquant than others. Moey then attacked the bag of chips, crunching down one after another. She tossed the bag at Harry, saying, “keep these away from me” and went to work on her apple. When the apple was history, she cracked open her water bottle and chugged it down in four long guzzles. She stood up, brushing the crumbs from her lap, surveyed the area, and settled down next to her bicycle, using her helmet as a pillow.

“I’m going to take my power nap, Harry – just for ten minutes. Don’t wake me unless something really weird happens – the wards, traps and alarms should hold us for now.” Moey said, before adjusting her patch, closing her eye and lying still.

Fifteen minutes later, Moey stirred.

“That was quick, I thought you’d be out longer,” said Harry, who had been watching the clouds and the river.

“Only when I’m not on the job. Merlin knows I want more sleep, but I don’t have the metabolism of a War Witch, so I just grab the power nap when I can.”

“Does it help?”

“I’ll ask you that question in fifteen years, smart guy. Of course it helps.”

“Moey, I think I need to get back.”

“Your girlfriend due to drop in this afternoon?”

“Very funny, I don’t have a girlfriend, Moey. Just some letters and homework before dinner.”

Moey collapsed the spells she’d cast beside the river, put on her helmet and they began to ride again. Pulling along side Harry, she began to coast again.

“You going out again after dinner?” She asked.

“Not tonight, why?”

“Trying to plan my schedule, dear boy. Until next week, I’m the only qualified Auror who knows how to ride a bicycle. Next week the current batch of apprentices qualifies, and when they do, I’ll have six qualified Aurors who can be part of your detail. Mind you, I’m not complaining – this got me away from my desk, and it’s been truly lovely to be riding again,” Moey said, looking up to scan the road.

“I didn’t ask to be followed, Moey.”

“I understand Harry. You’ll be sixteen next month – you should be hanging with your friends and chasing girls, not suffering with protective surveillance.”

“So, ambushing Lady Aurors doesn’t count towards chasing girls.”

Moey looked at him fiercely with her one eye. It reminded Harry of the look that Hedwig gave him, only not as warm.

“Only if you have very odd tastes, Harry, and I’m sure that you can come up with more reliable ways to meet girls your own age.”

“Enough banter, Moey, let’s get back to Little Whinging.”

The trip back was much more leisurely than the trip out. The mild tail wind that they had had traveling south was now a head wind when they were traveling north.

“So, Harry, what was your plan when you ambushed me in Little Whinging?”

“Well, if you were a Death Eater, or had tried to attack me, I was prepared to stun you and tie you up. If things got really hairy, I figure the *Reducto* r curse should be able to do a lot of damage to flesh and blood.”

“What if I had just been a friendly, one-eyed Muggle lady out for a bicycle ride on a lovely summer day?”

“Well then, I’d be very embarrassed, but I figure it’s better to be embarrassed than dead or captured.”

“But you didn’t have a plan for dealing with friendlies.”

“C’mon, Moey, this was as strategic as I could get on short notice. Did I frighten you?”

“I narrowly avoided wetting my pants. The look in your eyes told me that you thought I was dangerous. You had your wand out, mine was in my pocket. I didn’t want to give you any reason to do something we’d both regret.”

“Helluva way to meet, eh?”

“Yeah, call home, ‘Hey Mum, guess what, I met Harry Potter today and he blew my arm off when he thought I was attacking him.’ Only problem with that is that my parents are both Muggles and have no idea who you are, so it’d be even harder to explain how the man I was supposed to be protecting blew me away.”

“Your parents know what you do?”

“They think that I’m a police inspector and that I capture bad guys.”

“Not too far off.”

“Nah, except that too many times when I catch them, they don’t cooperate and they come back in bags rather than in handcuffs. Merlin’s beard, I hate those Death Eaters.”

They rode in silence the rest of the way to Little Whinging. Before reaching Privet Drive, Moey stopped.

“Harry, this isn’t strictly authorized, but here’s my card. When you head out, call me at this number and I’ll meet you, rather than tailing you. If you don’t call, I’ll still follow you, conducting surveillance, but it’ll be easier if you make the phone call.”

“Thanks, Moey – I’ll ride again in the morning if it doesn’t rain. If it rains buckets, like it’s supposed to, all bets are off.”

“It’s been a pleasure, Mr. Potter. Now, get going before your corpulent cousin spots me and I have to revert to my normal, violent way of doing business,” she said, flashing her bright smile, the one that contrasted with the particularly iron look in her remaining eye.

Harry went up the driveway to Number Four Privet Drive, stowed his bicycle, washed up and did his pre-dinner chores. The day, apart from slight stretches of fight or flight terror, had been a good one. After finishing his chores, he saw that two of the knobs were lit on the Passbox:

Granger and Weasley. He dreaded what might be in the Granger letter, so he opened the Weasley letter first. This letter also smelled of nutmeg and ginger, but the handwriting was quite different. He'd seen this hand before on Christmas and Easter packages; he'd gotten a letter from Molly Weasley.

My Dearest Harry,

The holiday is blazing by. Arthur and I decided to stay at the Burrow and only visit the other place as needed. Thus far that has worked out to be one day a week. The chickens are laying nicely, we have a wonderful crop of melons that will be ready within days and our pumpkin crop will surpass all records if we can just get a decent amount of rain. Ginny and Ron seem to be happier this summer, although both of them are moody at times, as if they were each missing a special someone. I'm doing my best to keep my nose out of that area of their lives, as they are not of the age where they appreciate supervision.

Fred and George are doing well with the shop, although I wish that they would wear decent robes instead of those outlandish dragon hide costumes, but of all the problems a mother could have, this is very minor. They are happy, they are supporting themselves, and most of all, they are not subject to the whims of the Minister of Magic, who seems to be catching up at last to things you warned him about over a year ago. I used to think that running a joke shop was neither a suitable or promising future for my sons, but I was wrong. Once again, Harry, I am in debt to you for you believed in them, and in their dreams, when I did not. Shortly after they opened the shop, I concluded that you were their mysterious investor. I knew that Gringotts would never invest in a business that Goblins couldn't understand, which left you as the only source for the hundreds of Galleons that they sunk into that shop. Am I right in assuming that you donated the entire Triwizard purse to their business?

You've befriended Ron, saved my daughter from a horrible death when you barely knew her, rescued Ron from endless mischief (yes, I know you were the one who got him into some of that mischief, but . . .) and now you've made my twins realize their dream. So, Harry, what are you going to do to turn Percy around? I'm joking on that point, Harry. I'm not sure that anyone can get through to him. I just pray that he realizes that when he comes home again, he will be loved and welcome. At least he still has Penelope, who doesn't have any split loyalties. According to Bill, there's no limit to what I can put through this Passbox, so tomorrow I'll be baking biscuits – would you prefer hermits or chocolate chip biscuits?

I meant what I said when I told Sirius that you were one of my children. The others were born at home, but you were born in my heart.

Your long distance Mum,
Molly Weasley

The note from Granger's house was from Hermione. It was a short note that read as follows:

Dear Harry,

I don't know what you wrote Mum, but she had tears in her eyes as she finished the letter. She called me in to her study and held me on her lap (she hasn't done that since I was 10). She hugged me, and told me that she was very proud of me, and then quoted one of her favorite proverbs "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." After that we cried a lot. Don't worry if you don't understand that last bit – you would have had to

be there. After that, we went for a drive (yup, I'm driving now) that ended up at a coffee shop, where we split a huge serving of chocolate brownie with ice cream and fudge sauce. All things in moderation, I guess. Along with the latte, I was so wired from the chocolate that my hands were shaking. Mum drove home!

Mum says that you are special. I knew that. She says that you love me like a brother, and want to protect me. I'd always figured that, but it was nice to hear it, even if it was coming second hand from Mum. Maybe someday you can tell me what was in your letter, but for now I'm just glad you wrote it.

I'm off for now – I'll write more soon.

Love from
Hermione

Harry looked up from the desk, blinking a tear from his own eye. The Dursleys could be beastly at dinner tonight, and he wouldn't worry. It had been a very, very good day.

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Author's note: yep, standard disclaimer from Prologue still applies.

The Letters of Summer **Dreams, Clouds and Darkness**

Chapter 5 - Dreams, clouds and darkness

Author's note: This chapter is different in tone and style, intentionally so. It begins and ends with dreams. Freud was alleged to have said, regarding dream interpretation "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Some of these dreams are just nonsense, and others are Harry's unconscious mind trying to sort out issues. You, gentle reader, may sort out which is which. This chapter also includes some vulgar language (from Dudley Dursley) that is not made up; a bloke who in real life resembled Dudley in many ways spoke it; I overheard the conversation years ago and it took up residence in a minor wrinkle of my brain.

It was a silly dream. It was the end of August and he was leaving for a week with the Weasleys at the Burrow. Harry was in his bedroom at Privet Drive, trying to fit everything into his trunk. Everything fit, except for the Passbox. When he picked up the Passbox, he opened one of the doors and was sprayed in the face with some liquid. His dream dissolved, but his face was still wet. Harry had gone to sleep with the window open to allow Hedwig a chance to hunt at night. Hedwig was now in her cage, the window was still open and a cold rain was blowing in, soaking Harry's pillow and drenching the parchment he'd been writing when he'd fallen asleep. To add insult to injury, the parchment was now illegible, and he had matching ugly blots of ink near his right ear and on his right thumb. He knew from past experience that this particular ink was impossible to wash off without magic. He grabbed a fresh sheet of parchment, writing a quick note to Mrs. Weasley.

Dear Mrs. Weasley,

Help! I fell asleep with my quill and my face is blotted with ink. Please send Magical Mess Remover before I get in too much trouble with the Muggles.

Harry

Harry knew that the chance of receiving a reply before breakfast were between slim and none. He guessed that the Passbox was in Ginny's bedroom. Molly wouldn't check it before breakfast, and Ginny was notorious for waking at the last possible moment. There had been a long running wager between certain Gryffindor boys whether or not Ginny had been wearing pyjamas under her school robes on certain mornings when she appeared at breakfast, very, very late. No, he'd made his mess and now he had to live with it.

It was a weekday morning, which meant that unless Aunt Petunia had left instructions to the

contrary, Harry was to prepare breakfast. Harry didn't mind the duty, and had gotten fairly good at preparing a small range of breakfast staples: porridge, eggs (poached, scrambled and fried), sausage, bacon, toast, and, on festive occasions, fried bread. Harry wanted to try his hand at waffles, having been introduced to them at Hogwarts, but the Dursleys didn't own a waffle iron and he daren't ask Aunt Petunia to buy anything. The odd thing about breakfast duty was that Aunt Petunia would not let him use the fancy non-stick pans that Uncle Vernon had bought her many years ago for Christmas ("those are my pans, boy, and I don't want you messing them up"); instead he had an ancient copper clad steel pan for cooking cereal and two cast iron frying pans. Looking in the refrigerator, Harry decided on sausage, scrambled eggs and toast. As with most chores, Harry had established a rhythm for this job: preheat the skillet, crack the eggs, start the sausage, load the toaster, set the table, pour the juice, pull the sausages, start the eggs, fire the toaster, stir the eggs, pull the eggs, greet the surly Dursleys who by now were sitting at the table, load the plates with food and serve. There were little touches that had to be remembered; Uncle Vernon wanted his toast buttered while Aunt Petunia wanted hers plain; Dudley didn't care, provided that there was jam on the table and the lid to the jam jar was unscrewed. Harry savored the notion that the Dursleys would starve once he left Hogwarts, two years hence, never to return to their care. He knew that they probably wouldn't starve, after all, Aunt Petunia kept the family fed during the year when he wasn't at Privet Drive, but it was a fun fantasy to entertain. The only thing wrong with his breakfast tasks this morning was that it was now 7:00 a.m., but there were no Dursleys at the table. Harry looked out the window; it was still raining. The sky was quite overcast and dark. Harry checked the clock – it was still 7:00 a.m.. He'd never called the Dursleys to breakfast before. He wondered whether they'd appreciate the wakeup call, or whether, like all other facets of his existence, if they'd regard it as an intrusion upon their ability to enjoy life.

Harry never resolved this dilemma, as Uncle Vernon padded down the stairs, followed by his noiseless wife, and with some delay, Dudley waddled down the stairs as well.

"Whuzzat on your face, Boy?" Vernon growled.

"Ink. Sir." Harry said. Harry had made a conscious decision before he'd left Hogwarts that he would be excruciatingly polite, everything would be "Yes, Sir" or "No, Ma'am." He figured that it would make the Muggles feel better, it didn't cost him anything, and it tended to make their interactions less painful. He'd almost forgotten the "Sir" this time, as he was still fuming at himself for allowing the inkblot to happen.

"Whuzzat?" Vernon bellowed.

"Ink, Sir." Harry replied.

"I heard you the first time, Boy, don't get fresh with me. Why do you have ink on your face, Boy?"

"I fell asleep writing a letter. My quill leaked," Harry said, as if everyone had similar mishaps.

"Whydja use a ruddy quill?" Vernon growled.

Harry started to answer "Wizards use quills" but thought the better of it. Instead, he said:

"I'm used to using a quill, it's all they allow at school."

"Oh, that ruddy freaking school." Vernon snapped.

"Wouldn't a ball point be more sensible?" Petunia asked.

"Dunno, M'am, I haven't used one in five years." Harry answered. Why didn't he use a ballpoint? It would certainly avoid the messes he couldn't clean without magic. He made a note to himself to look into that once he was in town again.

". . . until you've gotten that off yer face." Vernon concluded.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you just now, what did you say, Uncle Vernon?"

"I SAID, you're not to leave this house until that mess is off of your ruddy face!" Vernon bellowed, his face turning red.

"Yes, Sir," Harry replied peacefully.

Dudley smiled at Harry across the table before shoving jam covered toast into his face. It was not a friendly smile.

Harry's appetite, already dim on this rainy day, vanished. He forced himself to eat the eggs, pushed down half a slice of toast and drained his juice. He nodded at Aunt Petunia, picked up his dishes, rinsed them and placed them into the dishwasher. Looking in the general vicinity of his Aunt and Uncle, he addressed them both.

"I'd like to be excused. I'm going to try to de-ink myself. I'll come down later and clear the table."

Vernon grunted and drank his coffee. Aunt Petunia nodded her head and went back to sipping her tea. Dudley smiled again, his smile waxing from a sneer to a leer. Dudley cut this display of teeth short by shoving a second slab of jam smeared toast into his mouth. Harry took the stairs soundlessly.

When he entered his room, his mood improved, slightly. The Weasley knob on the Passbox was lit. Harry pumped his fist into the air and hissed out a "Yes!"

Inside the Passbox was a dinner plate. On the dinner plate was a small stoppered bottle, a folded piece of parchment, a potato, sliced into two pieces and a cloth napkin. Harry snatched the parchment off the plate, blessing Molly Weasley for her promptness. A closer look at the parchment caused him to revise his blessing.

Dear Harry,

I hope it was my letter that you were working on, as I'm quite disappointed that I haven't gotten

"the big one" from you yet. I can't tell you how many times I've fallen asleep writing in my diary, so I've got good at removing those ink stains. The bottle contains Mrs. Skower's Magical Mess Remover. Pour some onto the cut potato and rub the potato on your skin – voila, no more ink stained skin! Do chuck the potato though, as the combination of mess remover and ink renders it somewhat toxic. Under no circumstances should you apply the mess remover directly to your skin unless you fancy scald marks that look like love bites.

As ever your mastermind,

Ginny

Harry's mind wandered as he ran the mess remover soaked potato across his face, trying to see in the mirror whether he'd got the stain off of his ear. Ginny got the note first, so his guess that the Passbox was stored in her room was probably correct. Ginny kept a diary – okay, that's a bit odd, but not totally unexpected, as Hermione kept one as well. Ginny was familiar with the appearance of love bites. Again, for a girl with six older brothers, this was not too unusual. Harry had heard of the phenomenon, but until last Christmas, just before the holiday, when he'd witnessed a blotch on Seamus' neck he'd never had the chance to correlate folklore with reality. It didn't look pleasant in the slightest. Having scrubbed all the blotches he could see and feel with the potato, Harry turned to the napkin. It was moistened with something pleasant-smelling and a warming charm had been placed upon it. While Harry rubbed the napkin across his face and neck, luxuriating in this simple comfort, he heard the door click open. While taking the towel from his face, he said,

"Good morning, Big D. Did you get lost this morning? Your room is two doors down the hall."

Dudley was sitting on Harry's bed, this morning's parchment from Ginny in his hand, his lips moving as he read.

"So, is this from the twist that you were writing last night?" Dudley asked, his leering smile pasted on his doughy face.

"Right in one, Big D, Smeltings is improving your mind."

"Well she says right here that she's disappointed that you haven't given her the 'big one' yet. She'll be disappointed afterwards too, you're such a scrawny little nancy boy."

Harry said nothing in reply, shocked by Dudley's crudity.

"She got big boobs like that bushy haired girl?" Dudley leered.

"Not particularly," Harry answered coolly, not bothering to contradict Dudley's characterization of Hermione's build.

"Does she give good head?" asked Dudley again, a grimace like smile floating on his face.

"I haven't the faintest idea. Last I checked, she was dating a roommate of mine – be a bit of bad form for me to be hitting on her at the same time." Harry said, trying to exude a worldly confidence.

"Never stopped us at Smeltings." Dudley grunted.

"Yeah, well that's one of the many differences between Smeltings and Hogwarts, Duddykins. Women with wands can get right unpleasant if you don't treat them like ladies."

"So, if you're not shagging her, why are you writing her a letter?" Dudley asked, with a look of genuine puzzlement.

"I write letters to my friends, Dudley, because I want to stay connected with them over the summer while I live with the finest Muggles of Little Whinging. Care for a bite of potato, Dudley?"

"You can't fool me, freak. That potato's poison. The skanky little twist said so right in her note."

"So right you are, Dudley, I can't put one over on a Smeltings man," Harry said grimly, snatching the note from Dudley's hand. Harry folded the note in half, wrote "THANKS!" on the back and placed the plate back into the Passbox. After closing the door, Harry turned to Dudley.

"I'll bet you five pounds that it's not in the box anymore."

"Yer on – I know you can't do *you-know-what* in the summer." Dudley's face was seized by a fit of greed as he moved to open the Passbox. He pulled the door open and gaped at the now empty interior.

"Where did it go?" Dudley asked, a worried look passing on his face.

"Oh, that information might cost you another five pounds, cousin Duddykins, you see, *it's MAGIC* ." Harry whispered the last words for emphasis.

"So, Duddykins, if you think that I can't do magic over the summer, think again. If you think that you can talk about my lady friends in vulgar terms, remember that one of the first assignments we had last year was learning how to shrink things." Harry said, his wand now out, poking the fly of Dudley's trousers for emphasis. "One last thing, dear cousin. Hiding porno magazines under your mattress is so clichéd. Better come up with a better place to stash them, because they tend to fall out when your Mum changes the sheets on your bed. Now's the time when you leave my room, dear cousin, and go find something else to do, because I have to go finish my chores."

Dudley whimpered as he stood up, one hand on his crotch, one on his bum. Harry felt slightly soiled, first by the content of his discussion with Dudley and second by his distaste for blackmail. Dudley knew full well that Harry was the one who would be changing the sheets until the end of the summer when he hoped that he could be visiting the Burrow before term started. Nonetheless, the threat was clear. Harry hoped that he didn't have to take advantage of this threat, but it was also nice to have leverage without resorting to physical violence, a currency that Dudley understood only too well.

Harry slipped into the kitchen, finished his regular morning chores, including the perfunctory list of chores that his aunt had left on a list by his place at the table, and returned up to his room. Harry found a folded five pound note on his pillow. He chuckled and stuffed it into his pocket. As he did so, he heard a popping sound and saw the Weasley knob on the Passbox light up. Before he could open the door, the room was scented with the smell of warm biscuits. Inside the box were two smallish plates, one piled with dark brown hermits, the other with chocolate chip biscuits. The first thing Harry thought was how was he going to store so many biscuits? He thought of a plastic zipper bag he had in his hiding hole which contained the last of his Honeydukes' stash from Hogsmeade. He figured when the biscuits cooled off, he'd store them in the bag and hide them in the hiding hole.

Harry looked out the window, hoping for a break in the rain. No such luck. A chill passed over him as he sank to his bed, looking out on the rain-drenched yard. The rain came in cycles, first a gentle mist, followed by a vigorous downpour, followed by vicious gusts of wind that blew the rain sideways, which in turn calmed into gentle breezes and the mist started all over again. Harry was trapped; there'd be no riding today. Harry picked *Combat Cures and Countercharms* from his desk, but as he opened the book, he was hit by the futility of studying this book without being able to practice the wandwork. He thought briefly of nicking one of Dudley's pencils and practicing with a wand substitute, but that seemed pointless too. Learning theory without application was too much like Umbridge. Harry began to fume, rubbing the back of his hand as he looked out the gray, rain soaked window. His bitter, angry, resentful thoughts churned into morose 'what-ifs' and self-condemnations. Harry was back in the abyss. He never noticed the soft popping sound from the Passbox, likewise he never noticed that the biscuits had completely cooled. He held the now useless book in one hand, the other hand beating a gentle tattoo on the windowpane. Lunchtime came and went, Harry remained at the window. Finally, the sound of the garage door opener broke his reverie, by the sound of things, Dudley had gone on an outing with his Mum. Harry had never noticed that they had left. Harry idly picked up a hermit and began to pick it apart, squeezing the raisins as he popped them into his mouth. A distant portion of his brain noted that the biscuit was quite good, but for Harry's present mood, he might as well be eating one of Hagrid's infamous Stroat sandwiches for all he savored the taste.

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The dreams came back that night. Harry knew a lot about dreams; he had them in abundance. First there were the innocuous dreams, like the one that cropped up during exam week when he was brewing a potion under Snape's supervision, and instead of a swirling tincture in his cauldron, his cauldron was filled with mashed potatoes, complete with a well of gravy at the center. Next came the far sight dreams where he'd see an event as it happened. Thus far all of those dreams were linked to Voldemort, but Harry knew that it was only a matter of time before he'd have a far sight dream that wasn't linked to Voldemort's point of view. He wasn't sure whether this was a good thing or not, but he knew, somehow, that it was coming. Next came what he called mere nightmares, filled with riots of colour, strange issues and symbols from his past and present. Last were what he called his album dreams, when he would go from page to page through all the encounters he'd had with Voldemort, from his first year when he'd been wrestling with a two-faced Professor Quirrell to the evening a week ago when Fawkes had borne a blast of green light that

Voldemort had intended for Harry. The album dreams, for all their intensity, were mercifully brief – he normally woke from those dreams. Harry was such an old hand, however, at the mere nightmares that he rarely woke up. Instead, he'd find himself in the morning, twisted in sweat soaked sheets, often with his cheeks stinging from the salty, tear soaked pillowcase. Harry knew that Dudley could hear some of these dreams, and intended to ask Tonks to place a durable Silencing charm on his bedroom.

Tonight's dream started under the willow tree where he'd had the impromptu picnic with Moey. Moey wasn't there, and neither was his bicycle. Instead, under the tree was a stone path that led to the river. Harry had never taken this path before and part of his mind questioned whether the path really existed. The path led through a series of steps to a plain by the banks of the river. On the plain was a playground. Harry was drawn to the swings. Compared to the vandalized playground of Little Whinging, this playground was immaculately intact. While Harry sat in the swings, he saw the children's climbing toy transform into the arch he's seen in the death room, the room where Sirius had passed the veil.

The veil was fluttering in an unseen breeze. He could hear the middling distant murmur of voices. He saw a couple dressed in tennis togs walking to the playground, and then up to the arch. To Harry's surprise, the girl was Cho, dressed like the Muggle girl he'd watched playing tennis a few days ago. Her companion was Michael Corner. Before they got to the veil, Cho turned to kiss Michael, who disappeared. Cho walked up to Harry, placing her small hand on his cheek.

"I'm really sorry things didn't work out between us, Harry. I really do like you, you know." Cho said, standing on tiptoe. She gave Harry a full kiss that ended with her lightly nipping Harry's lower lip between her teeth. With that, she turned and passed through the arch, rippling the veil as she went.

Harry turned from the arch and saw a black robed figure flying an intricate brightly coloured geometric kite by the river. The breeze stopped and the kite came tumbling to earth. The black robed figure approached, winding up kite string as he came. With a start, Harry recognized Professor Snape.

"Potter, fancy meeting you on an otherwise perfect day." Harry's professor said.

The shame Harry had felt when he'd discovered his father in Snape's Pensieve memory flooded over him. "I'm sorry, Professor, about the Pensieve, I shouldn't have violated your memories. I'm ashamed of what my Dad did to you, I've had that happen to me. No one should be treated like that. I'm sorry. Please forgive me," Harry said to a Professor Snape who appeared to not be listening. Snape wound up his kite string, took the kite which was now faded and tattered and threw it through the arch.

"It's time to put away childish things, Potter." Snape said, turning his back to him. Although no words were said, Harry knew he was forgiven.

Harry heard a familiar bark and saw a great shaggy black dog running pell-mell through the plains. After looping around the arch, the great dog stopped, licked Harry's hand and passed under

the rippling veil. Harry felt his stomach lurch, as if he were falling, but before he could think about the veil and what he'd just seen, again, he saw the veil became lighter, thinner, transforming into the Mirror of Erised. Harry saw what he had seen during his first year when the Mirror had captured him; he saw his immediate and extended family. The Mirror blinked and Harry saw new scenes, happy scenes from his recent life: Snitches being caught, scenes from the Great Hall with Harry being surrounded by friends. The picture in the Mirror blinked again, and Harry was standing in formal robes next to a bride that looked a lot like his Mum; it blinked again and Harry was swamped on a playground with a gaggle of black haired children. The Mirror faded to gray and then turned red. Harry was now staring, eye to eye with an unblinking Voldemort. Hanging above them on a gossamer thread was a short sword. All around them was a circle of fire. Beyond the ring of fire Harry saw his family, his new family that he'd just seen in the Mirror. Light, brighter than lightning flashed, destroying Harry's vision. When his vision returned, the ring of fire was gone and Harry was alone on a pebble-filled beach – at the water's edge was the stone arch, hung with the fluttering black veil. As Harry walked toward the arch, he heard the sound of songbirds; the beach faded, the arch faded, leaving only the fluttering veil.

Harry was in bed, twisted in the sheets. Early sunlight was dripping into the room and the first songbirds of the day were indeed singing. Harry stood, shaking off the sheets. As he put on his glasses, he moved to the window. The sky was free of clouds of any sort. With any luck, he'd fit in a ride before the lawn was dry enough to be mowed. Harry was glad to be rid of the dream, glad that it wasn't raining, glad that he was going to be leaving the Dursleys, if even for a weekend, by tomorrow morning. Maybe today would be a better day.

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Yet another author's note: disclaimer from Prologue applies.

The Letters of Summer
The Day Before & The Evening After

Chapter 6

The day before

&

the evening after

It was Friday. Harry had the card from Moey in his pocket. After breakfast and the morning chores, he waited in the kitchen until everyone was occupied elsewhere, then quietly picked up the phone, dialing the number Moey had given him. Harry heard one ring, a click and a quiet voice say "Hello, Harry."

"I'm leaving in five minutes, shall I meet you at the playground?"

"Make it fifteen minutes – look for two blue helmets," Moey replied cryptically. The line was dead. Evidently Moey was as talkative on the phone as she was in person. Harry puzzled about the two blue helmets, then figured that maybe one of the new Aurors was coming onto the security detail.

The bicycle tyres spat, making a zipping sound as they rolled across the pavement, still wet from the previous day's rain. Harry hadn't expected the trail of dirty water that sprayed up his back while he pedaled to the playground rendezvous, but he didn't care; he was out of the house and in motion again. He was not conscious of the elapsed time between when he'd left Privet Drive and when he reached the Little Whinging playground by a serpentine route – he was engaged in moving meditation, mulling over the twisted symbols of his prior night's dream. Harry scanned the playground before he coasted to a stop – no blue helmets; no humans of any age or size were on the lot. He leaned against the trunk of a middle-sized yew tree – he wasn't in the mood to sit down; the ground was still too damp. Harry closed his eyes briefly and heard the zipping sound of tyres spitting water on the pavement. He touched the handle of his wand, hoping not to embarrass himself as he did the first time he'd met Moey, but still wanting to be prepared. Moey was dressed much as she was two days ago, except that she wasn't yet wearing her wraparound sunglasses, and she had a thin blue jacket today. Moey's companion was an older, heavier woman, wearing yellow wraparound glasses. Harry noted that she was wearing three quarter length sleeves, and a wand was tucked into the inside of her right sleeve. Moey's wand, Harry reckoned,

was in her hidden pocket again. Moey stopped a respectful distance away, facing Harry. He heard her whisper to her companion that she should keep her hands on her handlebars.

"Morning, Harry," Moey said.

"G'morning. What was the last thing I saw you eat?"

"Crisps. I handed you the bag and told you to keep them away from me. Do I pass Harry?"

"You pass, but I think you ate the apple for dessert after tossing me the crisps. You going to introduce your companion?"

"I was getting to that, Harry. Harry, this is Laurel, Laurel, this is the schoolboy who got the drop on me this week, the boy who intends to keep on living."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Potter," Laurel said, extending her hand. She had a firm, businesslike grip. Harry tried to guess her age, but floundered – probably older than Aunt Petunia, but he wouldn't put any money on making a more specific guess.

"You a new Auror?" Harry asked diplomatically.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, but it's not my first career. I'm in the Reserves, non-stipendary."

Harry had no idea what a non-stipendary Auror did, or any notion that the Aurors had a reserve component, but he wasn't in the mood to talk. He'd come to ride, and he'd accommodate minders, but still chafed at being on a leash.

"Don't be fooled, Harry, she's not a socks knitting Granny, although she does knit, and she is a Grandmother – she busted a smuggling ring by spotting discrepancies in shipping documents during her apprenticeship, right nice piece of work, top of her class in surveillance. Changes the colour of her helmet on a regular basis without being told." Moey said with a deadpan expression.

Harry could tell that the banter was meant to put him at ease, but he didn't want to play Moey's games, no matter how witty. Harry put his right foot into his toeclip, pointed at the road he intended to take, got back onto the saddle of his bicycle and shoved off. He rode hard for a mile, checking his mirror from time to time to see the blue helmets bobbing behind him. He did crack a smile when he looked back and saw that the colour on each helmet had changed: Moey was now sporting a deep burgundy, Laurel was now wearing a yellow and black helmet that resembled a Hufflepuff scarf. He'd seen Cho wearing a Hufflepuff scarf on and off through last year – a gift from Cedric no doubt. He wondered briefly if Michael would convince her to wear his Ravenclaw colours. For Cho's sake, he hoped he would. Those random thoughts were banished as he leaned into a curve. The roads were beginning to dry up as the rising sun burned off the dampness. The next time Harry looked back, Moey's wraparound glasses were back on. As the glare on the road increased, Harry made a mental note to look into finding a pair of his own – hobbies became expensive, even when the big pieces are hand-me-downs.

They rode in silence, taking several short connecting roads until they had looped around and were headed back in the direction of Little Whinging. Laurel came up on his right; Moey came up on his left, riding silently as a six wheeled beast.

"Short ride today Mr. Potter?" Laurel asked.

"Yes, Ma'am. I've got to get back as soon as the grass is dry to mow the lawn – I've got to get that chore out of the way before the weekend," Harry answered. Although Laurel was much heavier than Moey, she kept pace with Harry's ride without puffing. Moey was making enough noise to let Harry know that he should dial the pace down, which he did, grudgingly.

"Ride much, Laurel?"

"I haven't done much in the last three years, during my apprenticeship, but before that I used to tour on weekends – best thing to clear the mind." Laurel smiled. "I thought it was a bit odd when everyone in my class was asked if they could ride a bicycle – five of us Muggleborns said yes along with a sixth who wasn't – a distant cousin of Arthur Weasley." Harry nodded at the last comment, the Weasley mania for all things Muggle needing no introduction.

"I'm heading back now," Harry said. When he looked in his mirror again, the women were gone. He pedaled into the estate leading to Privet Drive. The ride wasn't long enough for Harry's purposes, but the mowing would be good too. Busy was good, he could keep his mind away from recursive trains of thought when he was busy – it was the idle times when he'd get trapped, like the day before when he was lost in the abyss. He rolled up the driveway and dismounted, not as fancy as Moey, but nothing to be ashamed of either. He stowed the bicycle and broke out the mower. His new trainers would be green with grass stains by the time he finished, but that was inevitable, so as long as they were dry by the end of the day, Harry didn't mind.

After the lawn was mowed and the last clippings swept from the driveway, Harry stowed the mower and went for a shower. He thought of writing more letters but wasn't in the mood. He looked at his books, but wasn't in the mood for that either. With a grin, he pulled out the Wizard Wheeze Chess set. The white pieces behaved like Muggle pieces, at least until they were arranged on the board. The black pieces marched out in formation in response to the Queen's commands. Harry smiled when he noticed that the Queen had more than a passing resemblance to a certain Gryffindor prefect. As he stared at the details on the Queen, he noticed that she wasn't wearing the normal crown, but instead had a head of bushy hair and a tiara. This led him to examine the white King, who appeared to be the normal player. The kingside Knight, however, had more than a passing resemblance to another Gryffindor prefect, down to the tiny freckles on his shiny nose. Harry reckoned that Ron had never noticed, as he tended to tune certain details out – but he was sure that the twins had noticed - after all, they put the details in the pieces in the first place. Three games later, Harry had won a game, lost a game, and ground the last game to an inconclusive stalemate. It *was* a better day.

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Sunday night was a cool, crisp night, more like fall than summer. The moon would rise soon, but

it was waning now, having waxed full the night before. Remus Lupin, along with every other Lycanthrope on Wolfsbane Potion, was safe tonight, although his nerves were still pleasantly on edge. He walked with a dark haired boy, half a head shorter than himself, walking and talking in a pleasant conversation. They walked to the end of the driveway at Number 4 Privet Drive, laughed and walked around the block again. When they returned to the Dursley house this time, they walked up the driveway, entering the house through the kitchen door. Both men were dressed as Muggles for the occasion, although Harry carried a knapsack which contained, among other things, a new set of formal dress robes, complete with scarlet piped black mourning bands on the sleeves, the sign of a wizard mourning a death in the family. Once inside the kitchen, the two talked for another half hour, leaning against the refrigerator and stove respectively. They were aware of three pairs of eyes that were taking peeks at them as they talked, but they didn't care. If the Dursleys wanted to snoop, that was their concern. Remus finally drew himself straight, extended a hand, shook hands with his new ward, and left the house with a gentle click of the kitchen door. Harry lifted the curtain on the kitchen door, hoping to catch a glimpse of Lupin as he left the estate, but there was no trace of him, as he was already gone. Harry sighed, went to the refrigerator, poured himself a glass of milk, drank it, rinsed the glass, loaded it into the now full (and dirty) dishwasher, put soap in that machine, started it, and headed up the stairs to his room. The Hogwarts knob on the Passbox was lit; the others were dim. Harry withdrew a long, large envelope from the Passbox, sealed with Albus Dumbledore's personal seal. Breaking open the seal, Harry found copies of several lengthy documents that he glanced at briefly. Attached to the documents with a silver paperclip bent into the shape of a dragon was a brief note.

Harry,

I regret that I was not able to stay longer at the Wake, but pressing business called me elsewhere. Enclosed you will find copies of the documents appointing Remus Lupin as your guardian until you attain your Wizarding majority next year. It just so happened that a friendly member of the Wizengamot was on duty this weekend, and the petition was granted without hearing. Remus has already filed papers at Hogwarts granting you permission to attend Hogsmeade weekends, so there is no need to concern yourself on this topic.

I have it on good authority that we have obtained a suitable tutor in Occlumency – lessons will probably start this week. Until that time, you would be well advised to continue with your programme of exercise, along with suitable meditation before retiring to clear your mind. Darkness is still afoot, and the Second War has already begun. Your tutor may be trusted to the same extent that you trust me – your mother was once engaged to apprentice under him, but that was cut short when you were conceived, a happy, but fateful disruption of plans. Tonks will arrange the introduction.

I remain ever yours,

APWBD

Harry looked about, determined that he had no chores that couldn't wait until morning, and pulled out parchment to write a letter to Hermione.

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Hermione was a creature of habit. To the best of her abilities, each day began and ended the

same way, whether at home or at school. Crookshanks was perched in her bedroom window, looking like a ginger striped sphinx; he too was a creature of habit. He would watch Hermione prepare for bed until she turned out the lights. The moment the lights went out, he would jump out of the window and then jump onto the bed. Depending upon the season of the year, he'd either curl up at her feet or next to her head, purring like a small bus until Hermione was asleep, after which he would roam the house. He did the same thing during the school year, only then he'd wander the grounds. Hermione had often wondered how he got in and out of the Gryffindor Tower, as she had certainly never seen the Fat Lady open the portal for any one or any thing that didn't have the proper password, but she'd never solved that mystery. She was ready for bed, dressed in a long, sleeveless cotton nightdress. Her teeth were brushed and flossed and now she was preparing herself for the hair ritual. Her hair was growing ever longer, and if she hoped to not look like a circus clown in the morning, she had to brush it out and braid it before falling asleep. Monica Granger took advantage of Hermione's open door and wandered in while Hermione was attempting to break apart a particularly nasty knot at the end of her hair with her fingers.

"Let me do that, I haven't brushed you out in ages."

"Oh, Mum, that would be wonderful."

If Hermione could purr, she would be purring to beat Crookshanks now. Time alone at the end of the day with her Mum was one of the few things she missed from her pre-Hogwarts days. Driving behind the wheel of the family Ford wasn't quite the same thing.

"Your hair is about as long as mine was when I married your Dad. I never braided my hair at night until I got married."

"What changed, Mum?"

"Oh, on our wedding night, your Dad fell asleep on my hair. I tried rolling over in my sleep, but my hair was still pinned under him. I screamed, and then boxed his ears soundly for pulling my hair. By the time I woke up I was mortified. After that, I braided it every night until after you were born, then I went for the short cut that I've worn ever since. One less thing to fuss with in the morning."

"Do you mind brushing me out, Mum?"

"No, not at all, it's part of what I love about having a girl."

Monica finished brushing out Hermione's chestnut coloured mane and began to braid it.

"Mum, was your wedding night your first time with Dad?"

"Well, it was the first time we got married, last time too."

"Mum! You know what I mean. Did you . . . wait?"

“Yes, we did.”

“Why?”

“Actually, it was your Father’s idea. I was going mad during the last few months of our engagement. I wanted to call off the wedding and just have him move into my flat. He refused, said that I was worth waiting for.”

Monica twisted a hair elastic around the end of the thick, fuzzy braid she’d just made. Hermione dashed to the hallway bathroom and brought back a caddy of nail polish and supplies. She looked up at Monica with dark brown eyes.

“Do my nails, Mum?”

“Who are you and what have you done with my daughter?”

“I am a girl, Mum, I’m entitled to do girly things from time to time.”

“Get one of the old towels, I don’t want to spill polish on your bedspread.”

Monica started with the emery boards and then began a precise application of an undercoat using a small bottle Hermione had selected.

“What’s this colour?”

“*Starry night* – I got it at Hogsmeade – after it dries the sparkles will twinkle, just like the stars at night. Are you glad you waited?”

“In a word, yes. All my very smart, oh so sophisticated sisters and cousins who hopped from bed to bed in college and moved in with their boyfriends thereafter are all divorced now, and I’m still married to the man I love. End of sermon, Hermione, I didn’t come up here to talk about that.”

“What did you come up to talk about?”

“Can’t I come up to spend time with my only girl at the end of the day?”

“Mum, every day you’re not at the surgery, we’re spending two to four hours together driving across all of England, it’s not like we’re lacking quality time this summer!”

“I was wondering why you haven’t received any letters this weekend.”

“They’re away,” Hermione whispered.

“I’m sorry dear, these old ears didn’t catch what you just said,” Monica replied softly.

“Ron and Ginny and Harry are all away this weekend,” Hermione said in a voice only slightly louder than a whisper.

“They are taking a holiday together?”

“Hardly, they’re at a funeral in London.”

“Whose funeral?”

“Harry’s godfather, Sirius Black.”

“Why weren’t you there, Hermione?”

“Oh, Mum . . .” Hermione moaned.

“Is there something you’re not telling me, Hermione?”

“Oh, Mum . . .”

“You’re repeating yourself, dear.”

“Mum, I love you madly, but sometimes you are really annoying!” Hermione pulled her hands back, looked at the freshly painted nails, and then looked out the window.

“When I came home last week, I didn’t think that there was going to be a funeral. Then when I got the notice from Tonks, when she came to set up the Passbox, I wrote Harry and told him that I wasn’t going to attend.”

“Hermione, he’s your friend, you should be there for him.”

“I know that, Mum, I told Harry that if I were to come to the funeral, I’d have to tell you everything, and if I told you everything, I was worried sick that you’d pull me out of Hogwarts.” Tears were streaming down Hermione’s cheeks. She sniffed loudly and began to pick at her thumbnail.

“I just painted that nail, I’d appreciate it very much if you’d wait a day before destroying it.” Monica looked archly at her daughter.

Hermione looked down at her thumb, up at her mother’s stern face, back down at her thumb and then up again at her mother, who winked at her.

“Mum!”

The Passbox was sitting on Hermione’s nightstand. Both women heard a gentle pop. Within a moment the Potter knob lit up.

“I suppose you’d like me to leave now so you can read that in private?”

“No, Mum, no more secrets.”

“None?”

“No more secrets about Harry,” Hermione qualified, blowing her nose and smiling weakly at her mother.

Watching Hermione read the letter was pure entertainment. As a small child, she'd been somber beyond her years. By the age of eight she'd cultivated an impressive poker face. The poker face was gone tonight and a range of emotions could be read. She was sad, pensive, her eyes flickered with rage, she brought her hand to her mouth to stifle laughter. When she finished the letter, she daubed her eyes and wordlessly passed the letter to her Mum.

Dear 'Hermy,'

No, I haven't heard from Grawp, but I thought I'd catch you up on what's gone on since our last note. I'm glad that you had such a good chat with your Mum. I didn't retain a copy of the letter, but in short your Mum asked if I was your boyfriend (I said no) and whether or not you are safe at Hogwarts (I said you were). Speaking of boys who are your friend, Ron was quite distressed that you were not at the funeral, and even more distressed that you were not at the wake, but I'll get into that later.

Remus and I have spent pretty much the past 36 hours together, which included, among other things, the full moon. As of noon yesterday, Remus Lupin is, according to papers I just got from Professor Dumbledore, my guardian for all purposes in the Wizarding world. That's the good news. The bad news is that I'm still at the Dursleys', but life is very rarely perfect. The mixed news is that instead of “Professor Lupin” I may now call him “Uncle Moony” until next year, when I become an adult. I'm not sure that this is an improvement or not, but in light of the last three days, I'm not complaining.

Thursday was wretched – just about as bad as it's been since Sirius died. Weird as it may seem, but that's the first time that I've written what my heart refused to believe, that Sirius is dead.

Friday was about normal if you are a grumpy guy like me, but Saturday, what a day! Tonks picked me up shortly after breakfast; I took the Floo from Mrs. Figg's house to Number 12 Grimmauld Place. Remus and I did various errands in the morning (Gringotts, the Ministry of Magic, Gladrags, the Solicitor's, Century Hardware) lunch, and the memorial service. The service was pretty much a 1662 Book of Common Prayer funeral service, except for the “commitment” portion, in which they had to change the words, as there was obviously no body to commit into the ground. The priest in charge at St. Simon's is a fellow who knew Mum and Dad – he officiated at their wedding. I never knew there were such things anymore, but Fr. Martin is a Greyfriar, and former student at Hogwarts (Hufflepuff, left about 10 years before Mum and Dad started.) Afterwards, there was a wake at the Parish house, which is where things got interesting.

Aside from me, the only students there were Ron and Ginny, Susan Bones, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom. There was food and drink, and after the first rush of guests disappeared (Dumbledore left around the same time with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley) there was dancing. Once Fr. Martin announced that the band was arriving, Luna Lovegood made a beeline for Ron (I take it she's fancied him for some time now – the feeling is *definitely* not mutual.) Ron turned to Susan Bones and asked if she'd dance with him. Susan, sharp girl that she is, knew the score

and was willing to save Ron from Luna. Ron's comment to me as Luna was advancing across the Parish hall was "Where's Hermione when I really need her?" Luna ended up dancing with Neville; I asked Ginny to dance.

Things with Ginny were a bit awkward at first, as I'm fairly certain that Ginny has something going with Dean Thomas, but Ginny didn't want to talk about it. I was my usual clumsy self on the dance floor but Ginny didn't seem to mind. Dancing with Ginny brought to mind one of Sirius' more cryptic proverbs "never dance with a Slytherin." When I asked him to explain that one, he'd said that you should be careful never to dance with someone you don't want to develop feelings for. It didn't mean much to me at the time, but it came back to me on the dance floor as I was getting a buzz from Ginny's perfume. I've noticed that she's a girl (well before Ron noticed that you were a girl, Hermione) but dancing with her seemed to focus my attention. She's brave, smart, has a wicked sense of fun, she's pretty – I just wish I knew where she stood with Dean! Timing is everything – in my life, I show up at the dock after the ship has already set sail.

Tonks joined the service mid-way through, and was glued to Remus for most of the wake. Unless I'm quite mistaken, I think she fancies him. What does Remus think? Who knows? He's very hard to read. Tonks had a bit too much to drink that night. The wake was timed so that Remus could depart before the moon rose that evening. He tarried too long, and instead of taking the Floo to Grimmauld Place, Fr. Martin offered the use of St. Simon's sanctuary for the night.

When it's not being used as a church, it seems that the sanctuary is a bit like the Room of Requirement; it becomes what people need. Fr. Martin knew that Remus is a Werewolf, and knew about the Wolfsbane potion as well. Before he locked the sanctuary, he turned to me, rubbed some stuff into my scar and said, "I suppose you need to join him." With that he shoved me in the door and locked it shut. Whatever he'd rubbed into my scar was buzzing like mad – powerful, like when I'm feeling Voldemort, but not painful. By the time my eyes got adjusted to the darkness, I sorted out all the changes. Remus was now a wolf – he's pretty much all silver in colour now. The sanctuary was a forest. I was a large white dog. Fr. Martin had transfigured me into a shape where I'd be safe with Lupin for the night, even if the Wolfsbane failed. It's difficult to express in words what happened that night. We chased through the woods and howled at the moon, mourning Sirius, mourning our loss.

I don't feel empty inside anymore. It still hurts when I think about him, and how I'll never see him again, but it's not as bad as it was. I'd talked with Lupin a lot before the wake – ever the Professor he told me a lot of things that made sense in my head, but after the night in the woods, they made sense in my heart too.

By the time morning came, we were both asleep by a river in the woods, until Fr. Martin unlocked the sanctuary and it became a church again. Fr. Martin changed me back into my usual shape and then prodded Remus with the tip of his shoes until he transformed too. We hung around through the early service, went to breakfast, walked through Muggle London and then Diagon Alley, a late lunch and another walk, ending the day at the Dursleys' (see, nothing's perfect).

Please don't kill Ron. I need him, just like I need you. I go mad when you two aren't getting along.

Ever your friend,

Harry

“So, why aren’t you killing Ron?”

“Be awfully hard to make you a grandmother if I kill my future husband for dancing with one of my classmates, Mum.”

“You’ve got it that bad?”

“Mum, I’m almost sixteen, I’m not ready to marry anybody yet. If I still feel this way about Ron when I’m twenty and he hasn’t yet proposed to me, I’ll . . . I’ll knock him off his broom, wrap my legs around him and squeeze him until he does.”

“That’s an awfully direct plan of action, Hermione.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a boy, they’re awfully slow at times - subtle stuff is lost on them,” said Hermione in her best deadpan expression. Mother and daughter locked eyes for a long moment until Monica Granger could contain herself no longer – she began to snigger, then snort and after giving up all pretenses of control, dissolved into hooting laughter. Hermione held her composure just a little while longer, and then gave into the same hacking, hooting, and gasping laughs. It was at that moment that her father, Albert Granger, pushed the bedroom door open.

“Everything all right here ladies?” he asked.

Monica, still heaving with laughter, tried to compose herself, looked silently at her husband, hooted some more, and then gasped.

“Yes, dear.”

“Are you going to explain any of this to me?” He inquired.

“No dear, some mysteries are beyond male comprehension.”

Albert crossed over to Hermione, who was now merely giggling, and kissed her forehead.

“G’night, ‘Mione.”

“Goodnight, Daddy.”

“I’m off to the showers, am I waiting up for you, Monica?”

“Please do. Are we locked up downstairs?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be in by the time you’re done.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” said Albert, as he turned to go out the door.

Monica looked at the door and shook her head.

“Boys are so awfully slow.”

“Mum!” Hermione protested.

“Just agreeing with you, dear.”

Picking the letter up off of the floor, Monica looked at Hermione.

“Is romance blossoming for your friend Harry?”

“Hard to say, Mum. Harry wouldn’t know what he was feeling half of the time if I didn’t tell him.”

“Take care of him, Hermione. Friends like that don’t come along too often in life.”

“I will, Mum, Goodnight.”

Monica gathered Hermione in her arms, kissed her cheek, hugged her soundly and left her room.

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Author's note: a reserve, non-stipendary Auror is an Auror who came into the service either late in life (as Laurel did) or who otherwise doesn't intend to make the service a career. The reserves are often skilled in some other area, which may be an earlier career, or their "real job" which supports them when they aren't off playing Auror. When they are on duty or attending training they are paid according to rank, and can contribute to a pension plan much like an American 501(k) plan, but they do not participate in the normal Auror pension plan, unless disabled in the line of duty. Chapter seven is written, but needs more work. Please be patient. Standard disclaimer from the prologue applies to each and every chapter of The Letters of Summer, so stop looking for it here.

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The Letters of Summer The Big One

Chapter 7 – The Big One

When Harry woke, he was looking forward to the day: breakfast, chores, a good ride; maybe he'd finish that letter to Ginny he'd been working on since he'd returned to Privet Drive. He stopped short when he saw that the Grimmauld Place knob on the Passbox was lit. Opening the door, he pulled out a lilac coloured scrap of parchment. Written on it in green ink was a terse note:

Harry,
Mrs. Figg's garden at 8:00 pm.
Tonks

"It must be the tutor," Harry mused to himself.

Harry toyed with the notion of a fancy breakfast because he was feeling good, but concluded in the end that he didn't like the Dursleys enough to make that much fuss over their breakfast. Breakfast was served, eaten and cleaned up without incident. If the Dursleys had noticed that he'd been gone for the past two days, they took pains not to mention it.

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Another Ride

As was often the case, Harry heard her coming before he saw her. The timbre of the derailleur clicking was deeper on Laurel's bicycle than on Moey's. Looking back in his mirror, he saw the familiar yellow wraparound sunglasses, a gray jacket with matching pants, and, in full Hufflepuff pride, a black and yellow helmet. As Harry banked into the curve, Laurel began to creep closer. By the time he'd straightened out from the turn, she was even with him.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter. Are you under the weather or just woolgathering this morning?"

"I'm feeling fine, so I must be woolgathering, whatever that is."

"It's an old, honorable figure of speech for when your mind is freely wandering. Given the smile on your face, I'd say it's a girl."

"Am I that obvious?" Harry thought to himself. "Did you train as a Legilimens before becoming

an Auror?"

"Nah, I'm just three times your age – what I don't remember from being your age, I fill in with what I remember from watching my own kids."

"Tell me about your kids," Harry asked, not because he was particularly interested, but because he knew that most adults of a certain age liked to talk about their children. Harry was better at listening than making small talk.

"Sorry, Mr. Potter, we've got rules."

"What sort of rules?"

"Stupid rules, Mr. Potter, stupid rules."

"How stupid?"

"Aurors on protective detail aren't supposed to tell their principal their last name, or anything about their families, if any. Do you know how hard it is for me to not talk about my kids?"

"That's weird all right."

"Tell me about it, Mr. Potter."

"So, Laurel, what do you tell your bosses about what we talk about?"

"Not a blessed thing."

"How's that?"

"That, Mr. Potter, is one of the rules that makes sense. I'm on a protective detail – if I'm going to protect you, you've got to trust me. You're not going to trust me if you think that I'm blabbing to every Tom, Dick and Cornelius working in the Ministry. By the way, Mr. Potter, you've been upgraded from protective surveillance to protective detail courtesy of your first run in with Moey."

"I'm glad that something good came out of that."

"Well, they couldn't very well fire her when she'd warned them that you were likely to take things into your own hands if you thought you were being followed."

They continued to chat as they rode along the river road. It was a pleasantly warm day with just enough cloud cover to keep it from becoming uncomfortably hot. Laurel regaled him with tales from her prior life, before Auror training, carefully eliminating names and dates. Harry concluded that there was a wild child still lurking inside this well-padded grandmother, which explained applying for, and being accepted into, the training program for the Auror reserves when she was well past 40. Harry was comfortable with Laurel, although he felt uncomfortable calling an adult

by her first name to her face.

"Laurel?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Why don't you call me Harry?"

"It's a point of respect, Mr. Potter. Would you feel more comfortable calling me by my last name?"

"Well, yeah, after all, you are old enough . . ."

"For your information, Mr. Potter, I'm *not* old enough to be your Grandmother, although I did do childminding jobs for women just a tad older than your mum. I still can't tell you my last name, but you can call me Ms. Laurel if that would make you feel better."

"It would, Ms. Laurel."

"So, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, Ms. Laurel?"

"Who is the girl?"

A month ago any probing questions would have been met with stony silence if asked by strangers, and with a snarl if asked by any but his closest friends. Harry's close friends knew better than to probe. Harry would share, but only when he was ready, not before. Today was different, because Harry had changed over the weekend. The internal, invisible wounds of the last year were at last beginning to heal, and after the events of the weekend, Harry had a glimmer of hope.

The night he'd spent as a dog, howling through the night with his guardian wolf, had cleansed him from the roiling anger and self-loathing that had displaced the rest of his emotions. He had a new guardian, the last friendly link to his parents. All of these changes, though welcome, were not surprising. What caught Harry by surprise was the hope that he'd gained when he'd danced with Ginny. She'd been a good friend this past year, although he hated to admit that he'd ignored her for years. As a general proposition, Harry knew that he liked girls, having the normal complement of hormones common to teenaged boys. His disastrous experience with Cho, however, had led him to the conclusion that he was some sort of freak who would end up as the male version of Mrs. Figg, living alone, talking to himself as he walked down the street. Dancing with Ginny had changed all that.

As he had held her during dances fast and slow he'd felt connected and alive. During the slowest dances she'd molded herself to him and he was painfully aware that she was a girl, soft and curved and warm. As he thought about that night afterwards, he'd concluded that he'd trade his Firebolt to experience that again. He knew, however, that he could never tell anyone about this last conclusion, although he figured that Hermione could and would drag it out of him someday, as she

could pry things out of him that no one else could.

Laurel was, for all intents and purposes, a stranger, and certainly not as close to Harry as Hermione or Ron, his normal confidants. She was, however, trustworthy, safe and wise. Harry knew that within limits he could trust her, and he also knew that if he didn't talk about some of the issues roiling around inside of him that he'd burst. This ride was the perfect opportunity, as they were alone, apart from prying eyes and eavesdropping ears. Looking straight ahead as he pedaled down the road, Harry surprised Laurel, and himself, opening up to answer her question.

"She's my best friend's sister."

"Miss Granger doesn't have a sister, she's an only child."

Harry smiled. "My *other* best friend, Ron Weasley."

"What's her name?"

"Ginny."

"Short for Virginia?"

"No, as best as I can tell, just Ginny."

"Do you have feelings for her?"

"I haven't the foggiest notion."

"So what's the problem?"

"I think she's already got a boyfriend."

"That could be challenging."

"He's one of my roommates at school."

"Oh, now that *would* be a problem. Girlfriends come and girlfriends go, but roommate changes need to be approved by head of House. Is that the only problem?"

"No."

"What else?"

"Well, there's the family. I don't know how they would feel about me being close to their daughter as I'm not exactly a safe bloke to be around these days."

"Tosh, you're plenty safe. I'm here."

"That's the point, Ms. Laurel, most boys my age don't need bodyguards."

"You've got a point there."

As they banked into another turn they were both silent. They'd gone further down the river road today than he'd ever gone with Moey. As they approached a fork in the road, Laurel pointed to the fork that led away from the river. A quarter mile down this road there were stone benches beside the road, sitting beneath an ivy-covered gazebo. Next to the gazebo was an iron water pump. As they approached the gazebo, Laurel spoke.

"We stop here."

Laurel leaned her bicycle against the gazebo and took off her helmet. Reaching behind her to free her hair from its clasp, she shook her hair from side to side and stretched her arms high overhead.

"Get your bottle, Mr. Potter, the water from this well is always cold and very sweet."

Laurel began to pump the iron handle. On the third stroke water began to gush from the spout. Harry filled Laurel's bottle and then his own. He washed his face and hands in the bracing cold stream of water and then changed places with Laurel, working the pump so that she could wash her hands and face.

"So, Mr. Potter. You fancy a girl, but you're not sure how she feels about you. You're not sure how her family might feel about her being with a high-risk friend. Is that all that's bothering you?"

"No," Harry replied. There was a long silence. Harry stopped pumping and looked off into the distance. "I'm haunted by what happens if we start something and the relationship goes to worms. So many guys at school will go out with a girl for a while, then things blow up and they never talk to each other again. Outside of the Dursleys, who are horrid, the Weasley family is all I've got. If things go sour and I can't see the Weasleys again, I'm wiped out."

"I think I see your situation."

"So, what's the answer?"

Laurel snorted. "Such a male approach – 'how do I fix this?' Girls, we'd spend the afternoon agonizing about this before we'd ever even think of fixing it." She took a long pull from her water bottle. "Let's break this down into parts – first you need to find out if she's available and interested. If you've got brass balls you'll just up and ask her. If you're like the rest of us, you'll ask one of her close friends. Next, you'll need to talk to her and to her family, not necessarily in that order, about the dangers you face. The last problem is actually not that difficult. If you are always a gentleman with her and treat her with respect, one or the other of you may decide to pull the plug, but you'll not crash. It can be done. I buried my first husband and divorced my second. I still have dinner on the holidays with my ex-in-laws, it's just my ex that I don't talk to before I've had my morning coffee."

"You make it all sound so simple."

“It is simple, it just isn’t easy.”

Harry clicked on his helmet, stowing his water bottle in its cage. Laurel took slightly longer to ready herself, as she had to adjust her hair until it was comfortable under her helmet.

“Mr. Potter, I either need less hair, or a bigger helmet.”

“Get a bigger helmet, Ms. Laurel, your hair is pretty the way it is.”

“Thank you, Mr. Potter, it’s nice to hear that.”

“Ms. Laurel?”

“Mr. Potter.”

“Thanks. For the chat – it’s been good to sort things out with you.”

“Don’t mention it, Mr. Potter, you know I won’t.”

“Yeah, I do,” Harry said as he flashed a brief smile. He put his shoes back into his toe clips. The talking was over; it was time for a serious ride. Harry took the lead for the first ten minutes, riding hard. Without a word, Laurel overtook him, pulling up close in front of him, allowing Harry to coast behind her in the still air that followed her. They changed places thereafter every ten to fifteen minutes until they reached the outskirts of Little Whinging.

“Tonks says you’re meeting someone tonight.”

“That’s right – I got a note from Tonks, telling me to drop by Mrs. Figg’s garden tonight around 8:00.”

“Tonks is over at Arabella’s house today, checking the security wards. Mrs. Figg is gone today, visiting her sister in the Midlands. If you’re meeting whom I think you’re meeting, you are in for a treat.”

“Who is it?” Harry asked, his curiosity piqued.

“I’ve only got a guess – I thought he’d died after the First War with Voldemort. You wouldn’t know him, he’s older than Dumbledore.”

“Is he on a wizard card?”

“Nah, he hates those.”

“Whom are you going on about?”

“If my guess is right, you’re going to be meeting Abelard tonight.”

“Abelard who?”

“No last name, just Abelard.”

“What can you tell me about him?”

“That comes under the category of things I can’t talk about, Mr. Potter. Ask Miss Granger, I’m sure she’s got a paragraph on him in one of her books.”

“How do you know Hermione?”

“I set up the security wards at her parents’ house last Sunday, the day her fireplace got connected to the Floo network. Never saw a house with as many books as that one. Pretty girl, got her looks from her Mum, her hair from her Dad.”

As they passed the Little Whinging playground, Laurel dropped behind Harry. Once again, when he checked his mirror next, she was gone.

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The letter

The house was empty when Harry returned, which was good, because he didn’t want to be interrupted. He ate a quick lunch, cleaned up all traces that he’d ever been in the kitchen and went upstairs. The Passbox was empty; all knobs were dark. He jotted off a quick note to Hermione, asking her what she knew about a wizard named Abelard. He didn’t feel like waiting for a response, but then again, he didn’t want to ring her up on the Dursleys’ phone for such a magical conversation. Harry put this on his mental list of things he hated about living with the Dursleys.

Harry pulled out the last draft of the letter, the one that had been ruined in the rain. He couldn’t make heads or tails of what he’d written in the letter, which was probably a good thing. If Dudley had read this letter instead of Ginny’s note the other day there would have been big trouble. He pulled blank parchment and a new bottle of ink from the desk drawer. Laurel was right: it was simple; it just wasn’t easy. He began to write, slowly at first, and then it began to flow. Having written and rewritten it several times, he did this draft without errors or smudges. His handwriting was no great triumph in penmanship, but it was readable, which was the point. He scanned it over again, folded it in half and wrote her name on the back of the sheets. He began to whistle, stopping himself when he realized the tune he’d been whistling: - “Weasley is our King” - then pulling the Burrow knob on the Passbox. He hesitated briefly before closing the door, and then gently pushed it shut. There was a quiet hiss as the chamber emptied itself. Harry then went to his trunk, pulling out the last of his clean clothes for a quick shower. He’d do his laundry before dinner and then go off to meet the new Tutor. Given Dumbledore’s track record in hiring, Harry had some misgivings about the meeting, but he crossed his fingers and hoped for the best.

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It had been a day of chores and errands for Ginny, hauling a load of produce to Mrs. Miller's house for sale at the market; returning to the Burrow for cleaning, sorting and counting; another trip into Ottery St. Catchpole, this time with Mum for groceries to replenish the pantry. In between there were breakfast and lunch dishes. There was a bit of a break before dinner, giving her time to head to her room. She'd intended to pull out the Muggle novel that Hermione had sent, polishing off a chapter or two outside while the sunlight was still good enough for reading under a tree. The Passbox had mail; specifically, the Potter knob on the Passbox was lit. Ginny approached the box as if Fred and George had loaded it. She reached out her hand, hesitated, and then pulled the knob, opening the door. Inside was a thick bundle of parchment, folded in half with her name written on the outside in a familiar hand. "*He wasn't kidding, this really is the big one*," she thought. As she reached for the parchment the only thing she could think was "*I am really going to wet my pants.*" A quick visit to the loo brought some relief. To maintain her dignity, she waited until she was back in her bedroom, sitting by the window for light. She'd locked the door, wanting to not be disturbed by anyone or anything. "*I'm such a coward, this is probably nothing but his shopping list for next term,*" she thought.

Opening the note, she smiled as she read. As she read on, she was certainly glad that she had visited the loo, as she *would* have wet her pants if she had had to read this with a full bladder. Some things were jarringly odd, others were touching, others frighteningly accurate, while still others evoked trains of memory that carried her back through the past five years, stopping at stations good and bad. She tucked the letter into her waistband and pulled her blouse over it. Unlocking the door, she went down the stairs as fast as possible without Apparating. Her mind was racing; her pulse was going through the roof. She had to discuss this with someone she could trust, someone who wouldn't tease her, who understood how her heart had ached for years. She had to talk to Hermione.

"Mum! Can I use the fire to call Hermione by Floo?"

"Of course, dear. Let me set it up, the Grangers are at a restricted address."

"*Restricted address, what's that about?*" Ginny thought to herself.

Molly picked up a small stoneware jar from the fireplace mantle, poking the fireplace into a cheery green blaze with her wand. Throwing a pinch of Floo powder into the fire, she spoke softly but clearly "***Nexus Silver Otter***." Turning to face her daughter, she said, "You forget what you just heard now. The Granger's Floo connection is code word protected; not just any Tom, Dick or Harry can call them or pop through their fireplace. I don't think they'd mind Harry, though, now that I think of it."

"Thanks, Mum, I can take it from here," Ginny replied.

Bending down to the hearth, Ginny said "Grangers'" and stuck her head into the flames, fighting the churning in her stomach as her head was transported to a hearth halfway across Britain. She'd been to the house before, so things were vaguely familiar, but the perspective from the hearth was always different.

“Hermione! Are you home? This is Ginny, I really need to talk to you!”

Ginny heard a clatter from the kitchen and the sound of women’s shoes clacking across the tile floor into the living room. Monica Granger walked into sight, startling briefly at the sight of a pert redhead sticking out of her fireplace, which just a moment ago did not have any fire in it.

“Oh, hello, Ginny. Hermione’s upstairs. I’ll go get her.”

Monica walked out of sight. Ginny heard Hermione’s mum calling her, followed by the sound of a teenager rocketing down the stairs.

“What’s up, Mastermind?” Hermione greeted.

“Uh, Hermione, can I come over and talk, right now? It’s really, really important.”

“Sure, Ginny. Let me ask Mum. Mum? Can Ginny come over for dinner?” Hermione called to Monica, who was somewhere out of sight.

“Fine with me, if it’s okay with her mother.”

Ginny didn’t wait for the message to be relayed to her through Hermione. Pulling her head out of the fireplace, she burst into the kitchen, narrowly avoiding knocking her mother over as she was bent over the open oven door. Molly looked at Ginny, holding her hand up for silence.

“First, I heard what you asked and what Monica said, and it’s fine that you go. Your brother doesn’t know that the Grangers’ Floo connection is open, and I’d very much appreciate it if you’d not tell him the code word for opening the connection, or I’ll have to have it changed again, but there’s a price for this, young lady.”

“What’s that Mum?”

Poking the barely concealed bulge at her daughter’s middle, Molly said, “I get to read the note when you get back.”

“Mum!” Ginny protested, knowing that in the end she’d surrender the letter.

“Off with you! Call me if you want to stay overnight. No code word is necessary for opening the connection on their end. They’ve got Floo powder in a brass jar on their mantle.” Molly looked at Ginny briefly, got a kiss on the cheek from her daughter, who dove into the green flames with a shout of,

“Grangers’!”

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The fireplace at Grangers’ house belched a great green fireball into the living room. Skidding out of the fireball, across the flagstone floor was a small, red-haired girl who came to a stop at Monica

Granger's feet, leaving a trail of fine soot behind her. The fireplace hiccupped once and went dark.

"Hello, Ginny, marvelous that you can come visit us. Is Floo travel always like this?" Monica asked.

Ginny coughed once, brushed the soot from her face and stood up with assistance from Hermione. "Pretty much, Mrs. Granger, pretty much. I skid farther than most people in my family, Dad thinks it's because I'm lighter."

"Oh, very well then, I'm back to the kitchen. Dinner will be at half past six."

"Thanks, Mum," Hermione said. Turning round to her girlfriend she said, "So, what's the big rush, did you get your Hogwarts letter and make Prefect?"

Ginny stared at Hermione as if she'd slapped her. "What *are* you talking about? The only way I'll make prefect is if 16 Gryffindor girls in my year drop dead!"

"Ginny, there are only 17 Gryffindor girls in your year," Hermione answered.

"That's what I mean, the only way I'd make Prefect would be if the rest of them dropped off of the face of the earth," Ginny replied.

"So what is it?"

"Not here, upstairs."

Racing upstairs, the two friends burst into Hermione's room, slamming the door after them. Ginny brushed off the remaining soot from the Floo trip, checking her hair in the mirror.

"All right, cough up," Hermione demanded, using her best Prefect's voice, turning Ginny away from the mirror.

"What you are about to hear never ever leaves this room, okay?" Ginny asked.

Hermione stood at attention, making the Girl Guide salute. "Guide's honor."

"You were a Girl Guide?"

"Right up to the time I started at Hogwarts. I'd still be one, but they don't have a chapter at Hogsmeade."

Ginny slowly lifted her blouse, pulling out the letter from her waistband. "It's happening, Hermione, it's finally happening," Ginny gushed. She'd discussed over and over again with Hermione how she'd felt about Harry, and how she felt invisible whenever she was around him. It had been the ongoing topic of many of their girl-to-girl talks.

Hermione took the letter from Ginny, sinking down onto her bed. She read the letter through quickly, and then started over again at the beginning. Looking up at Ginny with watery eyes, she asked, "Is all this correct?"

"Pretty much," she answered. "There's a few things that I don't recall, but they sound right."

"Well, if you want more confirmation, take a look at the letter he sent me on Sunday," Hermione said, wandering to her desk to retrieve Harry's latest letter.

Ginny read that letter with great interest, clapping her hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter halfway through. "He thinks I'm dating Dean!" she squealed.

"Ginny, *I* think you're dating Dean, along with half of Gryffindor! Aren't you?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione, I just said that on the train to shut my brother up!"

Hermione was silent for a while, looking out the window. Turning back to Ginny she said: "Yeah, well, be a little more careful with your disinformation next time; this fib is getting too much traction. You may have cooked your goose, my friend."

"How's that?"

"I know Harry, boy do I know Harry, and there's one thing he'd never, ever do."

"What's that?"

"He'd never double cross one of his mates, not even for a girl."

"What are you saying?"

"As long as Harry thinks you are dating Dean Thomas, he will treat you like you're a Blast Ended Skrewt."

"Oh," Ginny said.

She sat at the foot of Hermione's bed, slumping. Her mind was racing, her hands were picking at the hem of her blouse, pinching and twisting the fabric. "When I came over here, I was the happiest girl in all England. Now I'm toast, Hermione, I'm toast. This is so bloody unfair!" Ginny's eyes began to glisten. Soon the tears would start streaming.

"Language, Ginny. Who made you lie to your brother about Dean?"

"I know, I know, I've dug my own hole and fallen in. That doesn't mean that I have to be happy about it."

Monica rapped on the door. "Hermione, dear, it's time to set the table, dinner is almost ready."

“Coming Mum!” she replied. “There’s a solution here somewhere, Ginny. I’m not going to let you get this close just to crash. We’ll talk more after dinner, okay?”

“Sure, Hermione. I’m just glad I have you to talk through all this.” She turned to wipe her eyes and compose herself, taking a deep breath.

“Gryffindor girls have to stick together.”

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Dinner at the Grangers’ was subdued, but interesting. The conversation alternated between Monica and Albert telling amusing (but slightly embarrassing) stories from Hermione’s childhood and Albert quizzing Ginny on her upbringing at the Burrow and life at Hogwarts. Ginny was in the middle of an explanation of how Quidditch was played, using the centerpiece, two slices of French bread and a salt shaker when Albert’s pager chimed. Albert pulled the offending pager off of his belt, looked at the number displayed and walked away from the table. The ladies remaining at the table could hear him place a phone call from the kitchen wall phone, but were not privy to the details. Moments later, Albert returned to the dining room.

“Monica, I’ve got to go into the surgery and attend to this afternoon’s patient. A wisdom tooth extraction has dry sockets and I’ve got to do something to stop the bleeding. I’m sorry, ladies, but duty calls. Monica, I’ll be out late. Ginny, it’s been a pleasure getting to know you, and I hope we can have you over again soon.”

Albert crossed over to the end of the table, kissed his wife on the lips, kissed Hermione on the cheek, grabbed his cap and jacket and walked into the kitchen, exiting through the garage door.

Hermione looked at Ginny, cleared her throat, and said “Ginny, I think we should ask Mum for help with your predicament.”

Ginny shot Hermione a look that could have removed paint from a battleship. Hermione returned the glare as if to say “You want to fix this or not?” Ginny surrendered, and then turned her gaze to Monica, with a look reminiscent of Filch examining a Hogwarts malefactor. “Can you keep a secret?” she asked.

Nodding in Hermione’s direction, Monica replied, “I’ve been keeping hers for years.”

“All right then,” Ginny replied.

Ginny raced up the stairs to Hermione’s room, returning moments later with Harry’s thin letter to Hermione and her thick letter of today. Hermione began to clear the table. Monica re-read Sunday’s letter to her daughter, then read today’s letter to Ginny. She slapped the table and then looked up, first at Hermione, then at Ginny smiling cryptically, saying, “So, I’m right, and you, Ginny, are the *amourata* .”

“The what?” Ginny asked

“The object of Harry’s affections,” Monica replied.

“I wouldn’t go that far, Mrs. Granger, but I do seem to have his attention,” Ginny answered.

“Well, that’s the first step. Boys are slow, and you have to get their attention before anything else happens. You want the attention, am I correct? So what is the problem?”

“The problem is that Harry thinks that I’m dating one of his roommates from school.”

“And are you?”

“No.”

“Why does Harry think that?”

“Because I told my brother Ron that I was dating Dean, one of his roommates, so that Ron would get off my back.”

“Ah, the light begins to shine. Now you are wondering how you dig your way out of this problem without looking like a lying dirtbag shrew.”

“Mum!” Hermione protested.

“Just calling a spade a spade, dear,” Monica replied.

“That’s about the sum of it, yeah,” Ginny said, her neck turning a shade of red to match her hair.

“Have you discussed this with your mum?”

“My mum? No, not yet, we were going to do that when I got back from your house.”

“Hermione, dear, could you fire up the fireplace so we can call Molly on this Floo thing?”

Ginny stood up, a host of emotions flashing across her face as she looked at Hermione, flashing her a “what have you gotten me into now, dear sister” look. Hermione stared back, communicating the calm she never applied to her own life’s challenges.

“I’d better do that, Mrs. Granger. Mum doesn’t want anybody to know that you’re hooked up to the Floo Network, and we don’t know who’s at the Burrow right now,” Ginny said calmly.

“That would be fine – I think we need her perspective on this.”

Ginny walked to the mantle and pulled down the round brass canister. Opening the container she pulled a small pinch of Floo powder from the can and soon had a smallish green fire blazing in the Granger fireplace. “The Burrow,” she commanded. “Mum, are you there?” Ginny asked, sticking her head into the flames. A somewhat lengthy conversation went on for a minute, ending when Ginny pulled her head out of the waning flames. The fireplace went out of its own accord. “Mrs.

Granger, could you be so kind as to open the back door? Mum will be Apparating to your back yard in a minute or so.”

“Certainly, Ginny.”

A moment later Molly Weasley came through the door, dressed in her best cloak over everyday robes, carrying the remains of an apple pie. “Lovely to see you again, Monica. If you can brew some tea, I’ve brought dessert.” Turning to Ginny, she said: “So, can I assume that this has something to do with today’s Passbox post?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Hand it over dear, there’s no time like the present.”

Ginny brought her Mum the two letters. Molly pulled reading glasses out of a pocket in her cloak, and began to read the mail. Ginny stood behind her, rereading the note while she tortured the hem of her blouse again.

Dear Ginny,

I’ve written and rewritten this letter a half a dozen times since I started it at Hogwarts. I had a pretty good draft going the night I fell asleep with my quill. My window was open, and it rained in the morning, so to add insult to injury, that draft got wiped out in the rain. So, here I am again, writing from scratch. I want to thank you again for the Passbox; it’s been brilliant this summer. I also want to apologize for how I’ve slighted you over the past few years, treating you like you were invisible. You weren’t invisible, at least not to me, but I did ignore you because my world was limited to classes, Ron, Hermione and Quidditch. In spite of all this, you’ve been a good friend to me; but you were wrong about one thing, my mastermind friend. I did notice you.

I noticed you the first day I saw your family on Platform 9 & 3/4 at King’s Cross Station. You were wearing a brown jumper and had a blue ribbon in your hair. At the end of that year I noticed you the morning you came down to breakfast in your nightgown, squeaking when you saw me – your nightgown was pale blue with yellow flowers on the sleeves. I remember your elbow mashing the butter at dinner that week, you seemed a bit jumpy around me; at breakfast, your bowl survived the drop to the floor, but your porridge did not. I noticed, and was grateful, when you took on Malfoy in the bookstore after my first run in with the great Gilderoy Lockhart. I just wish that I’d noticed you more at school that year when Tom had his hooks into you; perhaps I could have saved us both a lot of mess and pain. I’ve noticed a lot of things since that time too. Here’s my little list:

1. When you drink tea, you take sugar but no cream; unless it’s herbal tea, then you just take a tad of honey.
2. When you take coffee you take both cream and sugar.
3. You write right-handed, but play Quidditch ambidextrously (see, hanging out with Hermione has improved my mind; I can use big words properly).
4. When you’re fibbing about small things, you tend to look away; when challenged, you make eye contact, but you don’t blink, ever.
5. At home your hair smells like apples. At Hogwarts your hair smells like bitter melon.

6. You carry a watch, but never wear it on your wrist; instead, it's in your pocket.
7. When you wear a bracelet, you wear it on your left wrist.
8. When you wear an ankle bracelet (yes, I look, I'm only a bloke) you wear it on your right ankle.
9. You never eat toast without butter.
10. You prefer apple butter to marmalade, and God help those who get between you and the strawberry jam at Hogwarts in the morning.
11. You like to stay up late at night, but rarely past 11:00 p.m..
12. You do not like morning.
13. You carry a tune nicely, and sing harmony on many songs.
14. I think you sing alto, but don't hold me on that.
15. You know more French than I do (which isn't saying much).
16. You like to take notes using coloured ink, but never use red ink.
17. You are a very good dancer. On some of the songs, you sing along with the music, singing the harmony part.
18. You prefer dark chocolate to milk chocolate, and think that white chocolate is gross.
19. At dinner you'll often make a well in your mashed potatoes and fill it with vegetables.
20. You eat broccoli and cauliflower with a light drizzle of balsamic vinegar.
21. You know the difference between balsamic vinegar and apple cider vinegar.
22. At the end of the day, the first thing you do in the common room is take off your shoes.
23. I've never seen you wear shoes at the Burrow unless you are getting ready to go outside.
24. When you wear Muggle clothing, you dress modestly (you have no idea how much I appreciate this).
25. You got your ears pierced the summer of your third year, after the Triwizard tournament.
26. You can't see Thestrals (be thankful).
27. Your Patronus is a dragon; Welsh Green, I think.
28. You didn't write my singing Valentine, Fred and George are to blame for that.
29. When you buy things, you put the change in your left pocket and the receipt in your right pocket.
30. You don't particularly like Fizzing Whizbees.
31. You do like Pepper Imps, especially after dinner.
32. You do better in Potions than I do.
33. Your hair is almost always up in a ponytail at meals, down when you're studying, and dealer's choice for classes.
34. When you are taking notes quickly, you randomly forget to cross your t's.
35. You pick the green onions out of Hot and Sour Soup.
36. You don't care for lima beans or brussels sprouts (I can't blame you!).
37. Your favorite cake is chocolate.
38. Your favorite fruit pie is cherry, followed by apple. You don't care much for pumpkin pie.

39. You like corned beef way more than Ron does.
40. You like strong mustard.
41. You drink coffee with your left hand.
42. When you put your hair up in a ponytail, you often miss a wisp of hair at the base of your neck, which is always curled in a semicircle.
43. You never button the top button of your blouse. (One of many salient differences between you and Hermione.)
44. When sunlight hits your eyes at just the right angle, flecks of gold appear in your irises.
45. You do crossword puzzles in ink.
46. You prefer gloves to mittens.
47. In the winter, you prefer scarves to hats.
48. You never wear rings.
49. Your ginger biscuits are as good as your mum's.
50. On the night of Sirius' wake you wore honeysuckle perfume. (I had to ask Aunt Petunia the name of the vine that grows on their garden wall after I came back from the wake. I've been trimming that blessed vine every spring for years, but never knew or cared what it was called until then.)

In earlier versions of this letter, I got this list up to one hundred items, but I think I've made my point. I'm moody, sullen, withdrawn, subject to bursts of anger, not very communicative, not very good at many aspects of social interaction, but I do notice things about other people, and I definitely noticed you.

Ever your friend,
Harry

Molly looked up from the letters. "Where did you get Honeysuckle perfume, Ginny?"

"From Penelope. She put it in my stocking two years ago at Christmas – it's a Muggle perfume."

"That's right – I'd forgotten. So, you have his attention. What seems to be the problem?" Molly asked.

Hermione and Ginny burst into a fit of nervous laughter as Monica brought a tea tray to the table. "That's the same thing I asked, Molly, it must be the Mum line of the evening." Monica announced.

Drinking tea, eating pie, swapping stories, the three witches and one Muggle mum chatted on into the night, making plans that would never be discovered by any male alive. When they left, they had a plan and an agreement. Harry would never know what had hit him.

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Complaints, comments, offers? Write me at kokopelli20878@yahoo.com – I write back.

The Letters of Summer Meet the Tutor

Chapter 8 – Meet the Tutor

Tonks was nervous. She was pacing in the garden behind Arabella Figg's house. In the past ten minutes her hair colour had gone from red to blond to black to green, back to red, finally settling on flamingo pink. Her nails were the next morphing target, changing shape from close trimmed nails to three inch stiletto points; changing colour from pearl gray, to gold, to red, to black, and finally settling on an assortment of colours that reminded Harry of a box of crayons, each nail a different colour. Harry finally snapped with all the fidgeting.

“Tonks, give it a rest! He'll be here when he gets here,” Harry said testily.

“I'm worried, Harry,” she said, but Harry never found out what she was worried about; a somewhat familiar cracking sound followed an odd, low *plunk* that sounded like the snap of a large, long rope. Without warning, Tonks smacked into Harry, knocking him to the ground and kneeling over his prone body, wand drawn in one hand, mobile phone in the other.

Standing in front of Tonks was a thin, elderly, bearded man dressed in Muggle clothing. He had apparently just Apparated into the garden. The visitor had no wand and was carrying a four-footed cane similar to that favored by many of the rehabilitation patients at St. Mungo's.

“Please put that wand away, young lady, you won't be needing it just now,” the old man said. He sank to the garden bench behind him with a weary sigh. Tonks said nothing, keeping her eyes on the man, wand still pointed at his chest. Although she was panting lightly, her wand hand was steady. The man sighed again. Pursing his lips to whistle, he blew two short sharp chirps. Tonk's phone and wand went flying into the air where they were caught effortlessly by the visitor.

“Madame Auror, would you please be so kind as to get up off of my student. I would like to introduce myself. I assure you that had I meant any harm to either one of you, you would be dead already.”

Tonks stood up, pulling Harry up as she did so.

“Don't try to take the boy's wand, Miss,” the man said. “I wasn't born yesterday.”

Harry spat, getting the dirt and grass out of his mouth. Straightening his glasses, Harry stepped

forward, extending his hand. *“Dumbledore says that I can trust the tutor as much as I trust him. I hope he’s right,”* thought Harry.

“Harry Potter, sir. And you would be?”

The man looked up at Harry, ignoring his outstretched hand. “Abelard,” the man said, staring at Harry’s face.

Harry withdrew his hand, sticking it into his pocket. *“This is one odd character that Dumbledore sent,”* Harry thought to himself.

“You are Lily’s boy,” Abelard stated. It wasn't a question.

“Yes, sir.”

“I only met your father once, but I knew your mother well. I was quite fond of her. That was before your time, of course. Madame Auror, if you promise to behave yourself, I will return these items.” With that, Abelard stood, handing Tonks the phone and wand in turn.

“Thanks. I’m Tonks,” she said, not proffering her hand. “Moody says ‘hello.’”

A smile flickered across Abelard’s face at the mention of Moody’s name. “Still alive, is he? Nice to know some of the dinosaurs remain on this earth.”

“I was at Moody’s house last night. He still has your decorations, sitting on his fireplace mantle,” Tonks volunteered.

The old man snorted. “That’s not where I told Moody to put them.”

Now it was Tonk’s turn to snort. “Moody still has to work with the Ministry, you know. It would be a bit strained if he shoved those medals up the Minister’s arse as you requested.” She had a cross-eyed smile on her face as she apparently contemplated Moody bending Fudge over to make a suppository delivery.

“Let them stay on the mantle then,” Abelard sighed.

Tonks’ face went serious again, looking intently at Abelard. “Answer me this, Abelard. How did you Apparate into Arabella's garden? This house is under a class-five ward, same as Hogwarts. I checked it myself this morning,”

“There's nothing wrong with that ward, Madam Auror. It's true that you can't Apparate through a class five ward.” Abelard looked down at the ground briefly, closing his eyes. With a muted pop, Abelard Disapparated, reappearing seconds later behind Tonks with a low twanging sound. Tonks had her wand drawn again.

“Yes, you can't Apparate through a class five ward . . . but I can,” Abelard stated with a slight smile.

"Godric's ghost, don't do that!" Tonks shouted, angrily sheathing her wand in her sleeve. Looking at him with a narrow, guarded glare she asked "How many people know how to bypass the wards?"

"Oh, not to worry, Madam Auror, we killed all the people who had the basic abilities to do that trick during the last war. Dumbledore can't do it; Riddle can't do it either. Tell your Aurors, though, that if either side develops fully qualified Seers during this war, you can kiss your wards goodbye."

Harry spoke up, trying to piece together stories that Laurel had told him along with discussions he'd overheard at Grimmauld Place last summer. "Mr. Abelard, what's the connection between Seers and anti-Apparition wards?"

"It's Abelard, Harry, just Abelard, no Mister. To answer your question, that trick ties together Farsight, Foresight and Apparition. Precious few wizards or witches develop all three skills to the point where they can tie them together in a useful way. As far as I know, I'm the only one alive who can do that. The Seers worthy of the name left in Asia and the Americas don't care to learn anything about Apparition, saying that it 'disturbs their inner eye.'" Abelard paused, looking at Harry, then at Tonks. "Madam Auror, I need to get going if I'm going to accomplish anything tonight."

"Go right ahead," Tonks replied.

"Not here. I need to take Harry somewhere secure and under my control. The wards and traps surrounding this estate will interfere with the scan I need to perform. I'll bring him back in two hours." Abelard began to trace a rectangle in the air with two fingers. The rectangle began above his head and ended level with the grass. As his fingers traced through the air, a doorframe the colour of burnished bronze appeared.

"I don't think so," Tonks replied. "Nothing in my brief said that you'd be taking Harry away from this estate." Tonks began to finger the handle of her wand.

"It would take days to take down all of the wards and traps surrounding this estate – it is far easier to take Harry away, so I can accomplish something useful. It goes without saying that you'll have to remain." Abelard replied in a calm but firm voice as if he were explaining some unpleasant fact to a small child.

Tonks began to puff, similar to the way Hermione would wind herself up before she got into a screaming match with Ron. As Tonks began listing all the reasons why Harry should not be taken from her sight, Abelard began to pat down the pockets of his trousers, shirt and jacket as if looking for something. Opening his jacket, Abelard pulled a cloth-wrapped bundle much larger than anything he could have conceivably held inside his jacket. The bundle began to squirm, then sputter, breaking into the lusty wail of a bawling baby. This brought a brief stop to Tonk's tirade as she goggled at the swaddled bundle in disbelief. Abelard tossed the bundle to Tonks, who tripped over herself to catch the crying, flying baby. As she caught the bundle, she disappeared. A moment later, she re-appeared in the garden, only to disappear again, holding the bundle with

one hand and her mobile phone in the other.

"Portkey?" Harry asked.

"Yup," Abelard replied.

"How did she get back?" Harry asked.

"Her mobile phone is a programmable Portkey – unfortunately the baby package is also programmed to incapacitate her if she tries to return here before two hours elapses."

"Where is she now?"

"A very nice beach in Tunisia, Harry. If she has the right attitude about it, she'll be just fine. Between now and then I'll think of something to make up to her – I have the notion that she's not going to have much of a sense of humor about this – Aurors can be so grim and narrow at times."

Abelard returned to the doorframe. Tracing his fingers where the doorknob would be if it were a conventional door, a squigglish handle appeared, shaped like a tilde. Turning to Harry, he motioned to the partially visible door.

"After you, Mr. Potter."

"Why can't you touch the door first?"

"A fair question. When you touch the handle to the door, it will be sealed to your touch, you will be able to open the door thereafter without any exercise of magic."

"Is that like a blood seal?"

"Yes and no. It's like a blood seal in that it will recognize you against all others on this planet, but it doesn't need any of your blood to seal the magic. Now where did you learn about blood seals? I thought they went out of style when Victoria was Queen."

"Uh, a lady friend of mine uses them," Harry replied.

"Sealing her diary?"

"Yeah, also sealing the knobs on my Passbox," Harry murmured, looking at the Cheshire doorframe, partially visible in the wan light from the street, barely visible in Mrs. Figg's garden.

Abelard looked into Harry's eyes; Harry stared back. As he looked in Abelard's eyes, he noted how cold and dark those brown eyes appeared. He felt a shiver of cold go down his neck, like a drop of rainwater. The feeling passed quickly and Harry saw Abelard smiling again.

"Shall we?" Abelard asked.

Harry froze momentarily. *“Dumbledore says that I can trust him, but Tonks was mightily worried about something. I’m safe here in Little Whinging, but he wants to take me away,”* Harry thought to himself. *“How do I know it’s safe to go with you?”* he asked.

“What did Dumbledore say?”

“He said I could trust you the same way I trust him.”

“What does your heart say, Harry?”

Harry startled at this question. Several people regularly asked him what he thought, but almost no one, apart from Hermione, ever asked him visceral questions like this. He examined his brief perceptions of Abelard, put up against the scant bits that he’d gleaned from Laurel, Tonks and Dumbledore. His mum had trusted him enough to choose him for apprenticeship, but then again, his mum had trusted Peter Pettigrew also. *“What do I feel?”* he asked himself. Looking up at Abelard, Harry knew the answer. Abelard wanted nothing from him, and certainly had the power to take him anywhere against his will. He’d brushed Tonks, a very powerful witch, aside like an overly friendly lap dog, but when it came time to rush Harry elsewhere, he didn’t resort to force or trickery. For reasons that Harry couldn’t quite put his finger on, he knew that Abelard could be trusted. He hoped this intuition was correct. He’d find out soon enough if he were wrong.

“That you’re ok.” Harry answered. “Let’s go then.”

Harry grasped the bronze handle. As he did so, he felt a brief tingle in his hand and the balance of the door became visible, looking like a brown and yellow striped gemstone. Harry searched his memory for the name of the stone. *“Tigereye,”* he thought to himself. Twisting the handle, he pushed forward, opening the door into a brightly-lit garden by the sea. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Abelard behind him in Mrs. Figg’s garden, which was in the waning light of a setting sun. He walked through the door, keeping the doorknob firmly in his grip. Abelard followed, walking forward into the garden. He turned, looking at Harry.

"You can let go of the door now, Harry. You are quite safe here."

"Where am I?" Harry asked.

"A place you've never heard of. That's not a sea, it's a freshwater lake. By local time it's about half past noon. Put it all together and you can figure out that you're somewhere in North America, but that information alone won't get you very far. During the first war my security was never breached – which is more than I can say for Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix, which is why I haven't spoken to him for almost 15 years."

"So, what do we do now?"

"You'll join me in a small snack, then you'll take a walk on the beach here while I read your signature – what Trelawney would call your aura."

"So what will that do?"

"It will tell me whether I've wasted my time coming here today, or whether you have a problem that I can assist in solving."

Harry let go of the door handle and pushed the door closed. As it clicked shut, it disappeared. Abelard took no notice of the disappearing door and began to walk down the beach. It was not a sandy beach, but instead consisted of smooth pebbles that crunched as they walked. They walked in silence for a while until they found a path that led away from the beach, up a small hill. At the top of the hill was a shelter – several high-backed reclining wooden Adirondack chairs were gathered in a circle. In the middle of the circle was a Muggle cooler. Abelard stood his cane next to the cooler, sat in one of the chairs and opened the cooler. Looking up at Harry, Abelard waved to one of the chairs. Harry sat down.

"What would you care for, Harry?"

"What are you offering?"

"Well, I've got stuffed buns filled with meat and vegetables, buns stuffed with what appears to be pineapple custard, and what looks like root beer."

"Root beer?"

"Think of it as American Butterbeer, but without any appreciable alcohol content."

"I'll take one of each."

"Good choice – I'm quite fond of all of what's in here today."

They ate in silence, Harry discovering that he was actually quite hungry, notwithstanding the fact that he'd eaten dinner with the Dursleys just over an hour ago. The food was warm; the root beer was cold. The buns were delicious. The meat bun was filled with what appeared to be chopped beef, onion and shredded carrot with a hint of ginger. Abelard was dipping his in a bowl of a dark smelly liquid as he ate it. He offered Harry a bowl of his own, but after sniffing the liquid, Harry politely declined. The custard filled buns were warm and filled with a concoction that teased Harry's tastebuds as he tried to identify the flavours involved: pineapple, coconut, a hint of nutmeg? Harry abandoned the analysis and devoured the bun, wiping the crumbs from his hands and face when he was done. He looked up to find Abelard watching him.

"Care for a gin-gin?"

"What's that?"

"My own version of a Muggle sweet – it's a hard candy flavored with ginger, lovely for clearing the palate."

"Sure."

Harry took the candy, which was in a small plastic wrapper. Putting the wrapper in his pocket (as there was no wastebasket handy) Harry began to suck on the candy which was quite strong flavored, balancing the hot of fresh ginger with a pleasant sweetness. As he sucked on the sweet, he noticed that his vision was beginning to go odd. A good part of his mind began to panic, thinking that Dumbledore had been wrong about Abelard being trustworthy.

"Don't be alarmed, Harry, you may be seeing things, courtesy of the gin-gin. You're perfectly safe. What do you see?"

Harry replied warily, "I see a circle of light surrounding you. I see a similar layer of light around me. The grass is turning orange and the chairs, which had been white, are turning blue and red."

"Very good, very good indeed," Abelard said, putting his fingertips together. "If you spit the candy out and wash it down with some root beer, you'll find your vision returns to normal."

Harry took aim and blew the gin-gin several yards down the trail leading up to the shelter. Three swigs of bubbly root beer and a satisfying belch later, his vision was back to normal. Harry looked at Abelard.

"So, what was that all about with the gin-gin?" Harry asked, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

Abelard didn't answer at first, looking out over the lake, scratching his close cropped white beard. Turning to Harry after a moment he said, "It's a screening test."

"For what?"

"For Seers."

Harry looked at Abelard in stunned silence. "So, what's it mean?" he said finally.

"It means that you inherited more from your mum than her pretty green eyes and sense of empathy. You're a Seer, Harry; or at least you've got the gift, whether you choose to develop it or not is up to you."

"You must be joking, Abelard. I've been on the edge of flunking Divination since first year."

"I'm as serious as a Dementor attack, Harry. If it's any comfort to you, your mum felt the same way about Divination. She called Sybil's predecessor a hopeless, gormless fraud. She was correct, of course. That teacher knew as much about being a Seer as I know about breeding sea serpents."

"Do you know much about breeding sea serpents?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"Not a blessed thing." Abelard replied, a crinkle in his eyes suggesting a smile, while the balance of his face looked somber. "Sit down, boy, it's time to do some work. Ever played with bones?"

"Bones?"

"Dice," Abelard said as he pulled a pair of giant dice from his pocket. Each was the size of a walnut; one was black with white dots, the other was red with green dots. "Standard cubical dice, each with six sides, numbered with coloured dots on the cubes' faces. We'll start with one die first. Pick up the red die. Good. Now, close your eyes. Visualize throwing the die. Now, in your mind, look to see which number is on top after throwing the die. Got that? Now, throw the die."

Harry did so.

"I'll be hanged," Harry said, mildly surprised. "That was just chance – let me try it again." Harry closed his eyes briefly, opened them and threw the red die again. "I'll be hanged twice," Harry said, his temper beginning to rise. "What's the trick?" Harry was certain that Abelard was having him on, manipulating the dice somehow. No way was Harry willing to believe that *he* was seeing the fall of chance before it happened.

"No trick," Abelard explained. "This is Foresight, plain and simple. The residue from the gin-gin is enhancing your natural abilities, but for this trick you either have it or you don't. You have it, strongly, just like your Mum."

"Is that why Voldemort killed her?" Harry asked, his voice cracking slightly.

"Harry, the proper answer to that question will take more time and energy than I have right now. I will be seeing you many times this summer, teaching you many things. Hold that question for our next session."

"You'll answer it then?"

"I'll answer every question truthfully, Harry, I cannot teach if there is a lie between us."

"You'll answer it next time?"

"Yes, Harry."

"All right, then. What do we do now?"

"I need to scry. Take a walk on the beach; skip stones; take a swim if you wish; anything that doesn't involve using magic with a wand. Come back here in a half hour. I may appear to be asleep then, but I assure you that I'll be hard at work," Abelard said with a slight smile.

"Okay then," Harry said, rising from the chair, giant dice in his left hand. He crunched down the path to the freshwater sea, rolling the dice in his fingers. Looking back once, he saw Abelard leaning back in the wooden chair, hands on his knees, palms up, eyes closed, looking for all the world like an old man napping in the sun. Harry noted the time on his watch, deciding that he'd walk north on the beach and began his stroll. About a tenth of a mile down the beach from the path he found a number of flat stones, suitable for skipping. Smiling to himself, he tried his hand at skipping the stones. The water was rough and Harry's aim unsure. The first two stones merely

sank into the water. The next three stones, however, skipped twice each before joining their companions underwater.

The pebbly beach gave way to dark, grey-brown sand that made for comfortable walking. Harry enjoyed this stroll, taking off his trainers and socks to wade in the gentle surf as he walked along the shore. The water was cold, cold enough that Harry was sure that he was not going for a swim, but the cold water on his feet helped keep him awake as he walked. It was a strange feeling to be as tired as at the end of the day, while walking on a beach at noon, but Harry had grown used to much odd juxtaposition since entering the magical world, and took this one in stride. Looking at his watch, he reckoned that it was about time to return to Abelard. As he came to the border where the sandy beach became the pebbly beach, he paused to put his shoes on. He rolled the socks and put them into his pockets – experience had taught him that it was nearly impossible to put socks onto wet feet without using a Drying charm first, and Abelard had requested no magic with a wand. Harry mused whether or not Mafalda Hopkirk could detect a Drying charm performed in North America from her London office. He was fairly sure that he was beyond her reach, but today was not the day to find out the answer to that question.

Harry crunched up the path to the circle of chairs. Abelard did not stir as he approached. Harry looked at his watch and then looked back to Abelard. Without opening his eyes, Abelard spoke.

"I only look asleep – I was quite busy. I was glad to see that you regained your knack for skipping stones after the first two throws."

"How could you see that from here?" Harry queried.

"Farsight, dear pupil, the companion to Foresight. Line of sight is irrelevant to Seers – if only we had time to make you a proper student. No matter that – it's time to return."

"How did the scrying go?"

"It was sufficient. I can teach you how to close your mind to Voldemort, which is why Dumbledore sent his wolf to find me."

"You know Remus?"

"Yes, of course I know Remus – he was the only member of the Order of the Phoenix who tried to contact me after I went into exile after the first war. He never found me that time, but I met with him after word got out that he was looking for me. Dumbledore figured that if he were successful once in smoking me out, he'd be successful again. He was right, of course. Not much escapes that man, but when he's wrong, he's disastrously wrong."

"I know."

"Yes, you would know, wouldn't you? Could you be so kind as to assist me in rising?"

Harry extended his hand to Abelard. His grip was firm, but his hand was small, shrunken like the

rest of him with age. With an “oof” he stood, turning around slowly to grasp his cane with one hand and taking Harry’s elbow with the other. They began to walk down the path.

"What about the cooler?" Harry inquired.

"The brothers will fetch it before this afternoon ends."

"The brothers?"

"There's a Greyfriar Abbey about half an hour's walk south of here. This stretch of beach is part of their grounds. They are kind enough to let me use their grounds from time to time. I repay their favors – we find the relationship to be mutually beneficial," Abelard explained.

As the path emptied out onto the beach, Abelard let go of Harry's elbow, speeding up the pace of his walk a bit. Stopping suddenly, Abelard looked down at the pebbles briefly, closing his eyes. When he opened them he took his fingers and traced the doorframe again, complete with doorknob.

"Does the door go to different places?" Harry asked.

"It goes where I tell it," Abelard answered. "Could you be so kind as to pick up a couple of stones, Harry?"

"Sure."

"Thanks. It's time. Please take the door, Harry."

Harry grasped the door's handle, twisting it and pushing. Again, as he pushed the door forward, it became visible, opening out into Mrs. Figg's garden where it was now night. Harry walked forward, letting go of the door this time, stepping aside for Abelard to follow. If Tonks had made it back from the beach in Tunisia, she wasn't anywhere to be seen. The door closed of its own accord and disappeared.

Abelard shuffled off to sit on the bench again, looking tired, old and fragile. As he sat, he beckoned to Harry.

"Do you still have those stones, Harry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. We'll need them shortly."

"Are we waiting?"

"Yes, lad, for the Auror to return. It's time for me to make amends for my little trick." Pulling a pocket watch from his jacket pocket, he opened the watch, consulted it briefly and closed it again. "About now."

A tinkling noise was heard, like a far away wind chime. Tonks was back in the garden, carrying a rolled up beach towel. She looked at Harry, then at Abelard. She started to say something and then stopped herself. Her hair changed from pink to blonde to tomato red, lengthening as it changed until it was down to the middle of her back.

"Was that completely necessary, Abelard?" she asked, trying to maintain some dignity.

"Would you have let me take the boy off, alone, if I had not done that?" Abelard countered.

"Probably not."

"There's your answer then," said Abelard. "Harry would you kindly smack those two stones together?"

Harry shot Abelard a look of puzzlement, but he was sufficiently used to cryptic old wizards that he did as he was told, holding a stone in each palm as he clapped them together. Harry felt a flutter of magic as the stones collided and knew that he had to open his hands carefully, as the rocks had cracked and crumbled.

"Bring them here, lad," Abelard commanded.

Harry walked over to the bench where Abelard was sitting, held out his hands and opened them. A fine white powder covered Harry's palms. The remaining chunks of stone were also coated with the powder. Abelard picked up three of the bigger chunks of stone and wiped the powder off with his fingers. Removing the powder revealed transparent bits of stone with swirls of brown and green and milky white. Two of the chunks were shaped like large teardrops, while the other was a flat coin shape. As Abelard finished wiping the powder off the teardrops, he made a complex twisting motion with his finger and thumb. When he finished, each teardrop was now affixed to a gold earring hook. He made a similar motion with the coin shaped stone, which now had a length of gold chain attached to it, making a striking necklace. Blowing the powder off of his hands, he held the necklace and earrings out to Tonks.

"A peace offering, Madam Auror."

Tonks walked over to the bench, tucking the towel under one arm. Stooping slightly to pick up the jewelry she examined them in the dim light.

"I generally don't take kindly to bribes, but in this case I may make an exception. They're gorgeous, Abelard. How did you know I liked agate?"

"Lucky guess, Madam. Can you find it in your heart to forgive a miserable old man?"

"Just this time, Abelard, just this time."

Abelard looked into Tonk's eyes, smiling briefly. "Thank you. Tell Dumbledore that I can do what he requests. I'll be back Wednesday at 9:00 in the morning, to start with Harry's lessons."

“Why don’t you tell him yourself?” Tonks asked.

“We haven’t talked for 15 years; I’m not quite ready to stroll into his parlor as if nothing has happened.”

“When will you be ready?”

Abelard looked at Tonks as if she’d just poked him. “Soon. Tell him . . . tell him . . . I think it’s time we talked. Messages left with Fr. Martin manage to get through the fastest.”

“Thank you, Abelard.”

“For what?”

“For coming when you were called. Moody told me what happened. He didn’t think you’d come, not for Dumbledore.”

“He’s wrong on that point. I’d answer any request Dumbledore made on behalf of his students. Whatever has gone on between us does not change the respect I have for his position. Your wolf friend played the winning card though.”

“What was that?”

Abelard stood, walked hesitantly over to Harry, ruffling his hair. His eyes were wet. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Lily, even after she’s gone.” Abelard straightened himself, tugging his jacket straight. “Harry, until we meet again, I must ask that you refrain from playing the bones. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Abelard.”

Abelard bowed to Tonks, nodded to Harry, blinked briefly and Disapparated.

“Blimey, that man gives me the creeps,” Tonks said.

“Why’s that?” Harry asked. He was still forming his own opinion of Abelard. He was odd, brilliant at times, definitely dangerous, but he felt comfortable, like an old shoe.

“He looks so harmless – and he’s anything but. I’d rather hunt snow dragons in the dark than cross that man. C’mon, Harry, it’s time to take you home.”

Tonks strained her eyes briefly and swished her wand. She morphed into Mrs. Figg, and was dressed again in Mrs. Figg’s normal attire, down to her threadbare tartan slippers. Taking Harry’s arm, she walked back to the Dursleys’ as if she’d done it a hundred times. She let go of his arm as they walked up the driveway to Number 4 Privet Drive. “Good night, Harry – don’t stay up too late.”

“Good night, Sis’,” Harry said.

This brought a brief smile to Tonks' lips. Pulling back into character, she turned around and shuffled back to her house, disappearing into the darkness.

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Author's note: True Seers often exercise complementary gifts: Foresight, the ability to see future events and Farsight, the ability to see things as they truly are, whether hidden or a long way away. The buns Abelard served Harry are staples of Chinese cuisine – I've made the version stuffed with meat and vegetables – they are known as Bao Tse. The smelly liquid Abelard dipped them in is rice vinegar – it's an acquired taste. The pineapple custard buns are found in Chinese bakeries – I've never found a decent recipe – if you find one, let me know. Gin-gins are available in certain Muggle sweet stores, but not the version Abelard used, which are custom-made by very skilled Wizard Apothecaries, using restricted ingredients. Snow dragons, as any good Mahjong player could tell you, are exceptionally rare, and have the ability to turn invisible at will.

The Letters of Summer Letters from Elsewhere

Chapter 9 Letters from Elsewhere

Harry woke in a fog. It was still quite dark, his head was aching, and his mouth tasted like some small swamp creature had crawled into it and died during the night. He touched his scar after sitting up. “*Ok, it’s not my scar that’s hurting, it’s the rest of my head that feels like it was the Bludger at Beater practice,*” he thought to himself as he got to his unsteady feet. He shuffled into the lavatory, flicked on the light and looked for Dudley’s bottle of ibuprofen. Harry had spent quite a bit of time reading up on Muggle medicine, as two chapters of *Combat Charms and Countercurses* dealt with the subject. He’d supplemented this knowledge, at Hermione’s suggestion, with some late- night readings from Aunt Petunia’s copy of *The Physicians’ Desk Reference*. Armed with this self-taught knowledge, Harry was confident that he would not kill himself taking two tablets, although if Dudley found out he was nicking his favorite analgesic, there would be hell to pay. Washing down the tablets with a splash of water cupped in his hand, Harry turned out the light, dashing the hopes of the birds that had started chirping, and returned to bed.

No position in bed was comfortable. Harry shifted between half a dozen positions before settling in his last position by default: hands behind his head, legs flat, ankles crossed. He smiled briefly, thinking that Ron often fell asleep in this position. With that smile on his lips, he himself fell asleep.

The dreams came back, with a vengeance. Colours were lurid, as if paint cans in primary colours had been randomly poured into the memories of the past few days. Harry was poking the fly of Dudley’s lime green trousers while sitting in Harry’s flame orange bedroom. Making breakfast in Aunt Petunia’s eggplant purple kitchen with lemon yellow table and chairs, frying up a breakfast of green eggs and blue toast. Riding alongside Laurel on the river road; Laurel was attired in yellow and black from head to toe, the trees overhead were covered by blue, gold and black leaves.

It was a small relief that the final dream scene was normal-coloured. Harry was looking at a Muggle dining room. Behind the dining table was a large fireplace. On the mantle of the fireplace was a dried flower arrangement and a round brass canister, the size of a one-quarter kilo coffee can. The dining table was empty, except for a pie pan containing half a slice of apple pie. The slice of pie had the distinctive crimping on the crust that he had previously seen on Molly

Weasley's pies. In the dream Harry watched the sun rise through the open window. The birds began to sing their morning songs.

He sat up, fully awake now, wiping the crud out of his eyes and stretching his arms. The headache was gone, thank goodness. "*What a vivid dream,*" he thought. He pondered the scene. The room had looked familiar, he'd seen it before, but he didn't know where. Checking his watch, he got moving to start his morning chores. Whatever he'd done the day before to provoke the headache @had has left him feeling as weak and sore as if he'd been smacked several times in Quidditch scrimmage. He visited the loo, washed up, and began that day's breakfast.

The imagery from the dream was tantalizing the back of Harry's consciousness as he cooked. It was the sight of Dudley waddling down stairs that dislodged the evasive piece of memory. ". . . *like that bushy haired girl . . .*" At Grimmauld Place, last summer, Hermione had kept a candid family portrait on her dressing table; a snapshot of her with her mum and dad, standing in front of a fireplace. As Harry searched his memory, he was sure that the portrait didn't have the extraneous details from his dream: the brass canister; the dried flower arrangement; and the lone half-piece of pie in a pie plate on the table. Harry resisted the urge to smack Dudley in celebration of finding the missing dab of memory. Dudley wasn't the high-five type, and Harry was certain that Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon would not perceive it in the spirit in which it was given. Instead, Harry was more pleasant than normal, smiling as he polished off breakfast.

The Dursleys scattered after they'd eaten: Vernon to work; Petunia to a meeting with her friends; Dudley to a sale at the video game store. Harry cleaned up the remains of breakfast in an empty house. Whistling as he wiped down the counters, he took the dishtowel up the stairs and tossed it the length of the upstairs hallway to sink perfectly into the white laundry hamper. It wasn't quite as complicated as sinking a Quaffle through the Keeper-guarded goal ring, but it would do for a pinch on a Tuesday morning. Harry inspected the laundry bins and reckoned that the white load could do with a trip to the washing machine. Minutes later he was back in his room. The Hogwarts knob on the Passbox was lit. Opening the door, Harry found a large envelope, addressed to him in Professor McGonagall's bold, flowing hand.

Harry,

Several students have written to you, care of Hogwarts, asking that I forward these notes to you. I hope these notes find you well and in good spirits. I expect to write you soon about business for the coming year. MM

Harry slit the envelope open with his thumb. Inside were three more envelopes, each addressed to "H. Potter c/o Hogwarts, Attn: M. McGonagall." Two of the envelopes were written in neat, feminine hands, the third was a rougher, masculine hand that looked vaguely familiar. Harry took this last letter to read first. Opening the envelope, he quickly turned to the tail of the letter to see that Dean Thomas wrote it.

Dear Harry,

I hope you are faring well with the Muggles this summer. Hermione and Ginny were rounding up members of the D.A., asking if we could drop you a line this summer. They set up mail drops from their addresses and c/o McGonagall. By the time I'd unpacked, I'd lost both of

their addresses, but I figured I could reconstruct McGonagall at Hogwarts, seeing as I've been living there off and on for five years.

My summer has been brilliant thus far. Dad managed to snag primo tickets to the home games of the West Ham football team. Enclosed you will find a picture of Mick, scoring the winning goal at last week's game. Speaking of scoring, I'm back with my old Muggle girlfriend, Gina. What a hottie! I don't think that I'll be able to walk straight by the end of the summer, but I'll find a way to deal with it. Just to increase your suffering, also enclosed is a pic of me with Gina.

Keep safe, old man; I want to hear you tell me about your summer on the Express.

Your mate,

Dean Thomas

Inside the envelope were two Muggle snapshots. The first was a very nice shot of West Ham playing on their home field. Harry remembered something about Dean's dad being a sports photographer for one of the major daily papers. The next picture was a shot of Dean standing behind a very pretty black girl with more than a passing resemblance to Angelina Johnson. Harry could tell that Gina was shorter than Angelina, however, as she was half a head shorter than Dean. Harry blushed when he saw where Dean's hands rested in the picture. Molly Weasley would have smacked any of her boys if they'd posed like that, not to mention incinerating the picture afterwards. Harry folded the letter over the photos, placing them carefully back into the envelope which he put safely away with the rest of his summer correspondence.

Harry was glad that Dean was safe and apparently happy back in the Muggle world, even if he didn't want to think about what Dean was not-so-subtly implying in his note. "*Let's think about that later,*" he thought to himself. The remaining envelopes he took to his bed, sprawling across it Ron Weasley style. The envelopes were of identical size; the only salient difference was that one was written in black ink, while the other was written in green. Feeling whimsical, he opened the green ink envelope first. Scanning it quickly, he was surprised by the signature at the end: Marietta Edgecombe.

Dear Harry,

I hope your holiday is going well thus far. I bet you never expected to get a letter from Marietta-the-sneak, but here I am. I'm doing well, all things considered. The doctors at St. Mungo's are clueless, saying that I should be fine by the end of summer. They, of course, don't have to live with my current face.

If you could find it within yourself to ask Hermione about the hex she used, I'd be forever in your debt. The odd thing about this all is that there's a hole in my memory between going to see that Umbridge woman and finding myself in Dumbledore's office with the Minister of Magic and a squad of Aurors.

On the positive side, I've continued to practice what you taught in the D.A. class. I can now produce a corporeal Patronus, not just a wisp of smoke. Mum is scared these days. The Dementors are far more active than the Prophet is reporting.

Bye for now,

Marietta E.

Harry had mixed feelings after reading Marietta's letter. On one side, she'd betrayed all of the D.A. to Umbridge, nearly getting the entire lot expelled and his closest friends tortured or killed by Umbridge and her stooges. On the other side, the endless humiliation of wearing SNEAK across your face all day, seven days a week was pretty severe. To top it all off, she didn't remember how it had happened. Harry told himself that he would write to Hermione this morning, but first he'd read the remaining letter. Pulling the last envelope open, he caught the faintest of whiffs of perfume, a spicy smell that he associated with one girl in particular. A falling feeling passed across his stomach. Looking to the tail of the letter he saw that this was a note from Cho. His immediate reaction was to close the letter and send it back, but curiosity won out and he read the note. He was glad he did.

Dear Harry,

Hermione let me know how to forward mail to you, so I finally got around to writing you a note before I ran out of July. I've been seeing a lot of Michael Corner this summer; he's been helping me deal with a lot of things. Among other things, he set me straight on your relationship with Hermione. I AM SO SORRY about how I treated you over that girl!

Looking back over this past year, I conclude that I didn't treat you very well. We need to talk some time. The boy/girl thing didn't work for us, but I do want to be your friend. There are dozens of girls at Hogwarts who would sell their knickers to be your girlfriend. I had the chance and I blew it. The timing was all wrong, I guess. The fact that I was playing widow to Cedric didn't help things at all either. But enough emotional flopping.

My summer is going well. I'm helping Mum out in the office two days a week and spending most weekends at the beach. Last weekend there was a minor Dementor attack. You were right. It's a lot harder summoning a Patronus when the sky's gone dark, all is quiet and the cold of the Dementor is driving you mad with fear and dread. I got it right on the third try and my swan banished them all. (There were three!)

Afterwards I got a short note from Hopkirk's office, to which my mum sent a Howler in reply. I'm turning seventeen next week; I'm not too worried. I owe you big time, Mr. D.A. Instructor. Let's talk on the Express, and if not then, the first day after the Sorting Feast. (Once I get back on the grounds, I'll have way too much to do the first day, given my Prefect duties.) I don't have so many friends that I can afford to throw a good one away.

Love from,

Cho

Harry was pleased to hear from Cho, but the stomach fluttering that had plagued him for two years when he'd been within ten feet of her was gone, apparently for good. He was happy for Cho, especially that she was getting along well with Michael Corner. Apparently the "boy/girl thing" was working for them. Good, it should work for someone; Cho had lived through enough pain that she was due for some good times.

Harry was fiercely proud of Cho's performance during the Dementor attack. Knowing that under real-world circumstances one of his students had executed something that he'd taught made him feel like his wretched fifth year at Hogwarts had been worthwhile.

The urge to get his bicycle back on the road was strong, but Harry felt that he needed to jot a quick

note to Hermione before he hit the road.

Dear Hermione,

I had the oddest dream this morning; set in your parents' dining room. There were no people about, just the stuff that's normally there: dried flowers on the fireplace mantle along with a brass canister, a pie pan on the dining table with one small slice of apple pie. Nothing happened in the dream, other than watching the sunrise through the dining room window.

I got notes from Marietta, Cho and Dean today – all are doing well. Marietta wonders if you know how to reverse the hex that's currently decorating her face. Dean has a Muggle girl friend (wasn't he dating Ginny?) and Cho successfully routed some Dementors last weekend. Did the chocolate hit the spot, or did your mum intercept it?

I'm hearing the road calling me. I'll write again, soon.

Harry

Harry called Moey's number, the only one he now knew by heart. It was busy. Harry had not made all that many phone calls in his life, so he didn't know if this were unusual or not. He posted Hermione's note in the Passbox, closed up the house and grabbed his bicycle from the garage. Just to keep things interesting, he chose a different route out of Little Whinging, meeting up eventually with the river road. It was another perfect day for a ride; not too hot, not too bright, not too windy. Harry gave the dark cloud front a worried look, but figured that a little rain wouldn't destroy his morning ride. From time to time he'd check – in front, on the sides, behind him; no other riders were visible in any direction. Pacing himself, he set a goal of getting to the gazebo by the well before he took a break. Bending forward, he pumped the pedals at an even pace. He reckoned that he could keep this pace for an hour or more without flagging. His mind was idle, he was drinking in the signs and sounds in time and in tune with the rhythm of his bicycle. As he approached the gazebo he felt a stand of *something* across his face; evidently he'd snapped a thread of spider silk. Harry lifted a hand to stroke both sides of his face; whatever it had been, it wasn't there any more.

As he got closer to the gazebo, he noticed Laurel's bicycle propped up against one of the pillars. It was odd to find her out here all this way from Little Whinging, but nothing about her surprised him anymore. She was sitting down on one of the benches, pouring some steaming liquid from a vacuum bottle. Looking up as he came under the arch of the gazebo she said "Latte?"

Harry's first response was caution. "*I took a gin-gin from Abelard last night and had weird dreams all night long,*" he thought to himself, but Laurel was safe. "Sure, if you have enough," he replied.

"I've got a quart, I think I can spare a cup. I was on a stakeout last night, got in this morning, and was just about ready to turn in when I got Moey's call. Teach me to leave my fireplace connected to the Floo network."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be a burden for you."

"You're not, Harry. I'm just a cranky old lady this morning, rankled that my superiors don't look at my schedule before calling me. Riding with you is a pleasure; I'd do it even if I wasn't getting

time and a half for every hour over 18 that I work on one shift.” Laurel smiled wanly and handed Harry the cup she’d just poured. She poured herself another, this one twice the size of Harry’s cup. “Pay attention to the blue band at the bottom of the cup – twist it to the right and your latte gets hotter, twist it to the left, it’s colder. Twist it all the way to the left and you’ve got a wonderful latte Popsicle without a stick.”

“So what happens if I twist it all the way to the right?”

“You get boiling coffee all over your lap – guaranteed way to ruin your morning, which is why I never use these cups at home.”

The oldish woman and the youngish man sipped hot coffee for a while. Laurel broke the silence.

“So, what’s the matter, don’t like our company any more?”

“What do you mean?”

“Taking off without letting us follow.”

“I called. Moey’s line was busy.”

“She didn’t tell me that.”

“So, how did you find me?”

“Maps.”

“Maps?”

“Yeah, neatest thing, those maps. Some guy named Remus from the Order developed them.”

“Remus Lupin, you mean. He’s my guardian,” Harry said with some small measure of pride.

“That’s him. Didn’t know if you knew him or not.” Spreading out several parchments for Harry’s review, Laurel pointed to the smallest map. “This shows a 50 kilometer radius from number four, Privet Drive; major roads and geographic landmarks are indicated; all magical creatures and persons show up too.” Harry looked at the map, which bore more than a passing resemblance to the Marauder’s Map. There was a tiny marking at the edge of the map for “Pump house Oasis” which was accompanied by two black dots with labels: “Laurel, Auror” and “H. Potter, Student.”

“Fascinating,” Harry said, not letting on that he had the predecessor to this map in a carefully wrapped bundle in his school trunk.

“Yeah, we have a more detailed map of the five kilometer radius around your aunt’s estate and a couple of maps that are in-between. I got the call from Moey, scrambled to find you on the map, figured that you were heading here, Apparated here with all my gear and settled in for a refreshing power nap.”

“You weren’t sleeping when I got here,” Harry protested.

“Old Auror trick, Harry. After Apparating here, I set a charm on the 50 kilometer map so that if any new magical creatures or persons appeared, an alarm would ring. Next, I set a Gossamer ward on the roads leading to this pump house a tenth of a mile off. When you broke the Gossamer ward, it set off a different alarm, letting me know that company was coming.”

“Does the Gossamer ward feel like snapping a strand of spider silk?” Harry asked.

“Sure does.”

“I felt that on my face as I rode here. Thought it was odd that I could feel it, but never saw the spider silk.”

“Well, it’s called a Gossamer ward for a reason, Harry. Unlike other wards, it doesn’t keep a blessed thing out, but it’s right useful when you know how to link it to other charms. You won’t find it in the standard charms book at school, it’s only taught in the Auror apprenticeship.”

“Ok, I can say that I learned something today.”

“Not a total waste, eh?”

“Good day for a ride.”

Laurel looked to the sky and back at Harry. “Aye, that it is. How was your meeting with Abelard?”

“About as bizarre as having tea with Tonks, except that he’s not nearly as charming or good looking.”

“He always was a bit odd, that one.”

“You know him?”

“He saved my first husband’s life during the First War. I met him briefly when he was visiting my husband at St. Mungo’s. After that, I pleaded with Winston to quit Magical Law Enforcement. He refused, of course. He died a year later, apprehending the Lestranges after they tortured the Longbottoms.”

“Bit of a waste, wasn’t it, saving his life only to have him killed a year later?” Harry asked. As the words left his mouth, he knew that he’d uttered something horrid, but had no power to take the words back.

“I thought so at first. I kept a journal the first year that I was widowed. I tallied up all the times that we ate dinner together that year, how many times I made him breakfast, how many times he’d told me that he loved me before we fell asleep, how many times we kissed. It was the best year of my life.” Tears were welling up in Laurel’s eyes. “How much would you pay for another year

with Sirius Black?"

"I'd give all the gold in Gringotts just to have him back for another day," Harry replied, choking up as he said it.

"So," Laurel said, blowing her nose and taking a long draw on her coffee, "it wasn't a waste by any means. He's as odd as they come, but I think the world of Abelard."

"He's going to be my tutor – I'll be working with him for the rest of the summer."

"I'm surprised that he took the job."

"Why's that?" Harry asked, remembering Tonks' comment from the prior night.

"Word has it he had quite a row with Dumbledore a number of years ago. Showed up at his office, started smashing things right and left. He destroyed most every tool and trophy in the office before he stomped out, saying he was leaving Britain. As far as I know, he'd kept that promise until last night."

"What was the row over?" Harry asked, remembering his own evening, smashing up Dumbledore's office.

"Dumbledore's told you nothing about it?"

"Apparently it's one item on a long list of things that he's never told me about. I'd never heard Abelard's name until you mentioned it yesterday."

"Have some more coffee, Harry, this is going to be a bit of a tale." Laurel topped off Harry's cup and refilled her own. "How much do they teach about the First War in school?"

"Practically nothing – the rise of Voldemort isn't covered until seventh year in History of Magic, and by then not many students are taking the class."

"I can't say it's changed any since my day; it was worthless then too." Laurel took a long slurp from her cup and began her tale. "When the War began, the British Ministry of Magic had five Seers in its employ, a record number, I might add. Four of the lot had apprenticed under Abelard. The Department of Mysteries recognized Abelard as a Seer, but he had no official standing with the Ministry and intended to keep it that way. The Death Eaters had three Seers, two of whom had apprenticed under Abelard. Voldemort's first blow against the Ministry was murdering all of the Ministry's Seers. Took four the first night, killed the fifth the next night. Abelard was abroad, some say in India, others Africa. I don't have a clue as to who's right on that one. The Ministry refused to believe that these murders were anything other than a freakish bit of crime. Dumbledore saw them as the opening salvo in a larger war."

Laurel took another gulp of coffee. "Dumbledore reached out to Abelard and convinced him to assist the Order of the Phoenix for a time. There was a joint task force between a few Aurors who saw what was happening and the Order of the Phoenix. The task force tracked down and

eliminated the Seers working for the Death Eaters.”

“Eliminated?” Harry asked.

“They left in body bags, Harry. It wasn’t our finest hour in the war, but after that, the tide started to turn. That was the end to Abelard’s involvement, apart from the incident with my husband. He’d made a deal with Dumbledore.”

“What sort of a deal?”

“In return for eliminating the Seers who were under Death Eater control, Dumbledore was responsible for the safety of Abelard’s last student.”

“Who was that?” Harry asked, dreading that he already knew the answer.

“Your mum, Lily Evans. Abelard had spotted her during her seventh year at Hogwarts. She’d agreed to apprentice under him, but before she took her pledge, she changed her mind, married your dad and got pregnant with you. My sources say that Dumbledore and Abelard had many long, long arguments about that, but in the end, Dumbledore assured Abelard that he could keep Lily safe.”

“The *Fidelius* Charm,” Harry murmured.

“Exactly. Would have worked, too, if they hadn’t switched Secret Keepers at the end.” Laurel stood, stowed her gear in the panniers of her bicycle and stretched like a very well fed cat.

“Enough history for one morning. I believe that you came here to ride.”

In silence they took off, rejoining the river road, going further north than Harry had ever gone before. Laurel showed him how to cross the river and get to the road that ran parallel on the other bank, riding south to the next bridge, backtracking until Harry knew where he was again.

It was a good thing that Laurel was leading, as Harry’s heart was breaking again. Losing his parents had been the first wound in his life, and this primal wound never seemed to heal. It seemed that every year he spent in the magical world brought a new layer of pain where he’d find out yet more of the darkness that surrounded their betrayal and death.

It began to rain.

There are many types of rain that can fall on riders. Some rains reduce visibility to a few feet, causing all who are not lunatics to seek refuge until the rain passes. Another type of rain will stop and start again, never declaring its intentions until it disappears in the same manner as it arrived. Today’s rain was a slight, steady rain that provided a welcome cooling. Other than the bother this rain caused with Harry’s glasses, it was entirely welcome, as it covered the tears on his cheeks quite nicely.

Laurel took her leave wordlessly as they entered the estate near number four, Privet Drive. If she’d noticed the tears on Harry’s face among the raindrops, she didn’t mention it. Harry seldom

cried, and never in public, but he didn't feel exposed in front of Laurel, as long as she didn't say anything about it. As he parked his bicycle in the garage, he noted that Aunt Petunia had returned. Harry looked down at his shoes and resigned himself to the inevitable. He was soaking wet. The only way into the house from here was through the kitchen, past Aunt Petunia. Standing on the bristling doormat in the garage, Harry stripped off his shoes and socks, hoping to drip less water when he came into the house. He opened the door, holding his shoes before him.

"MY FLOOR!" Aunt Petunia screeched. Harry scrambled past her, ignoring the rant that followed him up the stairs. He'd heard it hundreds of times during his years at Privet Drive, and no doubt would hear it a dozen or so times more before he turned 17 next summer. Once in his room, Harry stripped until he was starkers. Toweling off, he hurriedly dressed, tossing his wet clothes into the dark clothes hamper, dragging it down to the laundry. His socks, which were white before the ride, should really be washed with the white clothes, but if he put wet socks into the hamper, he'd never hear the end of it. Better to get gray, motley socks than put up with more screeching from Aunt Petunia. A Drying charm could solve all of these problems, but that was out of reach for another 13 months.

Aunt Petunia's rant had run its course by the time Harry reached the kitchen; all that remained was a sour expression on her face. She watched him wordlessly as he mopped the entryway leading to the garage. He rinsed the mop expertly, put it away and disappeared up the stairs. "*Well, nothing like a little screaming to make a bloke feel better when he's blue,*" he thought to himself as he made his way up to his room.

Two knobs were lit on the Passbox when he entered his room: Granger and Weasley. Harry pulled both notes out, feeling his mood lift without even opening them. He started with the Granger note first – this note was from the younger Granger.

Dear Harry,

I'm not ignoring your little notes. We had company last night and I didn't check the Passbox until it was quite late. There's not much written on Abelard that I can find here at my house. I know that he wrote the definitive text on Divination and Probability Theory. I haven't read it, but I've picked it up from time to time when I'd wait in Professor Vector's office over the last three years. Given the copyright date, I'd assumed that Abelard was dead already, but apparently he's very much alive.

Yes, I did get the chocolate. THANK YOU! No, I did not eat it all at one sitting. It meant a lot, first that you sent it to me, and second, that I got it when I needed cheering badly. It was almost as good as seeing you, in person, when you're happy.

Your dream shocked me. It's an exact depiction of my parents' dining room as of this morning. I ate the last piece of pie as part of my breakfast (it was delicious, had you been here I'd have shared, but you weren't here, so I ATE IT ALL!) Apparently hanging in with Trelawney's class has paid off; it looks like Farsight to me.

As to Marietta's hex, it will resolve itself if and only if she expresses remorse to one or more members of the D.A. To do that I suppose that she's got to regain her memory. Otherwise she doesn't really know over what she's expressing remorse.

I'm not surprised about Cho. There are many who think she's a lightweight hose pipe, but I've

always thought she was resourceful, notwithstanding her taste in men. Dean? I have no opinion either way. I, too, thought that he was dating Ginny, but I've often been wrong about that type of thing.

Well, I've got to run. Mum is calling me, the roads of England beckon, I'm off to spend more time behind the wheel.

Love from,

Hermione

Dear Harry.

How are the Muggles treating you?

I've got good news and I've got bad news. We'll start with the bad news.

I'm grounded.

I'm not quite sure how long I'm grounded, but definitely for the rest of the month, and maybe for the rest of the summer. The short story is that I was fighting with Ginny and Mum caught us. The long story is a bit more interesting, although I'm not really proud of it.

I was chatting with Mum about things, and she asked me about Dean. One thing led to another, and it hit me that Dean hasn't written Ginny all summer. I started talking to Ginny about this after breakfast, trying to point out that a proper boyfriend would have written by now, when BAM, out of the blue, Ginny slaps me. She stared at me; looking like she was going to hyperventilate or something, and then she started screaming at me. She screamed for quite a while, letting me know what a lout I've been to her, how I used to be her best friend, but that now I'm just trying to run her life and stick my nose into her business. She said something about how she'd never been dating Dean, and had only told me that she was when we were on the Express so as to shut me up, then she took quite a tangent and said a lot of other hateful things. When she ran out of things to say she was staring at me, still panting. Next, she hit me with a left to the gut and kneed me in the crotch. Then she ran away.

I chased after her. All right, I lay crumpled on the floor for a moment and *then* I chased after her. We ran through the house, out of the house, around the sheds and the chicken coop, past the lake and into the orchard. In light of current events, I always have my wand with me, so it's not too surprising that I started throwing hexes at her. I finally cornered her by the grain crib. She pulled out her wand and blasted me with the scalping hex.

As you probably haven't run across that one yet, it's a real stinker of a hex. For about 30 seconds the skin on your scalp expands like your head is a balloon, then it snaps back to its normal shape and size. By the time it does this, however, all the capillaries under your scalp have ruptured and your hair, (other than your eyebrows and eyelashes) has all fallen out. Let me tell you, it hurts. I was on the ground again, blinded with pain.

To Ginny's credit, she ran to Mum for help. Mum did what she could to stop the bleeding and start healing my scalp, but I now have a shiny head without a speck of hair. The hair will grow out, eventually.

Ginny's grounded too.

I haven't had a chance to talk to her since then. I waited until I knew she was out degnoming the garden to post this letter. Mum advises that I not speak to Ginny until tomorrow, at which time I think she's going to mediate between us, but then again, maybe I'll just be shut up in my room for the rest of the summer. I really feel bad about this. I'll probably feel worse after Dad gets home.

On the flip side, the Cannons are doing really well this week, not that I'll be likely to be

hearing any of their games for the rest of the summer – Mum hasn't cut off reading the Prophet's sports page yet, so I can still follow their progress.

I started off stating that this was good news and bad news. You have quite a complete picture of the bad news. Being a smart guy, you can figure out the good news yourself.

With any luck, you'll be visiting the Burrow for your birthday. I expect that I'll be writing lots more letters, so get ready to write me back, as I need all the encouragement I can get right now, I'm feeling lower than Dobby's drawers right now.

Your stupid friend,

Ron

Harry got a few good laughs over this note, thinking of what he'd say to Ron to tease him about his new hairstyle or lack thereof. There were definite drawbacks to having two hot-tempered teens living under one roof. Harry wondered when Molly was going to go white with worry. He supposed that if the twins hadn't done it by now, she must be somehow impervious to the stress of it all. Perhaps it was that she didn't suffer in silence. He remembered reading something in *Combat Charms and Countercurses* about the Scalping Hex. Maybe there was a treatment listed in that book, he'd have to check it after dinner.

Harry jotted off three quick notes: to Hermione, to Ron, and to Marietta. Harry figured that Cho's note didn't require an immediate reply – responding too quickly might send the message that he was desperate to get back into her good graces, which was *not* the case. She was all right as an ex-girlfriend, and Harry would definitely have a chat with her once school began, but the status quo was just fine right now.

Hermione's note was a brief condensation of Ron's story – he suspected that she'd hear full-length tales from one or both of the guilty parties, but news like this had to be passed on. Ron got a brief note of encouragement. Marietta's note was a bit longer. Harry spelled out that she needed to be checked for the effect of a Memory charm, and that once her memory was intact, she needed to find a member of the D.A. and apologize.

All three notes were posted to the Passbox. Feeling like he'd had a full day already, Harry worked a bit on the family laundry, volunteered to polish off his pre-dinner chores, and then curled up in his room for some applied research in *Combat Charms and Countercurses* before dinner. It was as he recollected, there was no countercurse for the hair loss, just a simple Healing charm for the burst blood vessels, which Molly had already applied.

Dinner was uneventful and not in the least memorable. After cleaning up from dinner, Harry went back to his room for another session of study. Tomorrow would come soon enough, and he needed to pay attention once his tutor arrived.

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Author's note: In the UK, houses aren't located in *neighborhoods* ; they are set in *estates* . (Don't ask me what the British Mr. Rogers sings at the beginning of the show, I don't know.) My brit-

picking friend (the steadfast Werff) pointed this out to me, and I've been trying to apply it consistently, but my Beta (the wonderful Aibhinn) pointed out that the word usage looks funny to the American reader.

The disclaimer found in the Prologue applies here; stop looking for it already.

Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com - write me, I write back.

The Letters of Summer Lessons

Chapter 10 – Lessons

Hermione woke when the Passbox popped softly. Lifting her head to see the time on her alarm, she concluded that now was as good a time as any to start the day. By the time she had her clothes on, she was able to walk without staggering. With one practiced swoop she popped the doors on the Passbox open, snapped up the letters and flapped the doors shut with a backhanded flick of her wrist. With one hand on the banister, Hermione slid down the stairs using the rubber-legged stance she had perfected as a child. When wearing slippers, if she hit the first stair just right, she'd bounce from step to step, slippers sliding on the carpeted stairs. It brought back memories of her childhood, before Hogwarts, when surfing the stairs was the height of rebellion against her parents' rule.

“Hey, daughter of mine, no surfing on the stairs! How many times have I told you that?” Monica asked rhetorically.

“In the recent years, none. The last time you told me that was August of 1991. I was eleven,” Hermione answered in her best swotty voice.

Monica poured herself a cup of coffee. Evidently she'd been up for a while.

“What do you want for breakfast, dear?”

”Dunno. Let me wake up first.”

“Coffee?”

“Ugh, Mum! You know I don't drink coffee! That's – that's disgusting.”

“Tastes change dear, you didn't like boys in the past either.”

“It's not the same thing,” Hermione said, sitting as straight as she could. “Do you have any strong tea?”

“Darjeeling strong enough for you, Captain Granger?” Monica asked in an odd, accented voice.

Hermione grinned. This was a game they used to play together, before she went away to

Hogwarts. "Arrrr, matey," Hermione replied in her very best pirate voice, "let me drink a cup before I make ye walk the plank," she said before she stretched and yawned.

"Magical Post arrived?" Monica asked.

"Yeah, short note from Harry, long letter from Ginny. I want to read them after I've had my tea."

"Well, sit down, I'll make your tea. Do let me know if there's news on The Plan."

"Arrr."

Hermione stared out the window while her mum made tea. Monica set the mug in front of her and returned to the stove to work on breakfast. Hermione took a long swig of her tea and slit open the note from Harry with her butter knife. She made a few faces at that note, the last of which was a smile and then opened the letter from Ginny. She read and sipped until she sprayed a bit of tea on the table. Adding insult to injury, she inhaled a few drops of tea at that moment, sending her into a spasm of deep bronchial coughs. Monica kept a close eye on her, and noted with some satisfaction that after the coughing subsided, Hermione finished the note with a slightly wicked grin on her face.

"How goes the plan?"

"Arrr," Hermione said again, distractedly.

"Is that good 'ar' or bad 'ar'?"

Hermione paused as she thought on her answer. "The plan's working, but the execution was a bit wonky. Harry now knows that there never was anything going on with Dean, and he's quietly happy about it. Ginny's note is quite, quite - something, I'll think of a proper word for it when I've had my second cup of tea."

Monica slid into her place at the table, spreading out slices of mango, pineapple and melon on a large plate. In front of her was a second plate of buttered toast. Monica nibbled on her first piece of toast while snatching the longer letter from her daughter's place.

Dear Hermione,

Maybe you've heard by now – I don't know if my mum has talked to your mum or not. Our plan, our beautiful plan, went down in flames yesterday. I don't have a lying dirtbag shrew problem anymore. Nooooo, now it's a psycho harpy problem. I feel sooooo bad, and now I'm never going to get past being Ron's sister. But I digress.

One of Bill's roommates at Hogwarts was Muggle-born and taught him how to fish, Muggle style. Bill went into town one summer and returned with a Muggle fishing pole – Dad thought it was fascinating. His favorite lure was a little oval of metal, shiny on one side, painted red and white on the other. One end of the lure was connected to the fishing wire; the other end had a wicked three-pronged hook on it. Bill would throw the lure out into our pond, you know – the one behind the pasture, and then reel it in using the little clicking machine on the handle of

the fishing pole. The lure would spin around, flashing in the water. I'd sit on the bank and watch Bill – he'd throw out the lure and reel it back in. When he did it right, you could see the fish rise up and chase the lure. Poor fish never knew that they were biting into a mouthful of hooks. They sure were tasty though.

Baiting Ron was about that easy. Mum made an innocent comment about Dean before breakfast. It twirled around in front of Ron, who couldn't resist swimming after it. I was prepared. I was more than prepared. I was OVER-prepared. I'd spent the night thinking of every rotten thing my brother had ever done to me, or failed to do, so that when I launched into my tirade I could be fresh and authentic and believable. I was fresh, I was authentic, and boy was I believable.

Ron started needling me about Dean, saying that he wasn't a proper boyfriend, hadn't written me all summer, was probably dating some Muggle girl, blah, blah, blah. That was my cue. I didn't mean to slap him, really, I didn't. It did feel good, though. The look in his eyes after I smacked his face was priceless. I had his total, undivided attention. I launched into my prepared rant. I told him that I'd never been dating Dean, had no intention of dating Dean and that I'd told him that I was just to SHUT HIM UP. I probably should have stopped there. I didn't. I was on a roll.

I gave him verses two, three and four about how he's an insufferable git who should leave his nose out of my business. Next I launched into how he's mistreated you over all these years; how he's so blind that he can't see that you're crazy about him, and that if he doesn't make his move he's going to lose you forever, because girls with choices don't wait forever.

After that, I returned to my favorite topic; how I used to love him, how he was my closest friend until he went to school and then he didn't have time for me any more. Around this time that little voice in the back of my head started screaming **stop, Stop, STOP** – but I couldn't. Finally I ran out of things to say, so I hit him again. This made him angry, so I kneed him in the privates and took off. I had a good half-minute head start, but boy is he fast when he's angry!

Ever since last summer when Harry ran into the Dementors in Little Whinging, Ron's never without his wand. Did you know that he has a little holster on his wrist for his wand? Did you know that I normally don't carry my wand, unless I'm leaving the Burrow? Ron's chasing me all over the grounds like a maniac, and I don't have my wand. Some witch I am. It was just fine until Ron started throwing hexes at me. Something in me welled up and protested against the unfairness of it all. I did wandless magic – I summoned my wand.

As a Muggle-born you probably aren't aware of the fact that most wizards and witches can't do wandless magic after puberty hits. Contrary to what certain parties might say, puberty has hit the youngest Weasley, shortly before I started my second year at Hogwarts, although I don't have as much to show for it as some girls I know. I shouldn't be able to do wandless magic at all. But I did. I ran out of places to run and Ron had me cornered. Things were out of hand, so I knew that I had just one shot at disabling him. Why I didn't do a simple Stunning spell, I don't know. The first spell that came to mind was one that I'd been reading up on in *Combat Charms and Countercurses* : the Scalping Hex.

It's a gruesome hex. It stopped Ron though – he was rolling on the ground, grasping his head, all of his hair was lying on the ground. I ran to get Mum. Mum is funny – there are occasions when she launches into immediate tirade mode, and others when she is utterly silent. I knew I was in big trouble when she didn't say a thing. She took one look at Ron and started in with

Staunching charms, stopping the subcutaneous bleeding from the Scalping hex. Then she did a Cooling charm, followed by a basic Healing charm. She put Ron in a magical stretcher and I towed him back to the Burrow. Once Ron was safely in bed, she turned to me and said in a very calm voice, “You went too far, Ginny. Go to your room. We’ll talk about this more when your father gets home.” Personally, I would have preferred being screamed at.

Ron’s grounded.

I’m grounded too. I’ll let you know for how long, but Dad hasn’t come home yet.

I did get to leave my room after lunch: I degnomed the garden. I set several personal records today for gnome tossing, and I suspect that some of the gnomes are not returning to our garden, as they went so far that they wouldn’t be able to find their way back.

I’m sorry, Hermione. I’ve probably bollixed things up for you too. There’s probably a lesson in here, and sixty years from now when I’m still living at the Burrow as a spinster, I’ll know what it is. Right now things look pretty bleak.

If you’re going to reply to this letter telling me how stupid I am, please save your effort – I already know that I’m stupid, and impulsive, and have real big issues with my temper.

My brother will live. If you must know, he looks kind of sexy with a smooth scalp.

Your very frustrated friend,

Ginny

“So, can you picture it?” Monica asked.

“Picture what?” Hermione replied.

“Ron, with a sexy bald head.”

“Muuuum!” Hermione took another bite of toast, speared a slice of melon which she transferred to her own plate, carefully carving off hunks. “Actually, I can. I can’t wait to see him,” she told her mum. To herself she said, “*I want to touch his head so bad, I ache .*”

“So, what’s with Ginny? She doesn’t strike me as the psycho harpy type.”

“Method acting, Mum.”

“As in Stanislavsky?”

“That’s the one. She had to appear angry to make the scene believable. So, she dredged up everything she has to be angry about with Ron and let that fuel her little tirade. It worked, too, but she got a bit carried away. Embarrassing as all get out for her, but I don’t think it affects the plan at all.”

“I think you’re right.”

~+~

“Ginny?” Ron paged, as he paced in front of her door, hoping that he could carry this off.

“What do you want, Ron?” Ginny answered, sounding like she was still really torqued off.

“Can I come in?” Ron said, waving his arms as he talked, even though Ginny couldn’t see him through the closed door.

“Are you armed?”

“No, Mum has my wand.”

“The door’s open.”

“Thanks.”

Ron walked into her room. It hadn’t changed all that much over the years. A Quidditch poster from the last World Cup was tacked up over her desk. The Passbox sat on a tiny table next to her desk. Her lamp was out; the only light in the room was that from the early morning sun which collected in a puddle on a rug next to the bed. The far wall had bits of matted artwork hung here and there. Her corsage from the Yule ball was preserved under glass on a corner of her desk. Her bed was no longer cluttered with stuffed animals as in years past; they had been banished without ceremony into the attic at the beginning of the summer. Books snaked across the bed and onto the floor. Several wadded up balls of parchment sat beside the rubbish bin, with a few more inside the bin, along with a lot of wadded up tissue. Ginny was lying down, facing the wall, and not looking up at him as he came in. Ron’s heart clenched when he saw the tissue debris. “*She’s been crying,*” he thought. “*I’ve got to do this.*”

”Ginny?”

“You’ve said that already.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” she said, obviously put out by this conversation.

“Sorry about the things you’ve said.”

Ginny sighed. “I’m sorry about the things I’ve said too, but I’m still grounded and you’re still bald as an egg,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Ron ran his fingers through his hair, out of habit; rudely discovering that particular motion didn’t work well on a smooth scalp. “I’m not doing this very well.”

“No, you’re not. I haven’t a clue what you’re trying to say.”

“I’m trying . . .”

“Yes, you are trying,” Ginny snapped. “That’s been a big part of the problem for the past five years,” she said, sitting up, holding her head in her hands.

Ron crouched at the foot of the bed, hoping that this was a safe distance. “What you said, after you slapped me.”

“Yes?”

Ron hung his head. “It was true.”

“WHAT?!?” Ginny barked. Ron stood again, wringing his hands as if he were trying to explain a not particularly convincing lie to Professor Snape.

“It’s true. I’ve been a lout, I’ve been trying to run your life like I’m Mum and you’re six years old; I haven’t been treating you like you’ve grown up. I’ve, I’ve been a prat, Ginny,” he said, hanging his head again.

Ginny swiveled off of the bed, standing up, staring silently at Ron. Without warning, she sprang, grabbing Ron about the middle, burying her face in his shirt. She was shaking, sobbing without sound. Taking a deep breath, Ron wrapped his arms around her and held her until she calmed a bit. Whatever hole he’d dug was now behind him. His real sister, the one who used to come and crawl into his bed when she was frightened by thunder, was back. The sobs slowed, she began to breathe deeply. She squeezed him, hard. “Ron, I love you so much. I feel awful.”

Ron smiled, eyes bright for the first time that day. “Yeah, but you look great. I merely look bald.”

“I wrote Hermione this morning. I told her you looked sexy with a smooth head.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh.”

He felt his grin spread even wider across his face. “I can’t help it, I guess. I *am* a sexy beast.”

Ginny punched him lightly in the stomach and flopped down on her bed.

“You are impossible!”

“No, I’m ravenous. I didn’t have dinner last night.”

“Me neither. If you let me use the bathroom first, I’ll make your breakfast.”

“Deal!”

~+~

Tonks was dressed, well, differently. Gone were the questionable tank tops and battered jeans. She was wearing Muggle clothes: a nice blue skirt with matching purse, nylons, blue pumps with a very low heel, and a white long sleeved blouse with a peter-pan collar. Harry didn’t know any of these details by name, only that she looked, for once, like a normal person, a real grown-up, not

like an extra from a documentary on techno music in the 1990's. Her hair was a rich brown, very close in shade to Hermione's hue, but straight, falling in bangs on her forehead and pulled into a no-nonsense ponytail in back, extending several inches past her collar. Harry noticed with some pleasure that she was wearing the agate necklace and earrings that she'd received from Abelard.

"Well, well, well," Harry said appreciatively. "Are you having tea with the Queen after you're done with me?"

"No, much worse than that," she replied. "I'm having lunch with Lupin."

"You've eaten with him before."

"Yeah, but this is - this is a - a - date," she said, her voice trailing off into a whisper. "Do I look okay? Should I change my clothes? Should I change me? Would he prefer to go to lunch with Harriet? I can do that, you know," Tonks said, her hands wringing while she sped up her pacing.

"Tonks, knock it off!" Harry exclaimed. He put a hand on her shoulder. "He thinks the world of you. You make him laugh, and there's not many who can do that these days." It made an odd picture in his mind, the gray, sad, wise academic paired with the clumsy, goofy, spontaneous Auror, but Harry reckoned that they'd be good for each other in a ying and yang fashion.

"But my clothes - my hair, surely he'd prefer Harriet . . ."

"TONKS! It's *you* he wants to spend time with, not a gender-bender vision of me in drag!"

Tonks was silent for a while, looking at the ground. Harry could see the colour of her hair throb from brown to red to blonde to brown while the length bobbed back and forth several inches. She took a deep breath, straightened her skirt and looked Harry in the eye. "Thanks, little brother."

"Don't mention it. I have such a wealth of experience playing Aunt Agony," Harry said, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, but even a stopped clock is right twice a day." Tonks sat down, took an emery board from her purse and began to attack a nail on her left hand.

"So, are you going to tell me what you were so worked up about last time when we were waiting for Abelard?"

Tonks snorted. "Oh, that. We don't have any pictures of him in the Order. The Aurors don't have any pictures either. He's one of the most famous Seers of this century, and we don't have a single penny-photo to identify him. Our communications before the meeting were spotty, so we didn't have any sign and countersign to confirm who it was that was coming for a meeting with you. Then he goes and takes you away from the estate."

"How was the beach?"

"Quite nice, thank you, once I resigned myself to killing two hours there," she said, the sarcasm

dripping from her voice. “Actually there’s a wonderful stand for Mango Lahsees right on the beach. I sucked down two of those and watched the sun set over the ocean. If Remus had been there it would have been perfect,” she sighed.

Harry’s retort was forgotten as he saw the bronze doorframe appear in the fashion of the Cheshire cat in front of him. The squiggly handle was the last part to appear.

“Think it’s safe, Tonks? Abelard said the door handle was tuned to accept me.”

“Give it a try. If it looks dodgy, keep the door open and I’ll be in behind you, otherwise I’m staying right here.”

Harry put his hand on the door handle. There was a crackle and a tingling in his hand. The door began to appear, shining magnificently in the morning sun. Harry twisted the handle and pushed the door open. The door opened into a garden, much like Mrs. Figg’s. Abelard was sitting in a wooden Adirondack chair, metal cane grasped in his hands. A familiar looking large, white, shaggy dog sat at his feet.

“Welcome, Harry. Madam Auror, I’ll have him all day today. The door will reappear in 12 hours. Is he free to walk home, or should he wait for an escort? By the way, the jewelry looks smashing on you, I’m honored that you choose to wear it.”

“I’ll have someone here to meet him this evening. Thanks, I’m honored to have received it,” Tonks said, a slight blush rising in her cheeks.

“Enjoy your lunch, Tonks,” Harry said as he passed through the door, which disappeared as he closed it.

“I plan on it, little brother, I plan on it.”

~+~

Abelard beckoned to Harry. As Harry approached, Abelard stood, reaching out for Harry’s elbow. “Welcome to my humble abode,” Abelard said, turning away from the chair and walking to an arbor next to the house. As Abelard stood, the dog also stood, tail wagging in a steady beat. The dog sniffed Harry’s crotch, not too diplomatically. Harry scratched it between its long floppy ears.

“Hello, pooch,” he said with some warmth. This dog was much nicer than any of his Aunt’s dogs. “Wait, Abelard, I was this dog! The night of the wake!”

Abelard laughed. “You were *like* this dog, but not *this* dog. Trans-species transfiguration is hard enough without making it trans-gender too. Rosie, go to your place.” Rosie trotted into the house; tail wagging in time to her lope. “Fr. Martin told me about borrowing Rosie’s form for that particular transfiguration.”

“It was a very enlightening evening.”

“It was supposed to be.”

“Where are we?” Harry asked, changing the subject, looking around at the walls surrounding the garden.

“You don’t need to know that, Harry. Suffice it to say that you’re in roughly the same time zone as Little Whinging, but much farther south. What you don’t know, you can’t give up. Mrs. Paprikash! He’s here.”

An older woman wearing a peach coloured sari walked out of the house and stood under the arbor. Nearly as tall as Abelard, she moved much more quickly. If Harry were to guess her age, he’d say that she was older than Hermione’s mum, and younger than Professor McGonagall, but wouldn’t put money on which end of that age spread she really occupied.

“Welcome sir,” she said, bowing slightly with her palms pressed together. Her voice was the high, nasal accent Harry associated with India. “May I introduce you to my daughters?” As she said this, two women came out of the house and under the arbor. Both women were taller than their mother, and each resembled her, but neither looked like the other. The older of the two was dressed like her mum, wearing a yellow sari with her hair loose; the younger was wearing baggy black jeans and a gray tee shirt, and her hair was in a thick, black braid. Both women were strikingly beautiful. The older resembled a character from one of Dudley’s video games, something about a pistol-packing archeologist. The younger looked a bit like a heroine from one of Dudley’s dreadful comic books. Harry shook hands with the older woman, who called herself Roopangi. The younger merely nodded in his direction and said that her name was Jasmine. Both spoke flawless English, with a cultured Oxford accent.

“Mrs. Paprikash has been in my employ for ages, Harry, along with various members of her family. Roopangi recently left my employ, Jasmine is her replacement.” Abelard cleared his throat and stood tall, as tall as he could, being a good three inches shorter than Harry. “I am ready to teach you, Harry James Potter. Will you apply yourself to learn from me this summer?” Abelard asked gravely. Abelard, Mrs. Paprikash and her daughters were all solemnly silent, watching Harry. He felt magic crackling in the air; the hairs on the back of his arms were tingling.

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “I am eager to learn from you, and I will apply myself to your instruction.” Harry was slightly baffled at his words; he hadn’t meant to speak so formally. As he spoke the words, he felt a release of the magical tension in the air.

“Very good, lad,” Abelard responded.

Mrs. Paprikash and Roopangi dismissed themselves, returning into the house. Jasmine moved to a chase lounge in the shade of a large tree, curling her legs under her body, sitting straight, and watching the arbor and the garden.

Abelard was sitting back in his chair, absorbing the sunlight like a thin old tomcat on a windowsill. “We’ve got a lot of work to do, and not much time to do it, Harry. From time to time

I'll cut a few corners, just as I did yesterday with the gin-gins, but you will come to no harm while you are in my charge. Speaking of which, did anything unusual happen after you made it home last night?"

"Well, I had a whanging headache that woke me in the early morning. After that, I had some really lurid coloured dreams that made no sense at all, and then I had a Farsight dream. This was my first Farsight dream that had nothing to do with Voldemort."

"Tell me about that dream."

"Not much to it, really. I had a bunch of dreams, things I'd done in the last few days, full of strange colors, then I saw my friend's dining room – it was early morning. I saw the sun come up, heard birds chirping. I might have heard a clock chiming as well. It was very, very vivid, lots of detail," Harry said, picturing the quiet dining room in his mind.

"How do you know it was a Farsight dream?"

"I wrote my friend that morning, telling her what I saw. She wrote back and said that's exactly how her dining room looked when she got up that morning."

"Who's the girl?"

"Hermione Granger. She's in my house and year at school. We've been thick as thieves since our first year. She's like a sister to me, which is a bit odd, as she fancies my other best friend, who happens to be my roommate at school. Everyone around them can see that they are more than just friends, but they've never admitted it to each other, at least as far as I can tell," Harry said, smiling.

"It must be difficult having two best friends with such a dynamic between them." Abelard said, raising one eyebrow.

"Only when they're not getting along. I go mad when that happens."

"What did you notice about the room that your friend Hermione confirmed?"

"Details – the dried flower arrangement on the fireplace mantle, a Floo powder canister sitting next to that, a pie plate with a single slice of pie sitting on the table, things like that," Harry explained, wondering where this was going.

"Hermione confirmed those details?"

"She ate that piece of pie for her breakfast."

"Excellent, I was always fond of pie for breakfast. Drove my mum mad at times, but she got over it, bless her departed soul." Abelard rose and walked over to Jasmine. Whatever he said was so soft that Harry couldn't hear it. Jasmine walked into the house. Harry noted with some distraction that parts of her bounced when she walked.

“Sweet Merlin,” he thought to himself, “*why couldn’t she be flat-chested and ugly?*”

Jasmine returned, carrying two stone cylinders and a small wooden box.

“Can I help you with those?” Harry asked.

Jasmine turned, looking surprised. “I don’t think so, but thanks anyway,” she answered, flashing a bright smile.

Not deterred by her answer, Harry tried to right one of the cylinders that toppled after Jasmine had set it down. It was dense, cold, and very, very heavy. “How did you lug these out here by yourself?” he asked incredulously.

“I’m not as dainty as I look,” she replied, hoisting the cylinder aloft and dropping it on the ground to seat it properly. Opening the box, she took out two sticks. They were either the fattest unsharpened pencils that Harry had ever seen, or wands of some unknown design. “Put these into those holes,” she said, pointing to a horizontal hole in the top of the cylinders. Harry did so, noting that the sticks seemed to click into the holes when they were pushed in a certain depth.

Abelard stood, stretched in the sun and faced Harry. “This is your first lesson. We’re not doing anything with Occlumency or Farsight or Foresight right off the bat, as we have to fill in some gaps in your training first. Imagine if you will, that those stones are your enemies and they are pointing their wands at you. What is your first move?”

“That’s easy, *Expelliarmus* ,” Harry said, remembering his first D.A. lesson.

“Try it, Harry.”

Harry pointed his wand at the two small pillars and invoked the charm. The stones tottered briefly, but the wands stayed in place. “Okay, what’s the problem here?”

“The problem, Harry, is that the Disarming charm works best in academic settings, not in real world application. A wizard who has a death grip on his wand will not be disarmed with that spell. A properly configured wand will not respond to it either.”

“Properly configured?”

“Jasmine, please show Harry your wand.”

Jasmine approached Harry, arms out slightly from her sides. With a sudden blurred move she brought her left arm up. As she turned her hand over, Harry saw that she was holding a short, stout wand; about an inch thick and four or five inches long. The base of the wand was connected to a leather thong that was wrapped around her wrist. Her pretty smile was gone, now, and a blank expression was on her face.

“I’ve never seen a wand like that.”

“Hope that you never see one in action, Harry. That’s a battle wand. It’s no great shakes for fancy charm work or transfiguration, but there’s nothing more effective in an all out shooting contest,” Abelard explained. “You may stand down, Jasmine.”

Jasmine returned to her chaise lounge, tucking her legs under her, smiling a faint smile. A shudder ran up Harry’s spine as he remembered one of Laurel’s stories about War Witches. “Ungodly beautiful women, fast as lightning and twice as destructive,” she’d said. Harry figured that whatever Jasmine did to earn her keep with Abelard, it probably *didn’t* involve gardening and keeping house.

“So what’s the answer, Abelard?”

“If you have a wand, you’d use *Fractus*, the cleaving charm.”

“What does that do?”

“Jasmine?”

Without getting up, Jasmine flipped out her wand and softly uttered the spell. The pillar closest to Harry rocked briefly as it was covered by a small puff of smoke. When the smoke cleared, Harry noticed that the stick was shattered into splinters. Jasmine came up behind him, passed him and replaced the splinters with a new stick, walking slowly back to her perch on the chaise lounge. “*Keep your mind on the lesson, Harry, not her caboose.*”

Harry pondered what Abelard had just said. “What if you don’t have a wand?”

“Good catch, lad, there’s hope for you. Without a wand, you’ll do a whistle charm, specifically the splitting whistle charm.” Abelard pursed his lips, giving a sharp whistle. The stick shattered. Abelard gave a second, louder whistle, shattering the stone pillar.

“Abelard!” Jasmine exclaimed. “I don’t have any more of those. Stop showing off!”

“Sorry, Madam,” he replied. Whistling a brief trill, the shards of stone came back together, minus the splinters of the target wand. “Jasmine, please drill the lad on the *Fractus* charm until he’s got it, then see if you can coax a proper whistle charm out of him before lunchtime. I’m expecting a call. I’ll be in my study if you should need me.”

“*Oh, great, Abelard’s gone and I have to practice combat charms with a War Witch. What am I in for today?*” Harry thought to himself.

Fortunately, for Harry, Jasmine was a kind, if economical, teacher. She sounded just the slightest bit like Hermione when she adopted her instructor mode, which made it bearable. She also walked differently when playing instructor: her hips didn’t roll. They spent a brief amount of time mastering *Fractus*. “See the target splitting in two, now, make it so.”

From there they went on to the whistle charm, which Harry adamantly could not produce in *any* fashion until Jasmine came up behind him. She placed her left hand on his belly, placing her

middle finger on his navel. She placed her right hand above that one, balled into a fist. Harry could feel the heat radiate from her compact body, and her breath on his shoulder (along with what all else was pressed into his back) was quite distracting. When Harry attempted to invoke the whistle charm, Jasmine moved her left hand to her balled fist and gave Harry a swift squeeze. His whistle lasted a brief moment before he opened his mouth in surprise. The target wand disappeared in a cloud of smoke, along with a tree limb behind the target.

“That’s better, Harry. Do you think you can do it on your own without me squeezing the *chi* out of you?” Jasmine asked.

“Let’s see,” Harry answered, hoping that it was approaching lunchtime. Harry stood, facing the remaining target. It was distracting to practice magic without a wand, which provided such a natural focus: point your wand and speak. Harry took aim at the target wand, visualizing the split. He whistled, pushing from his diaphragm. He felt a surge of warmth from his middle, heard a sharp crack and saw a cloud of smoke. When the cloud cleared, both the target and the stone pillar were in splinters and shards.

“Suffering Shiva, you’re as bad as he is, Harry!” Jasmine exclaimed.

Harry didn’t know if he was in trouble or not. At that moment, Mrs. Paprikash appeared under the arbor.

“Lunch is served,” she said, returning into the house.

“I’ll deal with you after lunch,” Jasmine said, tossing her braided hair behind her, turning on her heel and padding into the house in front of Harry. She was no longer in her teacher mode.

“*Don’t stare, Harry. If she catches you doing that, she’ll hurt you for sure,*” he told himself as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “I wonder what’s for lunch?” he said, snickering that he sounded so much like Ron when he said it. Turning to the shattered pillar, Harry dug out his wand and spoke “*Reparo* .” Moving quickly, he followed Jasmine into the house.

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“Bless us, O Father, thy gifts to our use and us to thy service; for Christ’s sake. Amen.” Abelard opened his eyes. “Dig in.”

“Uh, Abelard, what is this?”

“This is lunch, lad. The dish with the bean sprouts on it is a Thai noodle dish known as Pad Thai; the green and red dish is a vegetable popular in these parts, tomatoes and spinach, garnished with peanuts; in the green bowl is some applesauce, and for dessert, rice pudding. Eat it or not, it’s what’s for lunch.”

Harry concluded that he was going to like eating at Abelard’s house. The food, although like nothing he’d ever had before in his life, was delicious, filling, and in seemingly inexhaustible

supply. Jasmine and Mrs. Paprikash were at the table with Abelard and Harry. He noted with some amusement that Jasmine ate more at one sitting than Ron would, but where she put it was another question. Remembering the wave of heat he'd felt when she was behind him, he concluded that she must have the metabolism of a shrew.

“So, how did the lad do, Jasmine?”

“Not bad, picked up *Fractus* like he'd been doing splitting charms for years. Had no clue on the whistle charm until I squeezed the *chi* out of him.”

“You must have enjoyed that,” Abelard said, his eyes twinkling.

“Please. I'm sure that the girls at his school have to be restrained to keep away from him, but I prefer my men a bit older, and I don't poach on the job, ever,” she said, a hint of colour coming to her ears. “They must not teach wandless magic at that school of his,” Jasmine said, reaching for the bowl of rice pudding for her third helping.

“Uh, no, they don't. I was taught that after, uh, puberty, I wouldn't be able to do wandless magic any more.”

“Well, you were taught wrong, lad. At Jasmine's school, they have an entire year devoted to the subject, taught in the last year, well past the time when the students have all, eh - blossomed,” Abelard said, finding something of interest at the bottom of his water glass.

“What school is that?” Harry asked.

“The Shiva Institute, training institution of the Shiva Guild,” Jasmine answered.

“What's that?”

“That, lad, is what the War Witches call themselves,” Abelard explained.

“So you *are* a War Witch.”

“No, I'm a journeyman member of the Shiva Guild.” Nodding to Mrs. Paprikash, “Mum is a fellow of the Guild, has been since waaay before I was born. One more year on the job and I'll be eligible for fellow.”

“Why is what you're called a touchy subject?” Harry asked boldly, hoping that Jasmine wouldn't take him apart with her spoon while Abelard was sitting at the table.

“The words ‘War Witch’ carries such a bad reputation in the West, I guess. We're all supposed to be sooo beautiful, and we're aaall deadly, and we're aaaall roundheels, kinda like a witch version of the girls from James Bond movies.”

“Well, you are pretty.” Harry offered.

“Yeah, and I’m deadly too, but I’m not a roundheel. In fact,” she said, rising from the table. “I’m still intact.”

After Jasmine left, Mrs. Paprikash began to clear the table. Harry turned to Abelard and said, “That was *way* more information than I wanted to know about her.”

“I think that was for her mother’s benefit, not yours. Before she came into my employ, she was spending an inordinate amount of time with a young man that her parents didn’t like. There are some lingering issues there, but I’m trying to stay out of them.”

“Probably a good move.”

“I thought so,” Abelard said, smiling to himself.

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Abelard spent the majority of the afternoon discussing and demonstrating wandless magic. Harry’s pique at being taught things seemingly unrelated to Occlumency dissipated as the practical side of him saw the immediate application of what Abelard was imparting. “The magic is in the wizard, not the wand, lad,” Abelard warned him. “Don’t ever forget that.” He then explained at great length how the sensor system worked for the Improper Use of Magic Office. All magic performed within a small radius of the home address of a known underage Muggleborn was presumed to be performed by the underage witch or wizard. Outside of that radius, spells of significant power were checked against the wand signatures of underage witches and wizards. When Harry gave him a blank look at the mention of wand signatures, he gave a brief lesson on the arcane topic of wand signatures, and how they could sometimes be detected, and sometimes spoofed.

“So, once I get the hang of wandless magic, I can do what I want, as long as I’m further away than a half-kilometer from number four, Privet Drive?” Harry asked, starting to plot what he could do with this new freedom.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but you can do it without worrying about the Improper Use of Magic Office,” Abelard replied, with a slight grin on his face.

“What about stuff at the Dursleys’?”

“Small stuff, like household cleaning charms, drying charms, and the like, will never trip their sensors. You give off more of a magical signature in your sleep than those charms produce. Transfiguration is so high energy that it almost always trips the sensors, so kindly refrain from turning your cousin into a pig, however much he may deserve it,” Abelard said in an absolute deadpan.

“Whoa, that’s brilliant. How come no one’s ever told me this?”

Abelard spread his hands in a ‘who knows’ gesture. “Your Wizardborn friends pick this up by

osmosis and assume that everyone knows – your Muggleborn friends are just as much in the dark as you are. Back to the lesson, Harry: with a few rare exceptions, anything that can be done with a wand can be done wandless, the problem being that the wizard or witch is used to the efficiency of using the wand, and has forgotten how to channel those magical energies without it.”

“So wandless magic is more exhausting than magic with a wand?”

“At first, lad, at first. Once you develop control and skill, though, the efficiency matches or exceeds that of normal wand use.”

“But there are exceptions.”

“There’s always exceptions, lad.”

“The Unforgivables?”

Abelard nodded. “Almost impossible to perform wandlessly, they take so much energy. The countercurses can be performed wandlessly, though.”

“Professor Moody said there was no countercurse to *Avada Kedavra* .”

“He was partly right – once performed, there is no way to undo that curse, but while it’s being cast, it can be neutralized; not blocked, but absorbed.”

“Can you teach me that?” Harry asked eagerly.

“Not today, but we can work on the precursor to that countercurse – it’s useful in its own right. Close your eyes, lad. See the center of your guts, where your magic lives, where you felt the burn and tingle when you were doing the splitting whistle charm. Watch the magic flare into light. Now, push that light up your chest, down your arm and into your hand. Keep it there, right in your hand. Now, open your eyes, lad.”

For a moment, Harry saw a ball of brilliant light the size of a marble sitting on the palm of his outstretched hand. He lost his focus on the energy and felt it flow back into his hand, up his arm and into his chest. He was flushed with heat, as if he’d been sitting in an oven. “Wow, that’s hot.”

“That’s the Lesser light, lad. You’re a powerful wizard, Harry, don’t let anyone tell you different. That’s a hot piece of magic. Be careful who you show that to; it can do real harm if you can’t control it.”

“What kind of harm?”

“Bursting into flames, Harry, spontaneous combustion.”

“Weren’t you worried that I’d burst into flames?”

“Not a bit.”

“Why’s that?”

“One, I knew you could control that bit of magic if you could learn the splitting whistle charm in one morning; two, I have a very good Quenching charm that I’ve been casting since I was a wee lad myself.”

~+~

Mrs. Paprikash brought them drinks at 4:00, and after finishing them, Abelard quit his instruction and walked into the kitchen, Harry in tow. With Harry’s assistance they made a simple dinner that they shared with Jasmine. Mrs. Paprikash had left Abelard’s house after serving the drinks, going back to her own home. After dinner, they took a walk in the park-like woods that surrounded Abelard’s walled estate, Jasmine following twenty paces behind.

In their walk, Abelard showed Harry native spiders, and compared how natural webs were similar to and different from Gossamer wards, which he also demonstrated, with and without a wand. They watched bats flying in the waning light of dusk, and Abelard compared their own talents for echolocation with active and passive sensing charms that could be performed magically; again, demonstrating the charms with and without a wand. Every moment with Abelard was a teaching moment. Harry felt like a huge dry sponge thrown into the ocean. He was taking on a lot of information, but there was so much to take in and absorb and relate to what he’d already learned in his years at Hogwarts. His brain was full – he couldn’t learn anything more today.

They were back in the garden behind Abelard’s house.

“That’s it for today, lad. It’s time to send you back to Little Whinging.”

“But Abelard, we never talked about Mum,” Harry protested.

“Remind me on Friday, lad. Same time, same place.”

Abelard summoned the door. When Harry grasped the handle, it materialized in all its brown and gold glory. As he opened the door he saw Tonks standing in Mrs. Figg’s garden. He thought back to this morning when he’d seen her last, only now it was evening; it felt like it had been a lifetime ago.

“Good night, Abelard.”

“Good night, Harry.”

Harry closed the door. As he let go of the handle the door disappeared.

“So, Tonks, how was lunch?”

Tonks said nothing, her face aglow with a smile, a most normal blush starting to come to her

cheeks.

“Tonks?”

“It was brilliant, Harry, it was brilliant.”

He grinned. “Take me home, sister dear, I’m knackered.”

“Do I need to tuck you in?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but make sure that I get in the house, as I’m about ready to keel over.”

“Can do,” Tonks replied. With a blink and a wand swish, she was Mrs. Figg again, holding on to Harry’s arm. To the casual observer, he was holding her up, but in reality the reverse was true. They walked the short distance to Number Four Privet Drive, Tonks escorting him to the back door. She waited until she heard the door lock from the inside, and then shuffled off into the darkness herself.

Harry walked upstairs to his bedroom, ignoring the sour look that Aunt Petunia shot him as he passed through the kitchen. He entered the room without turning on the lights, falling into his bed, not bothering to take off any clothes, not noticing that all of the lights on the Passbox were lit. With his last snippet of energy, the door to his bedroom closed, although he was across the room, in bed when that happened.

He was a student again, and school was in session.

+++++

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Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com - write me, I write back.

Author’s notes: The Shiva Guild (known in the West as War witches) was developed at length in a prior fic. The guild includes both wizards and witches, but it is the witches that are most famous. Members of the guild usually work for hire, under contracts that are as short as a month and as long as five years. They are exceptionally well paid, and very effective at keeping their principal alive and safe. Not much is known about them in the West, and what little is known fits neatly into Jasmine’s lunchtime complaint. A “roundheel” for those not familiar with the old term is what Molly Weasley would call a “scarlet woman” or, as my better dictionary says, a woman who says “yes” very easily. For those wondering about Lahsees, it’s rather much like a fruit smoothie. Rosie and Jasmine are recycled from an earlier fic. If you want see what Rosie looks like, take a good look at Ginger on the following URL:

http://www.labradoodles.com/_wsn/page8.html

This chapter was a lot of fun, but it will take a while to pump out Chapter 11, as I’ve been collaborating with another author on a chapter for her fic, and that’s taken a wee bit of my writing

time. Please be patient.

The Letters of Summer Arrangements

Chapter 11 – Arrangements

Harry was watching a garden. It was night. It took a bit of searching in his memory, but he finally put his finger on where he'd seen this garden before: it was Abelard's. Judging by the colour of the sky and the starlight, he reckoned that it was a good two hours before dawn, a time that he'd often been awake in the past with the terrors that would visit him during the night.

Jasmine jogged into the garden through the back gate, dressed in tight black shorts and a loose black tank top, her hair in its standard braid. She was drenched in sweat. After closing the gate, she began a series of twisting and kicking exercises, followed by languid, slow stretches. From time to time she'd look over the garden wall, trying to see or hear something in the night. After cooling down, she began a different series of exercises with slow, fluid motions. He wasn't sure if this were ballet or some martial art; either way, she was very easy on the eyes.

The Burrow came next. It was still morning, well before dawn. Standing in the lane that led to the front of the Burrow, Harry saw a light go on, corresponding to the hallway outside of Ron's parents' bedroom. Harry thought of the kitchen, and like pouring cold honey, his vision changed to the inside of the Burrow, facing the Weasley clock. All the hands were pointed to "Home – asleep" except for Arthur's hand, which had moved to "The Loo." Harry heard a flushing sound and the hand representing Arthur moved back to "Home – asleep." Harry smiled, evidently the labels on the clock changed when greater detail was needed.

He was looking at the image of Hermione's dining room again. The flower arrangement was gone; the canister of Floo powder was now in the centre of the mantle; there was no pie on the table. Harry turned away from the hearth and looked upstairs. Having never been to the house physically, he hadn't the foggiest notion which bedroom was Hermione's, but he took a wild guess that the bedroom that had a small stack of books (bearing the distinctive logo of Flourish and Blotts) leaning against the doorjamb was probably hers.

She was in bed, asleep. She stirred slightly as he looked at her. *She's pretty when she's asleep*, Harry thought. *No worries, no nagging, just a pretty girl sleeping. This must be what Ron sees.* Harry noted her braided hair, held in place with an orange elastic that was about the colour of Crookshanks who, coincidentally, was sleeping on the pillow next to her, one paw stretched out to touch her forehead. Turning to her desk, he saw an open book, *Advanced Problems in Arithmancy*, and a parchment lying next to it with equations drawn out in Hermione's neat hand. On top of

the textbook was an open diary. Harry felt no desire to peek, believing that everyone was entitled to privacy, but he made a note to himself that he'd remind her to close it in the future.

He turned his attention again to the dining room. He watched the light spill into the Grangers' back yard as the sun crept to the horizon. A bench swing swayed gently under the maple tree's outstretched limb. Birds began to chirp and sing. He was tired and felt the need to lie down.

His bed was not as comfortable as most nights. Something was amiss, but it would wait for morning. The first rays of light poured into his own room and he heard the first chorus of birds chirping in reply. He was at number four Privet Drive, in the no man's land between sleep and consciousness.

He was awake. The alarm had not yet rung – it was set to go off in two minutes. During the school year, he rarely set his alarm clock, as that was what roommates were good for. Outside of the school year he always used it; the alternative to missing his morning chores was a half-hour tongue lashing from Aunt Petunia. He no longer feared the Dursleys, but he did not go out of his way to antagonise them either.

Harry rolled to his back, peered at his watch and sorted out his thoughts. *Okay, I'm home, it's Thursday, and I must have fallen asleep in my clothes. I was at Abelard's yesterday, and I've just had three Farsight dreams taking me to three different locations. I can't write Abelard, as his home is Unplottable; I'll see him tomorrow any way. I'm not going to jot off a note to Mr. Weasley saying, 'Dear Mr. Weasley, did you use the loo this morning at 3:00 am?' That leaves the obvious: Hermione.*

As he sat up and turned his alarm off, a wave of discomfort reminded him that *he'd* not been to the loo since he'd left Abelard's. Five minutes and a thorough hand washing later, he was downstairs, loading the coffee machine and examining the state of the laundry. Spending the entire day away had cut into this chore time; he was certain that he'd hear about it at breakfast.

A rebellious grin snuck across his face as he thought about how one could perform the Summoning Charm wandlessly. Building a picture in his mind, he uttered, "*Accio* dirty towels." Several minutes later, the washing machine was chugging away on a load of towels, there had been no screams from the upstairs inhabitants, and, most importantly, there had been no owls rapping on the window. The Summoning Charm, performed wandlessly, was below the threshold of Hopkirk's sensor. Harry pumped his arm in the air, fist clenched. *Yes!*

Breakfast was barely on time. Harry pulled the last slices of toast out of the toaster as Uncle Vernon trudged into the room.

"Where were you yesterday, boy?" he rumbled.

"I was with my tutor, sir," Harry replied, as inoffensively as he knew how.

"Whatcha need a tutor for, boy? School's already out for the summer."

Dudley grinned nastily. “Repeating a flunked class?” he asked.

“No, more like an extra credit class,” Harry replied, his temperature rising slightly.

“I’ll bet,” Dudley replied.

Despite this exchange, breakfast ended on a civil tone, and Harry did not experiment with the outer limits of evading the Ministry’s sensors through wandless magic. He’d thought long and hard about a Shrinking Charm on Dudley’s drawers, but was worried about getting too carried away and slicing him in half. There was a difference between rebellious and reckless; he was willing to go out on a limb to tweak the Improper Use of Magic office, but he wasn’t inclined to maim his cousin *by accident*. Clearing the table, loading the dishwasher, fetching the white laundry and transferring the towels from washer to dryer took very little time at all. Harry was looking forward to his next time cleaning the lavatories; *Scourgify*, performed wandlessly, should cut the time down to practically nothing.

Returning to his room, he discovered what he’d been oblivious to the night before: all the knobs on his Passbox were lit.

Huh, wonder how long it’s been like that?

Flipping open the doors, he found letters from Hermione, Ron *and* Ginny, ‘Uncle Moony,’ and McGonagall. He was unsure whether he should be happy that he had so much mail, or apprehensive that he’d committed some transgression that he was unaware of. His stomach lurched a bit when he figured that Ginny was probably replying to his monster-sized letter, telling him off, no doubt, for being a creepy stalker. He’d save that one for last. If it were as bad as he dreaded, he’d just get on his bicycle and ride until his legs fell off. He decided he’d start with McGonagall.

Dear Mr. Potter:

Please stand by your Passbox at 3:00 p.m. for a time sensitive message. A reply to acknowledge this message is expected.

Sincerely,

MM

Moony’s note was a bit less frosty.

Dear Harry,

If you are up for an outing, I’m free on Saturday. If you don’t mind a stay at Padfoot’s old den, it can be an overnight affair, giving us a spot more time. Albus says that you’ll be spending the day after your birthday at the Burrow this summer, so please plan accordingly. It’s not completely clear whether that’s a one-day affair or whether all of August will be spent there.

As soon as I hear, I’ll drop you a line.

P.S. Thanks for convincing Tonks to come to lunch as Tonks. You really are fetching as a girl, but you’re the wrong girl.

Uncle Moony

Okay, Moony thought my advice to Tonks was spot on. Maybe I do have a future as an agony columnist – something to fall back on if the Hippogriff breeding thing doesn't work out.

Ron's letter was far more interesting.

Dear Harry,

I'm still, as Ginny puts it, "bald as an egg," but at least the bruising is gone, so now my scalp is the normal pink/white colour of the rest of me. I never knew that I had a nervous habit of running my fingers through my hair. I still do it now, but there's no hair to run through, which makes me all the more self-conscious about it.

Ginny and I made up today. That was very good. Seeing as we're both grounded, probably for the rest of the summer, it wouldn't do to be on bad terms with her. I don't know what got into her, but it's all for the best, I guess. When she was screaming at me, after she slapped me and before she punched me in the gut, she spent some time screaming about Hermione. I didn't put that part into my last letter.

According to Ginny, Hermione's crazy about me, but I keep treating her like she's an annoyance, and if I don't make my move, I'm going to lose her, because "girls with choices don't wait forever." You have no idea how those seven words have haunted me over the past 24 hours. I've always had a *thing* for Hermione, but I thought it was just a one-sided attraction. I've ignored it, hoping that it would go away. Now I'm afraid that it will. Why the girl most likely to be Head Girl of Hogwarts would care about a generic Weasley like me is a mystery. I've never done anything about it, other than tease her mercilessly and abuse her about S.P.E.W. and other crazy things she's about. Do you think that Hermione likes me, you know, in *that* way?

Write soon, I'm going nutters.

Ron

Well, Harry thought, there is a God in heaven. Ginny slapped some sense into her thick-headed git of a brother. It was going to be fun to write a response to this note. He read Hermione's note next.

Dear Harry,

I feel like I've been ignoring you this summer, but I have been busy. I'd very much like to talk to you, maybe by phone, if that could work out. If you're worried about incurring telephone charges, prepaid phone cards are available at the British Telecom offices and other shops as well. The smallest I've seen is five pounds, which should do just fine for our purposes. My phone number is printed in the back of that catalogue that I left you for the clothes.

I've placed your order, by the way. To simplify things, the order is coming to my address – I'll put your stuff in the Passbox as soon as it arrives. Thanks for the reimbursement for the trainers and jeans; it's nice to have "walking around" money.

The topic I'd like to discuss is a certain Gryffindor Keeper. I wanted your male perspective. I could talk to Dad to get that, but in this particular instance, I'm not sure that's a good choice. J I've got to go. Write soon.

Love from,

Hermione

Harry stared at the remaining letter. A number of cowardly, craven thoughts came to mind:

dropping out of school and joining the French Foreign Legion was at the top of the list. After temporising for a while, he screwed up his Gryffindor courage and opened the envelope. The envelope didn't explode, and he hadn't been hit by a remote hex, so he concluded that perhaps it was safe to read the note. With a violent snap he pulled the letter from its sheath and laid it flat on his leg.

Dear Harry,

Please forgive me for taking so long to reply to your most excellent letter. The *Big One* was worth waiting for. Definitely. Things have been a little hairy here at the Burrow in the last few days for Ron and me. On second thought, that's a bad choice of words, as nothing's going to be hairy about Ron for months. According to Mum it will grow back, it's just a question of when. Thanks to Hermione, I've started studying for the O.W.Ls as I have lots of free time these days. Nothing like being grounded for the summer to bring out the studious side of me (NOT!)

You are far more observant than I ever gave you credit for. I suspect that I've underestimated you greatly, but then, aside from last year, I've been afraid to talk to you, so that's not too surprising.

I've made a number of decisions in the last year based on what appears to be an erroneous assumption. Harry, we need to talk.

Your friend,

Ginny

The letter on the whole, relieved Harry. All except for the last line. It wasn't a Howler, he hadn't been hexed, she appeared to appreciate the letter he'd spent weeks writing. So why did she need to talk to him? Hadn't they just exchanged letters? Wasn't that communicating? Harry concluded that this was one of those mysterious "girl" things, and he'd ask Hermione to translate next chance he got.

He wrote a quick reply note to Professor McGonagall, checking his watch to insure that he had the current time. He left his room, gathering up the dark coloured laundry, hoping that the towels were dry so that he could move the white load from the washer to the dryer. If they weren't dry, he knew how to handle that too.

Aunt Petunia hadn't left him any list of chores, but she was dividing her attention from looking out the window to watching him as he folded the towels. *From the look on her face she must find something about the smell of the towels offensive, but then she's always looked at me that way,* Harry thought to himself.

"Aunt Petunia?"

"Yes?" she replied with a brief snarl.

"I need to call my minder – it's a local call."

"You know where the phone is, boy. Keep it brief; someone may try to call and I don't want you tying up the phone."

Oh, yeah, bustling hub of social interaction we have here at number four Privet Drive; the Queen may be calling to see if we are available for tea. “Thanks, Aunt Petunia.”

It struck Harry as odd that the only phone number he knew by heart belonged to a woman he knew only by her first name, and that only grudgingly given at wand point. This was dismissed quickly, as the number of odd things about Harry’s life was so high as to make cataloguing difficult. He wondered if she could answer the phone while in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic’s underground offices, but in the end, he concluded that he didn’t need to know, and really didn’t care. The number rang this morning.

“Good morning, Harry. Where are we going today?” Moey asked in a quiet, hushed tone.

“Morning, Moey. I need to go downtown today.”

“Fine, meet me at the usual place. I’ll be driving my car, same colour as my helmet,” Moey said, and abruptly hung up.

Not much for small talk, I guess, he thought, carefully hanging up the phone in its charger. Harry was mildly surprised in his disappointment in not seeing Laurel today. He’d grown fond of the newly-minted Auror, one of the few adults who didn’t treat him like he needed help walking across the street. Equal part surrogate aunt and bawdy neighbour, she knew when to tell stories, when to listen and when to stay silent. *Well, at least Moey won’t be asking me about my non-existent love life,* he thought as he carried the folded towels to the upstairs linen closet, even though it was exactly that topic that he wanted to discuss with Laurel.

Harry pondered, while he pedalled to the playground, whether he should have brought his bicycle at all. Moey hadn’t said one way or the other, but the urgent tone of her voice led him to believe that she was coming instantly, which meant that he should get there as soon as possible. There were a few mothers and nannies with children at the playground. Harry scanned them with a suspicious eye worthy of Moody himself. All of the women, and indeed all of the children, had the normal number of eyes and didn’t resemble Moey in the slightest.

He rested his bicycle against an oak tree, and sat on a nearby bench, watching the two approaches to the park. After five minutes he heard the quiet sound of a small car approaching. From the corner of his eye he saw a pale blue Volkswagen Beetle, not the old, chattering model, but the new one. Something compelled his eyes to look away from the car, but he found that if he looked with his peripheral vision, he could get enough of a view to identify the driver. Short, dark haired, wearing an eye patch--it was Moey all right. He laughed when he caught sight of the license plate: IMA1IDRR01. Taking care to not look directly at the car, he walked casually to the sidewalk next to the parked car, scanning the playground as the children played.

“Aren’t you going to ask me one of those questions?” Moey asked, the faintest hint of amusement in her voice.

“The license plate convinced me, Moey, but if you insist. Where did Tonks go on her lunch date?”

“Who says it was a date? Can’t a nice girl have lunch with a werewolf without people reading too much into it?” Moey answered, her eyes crinkling a bit.

“Did you help her get dressed?” Harry asked, taking note of the similar clothing that Moey was wearing today: navy blue skirt with matching hose and pumps, long sleeved white blouse that was suspiciously thicker at one wrist than the other, with blue dangling earrings that matched the colour of her eye patch.

“Yeah, the girl has basically no notion of how to dress like a Muggle unless she’s going to a rave. Get your bicycle and let’s get out of here, Harry,” Moey said in a quiet tone. “I’m feeling naked out here in this park. Too many trees, not enough ways to get out.” Moey went to the back of the car and opened the boot.

Harry knew that the bicycle wouldn’t fit in a space that small, but a long habit of doing as he was told paid off as Moey pulled a round patch out of her purse, peeling the backing off of it like a medicinal plaster. As she put the patch on the frame of his bicycle, it shrank to the size of a loaf of bread. Moey took the petite bicycle from his hands and put it in the boot, where it joined a number of other objects that were covered by a tan blanket.

“Hey, I can see the car now,” Harry commented.

“Yeah, the compulsion ends about a metre from the car. It’s a nice trick, but it makes it dicey to drive in heavy traffic. I usually turn it off when I’m driving, but traffic was light today,” Moey explained. “Any Muggle in view of me as I put the Shrink-dot on your bicycle would look away, because I’m close enough to the car to be caught up in its Aversion spell.”

“Shrink-dot?”

“Nifty tool, eh? One of the pleasures of living long enough is acquiring appropriate tools. Very popular with my magical nephews and nieces; they can shrink most anything without attracting the attention of the Improper Use of Magic Office. It has a companion tool too, the Feather-patch. If I used them together, I could put this car into my pocket and carry it around. Wouldn’t want it in my pocket, though, if the charms wore off,” Moey added sagely as she got behind the wheel of the car. “Hop in, Mr. Potter.”

“How long does the charm last?”

“Instructions say ‘up to ten years’ but I don’t believe everything I read.”

Moey started the engine, checking the rear view mirror before she pulled into the sparse traffic. “I’ve turned off the Aversion charm. It’s bloody difficult to drive with it on; cars keep pulling into your space like you’re not there. So, Mr. Potter, where are we going today?”

“Someplace that sells a British Telecom prepaid telephone card.”

“You mean the Global Telecom card, like this one?” Moey asked, fishing into her purse for a

small plastic card while she weaves around a double-parked delivery van.

“Yeah, five or ten pounds.”

“You get more time for the ten pound card, I never buy anything smaller,” Moey said, frowning as she looked in the rear view mirror. Moey let a large sedan pass her as she slowed for a parking space. “Right here,” Moey said, shrugging her head in the direction of a very narrow spot between two delivery vans. “Hop out, Harry.” Harry did as he was told, gauging the distance with his eyes.

“No way is she gonna fit that car into that space,” he thought to himself.

Moey hopped out of the car, grabbing the sleeve of her left arm lightly. She then smacked the side of the car with her hip. The car slid into the space like a well-lubricated drawer on ball bearings, stopping as the tyres hit the kerb. Turning to face Harry, she had a look of triumph in her eye and a smug smile on her face. “There are days that it’s great to be a witch, Harry.” Moey slung her purse over her shoulder, scanned the area once and began walking.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked, quickening his pace to keep up with her.

“There’s a BT kiosk near here; they sell the cards. I need one myself,” she puffed as she poured on the speed.

“Moey?”

“Yeah, Harry?”

“You worried about something?”

Moey stopped abruptly, looking into his eyes. “Yes,” she replied, “but this is neither the time nor place to discuss it. We’ll talk when we get back into the car,” she said, resuming her power-walk.

They stopped at a green and yellow kiosk sitting on the sidewalk between a kabob shop and a newsstand. A pleasant looking older Muggle lady staffed the kiosk.

“What can I do for you, dears?” she asked with a slight lilt in her voice.

“I’d like one ten and one twenty pound Global card, please,” Moey said, passing three ten pound notes through the window. The woman pulled out two cards, passed them into the tray and into Moey’s waiting fingers. Harry was about to place his own order when Moey grabbed, hard, on his shirtsleeve. “I already bought yours, Harry, let’s get out of here.”

“Moey,” Harry hissed, “what’s eating you?”

“Not now, Harry, walk,” Moey replied, resuming her brisk pace.

Whatever peril Moey anticipated failed to materialise as they made their way back to her parked

car. The delivery van was no longer parked in front of her car, leaving the way for them to pull forward out of what had previously been an impossible parking spot. Harry almost regretted it, hoping to see Moey smack the car again out of its very snug space. Moey unlocked the car, and as she got into her seat, checking the mirrors and buckling her belt, Harry handed her a ten-pound note.

“Thanks, Harry. I’ll give you the plastic when we get home. Let me get into traffic before we start talking.”

Harry bided his time. He’d never ridden in the front seat of a nice car, apart from his excursions in the Weasley’s mutant Anglia, having spent most of his years as far back in the Dursley’s car as was possible, usually to be pinched and prodded by his cousin. The vantage from the passenger seat was certainly different than from the saddle of his bicycle.

“There was an attempted break-in at Gringotts recently. It was a co-ordinated Death Eater and Dementor attack,” Moey said in a flat voice as she bobbed her head, looking in the side mirror, rear mirror and turning her head from time to time.

“Any casualties?” Harry asked, not knowing if he wanted to know names.

“A Muggle fireman.”

“What was a fireman doing at the scene of a Death Eater attack?”

“His job,” Moey said flatly. “There’s a Muggle office building that sits on top of a portion of the underground chambers of Gringotts. There was an explosion in the building, which brought down one of the weaker warded sections. The explosion was called in by a Muggle policeman, who brought the Muggle firemen.”

“What did they get?”

“Not a blessed thing, as far as I can tell. That area was recently upgraded – work of some friends of yours from the Order on their day jobs with Gringotts: Mr. Weasley and Miss Delacour. Please tell me that Bill Weasley is not related to that insufferable prig, Percy Weasley.”

“I’m afraid that they are indeed brothers.”

“Can’t be. Bill is just so, so, *hot*,” Moey exclaimed, a brief flush of colour rising in her cheeks as she wiggled in her car seat. “I was doing the investigation, found out that the area had been recently upgraded. The attack would have worked if the old wards had been in place, but Delacour had upgraded it with help from Weasley. I was about ready to leave him my card, you know, in case he remembered anything later, when *bam*, that French Veela comes sashaying into the room. Any progress I’d made vanished as she turned on the old Veela charm. Life is just not fair.”

“I know them both.”

“She ever turn the charm on to you?”

“Nah, I was just a ‘leetle boy’ who shouldn’t be allowed to compete.”

“She played Quidditch?”

“No, she was the Triwizard Champion from Beauxbatons.”

“Oh,” Moey said, sinking in to her seat. “So, there are three Weasley boys?”

“No, six.”

“You’re having me on!”

“Nope, six boys, one girl.”

“I never knew that Arthur was that *persuasive*,” Moey muttered as she rounded a turn.

“Bill’s the oldest – you shouldn’t feel too bad, I hear that he and Fleur have been an item for about a year. Next comes Charlie; he works with dragons in Romania. Then there’s Percy, whom I gather you’ve already met.”

“If Percy were the last man on earth, I’d strongly consider becoming a lesbian,” Moey muttered darkly.

“Ah, yes, you’ve met Percy. Then there are twin brothers, Fred and George; they are the owners of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.”

“I’ve heard of that shop, but I didn’t know they were related to the rest of the lot.”

“Yup, then there’s Ron, who’s in my year. We’re roommates. The end of the line is Ginny Weasley. She’s in Gryffindor, too, year behind me.”

“Speaking of the end of the line, were you going to go for a ride, or do you want to go back to Privet Drive?”

Harry looked at his watch. “I probably need to go back.”

“Yeah, you’ve got an afternoon appointment.”

“How do you know about that?”

“It’s my job to know. Harry, do me a favour, will you?” Moey asked, reaching behind her on the floor of the back seat, retrieving a small can. “Have this opened and on a saucer before you open the Passbox,” she said, handing him a can of tuna. Coming into the parking area for the Little Whinging playground, Moey stopped the car and killed the engine.

“What’s this for?”

“Just play along, Harry, I want to settle an old score.”

“Uh, okay. Changing the subject, were you anticipating an attack downtown?”

“I was worried, Harry. Security is my job; I’m paid to worry about you, unlike many other women in your life. During the First War, the Death Eaters never attacked downtown London; not even during the height of their power. Now they pull this operation off without us hearing a whisper about it in advance. I can’t figure out what they’re up to, and that makes me cranky. But enough about that; you’ve got to run off to a late lunch and your teatime appointment.” Moey stepped out of the car and opened the boot of the car. She pulled out a handful of leather circles, some brown and some black, that she wordlessly handed to Harry. Next she pulled the miniature bicycle out, beginning to peel off the Shrink-dot.

“Shouldn’t you do that somewhere, uh, concealed?” Harry asked with some concern.

“Nah, the Aversion charm is back on. I could stand here starkers when it’s engaged and no one would notice,” Moey said, peeling the last of the dot from the frame of the bicycle. Pulling a sheet of plastic from her pocket, she covered the sticky side of the dot and put it into a black leather circle, which she handed to Harry.

“I’d notice,” Harry said quietly.

Moey looked up, staring at him briefly, a bit of colour coming to her cheeks, “Yeah, well, anyone further away than a metre wouldn’t. The blacks are Shrink-dots; the browns are Feather-patches. You have some fun with them, eh? They don’t work on living things. The leather cover keeps them safe and prevents accidental mishaps.”

“Dragonhide?”

“You bet. Harry, you take care now. Laurel will be on duty the rest of the week, so I probably won’t see you again until next week, and that’s dodgy at best,” she said, flashing him one of her rare smiles. Digging into her purse, Moey pulled out a ten-pound Global Telecom card. “Don’t want to forget this, Harry.”

Harry buckled his helmet on, noticing the collapse of the Aversion charm as he did so. Now free to watch the car, he waved as she pulled away. Moey nodded, and then motored on.

“I am a one-eyed Auror’ indeed,” he snorted, pedalling back to number four Privet Drive.

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Shortly before 3:00 p.m., Harry was back in his room, seated at his desk, writing a note to Hermione about the recent Farsight dream. He had no doubt that she’d confirm the details, but he had a hunch that Abelard would ask him if he’d got it confirmed, so he considered it part friendly correspondence, part homework. He’d opened the can of tuna downstairs and spooned the contents into a shallow bowl. As the label didn’t match the brand that Aunt Petunia stocked in her

pantry, she had no cause for screeching at him, and watched with a baleful glare as he carried the bowl up the stairs. He'd offered a morsel to Hedwig, who declined it with a mournful hoot before flapping out the window for a spot of afternoon hunting.

At three o'clock sharp, the Passbox gave a muffled pop and the Hogwarts knob lit up. Not knowing quite what to expect, Harry opened the door with some caution. Out of the box with a stretch and a flick of an ear stepped a large silver tabby cat with square markings around her eyes. The cat walked to the bowl of tuna, ate half of it, carefully washed her face, jumped from the desk to the floor and became Minerva McGonagall.

"That was most hospitable, Potter, thank you," Professor McGonagall said, licking the edge of her top lip briefly before giving him a half-smile.

Harry was glad, very glad, that he'd tidied the room before her arrival. He didn't think that he could lose House points for having a messy room during the holiday, but one could never tell with Professor McGonagall. "You are quite welcome, Professor. Would you like a chair?" he asked, rising to offer the only chair the room had to offer.

"Thank you, but that will not be necessary. I wanted to discuss a few things for next term. Some things are best said in person, and I do not possess a Muggle telephone. Your O.W.L. results are not yet final, but I did hear that Professor Snape appealed your 'Outstanding' score to the examiners. The examiners declined to change the score," she said, her mouth pursed, but her eyes smiling.

"That's great, Professor!"

"Let's not get too excited, Potter, that means that you now have the privilege of sitting under Severus Snape's tutelage for two more years with the advanced Potions classes," she pointed out, eyes still smiling.

"Yeah, well I'm trying to look at the good side of this."

"I came, Potter, to discuss Quidditch. As soon as that horrid woman was gone, the second thing that I did was removing your ban from playing Quidditch."

"What was the first thing?"

"Removing her name from the roster of approved instructors."

Harry laughed heartily. It was good to be able to laugh about Umbridge, now that she was gone. He unconsciously rubbed the back of his right hand with his left thumb, turning to look at Professor McGonagall. "What about Quidditch?"

"Miss Johnson is playing reserve Chaser for the Ballycastle Bats this season," she said, as if that were a complete explanation.

"Well, that's great!"

“Don’t be thick, Potter. The Gryffindor team needs a new captain.”

Harry stopped dead. “Why are you talking to me about this?” he asked, all levity gone from his voice. He had a sinking feeling he knew where this conversation was going.

“Because, Potter, I think you could do the job,” she said, a slight smile turning at the corners of her mouth. Pulling a small pewter badge from her pocket, she held up the pin and then placed it on the desk.

Harry didn’t move to pick up the pin. He knew that what he had to say would be difficult enough without touching it. He turned to look out the window, not because there was anything of interest, but because he didn’t want to face Professor McGonagall. The backs of his eyes prickled.

“Do you want an answer now?” he asked.

“That was my intent.”

“The answer is no,” he said, not turning from the window. The words tried to catch in his throat; he had to force them out. “I’m very honoured, but the answer is no.”

“May I ask why, Potter?”

Harry sniffled and swallowed around the lump in his throat. “I love Quidditch, and I’ll play Seeker as long as you’ll have me, Professor. But I want – Professor Dumbledore asked me to think about starting up the D.A. again, next term. I can play and be a student and teach the D.A., but I can’t do all that and be captain too,” Harry said, ignoring the tear that was running down his cheek.

“And you think that teaching the D.A. is more important than being captain?” she asked flatly.

I can save some lives – Cho’s family for a start, he thought to himself. “Yes,” he answered meekly, “I’m sorry, Professor.”

“Don’t be, Harry,” she said, her accent thickening slightly as she stood behind him at the window. She placed her arms around him, enveloping him in a firm, no nonsense hug. “I heard about the Chang family, Harry. I’m verry prroud of you.”

They stood there in relative silence, each taking turns to sniffle. When she released him, Harry pulled open his sock drawer and pulled out two clean handkerchiefs.

“Thank you, Potter,” she said, daubing her eye and giving her nose a discreet blow. “If I’m going to lose out to something, it had better be worthwhile. You’ve made the better choice. So, any suggestions for who should be captain?”

“That’s easy, Ron Weasley.”

“Do you think he can handle that job?”

Harry smiled slightly. "Have you ever seen him play chess?"

"No, but I have heard that he's very good at *that* sport," she said in an unconvinced tone.

"The man lives and breathes strategy. Other than his pathetic devotion to the Cannons, he's got a fine mind for Quidditch."

"Weasley it is, then. Would you like to deliver the news and the pin to him?"

Harry broke out into a broad smile. "That would be brilliant. Thanks."

"Don't forget, you needn't try out for the Seeker position, Potter; your ban is lifted."

"Isn't that a decision for the captain to make, seeing as the team already has a Seeker?"

McGonagall nodded and smiled cryptically. "Quite so. Before I go, some more letters came in for you," she said, pulling another thick envelope from her pocket. "If you would kindly shut the door after me," she said, and then turned back into a cat. The silver tabby jumped from the floor to the desk, stopping briefly to finish off the tuna in the bowl, licking it clean. She washed her face again, then nudged the Hogwarts door on the Passbox, pressing her whiskers against the edge of the box. Harry opened the Passbox door for her. The tabby blinked at him, then hopped into the box. Harry shut the door with a faint click, and the now-familiar slurping sound echoed briefly in the sparse room.

Harry palmed the badge, which now brought him nothing more than a bit of cool relief on a hot, sweaty palm. He nicked an envelope from the desk, put the badge into it and chucked it into his school trunk for safekeeping.

He'd take the bowl downstairs for washing, read the letters, write a note to Ron, post the finished letter to Hermione, and sometime this evening he'd try to figure out the mysteries of prepaid calling cards, but for now he was sapped of energy. Checking his watch, he set the alarm to wake him in time for his pre-dinner chores. It was time for a nap.

To be continued....

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The disclaimer found in the Prologue applies to this chapter, stop looking already.

Author's note: British Telecom discontinued its prepaid cards in September of 2003, but in July of 1996, it was a viable business line. I don't know if any private concerns sell them for use within the U.K., but the business for international prepaid calling cards is as thriving there as it is here.

The Letters of Summer The Changing of the Guard

Taking care of business

Hedwig was happy. For most of the summer she'd not carried any letters; the important mail had all come and gone through the Passbox. The recent bundle of mail delivered by Professor McGonagall, mainly from casual friends and members of the D.A., all merited individual responses. Harry reckoned that the responses were sufficiently non-sensitive that Owl Post could carry them. Some would go back to Hogwarts via Passbox, to be carried to their destination by school owls. His beautiful, long-suffering companion would carry the others. He sorted the letters into geographic piles, two to a stack. Hedwig stood at attention staring at him while he tied the letters to her feet, and carefully read out the addresses. She then noiselessly jumped from the bedroom window into the morning sky. If past deliveries were any basis for predictions, she'd be back before noon. Unfortunately for Hedwig, Harry would be long gone by then; today was a class day with his tutor. The letter on Hedwig's left foot, which was addressed to Anthony Goldstein, fellow D.A. member, read as follows:

Dear Anthony,

Thanks for your note. I'm glad to hear that your summer is working out so well. The story about your cousin's Bar Mitzvah was great – I have stories of my own that can match those for weirdness and embarrassment. Look me up once school has started and I'll see if I can top that story.

My summer? So far, so good. See you September 1.

Your Friend,

Harry

Harry was a little bleary-eyed as he finished off the morning notes. He'd spent much of the night at a public pay phone, talking to Hermione. After ringing off with her, he'd written Ron a lengthy letter, partially in response to Ron's recent note, and in part fuelled by things Harry had discussed with Hermione. It put him in an awkward spot, knowing that each expected that he'd keep their confidences, while each also knew that he was communicating with the other. He was looking forward to the day when they'd be talking, *really talking*, to each other. Either they'd both flame out and kill one another (not too likely in his estimation) or end up as something more than just friends. It was a day that he looked forward to, if for no other reason than he'd no longer have to check what he said about one to the other.

After finishing Ron's letter, he'd started on a reply to Ginny, which had only taken eleven drafts to get to an acceptable point.

Dear Ginny,

It looks like I'll be at the Burrow by the end of the month. I don't know if it's just an overnight visit, or if I'm coming to stay for the rest of the summer. Mastermind that you are, you can guess which one I'm rooting for. If I'm at the Burrow for the rest of the summer, we can surely carve out some time to talk then.

Hermione says that you've had a burst of wandless magic recently. I've been learning a great deal about that subject with my new tutor. Evidently a lot of what we've learned at school about wandless magic is just plain wrong. I have some interesting things that I'll be introducing to the D.A. next term, assuming that Dumbledore still wants me to teach that unofficial class. Perhaps you can help me iron the bugs out of my instruction this summer.

Your observant friend,

Harry

His chores were done, he'd caught up on his letters, and he desperately needed a shower in the half-hour remaining before he had to show up at Mrs. Figg's house. Grabbing a batch of clean clothes, he went into the lavatory and ran the water, hoping that there was still some hot water left. Harry hated waiting for hot water. *Why can't Muggles master the trick of instant hot water? Surely there's a technical fix for something the Wizarding world conquered sometime during the reign of King Ethelred.*

The room began to fog over. Harry flicked on the fan and jumped into the shower. While rinsing shampoo from his hair he heard pounding on the door, followed by a bellowing noise from outside the lavatory. The voice was familiar; it sounded like Dudley imitating a bull seal in rutting season.

With some irritation, he turned the water off and grabbed a cold towel. The knocking and bellowing continued, but by now Harry could make out the words.

"Haaarry, telephone! It's a gurrrrrl!"

Looking wistfully at the towel, Harry cast the drying charm wandlessly, wrapped the towel around his middle and jerked the door open.

"Haaarry, PHONE!"

"I heard you the second time, Dudley," Harry said, his voice as cool as possible.

"Downstairs, some crusty girl calling you."

"Did you catch the name?"

"Do you think I *care*, freak?"

Harry didn't bother to answer what was obviously intended as a rhetorical question, and dashed into his room. He pondered briefly just how long Aunt Petunia would scream if he wandered downstairs to take the call clad only in a towel. It was *not* worth it. A minute later, he was in jeans, pulling a t-shirt over his head while bounding down the stairs. Aunt Petunia was pulling a face similar to one who was violently seasick, shooting glances at the cordless phone lying in the center of the kitchen table.

"Thanks, Aunt Petunia," he said, picking up the handset. "Hello?"

"Harry, Jasmine here."

"Jasmine?"

"You know – short girl, long black hair, taught you how to whistle."

Harry winced. "Yeah, sorry. I don't get many phone calls."

"My boss said that I should give you a ring before you set off for class. Bring your broom."

My broom? "Right."

"Bye then."

"Bye," he said, but the phone line was already silent. Before he hung up, he heard a second click. Someone, obviously not Aunt Petunia, who was still sitting there, had been listening to the conversation on an extension. Without a word, Harry put the phone in its cradle, nodded to Aunt Petunia and padded up the stairs. A plan unfolded in his mind as he took the stairs. To keep from being disturbed while he got his trunk open, he jammed a doorstop under his bedroom door.

Sometimes Muggle solutions are the best.

His beloved Firebolt was at the bottom of his almost-empty trunk, next to the carefully folded invisibility cloak and atop the envelope that held the shards of Sirius' mirror. He'd collected the shards after getting a nasty nick on his finger while unpacking. He didn't know why he'd kept them. Perhaps he'd ask 'Uncle Moony' to fix it for him this weekend and put it to some good use. Grabbing a black leather disk from his desk, Harry peeled back the backing from the Shrink-dot, stuck it on his broom and watched his Firebolt dissipate until it was the size of a child's toothbrush. The doorknob rattled as he slipped the tiny Firebolt into his shirt pocket. When he opened the door, Dudley was standing out in the hallway, smiling.

"Where's your broom, freak?"

Harry smiled wanly, pulling the miniature from his shirt pocket. "Remember what I said about shrinking things, dear cousin?" Harry asked cheerfully. "You probably want to stay out of my room while I'm out today, as I wouldn't be around to reverse any accidents until way late tonight." He flashed a mock-concerned smile. Dudley grabbed at his crotch and waddled away at

a quick pace. Harry snorted, then reached into his pocket and locked his bedroom door using the knife that Sirius had given him in fourth year and ‘Uncle Moony’ had repaired on their last outing together.

He bounded down the stairs, calling out to Aunt Petunia on his way out the kitchen door: “I’m off to my tutor, I’ll be back after dinnertime.” If Aunt Petunia heard him, she didn’t answer.

As he reached the end of the driveway, Mrs. Figg rounded the corner, carrying a string bag of short round cans.

“Tonks?”

“No dear, I’m afraid that you’ve got to suffer with the genuine article today.”

“Oh,” Harry said, disappointed.

“Come along, Harry, walk me to my house so you can get off to see your tutor,” Mrs. Figg said, clinking her cans as she walked.

Harry bristled inside, wondering just how many people knew about the day-to-day details of his life. He stuffed that annoyance back down and meekly followed after Mrs. Figg, catching up to her at the street corner.

“Can I carry that for you, Mrs. Figg?”

“The proper question, Harry, is *may* you, and yes, you may.”

They walked in silence all the way to her house, Harry swinging the string bag in a gentle arc as he walked. As Mrs. Figg opened the door to her house, several cats poured out. The majority of the cats in the welcoming committee were taking turns weaving in and out of Mrs. Figg’s ankles, except for two cats who stood a few feet away from Harry, staring at him and the bag he was carrying. Both were desperately trying to make eye contact with Harry. Harry plopped the bag onto Mrs. Figg’s kitchen table, taking care not to release the bag too suddenly and mar the surface. He extended a wave to Mrs. Figg who was cradling a striped ginger cat to her chin, saying things to the cat in a high singsong voice. Mrs. Figg nodded to him as he slipped out the back door into her garden.

The field trip

The gemstone doorway began to appear as he walked into the garden. As he opened the door, he was struck by how much brighter the sun was shining in Abelard’s garden than it had been in Mrs. Figg’s. The door closed noiselessly behind him and disappeared. There were two Adirondack chairs on the lawn today, Abelard was sitting in one, dressed in shirt, tie and waistcoat, and appearing to be asleep in the morning sun. The other chair had been placed a few feet away, arranged for comfortable conversation. Harry sat down quietly, comparing the garden by daylight

to his vision of the garden by moonlight from his Farsight dream.

He realized that he was hearing a faint clicking noise, indicating that Abelard may indeed have been awake. Harry carefully examined his tutor, looking for the source of the clicking. Abelard wasn't sleeping, although his eyes were closed and he was breathing deep, regular breaths. His lips moved from time to time, his left hand was open, palm up to the sky. His right hand held a string of jasper-coloured beads that he was moving oh-so-slowly between finger and thumb, one bead at a time. Harry noticed that the beads and breathing were synchronized, one complete breath, inhale and exhale, per bead. At the end of the circle of beads was a small metal cross. When Abelard reached the cross, he opened his eyes, lifted the beads to his lips, kissed the cross briefly and dropped the string of beads into a small leather pouch that in turn was placed in his waistcoat pocket.

“Good morning, Harry. I won't ask if you slept well, as I know you were up late last night.”

“How did you know that?”

“Farsight, Harry. I checked on you at the end of my day. You were nowhere within the bounds of number four Privet Drive, so I scanned the town, looking for you. I was about ready to send Jasmine out after you when I saw you talking on a pay phone. You were followed by your minders, so I turned in for the evening.”

“Why were you checking on me?” Harry asked, bristling again.

“I am your teacher, Harry, which entails certain responsibilities on my part, just as you have responsibilities, one of which is to be sufficiently rested so that you can pay attention.” Abelard slapped the arm of the chair as he finished this sentence, causing Harry to flinch slightly. Harry startled even more when he heard Jasmine's voice behind him.

“Stand up, please, Harry. I need to measure you.”

Jasmine was dressed in green this morning: a knit shirt on top, Capri pants below, barefoot with her toenails painted a matching shade of pale green. She held out her arms, scarecrow fashion, and spread her feet about a half metre apart. Harry mirrored her stance. Jasmine pulled out a tailor's measure and quickly measured his sleeve length, collar, chest, waist, hips, inseam, circumference of his palms and length of his feet. Apart from the inseam measurement, it was fairly painless. Jasmine shook out the tailor's measure which first rolled out straight and then coiled up on its own length until it was a fat, flat disk. She popped the measure into her pocket and Disapparated with a muted pop.

“Your broom, lad?” Abelard asked.

Harry fished the miniature Firebolt from his pocket where it was doing a passable impersonation of a toothbrush. Peeling the Shrink-dot sticker off, he leaned the broom against his chair and put the sticker back into its protective pouch, looking up to grin at his tutor.

“That will do nicely, Harry.”

“So, Abelard, where are we going today?”

“East.”

“That’s a pretty broad area. What are we doing in the east?”

“We’re going see, to hear, to learn, lad. We’re going to visit the Snow Dragons.”

“Is that a sub-species of the Norwegian Ridgeback?”

“Good guess, lad, but not correct.”

Harry frowned. “They’re not listed in Scamander’s book – only ten species of dragon are listed there.”

“And yet they exist, Harry. I spent a great deal of time with them when I was a young man. Which means?”

“It means that either you’re having me on or that Newt Scamander missed something along the way.”

Abelard smiled. “Exactly. Most dragons are five percent magic and ninety-five percent meat – very interesting meat, but flesh and blood creatures nonetheless. Snow Dragons are ninety-five percent magic, five percent meat, and very unusual animals. I’m not sure that they are native to this planet, but I never learned enough of their language to ask the right questions on that point. Quite rare, difficult to find, and they can become invisible at will.”

A chill went down Harry’s spine as he remembered facing the dragons during the Triwizard tournament. “How do you defend yourself against a fire-breathing, meat-eating beast that you can’t see?”

“But you can see them, Harry, or at least you will see them today.”

“Now you *are* having me on, Abelard.”

“Not in the least,” Abelard said comfortably. “We’re going to enhance your Farsight today. You won’t see them with these,” Abelard said, pointing to his own eyes. “You’ll see them with this,” Abelard tapped one finger on Harry’s now wrinkled forehead as he stared at his tutor.

“Another gin-gin?” Harry asked.

“Yes, lad. Different dosage and formulation; more suited to your size and talent.”

Jasmine returned, carrying three bulky boiler suits. She placed the topmost suit in Abelard’s lap, the second suit on Harry’s lap, and shook out the third suit and began putting it on.

Abelard raised one eyebrow questioningly. “Jasmine, you’re not going on this trip.”

Jasmine didn’t reply, only zipped up the front of the suit and bent down to adjust the cuffs. She then silently picked up Harry’s suit, unzipping it and motioning for him to stand up. As Jasmine circled behind him, adjusting the suit to allow Harry to slip his arms in the sleeves, tugging on his shoulders, she replied, “Yes, I am.”

Abelard responded curtly. “**No** , you are *not* going.”

Jasmine faced Abelard and replied with a long string of invective in a high nasal language, followed by an even longer string of another, more modulated, accented language that Harry didn’t understand.

“You’re being *rude*, Jasmine.”

“You’re being **unreasonable** , Abelard.”

“If you’re going to be cheeky with me, do so in English.”

“I can’t curse in English the same way I can in Hindi and Pashtun.”

“Then perhaps you should limit yourself to reasonable argument rather than invective. You - are - not - going - with - us,” Abelard said, slowly and distinctly as if speaking to an idiot.

Jasmine took Abelard’s suit from his lap and motioned for him to stand. Moving gently she assisted him into the boiler suit, adjusting straps and zipping zippers, moving with a grace and gentleness that belied the fury that Harry could read on her face. Jasmine started to walk away towards the house and then pivoted on her heel, walking back to face Abelard.

“All right, how’s this for an argument? It’s my job to protect you. You are going to a dangerous place. I can’t protect you if I’m sitting on the patio, buffing my nails while you are off in the mountains.” Jasmine put one hand on her diaphragm as if the short speech had left her with a stitch in her side.

“The fact remains, child, that you cannot protect me if you are there. You can’t see the dragons.”

“What of the boy?” Jasmine asked with a backhanded gesture to Harry, who would rather not witness this argument in the first place, and certainly didn’t like being called “the boy.”

“He’s flown with dragons before, and by the time we arrive, he’ll be able to see them. You are pledged to obey me. Please don’t make this a matter of obedience.”

“You’re wrong, Abelard,” Jasmine said, her eyes beginning to glisten, both hands on her stomach now. “I’m pledged to protect you, protect you at the cost of my life. My pledge to serve and obey you is subordinate to that first pledge. I cannot obey you in this, Abelard. I cannot. I’m – I’m so sorry, Master,” Jasmine took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she bowed her head. Harry suspected from her posture and expression that she was fighting off nausea. Jasmine took another

deep breath, looking up to face Abelard. “Do you know what happens to *me* if *you* die while I am pledged to your service?”

“Upon my death, you are obliged to serve my heir for the balance of your pledge period, and if I have no heir, to my most senior student,” Abelard recited, looking down at the ground, as if recalling a lesson from decades past, looking up briefly to glance at Harry.

“Almost correct; what you describe would be true if you were to die of natural causes. If your death is by violence, I am obliged to *avenge* your death. I would most likely go mad, and if I was not successful in avenging your death, I would die from starvation.”

Abelard sat down again abruptly. Jasmine knelt beside his chair, taking one of his gnarled hands in her own smooth one, bringing it to her lips for a brief kiss. “I am so sorry, Master.”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for, child. You are what you are and I’m glad of it. Most days at least.” Abelard sat silently, still holding Jasmine’s hand. He brought his other hand to circle hers, bowing his head, closing his eyes. Harry sat down and watched with rapt fascination. The concentration between the two was entire and absorbing; he was certain that they had forgotten that he was there. Looking at Abelard’s face, Harry could see that his eyes were moving, though his lids were closed. After several minutes, Abelard relaxed visibly, releasing her hand. He then took a deep breath, and then looking to Harry said, “Help me up, lad.” Turning to Jasmine he said, “You’re not dying any time soon. Go get your broom.”

Jasmine bowed her head to the ground until her forehead touched the lawn. “Thank you, sir.” Rising nimbly, she paced off to the house.

Waiting until she was out of earshot, Harry asked Abelard, “Why is she calling you ‘Master’ now?”

“It is very difficult for her to disobey me. I should have realized this problem, but it’s been many years since I had someone pledged to me as strongly as she is pledged.”

“Why was that necessary?” Harry asked.

“It is the paradox of the Shiva Guild – the witches are most powerful when they are pledged, and that power increases with the severity of the pledge.”

“What were you seeing just now? When your hand was on Jasmine’s.”

“I was looking at Jasmine’s lifeline for the next few months, trying to scry the possibility of madness or death.”

“Wouldn’t it be simpler to check your own?” Harry asked. *Not to mention less intrusive?*

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I cannot see my own death, not directly. No Seer can; it is a possible future that is always dark to us.”

Jasmine returned, bringing her broom, a collection of leather helmets and goggles and a map case. Abelard emptied the map out onto the ground. Waving his hand over the parchment, it enlarged and became three-dimensional. Abelard then conjured an additional chair next to where Jasmine was standing. She sat without a word. The map was now a sculpture of a valley surrounded by mountains. Abelard closed his eyes again, touching the edge of the map. Detail became visible in the sculpture, down to individual trees in the lowest part of the valley. Abelard opened his eyes again.

“Despite the histrionics of some people, today’s trip will be fairly safe, provided that we take sensible precautions. When we open the portal, it will appear here,” he pointed to a spot on the map, “on the south side of the valley. We will fly up the valley, hugging the eastern rim, making our way to this ledge on the north side. The ledge is huge – you can’t appreciate the scale on the map.” Abelard traced the route with his fingertip.

“Why not open the portal on the ledge?” Jasmine asked.

“It won’t open there – very unusual ambient magic.”

“You’ve been there before?” she asked, surprised.

“I lived there for several months, before you were born or your mother entered my service.”

“Why are we going?” Jasmine asked.

“We lack one essential ingredient for Harry’s next project. He needs to experience the Snow Dragons.”

“How much of an experience?” Harry asked with some trepidation, remembering the scrapes and scorches he’d received from the Norwegian Ridgeback.

“We’ll watch them. If we’re lucky, we may talk to them.”

“Dragons talk?” Jasmine asked.

“Their own speech,” Abelard replied. “All dragons speak, but the Snow Dragons are cleverer than the rest of their kind. It goes along with their more adept use of magic. They are very long-lived, so they should remember me, all but the youngest. The Dragons call the ledge the Plains of Meeting – it has ceremonial significance to them.”

Jasmine looked down at the map. “If things go wrong, where do we go?”

“Plan A is to regroup at the insertion point and use the portal. Plan B is to go over the north ridge, right about here, and once we’re over the ridge, follow this rift to the river, follow the river to the village below. It’s a Muggle village, but the innkeeper is a wizard, or at least, he was when I

visited them last.” Abelard smiled weakly. “That was quite some time ago.”

“Abelard, can I ask a dim question?” Harry inquired.

“There are no dim questions,” Abelard replied.

“We’re sitting here on a sunny day in insulated boiler suits. Why aren’t we all sweating like horses?”

Abelard shot a glance to Jasmine. “Care to answer that?”

Jasmine turned to Harry. “The suit is charmed to keep you at a constant temperature,” she told him. “In a hot environment it will keep you cool; in a cold environment, it will keep you warm. It’s based upon the sentry suit our security forces use.”

“*Our* forces?” Harry asked.

“The Guild. We don’t all do personal protection.” Jasmine flashed a brief smile, letting Harry know what she thought of those less fortunate souls. Abelard spoke next.

“Tell me, Harry, have you had any more Farsight experiences?”

“Three in a row, last night,” Harry replied.

“Excellent,” Abelard sighed. “Your Eye is opening.”

“My Eye?”

“Your ability to exercise the gift. Today should kick it all the way open for a while.” Abelard unzipped the front of his boiler suit, dug into his waistcoat and pulled out a wrapped gin-gin. “Here. Shouldn’t trigger any Foresight and shouldn’t leave you with any dreams later today.”

“Shouldn’t?”

Abelard held his thumb and forefinger apart by a tiny slice of space. “Probability of five percent or less.”

“I can live with that,” Harry said, unwrapping the gin-gin. “Just one?”

“Yes, just one, but this one you won’t spit out,” Abelard said with a wan smile.

Harry stared at the candy briefly and then popped it into his mouth. Compared to his last encounter with the candy, this was anti-climactic. It tasted strongly of ginger (no surprise that), provoking a copious flow of saliva as the sweet dissolved. He turned to look at Jasmine and Abelard. He could see the faintest of lights surrounding them – Abelard’s was white, Jasmine’s was blood red.

Abelard stood with some difficulty and turned to Jasmine. “Your broom, Ma’am?” Jasmine bent to retrieve it, handing it to Abelard, who turned to Harry. “Yours too.”

With some misgivings, Harry surrendered his Firebolt. Abelard held the two brooms together, closing his eyes briefly as he muttered, “*Iugalis* .” With a brief shimmer, what had been two brooms was now one larger, longer broom. Turning to Harry, he said sharply, “Never use this charm on a person – *never* .” Startled at his vehemence, Harry nodded.

Jasmine stared at what had been her broom. The shocked look on her face matched Harry’s. “You’ll be riding pillion, Jasmine,” Abelard told her. “Dragons fly; Harry can see them, you can’t. I’ll de-yoke the brooms after today’s mission, they’ll be unharmed.”

Jasmine took the broom from Abelard, a sour expression on her face. “All right then,” she said, handing the broom to Harry with a sign. “It was a Fashir.”

“Mine was a Firebolt.”

Jasmine smiled wickedly. “If my broom is preggers after today, I’ll give you the pick of the litter.”

“What are you going on about?”

Jasmine leaned closer, whispering in Harry’s ear. “*Iugalis* is a yoking charm for things, a marriage charm for people. The Fashir is the best racing broom in India. The Firebolt is Europe’s finest.” She grinned wickedly. “Imagine what their offspring would be like,” she said with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

Harry pursed his lips, trying to keep a straight face. “We’ll find out, won’t we?”

“Oh, Harry, one more thing,” she said, still close to his ear.

“What’s that?” Harry whispered in reply.

“I can take anything but the Wronski Feint – do that and I’ll squeeze the *chi* out of you.”

“And what’s so bad about that, Jasmine?” Harry asked, trying to look sly and sophisticated.

“I’m very strong, Harry. If you pass out while we’re flying together, we’re toast. The broom won’t respond to me when I’m riding pillion.”

“Got it. Don’t scare the pretty passenger,” Harry said, beginning to turn away.

“No,” Jasmine said, catching his collar firmly. “Don’t go out of your way to scare the humiliated, out of sorts, very *dangerous* passenger, who would rather be flying her own broom.”

“That’s what I said in the first place.” Harry flashed a grin and went into the house for a quick visit to the loo. As Abelard was nowhere to be seen in the garden, Harry supposed that he’d had

similar thoughts.

Moments later, they were all assembled in the garden again, helmets on, goggles pushed up onto their foreheads. Abelard summoned the doorframe, extending his hand in an ‘after you’ motion to Harry.

Harry grasped the handle, twisting and pushing. An unseen wind was pushing back. Harry leaned into the door and almost stumbled through. It was almost sundown wherever they were on the other side of the door. The valley looked familiar, but the model didn’t convey just how long the valley was, or how high the mountains.

Abelard mounted his broom. “It would be a good idea to fly a short loop here to get your feel for the broom’s handling, then we’ll take off.”

Harry glanced at Jasmine and mounted the broom, taking care to leave space for her behind him. She climbed onto the hovering broom, placing her arms around his middle. Harry was glad that they were both clad in boiler suits, as having this much contact with Jasmine’s very curved body in normal clothing would be quite distracting. Jasmine flicked a toggle on Harry’s helmet, activating the communication charm. It was an odd, breathy sound, as if she were whispering in his ear without the sensation of breath. “Budge up, Harry, you’re too far back.”

“Why do you say that?”

“There are heel pegs to keep your feet in place when we’re in racing position – you’ll miss them by about two inches unless you scoot forward.”

Harry slid awkwardly forward, with Jasmine moulding herself to him.

“Pull your heels up until they click on the pegs – yeah, that’s right. Isn’t that better?”

It was – amazing what small touches could improve the ride. Harry made a note to himself to get pegs installed on his Firebolt the next time he visited Diagon Alley.

They flew a lazy loop around the doorframe, which although closed, did not disappear from sight. Harry climbed steeply, did a small dive, and after giving warning to Jasmine, executed a Sloth-grip Roll before coming to a stop next to Abelard. Abelard pointed to the ledge at the far side of the valley. His gesture made it clear that they should stay to the eastern side. With a thumbs-up gesture, he started off.

Harry was keeping an eye out for dragons, not sure what an invisible dragon would look like at dusk. Jasmine’s voice came into his ear by the intercom charm.

“Fly low.”

Harry skimmed over the tops of the craggy terrain.

“Faster.”

Harry complied. Dragons aside, it was a brilliant night for flying – clear sky, not too much crosswind. The yoked Fashir/Firebolt combination flew like a dream: plenty of power, great brakes, and excellent response. It wasn't a Firebolt; it was somehow - better. As Harry leaned forward to a racing position, Jasmine moved her hands from around his middle to reach forward and place the tips of her lightly gloved fingers on his shoulder blades. From what he could feel on his back, she had her head turned to one side, her cheek against his back.

“Don't hold back, Harry, I'm not made of glass. Open this broom up.”

Harry felt a surge of speed as he approached what he felt was the safe limit of the fused broom.

“Lower.”

Harry was following the contour of the terrain, popping up over rises and diving into the gullies that lay on the other side of the ridge. He saw twin peaks ahead and decided to thread the needle, flat out full-speed.

“YES!” Jasmine was making a throaty sound now, digging her fingertips into Harry's shoulders. Evidently this was the sound made by a contented War Witch with a serious thing for speed. Jasmine said something in the modulated language she'd used to curse Abelard earlier that day.

“I'm sorry, I didn't catch that.”

“Keep flying, Harry, this is lovely.”

Another twenty minutes and they'd reached the ledge, seriously ahead of Abelard, who was about ten minutes behind them. Harry had seen some unusual flashes of colour, far away in the darkening sky, but not near enough for concern. Out of an abundance of caution, they circled the ledge, carefully inspecting the area in all directions before landing. The ledge was a gigantic plain; at least six Quidditch pitches could be assembled here, side by side. A stiff wind picked up, making enough noise to mask any other sounds. Harry stretched stiffly, scanning the sky for the colour flashes. Jasmine's wand was out, pointed at the ground as she looked about. Jasmine came close to Harry, putting her hand to the side of her helmet. Harry clicked the intercom on again. “Close your eyes, Harry. Now, look around again, this time with your eyes closed.”

When he did so, the distant flashes became far clearer; there were dragons flying above the ledge in a circular pattern, at least six of them. They were flying in formation, two groups of three, circling the airspace above the ledge at a respectful distance. Harry opened his eyes – he could see them now, slightly more clearly with his eyes open than shut. The colour, he noticed, was shimmering light, similar to the light he'd seen surrounding Abelard and Jasmine in the garden earlier that day. He could see the same red light shimmering around Jasmine – he guessed that this was the aura that Trelawney talked about *ad nauseum*.

“Harry, what do you see?” Jasmine asked, sounding as though she were trying to keep panic out of her voice. “I can feel them, but I can't see them.”

“They’re in the air, Jasmine, nothing on the ground, yet. Six dragons, flying clockwise above us – I can see a sheet of light where their skin should be, same as I can see your aura right now. They are red, orange, yellow, blue, green and a really pretty purple.”

“You can see my aura?”

“Yeah, it’s a lovely shade of red. I can see it when I close my eyes too.”

Jasmine blushed, which did odd things to her complexion. “Let me know when they land. I feel so bloody helpless here.”

“As I recall,” Harry said blithely, rather enjoying her discomfiture, “you invited yourself to this party, Jasmine.”

“Yeah, when I get back home, remind me what a blithering idiot I am. Until then, don’t leave me, Harry,” Jasmine said, crossing her arms, moving closer to Harry until her shoulder was brushing his arm. “Where’s Abelard?”

“He’s about five minutes out. I can see his aura too; it’s a milky white.” He lifted his head, eyes still closed, as movement caught the edges of his vision. “Heads up, the rainbow gang is landing.” Jasmine started, leaning slightly into him, her head turning back and forth blindly. “Easy now,” Harry reassured her. “We’re surrounded. Mr. Red is at 12 o’clock with Orange at 2, Yellow at 4, Blue at 6, Green at 8 and Purple at 10. They’re about fifty metres out – put your wand down.”

The normal reserve and confidence that Jasmine exuded was coming unwrapped, but Harry was oddly calm. He remembered Charley Weasley saying, “Never rush a dragon and never run away from them – if you remember this first rule of engagement, you’ll probably survive.”

The dragons began to call to one another, their auras waxing and waning. Jasmine shivered, obviously fighting to keep her emotions in check and not blast randomly at things she could feel but not see. “What are they saying?” she asked.

“I don't know. Abelard is the one who speaks a little of their language.”

The red dragon advanced towards them, hunkering down like a cat monitoring a mouse hole. The dragon’s mouth opened, uttering a series of sibilant hisses and clicks. To Harry’s horror, he found that he could understand the dragon speech perfectly. “*Son of Adam, daughter of Eve, why are you here? The People have not invited you to the Plains of Meeting.*”

Harry looked the red dragon in the eye, hoping that he could speak Parseltongue as well as he understood it when it was spoken to him. “*Please, sir, my name is Harry, and this is Jasmine. My teacher, the great Abelard, sent me to the Plains of Meeting. I meant no offense in coming here uninvited.*”

“*You are Abelard’s egg?*” the red dragon asked.

"I am not Abelard's egg, I am his student," Harry replied, hoping that he was understanding the dragon's use of "egg" for offspring and that "student" translated into Parseltongue.

"What is Jasmine? I do not know that word."

"Jasmine is a name; it also applies to a fragrant flower."

"Think of the flower."

Harry thought of the jasmine blossoms he'd seen in Greenhouse Number 2, grateful that he'd paid attention when Neville gave him an inside tour last year. Pulling the picture to the front of his mind, he felt a gentle probing on the rim of his consciousness.

"We do not know that flower, but we know of Abelard. He was a student here when we were but eggs," Red stated.

Blue spoke from behind Harry. *"Mm'lch, Abelard approaches."*

Red reversed a few steps and sidestepped until he was standing to the right of Orange. Abelard landed his broom, setting it down beside Harry and Jasmine. Red waddled back to his prior position. Abelard bowed deeply and then bellowed a tremendous roar. Red bowed his head until his chin was on the ground, responding with an ear splitting roar. Abelard said out of the side of his mouth, "Now you two bow."

Harry bowed deeply, but skipped the bellowing roar. Jasmine curtsied. Red snorted a spigot of flame and then said, *"Abelard, you are welcome here, always. Why did you bring young that are not your eggs?"*

Abelard stared at Red blankly. Harry whispered to Abelard, "Did you understand the question?"

"I think he wants to know why you two are here," Abelard said with a puzzled look on his face.

"Actually, he wants to know why you brought us here if we are not your children," Harry explained.

"You understand their tongue?"

"It's some variety of Parseltongue. I'm a Parselmouth."

"I should have figured. Answer for me, if you would, lad."

"Abelard says that he has no eggs, but we are members of his house." Harry realized with a split consciousness that as he said the words 'members of his house' his mouth translated the phrase as 'eggs of his nest.'

Red pondered this reply for a moment, looking to Orange and Purple. *"Nestlings of Abelard are welcome to the plains of meeting. Let us call Primus."*

Harry turned to Jasmine and Abelard “I guess we’re ok because we’re Abelard’s honorary children – they are calling for another dragon, someone they call Primus.”

“Primus is a title, Harry, for the leader of this clutch.”

“Yeah, well, whatever he is, the biggest white dragon I’ve ever seen is coming this way with a dark blue following close behind,” Harry announced blandly.

The large white dragon landed with a slight thump, barely louder than that a cat would make jumping down from a bed. The dark blue dragon landed behind it, circling under and to the side of the large white. As the blue dragon circled under, Harry was reminded of the way that Mrs. Figg’s cats would rub her ankles in greeting. He felt more gentle probing at the edge of his consciousness. Abelard bowed again. Without prompting, Harry, too, bowed and Jasmine curtsied.

White opened his mouth. *“As we saw so long ago, you have come back to us, Abelard. You are growing dim. Why is your short nestling so afraid?”*

“Harry, answer please. I can barely understand his question, and I’m certain that I’d bollix the answer.”

Harry was rather afraid he'd bollix the answer as well, but he took a deep breath and said, “Jasmine is afraid because she can sense your presence, but she cannot see your beauty. Our kind is very dependent upon what we see with our eyes.”

The white dragon snorted a brief spear of flame and then became visible. Jasmine gasped, grasping Harry’s left arm. The other dragons followed, iridescent in the twilight, their visible form matching their aura colours closely. They were awful and breathtaking, both in their size and in their beauty. Their musculature rippled underneath their finely-scaled skin, catching the available light in the facets of the scale like a mountain of pearls and diamonds. In the dusk they were astounding; in full daylight they must be unbearable.

“Say thank you, Jasmine,” Harry prompted. “They’ve become visible to put you at ease.”

Jasmine curtsied, somewhat clumsily in her awe, to the great white dragon. “Thank you, sir.”

“*You are quite welcome,*” White replied.

“*You understand her speech?*” Harry asked.

“*I hear her speaking her own tongue, but her mind is clear enough,*” White replied. “*Abelard learned a little of our tongue many seasons ago, but we always relied upon the clarity of his thought.*”

There was a side discussion among the dragons that Harry could not make out. White then said, “*Mm’lch says that you fly quite well; he had a most difficult time tracking you in the valley. He wants to know if you were attempting to be evasive.*”

Harry blushed, remembering how he had ripped over the terrain. *“No, sir, I was merely enjoying a good day to fly. Jasmine is good company, and I was learning how to fly a new broom.”*

“Jasmine is not your krulach,” White said, a statement, not a question.

“Please, sir, I do not know the word ‘krulach.’”

The dark blue dragon twisted her neck around and under the neck of the great white dragon, rubbing the top of her head on the great white dragon’s chin, stage whispering, *“They are mammals, Primus; they bear young and suckle. They know not krulach.”*

“Jasmine does not bear your young,” White said, restating his earlier words.

Harry blushed furiously. *“No sir, she does not bear my young.”*

“Yet you fly with her?” White inquired.

“Our customs of mating are different than that of The People. Nestlings will fly together without marking each other,” Harry stated, feeling odd as the dragon terms came bubbling out of his mouth when he’d meant to say ‘friends fly together without commitment.’

The great white shook his head as if to clear it from a vexing thought. Looking straight at Harry, he said, *“Why have you brought your nestlings here, Abelard?”*

Abelard pulled himself as tall as he could stand. *“Primus, Harry is the Servant of the Light we discussed many years ago when I was little older than Harry is today. He must be equipped for his life tasks.”*

The great white snorted flames again, both nostrils this time. Harry felt more probing at the edge of his mind, gentle but persistent. *“Come forward, Harry,”* White said. White’s tail snaked around his great body, thrusting forward to the right of his front feet, dangling in mid-air in front of Harry. *“Grasp my tail.”*

Harry walked forward and grasped the tip of White’s tail. It was surprisingly warm and smooth, like a muscular rope. He could feel a surge of magic as his skin made contact with the dragon’s hide, his scar buzzing with magical energy again. It was quite similar to the buzzing induced by Fr. Martin’s Transfiguration salve. Harry looked down; expecting some sort of transformation, but to his relief saw that he remained unchanged. The great white dragon pulled back his tail and Harry knew without bidding that he should return to where he was standing before.

“You are indeed the Servant of the Light, yet you are tied with a thread to unspeakable darkness,” White said. There was a quiet question to his tone, as though he invited clarification.

Abelard paused for a moment, and then spoke slowly and clearly. *“The thread will sever when the Servant of the Light overcomes the darkness.”*

“Darkness attempts to extinguish the Servant of the Light?” White asked.

“There have been five attempts,” Abelard answered.

The great white dragon yet again blew flames from its snout, which Harry was reckoning must be the dragon equivalent of a deep sigh. “We are of the light,” he said at last. “We are obliged to aid the Servant of the Light. How may we be of assistance to you, Abelard?”

Abelard smiled, and Harry thought he could detect a bit of relief in the smile. “It is a trifle, Primus. Harry needs to see you, in flight, transforming and disappearing.”

“I think my *krulach* should do that,” White observed.

“As you think best, Primus,” Abelard answered. “Harry, watch the dark blue dragon carefully.”

The dark blue dragon, apparently the *krulach* of the white, raised her head and bellowed a tremendous roar. The roar was followed by a blistering blast of flame. The dark blue dragon disappeared with a gentle pop that must have been some sort of Apparation, as she appeared moments later in the air, flying loops and diving. As she flew, she became invisible; leaving only her aura, then became visible again. Landing in front of Harry, she crouched down, catlike as the red dragon had been, then began to shrink in size until she was barely the size of a squirrel. With another pop, she Disapparated, appearing again in the air, flying languid loops, this time twice her normal size, which was half again as large as the great white dragon. With a third pop, she Disapparated from the air and Apparated again to her crouching position in front of Harry, back to her apparent normal size, which was slightly larger than a lorry with wings and a long tail. Harry felt gentle probing at his mind that withdrew after a moment.

Dark Blue spoke. “*Farewell, Abelard. We will not see you again. I must speak briefly with your nestlings. We will escort them safely to your door.*”

Abelard bowed deeply, mounted his broom and took off at a fair clip. Jasmine nestled in closer to Harry, one hand on his elbow, the other on the back of his neck. Sometime during the extended chat with the dragons she’d removed her glove and holstered her wand. Harry could feel the warmth of her fingers on the back of his neck.

“*You know that Abelard’s time is short?*” Dark Blue asked.

To Harry surprise, Jasmine answered. “Yes, Ma’am, we know that his time is short.”

“Do not try to extend his time. He has done all that has been required of him, and then much more.”

“He has made his wishes quite clear, Ma’am, and we will honour his wishes,” Jasmine replied.

“*Thank you, nestling of Abelard. Servant of the Light, I cannot see if you will return again; your future is very difficult to see clearly. You, your *krulach*, and your nestlings are welcome at any time to return. We are of the light and must do what we can to assist the Servant of the Light.*”

Harry nodded, unsure what to say.

"You require one last thing." Breathing a long jet of flame into the rock, Dark Blue closed her eyes. When she opened them again, a small white stone appeared in the middle of the expanse of stone that bore scorch marks from her flame. *"This is for your krulach, Servant of the Light. When you have need of it, you will know how to use it."*

Harry advanced slowly, shaking off Jasmine's hands with a gentle shrug, kneeling down to carefully pick up the white stone. To his surprise the stone was cool, much cooler than the stone it was sitting upon, which still radiated heat from the dragon's fire. Picking it up, he saw that it appeared to be an intricately carved model of the great white dragon, bent in a circle with its tail in its mouth. Harry placed it securely in a pocket and zipped it shut. Standing again next to Jasmine, he bowed deeply. Jasmine curtsied and then picked up their broom.

"Farewell, Servant of the Light," the White said, bowing his head.

"Farewell, Primus," Harry replied. *"I am glad to see your beauty. I am deeply in your debt."*

"The beauty is not ours, Servant of the Light; we are of the light. Mm'lch, make sure that the Servant of the Light reaches the golden door without mishap."

The rainbow dragons were all airborne again. Harry knew without being told that they were waiting for him to be aloft. He put his goggles in place, cinched the strap on his helmet, clicked his intercom off and on to insure that it was on, and mounted his broom.

Jasmine settled into place, reaching up under his arms to place her fingers on his shoulders, tilting her head to the left, placing her cheek against the back of Harry's neck. *"Harry, this has been the most beautiful and weird experience of my life, but if you don't pour out every bit of speed this broom can produce, I'll figure out a creative way to hurt you when we get home ."*

Harry snorted, kicking off from the ground. Within a moment he was in racing position, flying with the red dragon as escort. The other dragons had disappeared. Red kept pace with Harry quite well, but seemed to prefer a good amount of altitude compared to Harry's ground-hugging approach to the ledge. After a good twenty minutes of flying, he spotted the golden door. The door appeared to be open. Harry put on a burst of speed and overshot the door, earning a baffled comment from Jasmine. Harry was smiling broadly as he climbed steeply and then turned backwards into a vertical dive. Three seconds into the dive, Jasmine figured out what Harry was doing.

"HAAARRY – YOU BASTARD! I TOLD YOU I'D DO ANYTHING BUT THE WRONSKI!"

Harry had already clicked the intercom off, but it didn't matter, he could hear her screams quite clearly. A fraction of a second before ploughing into the ground, Harry made a sharp turn. He cleared the ground by inches and shot through the open doorframe like a manic Bludger. Once through the door, Harry climbed, losing speed as he gained altitude. He made a gentle loop as he spiralled in to land in the garden. Abelard was sitting in an Adirondack chair next to the back door.

Jasmine released her death grip on Harry's shoulders, peeled off her helmet and goggles. She began to stomp off to the house, stopped and wheeled around. She stomped back to where Harry stood with the broom in one hand and helmet in the other, tossing her helmet to the ground.

"This is for scaring me spitless!" she said, smacking his cheek with an open palm. Standing on her toes, she reached up and grabbed Harry's collar, pulling his head level to hers. She stared into his eyes briefly before giving him a vigorous kiss. "That's for everything else!" she said, pushing him away. Before Harry could figure out what had just happened, Jasmine picked up her helmet and stomped back into the house.

Abelard looked on with amusement as Harry stared uncomprehendingly after Jasmine. "Jasmine is the Queen of the mixed signal," he said. "I see that she's feeling comfortable enough with you to express herself freely."

Harry rubbed his cheek. He suspected that he'd have quite a mark there for the rest of the day. "Is that what she was doing, expressing herself?" He shook his head. "I don't pretend to understand girls, Abelard."

"You didn't attempt to perform the Wronski Feint, by any chance?" Abelard asked.

"Not exactly the Wronski, but pretty close."

"Hummmph. Jasmine likes flying fast, always has, but she doesn't care for the Feint. She saw her brother plough into the ground when she was eleven. With the best of care he was hospitalized for months."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling particularly low right then. *I am in deep trouble.*

"After we finish lunch and our lesson for the day, perhaps you two can have a chat about that."

"Yeah, Abelard, I'm *really* looking forward to that."

"Go inside and get a shower before lunch, lad. I'll run interference for you until after lunch."

Something old, something new, lot of magic, one piece blue

Lunch was soup with fresh yeast rolls. Jasmine joined the table after the blessing, sitting as far from Harry as she could without making a scene. After two bowls of soup and five rolls, she excused herself from the table and disappeared. Harry cleared the table, loaded the dishwasher and wiped down the counters. When he returned to the table, Abelard was finishing some tea. Next to his teacup were a small stone Pensieve and an elegant ebony wand.

"Nice wand," Harry said, slightly surprised that Abelard even had one, as the older man had performed all of his magic without one in all their encounters.

“Today’s trip was quite tiring for me, Harry. Pensieve work has always been easier with a wand than without, and today I just don’t need the extra effort that doing this work wandlessly would require,” Abelard said, rubbing his eyebrows as he spoke. He looked as though he’d aged thirty years since that morning.

“Would you rather do this next session?” Harry asked.

“We haven’t time, lad,” Abelard snarled. “I’m quite surprised that Voldemort hasn’t been pounding you senseless this summer. I cannot in good conscience delay building your defenses. It will be today, Harry.”

“What are we doing?” Harry asked.

Abelard sighed. Picking up his teacup, he swirled the dregs and then knocked the cup back, draining it dry. “Primus said it best, lad. You have a thread connecting you to Voldemort.”

Harry’s hand went unbidden to his scar.

“It’s not the scar, lad. The scar is merely the sign of the link; otherwise Dumbledore would have removed the scar years ago. The only thing that will sever this link between you is death: his or yours. He lost a bit of his power when he tried to kill you almost fifteen years ago. If he succeeds in killing you, he’ll get that bit back, plus a healthy residual dab of magic from your own abilities. If you kill him, it’s the reverse.”

“I don’t want his magic,” Harry said, his eyes wide with horror at the prospect of absorbing anything more of Voldemort.

“We’re long past the point of wants, lad,” Abelard said, looking blankly out the window. Returning his gaze to Harry, he continued. “Think of the link as a bridge. You are on one side of the bridge; he is on the other. How do you defend yourself from an enemy that has a bridge into the most sensitive portions of your mind?”

“Uh, blow up the bridge?” Harry offered.

“That would be a good tactic, and you’ll be working on that soon enough. When Voldemort dies, the bridge will be gone. But until that time, you need to defend the bridge, as you cannot sever the link, nor would you want to - in the end, it will be your preferred avenue of attack. You need sentries on the bridge, beings that can sense your adversary, tell you when he is coming, repel the attack, and if necessary, bind up your wounds and take you far away. We’re going to build those sentries today and install them in your mind.

“Dumbledore meant well when he tried to teach you Occlumency, although why he ever let Snape be your teacher is a mystery to me. Occlumency closes the mind from invasion, but could never defend against this type of attack. You cannot close this bridge, you can only defend it.”

“So, what do we do?”

“First we harvest some of your memories and store them in this Pensieve. Then we’re going to use those memories to build your sentries. Lastly, we install them.”

Harry nodded abruptly. “Let’s do it.”

With a small smile, Abelard picked up his wand. “Most of these memories are quite fresh, this should be quite easy. Think of the spider we say the first day you visited me here.”

“The brown one with the long stringy web?”

“The very same one. Bring the memory to mind. See the spider, see her spinning her web. Do you have all that?”

Harry placed his palms flat on the table, eyes closed. After a moment, he nodded. “Yeah, I’ve got all that.”

Abelard touched his wand lightly to Harry’s temple. “*Fiat Memoriam*,” he said, and pulled a gooey, glistening strand from Harry’s temple, dropping it into the Pensieve. The swirling, milky fluid in the Pensieve hissed briefly as if Abelard had poured in drops of molten metal. After a brief bit of bubbling, the surface of the Pensieve became placid. “Wonderful, Harry. Now we need to think about the bats we saw the same night. See them surging into the night sky – focus on their flight.”

Harry concentrated, picturing them clearly in his mind. “Ok, I’ve got it.”

Abelard repeated the incantation, placing the string of memory into the Pensieve with similar hissing and bubbling. “Now I want you to visualize the dark blue dragon. Her name is Mm’lau, the krulach of Primus. Recall everything, lad: flames, roars, flying, size changing, Apparition, Disapparition, the awful beauty of this creature.”

That memory was etched onto the backs of his eyelids; he didn't think he'd ever forget it. “I have it.”

The memory harvested this time was a very long strand that caused violent boiling in the Pensieve. Harry’s eyes snapped open.

“Whew, that must have been a good one.”

“Mm’lau always did pack a good punch. I could tell you some great stories about her, but not today.”

Harry smirked. “Anything else?” .

“Only one more to harvest, then the real work begins.”

“Which memory now?”

“Your headmaster’s phoenix, Fawkes.”

Harry relaxed. “Fawkes and I go way back.” He closed his eyes as he brought to mind every encounter he’d had with the immortal scarlet bird: Fawkes bursting into flame on a Burning Day; swooping down with the Sorting Hat in the Chamber of Secrets; beautiful snatches of phoenix song; Fawkes standing over him, weeping tears into the wounds he’d received from the Basilisk and again on the wounds he’d received the night Voldemort was reborn.

“*Fiat memoriam*,” Abelard said as he harvested the last strand of memory. He reached into his waistcoat and pulled out a glass vial, adding several pinches of powder to the Pensieve, closing the vial and returning it to his pocket. “Jasmine,” he called. There was no answer. “Jasmine, now!” he bellowed, a note of irritation in his voice.

An oversized t-shirt appeared on Abelard’s lap. Abelard put a hand over his eyes and chuckled. Moments later there was a gentle pop as Jasmine Apparated into the room, clad in a large terrycloth bathrobe with her hair wrapped in a towel.

Abelard lifted the t-shirt. “What am I to make of this, Jasmine?”

“I wanted you to keep your shirt on – I wasn’t able to come when you called. I was in the shower, sir. I didn’t think that Harry would appreciate seeing me starkers today, or any other day for that matter,” Jasmine said, smiling.

“I may need your assistance if this gets out of hand. I am very weary,” Abelard said, gesturing towards the Pensieve.

Jasmine looked around the room and then stared at the Pensieve. “Let me get some tongs. I think this should be done outside.”

Abelard tugged at his beard. “That would be wise.” Looking at Jasmine, he said, “Get decent and meet us out on the flagstones in the garden.”

“Yes, sir.”

Abelard pulled himself out of his chair with some effort, stretched, and moved slowly into the kitchen. Mrs. Paprikash had prepared a tray with tumblers, a pitcher of ice water and a pitcher of some cloudy juice. Harry picked up the tray and headed out into the garden, earning a smile and nod from Mrs. Paprikash, who returned to her cupboard, pulling out ingredients. Given the collection of bins, bottles and bags already on the counter, she was preparing for an industrial strength batch of cooking.

In the garden the afternoon sunlight was bright, making the cold drinks especially welcome. Following Abelard’s lead, Harry half-filled his tumbler with water, topping it off with juice. The combination was delicious.

“What is this, Abelard?”

“Tamarind, Papaya and water – I don’t care much for either of the juices on their own, but the combination is right pleasing.”

The juice seemed to recharge Abelard, peeling back the fatigue that had shrouded his demeanour since they’d returned from the meeting with the dragons. Looking particularly satisfied, he drained the dregs of his tumbler and refilled it.

Jasmine walked out to into the garden, carrying the Pensieve with metre-long tongs. Her hair was pulled back into a bun, held in place with metal pincers; the bathrobe had been replaced with black cargo pants, boots and a loose, long-sleeved denim shirt. Jasmine set the Pensieve down on the flagstones and handed Abelard his wand, then pulled her own wand, a delicate inlaid bamboo creation, from her sleeve. Noticing Harry’s glance at the wand, she blushed momentarily.

“I haven’t used it since school, all right? We were *supposed* to learning how to be ladies, and this is a ladies’ wand. I did learn something more than death and destruction at the Institute,” she said, pulling a funny face. She twirled her wand counter-clockwise over the Pensieve. In response, the contents of the Pensieve swirled clockwise. Moving a chair back a respectful distance, Jasmine placed her hand over her eyes.

“Look away, this is going to be hot.”

As Jasmine poked her wand in the direction of the Pensieve, Harry heard a great whoosh as a fireball shot straight up from the Pensieve. The fireball was bright, blindingly so. Harry turned his back to the tiny inferno, feeling surges of heat against his back. The fire waned quickly, allowing the wizards and witch to look at the Pensieve again, or at least where the Pensieve had been. The flagstones were scorched in a nice even circle. The flagstone at the centre of the circle had crumbled under the heat, leaving a small mound of ash where the Pensieve had been.

Jasmine squatted at the edge of the scorch ring, holding the back of her hand over the ashes, pulling a face. Walking into the house, she returned moments later with two pitchers of water, a large metal spoon and a bottle of dish soap. Squatting again at the edge of the ring, she carefully leaned over and scooped the ashes into a pitcher, covering her face with her hand as a cloud of steam and fly ash erupted from the pitcher. After there were no more ashes to be scooped, she squirted soap into the now steaming pitcher and stirred with the spoon. From the sound of the spoon, there were a few clinkers in the pitcher. Harry crouched next to Jasmine as she poured the water out into the hole in the flagstones. When the pitcher was almost empty, Jasmine used the spoon to gather four slime-covered objects from the bottom. “Hold out your hand, Harry,” she directed, her face suppressing a sly smile.

What felt like warm rocks plopped into his palm. “I’m honoured, I’m sure, but what exactly is this?” Harry asked, a slight scowl on his face.

“Those are your sentries, lad,” Abelard said, his face impassive, all but his eyes, which were smiling.

“I have faith in you, Abelard, really I do, but a handful of muck is not what I was expecting.”

Harry replied.

“The muck is just muck, lad, but there’s treasure in your hands.”

“I’m sure,” Harry said dryly, making sure that none of the muck dripped onto his new jeans or trainers.

“Stand still, Harry,” Jasmine said, pointing her wand at his hands. “*Scourgify* .”

Harry felt like he’d been slapped by a tidal wave of cold seawater, but when he looked down, the muck covering his hands was gone and his clothes were spotlessly clean and dry. In his hands were four intricately carved stones: an agate carved into the form of a spider; some tiger-eye carved into a bat; a garnet-coloured phoenix; and a delicate dragon the colour of lapis lazuli. The dragon was bent into the shape of a ring, its tail held delicately in its mouth. The pieces were intricately detailed: Harry could see individual hairs on the wings of the bat, the spinners on the spider, feathers on the Phoenix, and eyelashes on the dragon. Each was so lifelike that Harry wondered if they would walk (or fly) from his hand if he blinked.

“They’re gorgeous, Harry, I wasn’t expecting anything so wonderful,” Jasmine said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Turning to Abelard, Harry asked, “What am I supposed to *do* with them?”

“Have a seat, Harry. First we’ll talk, and then we’ll do,” Abelard said, looking up at Jasmine. She flicked her wand, bringing a circle of chairs together. Making a funny face of concentration, she conjured a table in the midst of the chairs. She frowned at her result, a delicate cherry wood Queen Anne style table. Another wand flick later the table was rustic and white, matching the Adirondack chairs. Jasmine cleared her throat.

“Excuse me for a moment,” she said, shedding her long sleeve shirt, revealing a loose, modest black tank top. Holding her wand in her teeth, she pulled her hair out of its bun, revealing a swatch of midriff when she did so. Catching Harry’s gaze, she turned her back to the men, shaking her hair loose, applying the *Scourgify* charm. Turning around, she smiled shyly and sat down.

“Your hair is quite pretty,” Harry said, “I’ve never seen you wear it loose before, it’s always in a braid or a bun.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Jasmine replied, “I normally keep it up when I’m working, but I just had to get the ashes out of my hair – I couldn’t stand being gritty any more, especially after just showering.” Turning to her employer she smiled and said, “I’m ready now, Abelard.”

“Let us be thankful for small things,” he said dryly. “Harry, put the sentries on the table.” A moment later the carvings were spread out on the table, glistening in the afternoon sun. “These are bits of your magic, carrying your memories of the items they represent – think of them as little magical machines that work at a dedicated task. That task is defending your mind, Harry.”

“How do they do it?”

“Elegantly, Harry, elegantly. The bat, in nature, uses its voice as an active sensor. Muggles call it Sonar: finding things in the dark, or the light, by listening for the echoes. This magical bat will search far and wide for bandits that threaten the bridge. The spider, in nature, spins its webs for a multitude of purposes. The magical spider will spin threads that serve as Gossamer wards; when the thread is broken, you’ll know it. If you differentiate the threads, you can tell how far away your intruder is, and where they are at any given moment. The dragon, oh, Mm’lau, you are such a beauty. The dragon is your active defence. No one in their right mind would attack anything that a dragon was guarding.”

“Thanks, Abelard,” Harry said, remembering the first task from the Triwizard tournament. “That must mean that I really am loony.”

“This dragon is much smarter than that Norwegian Ridgeback, Harry.”

“And the phoenix?”

“The phoenix is good for many things--for healing the wounded, for carrying messages, for transporting heavy loads, for inducing calm and cheer through its song.”

“So I’m going to carry them around with me?” Harry said, his eyebrows raised.

“No, lad, you’re going to have them inside you, guarding your mind.”

Harry wasn't entirely sure he liked that. “Mr. Weasley always says never trust anything if you can’t see where it keeps its brain.”

“A wise sentiment, lad, very wise. All of these bits of magic are made from your memories, and consist of bits of your own magic. We’re going to return them to you and put them to work.”

“What are the side effects?” *There has to be a catch somewhere .*

“Good question – let me ponder that for a moment.” Abelard tapped his lips with a finger. “Hmmm, yes. From the spider, you’ll gain an unusual aptitude for casting the Gossamer ward and related invisible charms. No other side effects there. With the bat, you’ll be able to understand the language of bats, but not speak it. It’s of limited utility – you won’t develop any cravings for moths, so there’s not much to worry about there. The dragon, hmmm. You’re already a Parselmouth, so that won’t change, although it might improve a bit. You will be able to speak with Mm’lau, or a shadow of Mm’lau, but as it’s your own memory and magical essence, it will be under your control at all times. Your talents at Occlumency and Legilimency will sharpen, as that is second nature to the dragons. There is one thing. Ah – dragons - er - mate for life. It will similarly affect your temperament – you’ll mate for life when the time comes.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“You’re asking the wrong wizard, Harry. I’ve been celibate all my life. I missed my mate.”

“And the phoenix?”

“This shadow of Fawkes will be present in your mind – you’ll be able to talk to it, and it will be able to understand you, as Fawkes understands Dumbledore. You most likely will be able to understand the tongue of the Phoenix, but again, your body can’t make the sounds that make up their language. The positive side of all of this is that even when you are asleep, your mind will be guarded from magical and physical attack.”

“And after Voldemort?”

“After Voldemort you will still have the sentries, but without a pressing need, they will stand down and lie dormant until need for their protection arises again. With Voldemort’s death, the link will be gone. There will no longer be any bridge to defend. I suppose it would be possible to remove them, but I rather much doubt that you’d want to – you’ll grow accustomed to them.”

There was a long moment of silence. Jasmine got up, walked into the house and returned with pitchers of juice and ice water. Abelard refilled his tumbler, smiling like a cat with tuna breath.

Harry froze as he thought it over – he was going to stuff four magical creatures into his mind to keep the foulest wizard alive out of his mind. He thought of the times when he’d been gripped with fury as Voldemort tried to possess him, shuddering as he remembered the bone deep revulsion that racked him after Voldemort withdrew. Harry looked up and nodded at his tutor. “It’s odd, Abelard, but I’d rather have these beasts in my mind if I can keep Voldemort out of it.”

Abelard chuckled. “That’s about how I see it as well. Remember when we were doing the work to produce the Lesser light?”

“That ball of light that I pushed out of my hand last lesson?”

“Correct. This will follow a similar path. This too is a hot charm, which is why I have asked Jasmine to join us.”

“She’s the fire department?” Harry said with a smile.

“Something like that, lad, something like that.” Abelard gave him a sharp look. “Are you in or out, Harry?”

“I’m in,” he said with determination.

“Then close your eyes. Look deep within your guts, where the magic flows. See the magic swell and throb and churn – yes, that’s right. Now, see a simple ring – a plain circle. Push that ring up from where all your magic is stored; up your arm and into your hand. Good, now open your eyes, Harry.”

In the middle of Harry’s right palm was a gold circle, thin as fine thread.

“Don’t touch it, Harry – command it to become larger.”

“Larger?”

“Yes, larger.”

“Larger,” he said, with a small hiss of effort. Through half closed eyes he saw the ring expand until it was the size of a dinner plate. It was now hovering above his hand, floating a discernable half-inch above his palm. He held the wrist of the open hand with his left, supporting it and sweating as if he were hoisting a boulder.

“Make it stand on edge, Harry.”

Harry said nothing, but another hiss could be heard. The ring now stood straight up. Abelard looked at Jasmine and nodded. She picked up her wand, pointing it at the carved jewels that one by one, floated from the table into the large ring on Harry’s hand. When all four sentries were in the circle, Jasmine swirled her wand above the ring. The ring began to twirl on its vertical axis, spinning faster and faster until the space appeared to be a golden sphere.

“The sentries are now contained, Harry. Shrink the ring. Don’t worry about the contents of the sphere – they are bits of your magical essence, the size of their container is a non-issue, you won’t hurt them in any way. Now, just as you did with the ball of light, absorb the sentry sphere back into your hand, down your arm, into the centre of your magic.”

This was easier to say than do. Harry closed his eyes, hissing with the effort of shrinking the rotating ring. When it got to the size of a marble he paused, panting. “Water,” he whispered hoarsely. Jasmine brought a cup to his lips, letting him gulp from the cup. Nothing had ever tasted as good, as he felt it slide down his throat, cooling the heat his efforts had created. He closed his eyes again, bringing the ball of magic into his hand, closing his hand as his palm emptied, feeling the surge travel down his arm, into his body where he was flooded with warmth that turned into a brief spasm of intense heat. He felt a click inside his head and almost fell out of his chair as he relaxed from the exertion and tension that he’d been bottling up. “Wow, that’s hot,” Harry said, reaching for the cup of water again and wiping his forehead with the back of one shaking hand.

“Congratulations, Harry,” Abelard said with a note of pride in his voice, “your sentries are now installed and active.”

Harry closed his eyes, calming himself as he breathed in and out, deeply. *Fawkes*? he called tentatively. There was a brief trill in reply. *Mm’lau*? He saw a flash of blue light, rippling in his mind. *Spider*? There was no reply, but he could feel the threads being cast from point to point. *Bat*? Again, no reply, but he could sense the flutter of wings in the darkness of his mind. He grinned. *Two of these guests need better names, but that’s not a problem for today.*

His eyes opened and he looked at his tutor. “Ok, Abelard, they are all in there. How do we test them to see if they work?”

“Well, we could ask Voldemort to try attacking you, but that’s a bit much for today, so I thought

we'd see how an accomplished Legilimens does in an attempt to get into your mind," Abelard said, smiling as he tugged on the end of his close trimmed beard. "Don't look at me, lad, I'm tapped out for the day."

Harry turned to Jasmine. "You're a Legilimens?" he asked incredulously.

"Well, yeah, I am," she said with an amused look on her face. "The Guild has its own version of the art – looking into eyes is okay for shallow stuff, but to really make contact with your mind, I need skin contact."

Something clicked into place. "That's what you were doing when you were touching the back of my neck when we were talking to the dragons."

She had the grace to blush. "I'm sorry, Harry, I should have asked first, but I had to know what they were saying to keep from going mad. Once I was inside your mind, I saw them and heard them as you do. It was really a very beautiful experience."

"I'm not mad at you, Jasmine," Harry reassured her. "I'm just amazed that you can do it without making me feel like I've been violated. When I practiced with Professor Snape, I always felt like he'd come into my skull with a sledge hammer."

"Yeah, well, I'm good, what can I say?" Jasmine said, smiling as she spread her hands.

Jasmine stood, stretching out her hands to touch Harry's face. Harry closed his eyes. He heard an echo ping back to him, high and faint as she approached. Next he heard the sound of threads snapping, making little musical sounds as they severed. Last he saw a flash of dark blue light as Mm'lau uncoiled her neck, striking forward. There was a roar within his head, some shouts and a brief sense of dragonfire. The next thing Harry knew, his eyes were open and Jasmine was across the garden, flat on her back, shrieking, holding her hand. Harry bounded out of his seat, crossing the lawn.

"Stay where you are, Harry!" Abelard shouted. Abelard moved nimbly, cutting around Harry, kneeling beside his fallen guardian.

"I'm okay, Abelard. I just got a very nasty fright as the dragon came at me from within Harry's mind. She said something rather insulting and then scorched my hand for good measure." Pulling herself up, she walked Abelard back to his chair, plunging her red, blistered hand into the pitcher of ice water. "The dragon was all in his mind, but the burn is quite real, thank you."

Abelard pulled her hand out of the pitcher, smoothing his hand over the blister on her palm. With each stroke of his fingers, the blister receded until the hand was looking normal and healthy. Abelard released her hand. Jasmine flexed her fingers and made an experimental fist. "Much better, thanks, boss." She grinned. "Do you remember the last time you did that?"

Abelard said nothing. Jasmine began, with the slightest bit of a pout, "You don't remember, do you?"

Abelard returned to his seat. “I forget nothing, child. You were a slip of a girl, eight or nine years old, I suppose, pigtails and big brown eyes. You knocked on the door of my study, asking if I had a medicinal plaster. You were a frightful mess; you’d been climbing in my mango trees, even after your mum had forbidden you to go near them, and after falling out for the third time, your dress was ruined and you had scrapes up and down your arms and legs. Your knees looked like a cheese grater had attacked them. I managed the healing charms, but your dress was beyond repair. I conjured you a duplicate of the old one and burnt the original in my fireplace. I never did tell your mum. You were more frightened of her than you were of me. I still don’t know why you were climbing in my trees.”

Jasmine laughed, “It seemed like a very good idea at the time. The ripest mangos were all at the top of the trees; the ones lower down had already been picked.”

“Should I tell your mum after all these years what happened to that brown dress?”

“No!”

“There’s a price for my silence, child.”

“And that would be?” Jasmine asked sweetly, a smile playing on her lips.

“You’re making dinner tonight. Harry can help you in the kitchen. I’m going to lie down before I fall over.”

Jasmine gathered up the tray and pitchers, returning to the house.

“Changing the subject slightly, Harry, what did Mm’lau say when she was repelling Jasmine?”

Harry could feel the heat rise up the back of his neck and spread across his face. “Uh, it doesn’t translate real well, but she pretty much called her a scarlet woman and said to keep her hands to herself.”

Abelard sighed. “The sentries are little bits of your memory and magic, and will do as you tell them, but I’m afraid that you’ll have to be very clear with the echo of Mm’lau. That bit of magic has a lot of intelligence packed into it. You *can* order her to stand down. I recommend that you do so before she blasts the next person that tries to shake your hand.”

Harry nodded and closed his eyes.

Mm’lau ?

I am here.

You injured Jasmine. She is my friend.

She. . . she intended to touch your mind without permission .

That was a test.

Did I fail that test, Harry?

No. You did well, but you need to stand down while I'm here. Abelard and Jasmine and Mrs. Paprikash will not harm me.

I will stand down, Harry. I will watch, though.

That's fine, Mm'lau. I'm glad you're here.

Harry saw a wiggle of blue light in his mind's eye as Mm'lau disappeared to wherever she went when she was not talking to him. This would take some getting used to. From his brief chat, he felt that the echo of Mm'lau in his mind had a temperament that was something of a cross between Molly Weasley and Mad-eye Moody. He opened his eyes again. Abelard was basking in the afternoon sun. Seeing Harry's eyes open, he looked up.

“Finished your chat with the hired help?”

“Uh, yeah. The Mm'lau echo seems quite serious about protecting me.”

“That's her reason for being, Harry. You would do well to harness this rather than ignore it.”

A niggling something in the back of Harry's brain burst at that moment. Digging into his pocket, he pulled out the white dragon that he'd received at the Plains of Meeting. “Abelard, what's a *krulach*?” Harry asked, giving it the throaty pronunciation that approximated the word in Parseltongue.

“Do you want the long answer or the short answer?” Abelard replied.

“The short one. Mm'lau gave me this after you left the Plains of Meeting. She said it was for my *krulach*, and that I'd know what to do with it when I needed it.”

Abelard made a beckoning motion with his hand. Harry placed the dragon figure into Abelard's open palm. “The short answer to your question is that a *krulach* is an adult dragon's life mate. The long answer requires an understanding of their courtship rituals; how they hatch their eggs and a bunch more obscure stuff that only biologists would find interesting.” Abelard closed his eyes, holding the dragon figure between two hands. “Most curious. Did she retrieve this from somewhere?”

“No, she scorched a bit of the ledge, and when she stopped breathing fire this figure was smack dab in the middle of the scorch mark.”

“Even more curious. Jasmine,” he called. There was a sharp pop as Jasmine Apparated to Abelard's side.

“I thought you said that I was going to have a helper in the kitchen,” Jasmine began, wiping her

hands on an apron that she must have just tied on.

“Soon, I’m almost done with him. Have you ever seen this, Jasmine?” Abelard asked, handing her the white dragon figure.

“Yeah, the dark blue dragon conjured it while we were standing on that ledge, surrounded by the rainbow gang.”

“You’re better at reading magical signatures than I am; take a look at this. Was this made by a dragon or a human?” Abelard asked, his eyebrows colliding with furrowed forehead.

Jasmine reached back behind her head and pulled out her elegant bamboo wand. Holding the dragon figure in one hand, she passed her wand over the figure using the same steady scan that Tonks had used at the beginning of the summer when she’d delivered the Passbox to Privet Drive. “It’s a human signature, female, not male. Other than that, I can’t tell you much. Not a sniff of dragon magic on it. If I had another signature to compare it against, I could make a match, but that’s about it.” Handing the figure back to Abelard, she looked back to the house. “Can I go now? I’ve got a salad to finish.”

Abelard nodded and Jasmine Disapparated with a pop.

“So, lad, somewhere in your future there’s a lass who is your *krulach* . Evidently she also needs protection. It’s a bit odd; Mm’lau protects you and her mate will protect your *krulach* . It makes perfect sense, if you think like a dragon.” Handing the figure back to Harry, he said, “Take care of it, lad. You can’t break it, no matter how delicate it appears, but I wouldn’t show it around much, if I were you. You’ll know when you need it. I’ve never known the dragons to be wrong about their vision of the future, never.”

Harry helped Abelard out of his chair and the two walked off into the house. Abelard disappeared into the wing of the house, apparently for a pre-dinner nap. Harry stayed in the kitchen, where Jasmine was launching into a frenzy of cooking: salad, dessert, meatballs and a pasta sauce. There were enough rolls leftover from lunch to serve at dinner, and as dinner approached they’d put the pasta on to cook. Jasmine’s cooking philosophy was make it all now and throw it together at dinner time, leaving some time to play before dinner. They chatted and swapped stories from school, Harry apologized for the insult and injury she’d received from his sentry, assuring her that Mm’lau was standing down. After a good hour’s work, dinner was ready to roll.

Jasmine washed up, wiped the counters and loaded the dishwasher with Harry’s assistance. She then tossed her apron aside, went out into the garden and retrieved their now de-yoked brooms. There was a bit of steel in her gaze, but her smile was warm enough. “I’m not done with you, Potter. We’re going to fly before dinner, and you’re not going to stop until I can do the Wronski Feint.”

It was, after all, a lovely day to fly.

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Author's notes: This chapter took a while, and is now broken into one long chapter and a short chapter. Abelard is using a rosary know as Anglican Prayer Beads. You can find a picture of it at:

http://www.solitariesofdekoven.org/assets/pb02_lrg.jpg

Any confusion about Harry and Jasmine will be resolved (or not) in the following chapter. I'm not making any promises about when that will come out though, as real life intrudes from time to time.

The disclaimer from the preface applies to this chapter too.

The Letters of Summer Dinner with Abelard

Chapter 13 - Dinner with Abelard

Harry was dressed for flying, helmet strapped in place as he waited on the ground, eyes turned to the sky. He gripped his Firebolt with one hand and shaded his eyes with the other against the glare of the setting sun. "Start now," he said aloud, although there was no one in the immediate vicinity.

He saw a black dot appear in the distance, becoming ever larger as it hurtled towards him. He could hear the screaming, first on his charmed helmet, next with his unaided ears as he pulled the helmet off - the screaming had grown too loud. Speaking into the helmet, he said sharply, "Hard turn - now, now, NOW! Yes!"

A shrieking bolt of fury flew past Harry at a blinding speed. Raising his helmet in a salute, he cheered as Jasmine shifted out of her racing stance and let her toes skim the surface of the meadow. "Bloody brilliant, Jasmine!" he called, grinning in delight.

Jasmine turned sharply and flew oh-so-slowly back towards Harry, hovering high enough to put their eyes on level. She peeled off her helmet, and tossed it to the ground. Her face was flushed, but her eyes sparkled with delight. Reaching out with her left hand, she touched his cheek lightly, hesitantly, as if his face might scald her fingers. "Harry, thanks," she said seriously. "You've no idea what it means to me to be able to do that manoeuvre without falling to pieces, figuratively or literally." Dismounting from her broom and letting it drop to the ground beside her, she pulled him into a hug, her forehead pressed into his shoulder.

At first Harry was stiff, not knowing what to do with his hands. After a moment he relaxed; not wanting to look like a total fool, he moved his hands to the middle of her back, which he figured was safe. Harry's mind was racing, trying to figure out just what the heck was going on at the moment, trying hard not to let his confusion show. They lingered there in the fading light until Jasmine broke away. "Oh, pooh, Abelard's awake."

"How do you know?" Harry asked, picking up Jasmine's helmet and broom.

"It's a side-effect of the pledge. It doesn't matter where I am; if he wakes up, I can feel it. Same for when he falls asleep. I can sense his mood; I know when he's hungry or thirsty; at times I can even tell *what* he's dreaming about." She took her helmet and broom back with a smile of thanks.

“Let’s head back to the house – we need to get dinner on.”

“Doesn’t that get to be oppressive?” Harry asked, shouldering his Firebolt and falling into step beside her.

She shrugged. “It depends upon the principal. Since school I’ve been pledged to three principals, all older men.” She gave a small half-smile. “It should come as no surprise that Abelard’s the best of the lot.”

No, not really - I haven’t a clue. “How long have you known him?” Harry asked curiously.

“There was never a time when I didn’t know him – Mum returned to his service when I was about two.” The half-smile became a full-fledged smirk. “If he ever spouts off on how he changed my nappies, he’s telling the truth.”

Harry frowned. “Doesn’t that make it hard to be pledged to him?”

“Actually, no, it makes it easier.” She grinned sideways at him. “I’m going to tell you a deep, dark, girly secret, Harry. When I was little, after my dad died, I wanted Abelard to marry my mum so that he could be my father. When I saw that wasn’t going to work, I hatched my own plans for how I’d snare him as my husband once I finished school.”

Harry snorted.

“Yeah, well, I was eleven at the time.”

They continued towards the house in silence for a few minutes before Jasmine spoke again. “There are three things that I can’t do when I’m pledged, Harry.”

“Oh?” Harry lifted his eyebrows inquiringly.

She ticked off a finger for each point. “I can’t get drunk, I can’t conceive – although that’s been purely theoretical in my life – and I can’t fall in love.”

“So when do War Witches marry?” Harry asked, then flinched slightly when he remembered that Jasmine hated that title. He was trying to figure out where this conversation was going.

Jasmine ignored the slight, taking Harry’s free hand in hers, lacing her fingers between his. “We marry at any time, Harry, but we do have to wait between pledges to form any emotional bond with our mates. The pledge does funny things to my metabolism. I’m not going to get into details, but it makes a big difference.”

Panic struck Harry. He had never known that the skin between his fingers was particularly sensitive, but now every square centimetre seemed to be packed with nerve endings that were all sending messages back to his brain. “*A singularly beautiful girl who’s ten years older than you is holding your hand, Potter. Why is this happening, and what are you going to do about it?*”

Keep talking Harry, otherwise you'll look like a prat. “So, which is better, pledged or unpledged?” he asked, desperate for something, anything, to say.

She shrugged again. “Apart from the limitations I just mentioned, pledged is better. It’s like the colours are sharper, the sounds are brighter, and everything is more intense. When the time is right, I’ll take a break from that, but there are no men in my life that are tugging on my heart right now, so it’s a bit of an academic discussion.”

He had to ask. He hoped his voice wouldn’t break. “Jasmine?”

“Harry.”

“Are you exercising your Legilimency right now?”

“Every time I touch anyone I’m exercising Legilimency; I can’t turn it off when I’m pledged. But that’s not why I’m holding your hand.”

“Why *are* you holding my hand?” *Gadzooks. My voice had to crack right then, didn't it?*

“Is that a problem?” She wasn't looking directly at him, but he could sense all her attention was on him.

“Not particularly,” he said, wondering just how truthful that was. “I’m just wondering what you mean by it.”

Jasmine sighed. “I come from a fairly demonstrative family, Harry. This is how I’d walk with my brother, especially after flying. He didn’t have to say a thing, just hold my hand and I’d feel like all was right in the world. I got a lot of comfort from his touch.”

“Is that what you feel with me?” Harry asked. He didn’t mind being a brother; after all, Hermione was his sister, sort of, so what was one more? He wasn’t sure if he wanted to be anyone’s security blanket though.

She thought for a moment. “Subjectively, yes. I feel very safe when I’m with you – it’s kind of odd, but I like it. I like it a lot. Objectively, I’m well aware that there’s a war brewing in your end of the Wizarding world, which is why you’re here in the first place.” She smiled. “Some things aren’t meant to be analysed, Harry. It’s a lovely day, we’ve just finished some brilliant flying, you’re holding a pretty girl’s hand, and in a matter of minutes, you’ll be enjoying a lovely meal. Enjoy the here and now, Harry Potter.”

“All right then.” *Pinch me, I must be dreaming .*

~+~

“Could you light the candles, please, Jasmine?” Abelard asked.

Jasmine looked around for matches, but there were none. She patted her pockets, but her “delicate” wand was elsewhere. Harry saw the familiar leather thong on her left wrist, but evidently battle wands were not useful for this task. Jasmine screwed up her face with concentration and snapped her fingers. A bright yellow flame danced above her thumb. Keeping her focus on the flame, she lit the candles. As she relaxed her hand, the flame went out. She smiled as she turned to Harry. “I haven’t done that since school - nice to see that some things come back to you when you need them.”

Dinner was a simple affair. A nice green salad, rolls left over from lunch, meatballs, spaghetti with chunky vegetable marinara sauce, a bowl of freshly grated Parmesan cheese and, cooling on the buffet table, mango crisp for dessert. With the candles lit, the simple table looked like it was prepared for a noble feast. The chitchat at the table stopped long enough for Abelard to bow his head.

“Give us grateful hearts, Our Father, for all thy mercies, and make us mindful of the needs of others; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.” Jasmine and Harry both looked up, and he smiled. “A lovely meal you two. Tuck in.”

Harry wasn’t exactly sure how she did it, but while he was working his way through his salad, taking care to use the shorter fork beside his plate, Jasmine polished off a plate of pasta *and* the salad. Fortunately they’d made a triple batch of meatballs; Harry knew that they’d have enough.

“So, Jasmine, was he of any assistance in the kitchen?” Abelard asked.

Jasmine wrinkled her nose while spreading butter on a roll. “Not bad. He’s better on a broom though.”

“So, you two went flying again?”

“Oh yeah,” she said, breaking out into a big grin. “I can do it now, the Wronski Feint, that is. Your student is not a bad teacher.”

“No surprise that,” Abelard said, pushing his salad plate away and spearing a meatball with his fork.

“Are you feeling better now, Abelard?” Harry asked.

“Much better. My sleeves are all ravelled now.”

“What?” Jasmine asked before popping the rest of her roll into her mouth.

“Literary allusion . . . Shakespeare.” Abelard answered.

“Something about sleep knitting up the ravelled sleeve of care.” Harry volunteered.

“Very good, Mr. Potter.” Abelard beamed. “If I could, I’d award house points, but alas, I am merely a tutor.”

Yeah, and I'm the Prince of Wales, Harry thought.

The small talk at dinner moved from the events of the day to a discussion of the fine points that distinguished Apparition and Assisted Apparition. Harry finally broke this stream of discussion. "Should I be taking notes, Abelard?"

"That's not necessary, but I'd be disappointed if you were surprised to find out what our next study session will cover," Abelard replied.

"Apparition?" Harry asked, startled. "I'm too young, I can't study that until I'm of age."

"Actually, Harry, under British law, Apparition instructors are forbidden to instruct students under the age of seventeen, and the Ministry will not grant a license to any applicant under that age."

"That's what I meant."

"The only flaw in that argument, Harry, is that I'm not a British Apparition instructor and you're not applying for a British license."

Harry thought about that for a moment, and then grinned. "You can teach me?"

"Jasmine, where do I hold licensure?"

Jasmine looked up from her second helping of mango crisp, licking off the back of her spoon. "Japan, Australia, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Benin and Colombia. Your Canadian license lapsed last spring."

"You're licensed to Apparate in all those countries?"

Jasmine laughed a sparkling tinkle of a sound. "Not to Apparate, Harry, to teach Apparition!" she said.

Abelard cleared his throat. "Dumbledore and I have generated a little list of topics that he agrees you should learn before school starts in September."

"Like what?"

"Well, having dealt with the majority of your Occlumency issues, next on the list is Apparition, which shouldn't be too much of a strain, provided that you get in touch with your inner dragon; magical duelling skills; armed and unarmed combat; some more wandless magic; healing charms; some social skills. I have a rather full syllabus, I'm afraid. What I lack is time."

Jasmine had told him once what Abelard charged paying clients. Abelard had already spent enough time with him this summer to put a serious dent in any Gringotts vault. He didn't mean to blurt out what he'd been wondering since the first day he'd met Abelard, but it came out anyway.

"Why are you doing this?"

Abelard picked up his spoon, tracing it around the rim of his bowl of dessert. “That’s a long question to answer, lad. First and foremost, because Dumbledore asked; second, because I owe it to the memory of your mother; and finally, because you need the help. You’re a very capable wizard, Harry, and a fine young man. Alas, capable and fine character are not enough in this hour, you must become dangerous.”

Abelard looked to Jasmine and smiled briefly. “Between the two of us, we can make you…” he paused, and finished in a whisper, “...very dangerous.”

Abelard took a spoonful of his dessert, swallowed, sighed and put his spoon back on the table. “Believe me, Harry, it’s not what I want to be teaching you. I’d rather take up where I left off with your mum and make you a Seer. You’ve got the gift; it’s as strong as she had it, and she was two years older when I first met her. Jasmine, would you be so kind as to turn the coffee on? It’s time that Harry and I finished a most unpleasant conversation.”

Harry looked down at his own dessert, concluding that he wasn’t hungry anymore. He rose and cleared the table, putting leftover food into containers for the refrigerator, and filling a tray with items for coffee service. When the coffee had finished brewing, Jasmine filled a thermal carafe, delivering the coffee service tray to the table. She then gave a slight bow and left the room.

Abelard sighed again. “Jasmine does not like to hear this tale.”

”Why is that?”

”Do the math, lad. Jasmine was living under my roof when your mum began her apprenticeship.”

Harry did the math in his head. *That would make her, what, eight or nine when Mum was here. Jasmine knew my mum.*

Abelard tipped his empty coffee cup towards him, attempting to balance it on the saucer. “No two apprenticeship programs are the same, but in all mentoring programs master and student make commitments to each other. I found that I needed about three years to turn a reasonably gifted student into a competent Seer. It was my practice to have a prospective student under my roof for a month, after which I would ask them to commit to their Apprenticeship, taking their pledge. Some students never got that far. They, or I, would decide that they were lacking in aptitude or attitude. Your mum was lacking in neither. When she was here she started off having visions, visions of the future. True Foresight. I tried to help her sort through the visions, weighting the possibilities and weeding out the desired outcomes versus the true visions, a difficult task under the best of circumstances.” Abelard paused to fill up his coffee cup.

”She saw, quite rightly, that the crucial junction coming up in her life at that time was whether to stay and finish her Apprenticeship or leave and marry your father. She chose to leave.”

”You wanted her to stay?”

Abelard struck the table with one hand. A small spray of coffee hit the table from Abelard's cup. "Of course I wanted her to stay!" he snapped. "She'd still be alive if she had stayed."

Abelard reached for his coffee cup, took a sip, put the cup down and rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "She rightly saw that if she stayed, James would die. She also saw that if she married and conceived, Voldemort would be crushed. She saw great risk to both James and herself if she left. I pointed out that my visualization of the future showed that they both would most certainly die. She argued with me that she didn't see James' death as a certainty. She couldn't see her own, of course. She finally saw a vision after Voldemort's defeat that convinced her to leave."

"What was that?"

"Some time after Voldemort's defeat, she saw James dancing with a red haired girl in the Parish Hall of St. Simon's."

Jasmine entered the dining room without knocking, carrying a Pensieve not much bigger than a coffee cup. She placed it on the table in front of Abelard, fetched a plate from the cupboard and put it down next to the Pensieve before she left as she came, without a word.

Abelard peered into the Pensieve, swirling his fingers over the top of the shallow bowl. He then dipped a teaspoon into the Pensieve and poured several spoonfuls of liquid onto the plate. Waving his hand over the plate, a murky picture began to appear. Although the quality of the image was poor, like peeking through a particularly dirty window, it was fairly plain that the snippet from the Pensieve showed James dancing with a red haired girl. Only James' face was visible, but given the way he was holding her, it had to be Lily.

"This is Lily's vision as she stored it in the Pensieve. I've studied it and studied it until I couldn't stand to see it any more. Over time I've refined the image a bit." Abelard moved his hand over the plate. The resolution improved, the figures got brighter and bigger. Harry could see other couples dancing in the background. His attention was riveted when one particular couple passed by in the background. There was a distinctive sucker scar on his arm, and he'd recognize those hands anywhere. The couple in the background was Ron Weasley and Susan Bones. He couldn't see the faces, but he'd recognize those hands and that particular caboose anywhere. He turned his attention back to the couple in the foreground. It wasn't James dancing with a red haired girl; it was Harry.

"She didn't see Dad dancing with her," Harry said in a faint whisper.

"Of course she didn't. She saw you. That's why I was so gobsmacked the first time I saw you in Arabella's garden. Has this happened yet?"

Harry was silent for a long while. He had no idea what he was feeling, as his mind and his guts reeled from seeing this vision other than that it felt remarkably like being tied into knots. "It happened at the beginning of this month," he said at last, quietly. "That was at my godfather's wake. So she died because of a false vision?"

Abelard didn't answer at first. Picking up his napkin, he blotted the islands of coffee that had escaped from his cup. "Not at all, lad. Her vision was true; it was her interpretation that was slightly off. She married the love of her life, she had you, Voldemort was crushed, and she saw you, the fruit of her union, alive and well after Voldemort's defeat. At the time she had this vision, you hadn't yet been conceived, so it's not all that surprising that she didn't stop to think that not all dark-haired men dancing with beautiful red-haired women answered to the names of James and Lily." Abelard paused. He then asked, in a near whisper: "Who is the girl, Harry?"

"She's my best friend's sister."

"Do you have feelings for her?"

"I . . . I don't know. When I was dancing with her I felt – I felt at peace with myself. It was wonderful."

Abelard didn't reply immediately. Harry wasn't listening to him at that moment anyway; he was staring at the Pensieve picture on the dinner plate, repeating the scene of dancing couples again and again. Abelard picked up his coffee cup and drank several swallows of coffee. "Your mum took great comfort in that vision, Harry," he said at last. "It convinced her that I was a constipated old codger who couldn't see the future as clearly as she could; it convinced her that if she returned to a war zone she could live with love rather than merely staying alive. She knew that she could risk everything and in the end everything she held dear would survive."

Harry swallowed, hard. He felt his eyes begin to burn. "But she was wrong – she died, Dad died."

"Was she wrong?" Abelard countered. "She lived with love, she defeated the darkest wizard of her day, and a little bit of Lily and James lives on in you, Harry. She would have been proud of you." Abelard reached across the table and placed his hand on Harry's. "You asked me once why Voldemort killed Lily. I don't really know, but I can hazard a good guess. He knew that she'd never bend her knees to him while she was alive. It was better for him to cut off the life of a potential Seer than allow her to grow her gift to the point that it would be dangerous to him. He underestimated her; so many people did." Abelard took in a deep breath and sighed. "You look like hell, lad. Let me have Jasmine take you home; you've had enough for one day."

Harry's mind was whirling with emotions and thought. He didn't remember passing through the doorway, or Jasmine holding his arm as she walked him to number four Privet Drive. He didn't remember ringing the doorbell to gain admittance to his summer sanctuary, or the speechless look Aunt Petunia gave when Jasmine kissed him on the cheek before walking back into the shadows that surrounded the house.

Part of his mind was playing the "what if" game. What if Ginny had been sick on the day of the wake? What if he'd been dancing with Luna or with Susan instead of Ginny? Another part of his mind was struck by the realization that before he'd been conceived, his mum had seen him dancing in the parish hall of the church where she'd made her own wedding vows. He pondered the thought that Abelard said that vision had given his mum courage. He was proud of that for some reason – he hadn't done anything, but he'd given her hope to face the darkness. He found

himself in bed, staring briefly at the ceiling before taking his glasses off and setting them on the desk. He didn't remember the voice calling to him across time, but he felt waves of comfort rolling across him as he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Goodnight, Harry. I am proud of you.

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The disclaimer found in the prologue applies to this chapter, too.

Author's Notes: A few readers asked some questions about Jasmine, which I'll attempt to answer. Being pledged does strange things to her metabolism. Although she's 26-27, she's physically 18 and can pass for an old 16 when she puts her mind to it. How does she feel about Harry? I asked her that one day. Her reply: "I'd loved to be loved by someone like Harry. He's powerful without being a jerk, and he treats me like a lady. As far as anything between us, that's not going to happen and I know it, so for now, I enjoy his company and flirt with him a bit. If my boss croaks anytime soon, Harry will be my new boss, which would make things very messy if I let things get out of hand this summer. Harry's a lot of fun once you get past the moody brooding."

The Letters of Summer Motoring with Moony

Chapter 14 – Motoring With Moony

Sunlight streamed into the bedroom, spilling over the edge of the bed, seeping along the floor to the door. The door was sufficiently ajar for Crookshanks to come and go as he pleased. He pushed the door open, jumped onto the table holding the Passbox, rubbing against the door with the lit knob, then crouched into his Sphinx position, apparently contemplating his options. After a moment he rose, arched, stretched, and jumped onto his mistress' bed. She was usually a back or side sleeper, but this morning she was lying prone with a sheet wrapped around her head.

The tabby looked coolly at the mound of sheets and blankets, carefully walking up the length of his companion until he was squarely on her back. "May-ow!" he said at a moderate volume. She didn't stir. Flexing his claws slightly, he began to dig, pawing the sheets until he'd pulled the offending sheet down from her head, exposing an ear. "May-OW!" he said, using a slightly louder tone. Still no response.

If cats could shrug, he would have. He licked her ear, using the raspiest part of his tongue; Hermione began to stir. She would have batted him away except for the fact that she was pinned beneath him and her hands were under her shoulders.

~+~

"Crookshanks, so help me, if you bite me I'm going to make you regret it."

Crookshanks mirrored loudly, jumping to the Passbox table. His mistress rolled over, pulling the tangled sheets away. "I was having a lovely dream, cat. Surely you're not hungry?"

"May-yowl!" he replied.

That was when she saw the lit knob on the Passbox. "Clever cat," she cooed, skritchng him under the chin as she pulled the box open. It was a letter from Ginny. Only good news came from the Burrow, so she was in no hurry to open the envelope.

She padded down the stairs to the kitchen. It was dark and empty – *I must be the first one up this morning*. She quietly walked back up the stairs far enough to peek at Mum and Dad's door. It was closed. Mum and Dad's door was always open in the mornings, except for the times that it

was closed. On those mornings, breakfast was often late and Mum would show up wearing her nightgown inside out or misbuttoned. Hermione smiled. The calendar showed that neither parent was due in surgery this morning, so she decided to brew some coffee. When her parents finally made their way downstairs, hopefully in a cheerful mood, it would be ready.

When Mum and Dad ate breakfast together, the coffee was half regular, half decaffeinated. She tossed the old grounds into the rubbish bin and rinsed the permanent filter in the sink. Loading the filter with level scoops and a generous splash of cinnamon, she filled the reservoir with water and switched the machine on. Although she didn't particularly like coffee, it was a key ingredient in how the kitchen was supposed to smell on the weekend. Whatever flaws she might have as a teenaged, Muggle-born witch, she was observant and quite willing to accommodate the preferences of those she loved.

Having discharged that duty, she went looking for the paper, which had fallen through the slot in the front door onto the interior doormat. She looked briefly at the mail flap. *Is that a security risk?* she thought, frowning. Maybe she'd ask Tonks the next time she saw her, or maybe she'd jot off a note to Dumbledore; after all, she had a pipeline straight to his desk.

She opened the refrigerator door. Nothing inside said 'eat me', so she put on water for tea and sliced bread for toast. There was less than half a loaf left, so she wrote herself a note, a Muggle note on a post-it pad with a ballpoint pen, to toss a new batch of dough into the bread machine before she tackled her Saturday morning chores.

She opened the note from Ginny while waiting for her toast. Ginny must have written it quickly; it was far messier than her normal neat hand, random *t*'s were uncrossed, and several *i*'s were undotted.

Dear Hermione,

I'm worried. I had an odd dream again, one that I haven't shared with you before. You know I've been writing in a diary since first year. Unlike yours, my diary doesn't talk back and merely records my thoughts. This is volume four – I start a new one every school year. For obvious reasons, volume one is missing – it's somewhere with Lucius Malfoy, but I doubt that it can be read, between the nasty holes and the Basilisk poison. Volumes two through four are sealed with a blood seal. Mum taught me that charm the summer after first year, when she gave me a normal diary and encouraged me to keep writing. When I go off to school, she gives me her diary from when she herself was in the corresponding year. Her diary is blood sealed too, but she added Dad to the blood seal, so any of the Weasley children could open and read what's inside. Needless to say, the boys don't know about the diaries. I'll never tell them, that's for sure! I write in my diary whenever I feel like it, but always before bed.

Several nights ago, I dreamed of writing in my diary, which is a bit like dreaming of brushing your teeth. In the dream, the diary looked like mine, but when I opened it up and started writing in it, Tom started writing back. Talk about a shock! Tom asked me to start writing about what happened that day, the sort of things I'd written in my real diary a few hours before that dream. When I had that first dream, I was really, really tempted to answer Tom.

Ron confided to me once that he missed Scabbers. In some twisted way, I miss Tom too. He was a great correspondent, pulling all sorts of information out of me during my first year at

school. As much hell as he put me through, causing me to doubt my sanity, he thrilled me during that year with the attention he lavished on me. I carried the diary with me everywhere. When I finished writing in it, I kissed the diary before I closed it (is that sick or what?) and slept with it under my pillow.

I know now that Tom is a monster, but by Merlin, he was good looking, and oh, those eyes. His eyes were like smouldering coals (not unlike someone else near and dear to our hearts). I thought that Tom was totally devoted to me. I was so stupid. I never did answer Tom's questions in that first dream. I woke up instead. I jumped to my desk and whipped out my real diary, writing Tom's name again and again, calling to him. To this day I don't know whether or not I wanted him to answer. There was no answer, of course. If he had answered, I would have woken Mum up to burn the diary.

I had that dream again tonight. The temptation to answer Tom's questions was strong, surprisingly strong. In my dream I tossed the pen to the ground several times, only to pick it up again.

I'm worried, Hermione. Is this just the overactive imagination of a housebound girl, or is Tom trying to tap into my mind just like he tapped into Harry's mind last summer? Just thinking about that dream makes me want to puke.

I lost my innocence in my first year. I can never say "I'm sorry" enough to the people I almost killed, including you. I'm still a virgin, at least physically, but Tom was the one who first took my innocence. When people thought that Tom was possessing Harry, everyone shunned him. For the first time in my life I'm glad that Mum keeps me in the dark about the affairs of the Order – I don't know anything of use to Tom. I know that I'm not going to talk to Mum about this, and Dad would just give birth to dragons. What do I do, Hermione? Who do I tell? I don't know where to turn.

Write soon!

Ginny

P.S. Don't call me by Floo about this. The Burrow always has eavesdropping ears – Extendable and otherwise.

Well, so much for not getting bad news from the Burrow, Hermione thought.

Hermione had always prided herself on her emotional control, but right now she didn't have a lot to be proud of – she'd just gone from room temperature to a fast boil without any time in between. She was furious at Voldemort simply for existing. She'd known since she was little that genuine evil was alive and well outside of the realm of fairy tales. Ever since her first year at school, she'd understood that Harry was a lightning rod for calamity. She knew after fourth year that Voldemort was back – she believed Harry. Now she understood the randomness of evil, how it could unpredictably strike a girl who wanted nothing more out of life than to play Quidditch, do reasonably well in school, enjoy her few friends, and be loved by the boy who had been ignoring her for the past four years. Hermione was angry. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, but there wasn't a bloody lot that she could do about it just then. Part of her wanted to be a little girl and crawl into Mummy's bed and hope that things would get better, but given the current activity in that room, that was *definitely* not a good idea.

The toaster popped. She reached for the pot of butter and absent-mindedly spread butter on her

toast. The teakettle began to whistle, so she filled the teapot and let it steep the required time, nibbling on her toast. For all the enjoyment she got out of it, she might as well have been eating the morning newspaper, which remained on the corner of the breakfast table, unread.

It came to her as she sipped the first cup of tea. *Harry* would know how to read this dream, having had a year of dreams fuelled by Voldemort. She grabbed the note pad next to the phone and scrawled a quick note, Muggle style.

Write Harry. If you haven't the brass to do that,
let me send today's letter to him. After Harry,
I'd tell Professor Lupin or Dumbledore.

Love from Hermione

Walking on tiptoe up the stairs, past the still-closed door to her parents' bedroom and into her own, Hermione pulled down the Passbox door to the Burrow and popped the note into the chamber. The door clicked shut and there was the briefest of slurps as the note went to its destination. She felt accomplished for the morning, although she'd been up and about for less than twenty minutes. Maybe with a proper breakfast she could start revising the Plan.

Harry's birthday was coming soon, and she had to get a move on if all the pieces were to come together.

~+~

Harry heard voices as he woke up. He looked at his watch in panic, hoping that he'd not overslept. It was a Saturday, so the Dursleys were expecting breakfast an hour later than on weekdays. To his utter surprise, when he walked into the kitchen minutes later, the voices were laughing politely and carrying on like old acquaintances. Aunt Petunia was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping tea with Remus Lupin. Harry gawked at this scene briefly, having the presence of mind to shut his mouth before either of them noticed his breach of composure.

"Good morning, Harry. What would you like for breakfast?" Aunt Petunia asked, as if this were how every morning started at the Dursley household.

"Uh, eggs on toast and tea, please," Harry answered.

"And for you, Remus?"

"The same, Petunia, if that would not be a bother."

"It's no more bother to crack six eggs than four, Remus," Aunt Petunia answered gaily.

Harry felt his jaw go slack. He quickly pulled it shut, but as he put on his game face he asked himself, rhetorically, "*Who are you, and what did you do with my real Aunt?*"

~+~

Harry?

Yes, Mm'lau?

The man sitting at your table?

Remus Lupin.

You know that he is a Dark Creature?

Yes, Mm'lau, I've known for years.

Does he pose a threat to you?

No, he is my guardian.

What is a guardian?

My Mum and Dad are dead. My godfather died a month ago. The headmaster of my school had Remus appointed to watch over me because my Mum, Dad, and godfather can't do it.

Your headmaster knew that he was a dark changeling?

Yes, he's known that he is a werewolf.

He is your friend?

Yes, Mm'lau, he is my friend.

I will watch him, Harry.

Thank you, Mm'lau.

“Where did you just go, Harry?” Lupin asked quietly while Aunt Petunia went to mind the teapot.

Harry’s mind was elsewhere. He knew that he’d been spoken to, but hadn’t the foggiest what had been said. “I’m sorry, Uncle Moony, what did you say?”

Lupin picked up his fork, smiling genially at Harry. “You just faded away as you ate your toast. I wondered where you went.”

“I was having a chat inside my head. We’ll talk about it later. I promise.”

Harry watched as Lupin pushed the last bit of egg onto his fork with a corner of toast, popping the toast into his mouth after eating the egg. “You’d better,” he said, crossing his knife and fork on his plate.

Aunt Petunia brought tea to the table, pouring Remus’ cup first. “If I recall, you take sugar but no

cream.”

Lupin laughed. “That’s quite a recollection - it’s been what, seventeen years?”

“Seventeen years this August 14th, Remus.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“I met your aunt at your Mum’s wedding,” Remus explained. “Each of the groomsmen were paired to one of the bridesmaids - I had the pleasure of escorting your aunt down the aisle, and danced with her at the reception.”

Harry wasn’t sure just how much pleasure that had brought his guardian, but didn’t feel up to making a point of it. “Whom did Sirius dance with?” Harry asked.

Remus winced closing his eyes briefly, opening them again to look at Harry. “No one you ever got a chance to meet. She died a month after the wedding. Your parents were married in perilous times, Harry.”

“Where are you taking my nephew today, Remus?” Aunt Petunia asked pleasantly. Harry thought that she was hoping to change the subject.

Lupin was swirling the last of his tea in his cup, pausing to think before replying. “We have a number of errands today in the City, and then I thought that Harry might like to catch a concert and a nice dinner - I’ll bring him back after lunch on Sunday.”

Aunt Petunia spoke with a light airy voice. Was she flirting with Lupin? “Sounds like fun. How are you getting into the City?”

Remus grinned. “I’m the proud owner of a new car, Petunia.”

“You’re having me on,” Aunt Petunia said.

“Actually, Aunt Petunia, one of my minders owns a car too,” Harry volunteered.

“I’m afraid my frugality is legendary.” Putting down the teacup he looked up, glancing at Harry and then Aunt Petunia. “Harry’s godfather left me a considerable sum of money, with the condition that I had to spend a certain amount of it on myself within thirty days. A further condition was that I couldn’t use any of that money to buy books. I got a nice haircut, some new clothes, a few tools, but if I was going to meet Sirius’ spending target, I had to spend it on something big, so I bought an automobile.”

“Did you spend enough?” Aunt Petunia asked with a slightest of giggles. She was flirting with him.

“Actually, I got a good deal on the car, but yes, I spent enough not to jeopardize the remainder of the bequest. Under the terms of the will, if I failed to meet that particular condition, the money

would revert to a trust controlled by Bellatrix LeStrange.”

“Who’s that?” Petunia asked.

“The woman who murdered Sirius,” Harry answered darkly, effectively ending the conversation.

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Nothing more was said at breakfast. Harry wondered briefly where Uncle Vernon and Dudley were - they hadn’t appeared at all this morning, but he figured in the end that on that front, no news was indeed good news. He cleared the table, putting the dirty dishes into the dishwasher and washing out the frying pan by hand. Taking a peek at the weather forecast in the morning paper, he ran upstairs, brushed his teeth quickly, grabbed his light jacket, and leaped down the stairs. Uncle Moony had said that he needn’t bring any clothes, as they’d be shopping. Not having to pack anything other than his toothbrush was convenient. Aunt Petunia was nowhere to be seen, so he called out “Goodbye Aunt Petunia,” nodded to Remus and walked out the door.

Remus’ car was at the kerb, a funny humpbacked convertible coloured in a shade between off-white and silvery grey. “What do you call this colour, Uncle Moony?”

Lupin answered with a slightly embarrassed smile, “Full Moon.”

“Ha!”

An expression of relief passed Lupin’s face, although Harry wasn’t clear what that was about. “My thoughts exactly. When Tonks found out the name of the colour, she insisted that it was a divine sign. Help me with the top, will you Harry?”

With a minimum of fuss, they brought the top down on the car, tucking it safely into the space behind the rear seats. Harry popped into the passenger seat, joined shortly afterwards by Lupin as he folded himself behind the steering wheel. Fishing around in his pockets, he produced a key that he inserted into the transmission hump sitting between them, cranking the car’s engine to life.

~+~

“So, Uncle Moony,” Harry said without preamble. “Are you a werewolf in love?”

Lupin coloured briefly as he checked his mirrors prior to pulling into traffic. “I wouldn’t say that yet.”

Harry pressed on, ignoring the discomfort his guarding was emanating. “But you have feelings for her.” There was no need to specify the *her* in question.

Lupin was silent for a good long while. Either he was hoping that Harry would drop the topic, or he was very carefully choosing his words. “That I do. She’s a wonderful woman, and for some reason known only to Providence she’s interested in me. I keep waiting for her to tell me that it’s all a big prank and that she’s really going to put me down as a dangerous creature.”

“That must dampen your ardour at the end of a date,” Harry said with a smirk.

“I try not to think about it,” Lupin said dryly.

~+~

Motoring with Moony was, simply put, a blast. He was a considerate driver as he pattered out of the estate, rolling to a stop gently and checking both ways before proceeding. Once he was out of the city, onto more deserted country roads, he ramped up the speed, banking into turns, upshifting and downshifting as if he had no brakes at all.

“Uncle Moony?” Harry said, shouting above the wind noise.

“Harry.”

“Where did you learn to drive?”

A wistful look passed over Lupin’s face. “Alberta.”

“Who?”

“Not a who, Harry, a where. Alberta is one of the western provinces in Canada.”

“What were you doing in Canada?”

Lupin was silent. Harry wasn’t sure whether he was thinking of a reply, or gauging whether he had sufficient speed to pass a slow sedan before the road curved again. “After your Mum and Dad died, I travelled abroad for a number of years. Some of that time I spent in Canada and the United States, doing odd jobs, trying to manage the pain.”

“What sort of jobs?”

Lupin smiled, checking the rear view mirror briefly. “I was a dishwasher, a short order cook, a librarian, but mostly, I was a bounty hunter.”

Harry’s face lit up. “A bounty hunter? Cool!”

“My tastes are simple. Other than paying for lodging and Wolfsbane Potion, I don’t need a terrible amount of money to live. I still have every Sickle I earned from my year at Hogwarts. I’ve been living on what I earned during my travelling years.” Lupin looked oddly satisfied to Harry.

“Did Dumbledore know about those jobs?”

“Yes, he did. It’s not on my resume, though.”

“What’s on your resume for those years?”

“Research.”

Harry laughed. After a few seconds, Lupin joined in. It wasn't particularly funny, but the laughing was contagious.

~+~

Dear Hermione,

I'll give some thought to writing Harry. Please don't send my note on to him. That letter was for your eyes, not his!

Ginny

~+~

Dear Hermione,

I've just sent off a letter to Ron, getting the shock of my life, but more on that later. I'm at the place we stayed last summer. WOW! What a change! The portrait is gone, the tapestry is gone, and Kreacher is gone too. This place is almost bearable now. You'll be glad to know that the House-Elf Liberation Front has spread to this part of London – Dobby and Winky have been doing the restoration work, for pay, now that school is out of session. Remus won't say how things came to be so changed, but he does smile a bit when I ask him about it, so I'm sure that there's a good story there.

I've been away all day, so if you sent me anything after breakfast, I've not received it yet. I'll be back home Sunday afternoon. I've spent the day with “Uncle Moony.” The first time I called him that I felt like I was eight years old, but it's growing on me. We've spent the day motoring around (Moony has a car!) shopping, visiting Sirius' solicitor, etc. For all intents and purposes, what Sirius owned was split between Lupin and Potter. Uncle Moony has what's known as a ‘life estate’ in the house – it's his as long as he's alive. I had to sign a small raft of paperwork at the solicitor's office – it took quite a while. One of the things that we discovered was that Sirius had a network of dead drops for both Muggle and Magical mail. How he got mail from the drops is a mystery – either he had someone outside the house that we don't know about, or Kreacher did the pick-up and drop-off. We've been cleaning these up and closing them out, paying bills, collecting stuff that Sirius had on order as of the time he died. He bought you a very nice birthday present. I'll make sure that you get it some time this summer. Sirius had an excellent racing broom on order that came in just last week. I've only seen one other broom like it, but it's a nice one. Uncle Moony already has a broom, I'm still fond of my Firebolt, and Ron doesn't need one, so I'm thinking that I should give it to Ginny before the Quidditch season starts again.

Uncle Moony finally has room for all of his books, so you may want to spend some time this summer culling the duplicates between the old family library and the Lupin library. Some of the titles are really creepy and probably belong in the restricted section (how many books on blood poisons does one library need?) but I'm sure you'd find something of interest.

You'll be pleased to know that I'm not a total Philistine, as I can now say that I've been to a University music recital. As you know, the Uni campus is not too far from where we stayed last summer. Apparently there is a music conservatory attached to the Uni (I gather it's something like one of our houses at Hogwarts, but I'm not entirely clear on how the Uni is

organized.) and the music students are required to give performances as part of their studies. The main composer was Bartok.

The recitals are free, so I went there after dinner with Tonks and Uncle Moony. Ah yes, they are an item now. I don't know if this was a last minute thing and Tonks just came along for the ride, or if I'm acting as chaperone (in which case, I'm about as good a chaperone as Ron is a prefect). They're pretty low key, but I noticed a lot when they didn't know that I was watching, including a very active game of footsie under the table at dinner that almost caused Moony to choke on his wine. After dinner and the recital, we went for a walk, came back home, chatted for a while and I turned in. I went looking for the Passbox after I finished Ron's letter, not thinking that I'd need either Lupin or Tonks to work the doors. I found the Passbox, and then went looking for one or the other of them. I heard music coming from the library – that should have tipped me off – they were dancing. It was a waltz, I think. When the music ended, they stood in silence for long while. Social dolt that I am, I didn't even *think* that they could be kissing.

Evidently Moony is much better than I am at kissing. No surprise there. Tonks wasn't crying. Her hair *did* change colour for a while – throbbing between blue and red – my guess is that must have been one good kiss. I'm sure that I'm jealous, not that I want to kiss Moony any time soon.

I tried to leave the library quietly, but Moony snagged me before I could shut the door. My face was red. Moony's ears were red. Tonks went from red hair to blue, but otherwise looked like she'd been doing nothing at all out of the ordinary. Tonks posted Ron's letter for me, and then I made a tactical retreat. They seem to fit together, and both seem to be happy. Moony denies that it's serious, but I have my own opinions.

I think I'm going to wait for morning before I post this note. I don't want to intrude upon them – they don't get a lot of time together between Tonks' irregular shifts as an Auror, and Lupin's assignments with the Order. We'll be going back to St. Simon's tomorrow, and then Uncle Moony says we have a surprise for lunch.

Evidently I'm going to be visiting the Burrow for my birthday. It will be good to see you. I miss you, you know. No one's been saying anything at all about my need to start studying for the N.E.W.T.s.

I'll write more when I'm back at Azkaban South.

Your friend,

Harry

~+~

Harry blinked as he stepped out into the morning sun. "I have never heard anyone like Father Martin," Harry observed. "When he gives the homily, it sounds like he wrote it just for me."

"Oh?" Remus said.

"Yeah, I've got a lot of issues with forgiveness. He's given me a lot to think about today."

Remus followed him into the sunlight, donning a fedora and sunglasses. The walk from St. Simons to Grimmauld Place wasn't long at all. After fetching a baseball cap from his room, Harry hauled the bags from yesterday's shopping and placed them into the boot of Uncle Moony's

car.

Harry opened the door on his side of the car, looking across at his guardian. “So, Uncle Moony, where are we going?”

Lupin smiled. “We’re going to the Grangers’ for dinner.”

“Brilliant! Will Tonks be joining us?”

A wistful look passed across his face as he folded into the car. “Probably not – she’s the desk officer today back at her duty section.”

“Does Hermione know that we’re coming?”

“Monica and Albert know, but it’s a surprise for Hermione – she was told that company was coming for dinner, but not who was coming.”

~+~

The drive to the Grangers' was as pleasant as an urban drive can be on a sunny Sunday morning. As they motored along, Harry noted with some amusement that a pale blue Volkswagen Beetle was discreetly following them. The Beetle was at a sufficient distance that he couldn't read the license plate in the rear view mirror, but he was fairly certain that the driver was wearing an eye-patch.

Several daydreams later, they were in the estate where the Grangers lived and pulling into the driveway leading to a nice two-story brick house, impressive but not pretentious. The front lawn had a low brick wall surrounding it, while a higher wall surrounded the garden in the back of the house. Harry noticed that Lupin's nostrils flared as he stepped out of the convertible. “Lunch is being grilled in the garden,” he said with a smile.

Harry blinked as he stepped out the car, and then closed his eyes again. When his eyes were closed he saw the active and passive wards surrounding the house. “Uncle Moony?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“The wards are up. Are you sure that they know that we’re coming?”

“For now that’s normal, Harry,” Lupin answered, a curious expression on his face.

Harry felt a ripple of magic as he walked toward the house and through the first ward. He dispatched Threads and Batty to do their perimeter duty, more as a matter of practice than caution. Harry closed his eyes as Mm'lau's aura flickered into consciousness.

Trouble, Harry ?

Just being cautious. We're going to meet some people; they are all friends of mine."

Is this the perch of your nestling ?

Uh, yeah. My nestling, Hermione, lives here with her Mum and Dad.

You must touch them, Harry. I need to read them .

I think I can arrange that, Mm'lau.

Thank you, Harry .

The dark blue sheet of light crumpled in on itself and winked out of sight in Harry's mind's eye. Harry opened his eyes and continued walking up the steps. These conversations took some getting used to. Lupin was by the front door, tracing a pattern on the door with the handle of his wand. The shaft of his wand was discreetly tucked into his shirtsleeve. Harry heard a faint click as Lupin finished tracing the pattern. Lupin pushed the door open. Turning to Harry, he had a sheepish grin on his face. "Monica wants me to just come on in rather than knocking. I'm over here enough that I can do it, but it still feels odd to walk in, unannounced."

Harry filed away for another time the question that sprang to mind as to why Lupin was such a frequent guest at the Grangers' this summer. *Probably tutoring for Hermione*, Harry thought. Remus walked over to Monica, who was talking on the cordless phone. She gave him a one armed hug and mouthed to Harry "she's in the kitchen" while hooking her thumb in that general direction. Harry walked into the kitchen, thankful that he'd chosen new shoes with crepe soles – he was silent as he walked on the tile floor.

A familiar backside was facing towards him. Hermione appeared to be chopping something while standing by the kitchen sink. She was dressed in a mid-length yellow print dress, her hair being lightly restrained by a matching yellow ribbon. A radio next to the sink was quietly playing classical music that Harry didn't recognize. He placed his hands lightly on her waist, causing a brief flinch, but Hermione relaxed as he brought his cheek against her left cheek. "Have I told you that I missed you?"

"Only in this morning's post, Harry," she replied. Harry couldn't see her face, but he knew that she was smiling.

"Oi! Potter!" Lupin called loudly from the entryway. "No groping pretty girls in the kitchen."

Harry smirked, thinking up a response. He quickly tossed her knife into the sink and spun her around so that she was facing him. Grasping her right hand in his left hand, he returned his right hand to her waist and began dancing in a box pattern to a three/four beat. "She's pretty, she's a girl, she's in the kitchen, but I wasn't groping her. As you can plainly see, we're dancing." Harry was concentrating, hard, on doing this right. Under his breath he was counting and hoping that he didn't step on her feet. Dancing with Ginny at the wake had improved his skills, but he was in no danger of winning any dance contests anytime soon.

They continued waltzing in the kitchen, moving closer to the entryway. The music stopped,

ending their impromptu waltz. Hermione twisted around so that her back was against Harry's chest, taking care to move his hands back to her waist. Batting her eyelashes at her former professor, Hermione said, "Uncle Moony, everyone knows that the *proper* place to grope pretty girls is in *the Library*." Hermione raised one eyebrow, but otherwise maintained a straight face until Lupin's blush spread from his ears to his face, at which time all three broke out into paroxysms of laughter.

Monica chose this moment to end the phone call and join them. "What's all this, Hermione?" she inquired.

"Nothing Mum, you would have had to have been there," she answered.

"Or read about it in the morning post," Lupin muttered, looking extremely uncomfortable. Looking to Monica, he asked, "Will dinner be in the garden? Can I take the plates out?"

Monica, realizing that she wasn't about to get an explanation, replied, "Yes, and yes, thank you." Holding her hand out to Harry, she said "Harry, so good to see you again."

Harry moved lightly away from his friend and shook Monica's hand. "Uncle Moony kept it a surprise until we were on the way here. Your home is lovely – it's much as I imagined it," Harry said, breaking eye contact with Monica long enough to sweep a glance from the kitchen through the entryway and into the living room where he saw a brass canister of Floo powder resting on the fireplace mantle.

Hermione smirked at this comment, returning to her chopping by the sink.

~+~

Lunch (which the Grangers called dinner) was slightly chaotic but very satisfying. Albert and Monica sat at opposite ends of the table with Harry and Hermione on opposite sides of the table. Lupin was seated next to Harry, serving as a buffer between Harry and Monica. Albert was attempting to hold down a conversation with Remus while Monica was drilling Harry for Hermione stories. Much to Hermione's mortification, Harry was recounting very detailed, if slightly sanitized, versions of the Troll story, the puzzles at the end of their first year, the second task from the Triwizard Tournament and an amusing account of the Bubotuber pus letters Hermione received, along with a number of Howlers.

"So, Harry," Monica drawled, "did you ever consider Hermione as girlfriend material?"

"Mum!" Hermione protested.

"Yes, I did," Harry replied, stuffing a forkful of salad into his mouth while watching Hermione's eyes flash. Harry chewed and swallowed, then picked up his tumbler of ice water. "I had a terrible crush on another girl at the time – terrible in that I couldn't think straight, but I couldn't get out of my shyness and do anything about it either."

“So, what happened with that crush?” Monica asked.

“Well, last year I blundered into asking her out on a date.”

“And?”

“And it was terrible.” Harry considered leaving it there, but Monica’s eyes were boring holes into him. “We ran out of things to talk about and she threw a jealous fit when I told her that I was going to go talk to Hermione after our *date* .” Harry moved the tumbler of ice water to his forehead, brushing against it as he relived the humiliation of that afternoon at Hogsmeade.

“And?”

What is with this woman? Why can't she give it a rest? “And it got me to thinking about how I felt about Hermione.” Harry didn’t notice that the other conversation at the end of the table had come to a screeching halt, as he was concentrating on watching Monica’s reactions. “She’s very pretty. She’s the smartest witch that I know. She’s always believed in me, she’s never lied to me, she’s always been there for me, whether I’m acting decent or not. It’s like I wrote in my letter, Mrs. Granger: I’ve never had a sister, but I don’t think that I could ever love any sister more than I love Hermione.”

Monica looked mildly displeased. “So why isn’t she on your list?”

“MUM!” Hermione shrieked.

“I never said she wasn’t on my list, Mrs. Granger. She’s there all right, just not at the top of the list.” Harry took a long swallow of ice water, watching the identical expressions of surprise on the faces of Miss Granger and Mrs. Granger.

“Who else is on this list, Harry?” Remus asked, his conversation with Albert abandoned for the moment.

Harry smiled. “I’m afraid that’s sensitive information on a *need-to-know basis* , Uncle Moony,” he replied, draining the last of his water. Looking at his tumbler, Harry stood, smiled again and said, “I’m going into the kitchen. Anyone else for something more to drink?”

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The conversation after lunch took a more conventional and less confessional tone. Harry began to clear the table, more out of habit than anything else, carrying dishes to the sink. Hermione followed after him with the uneaten food, putting leftovers into zipper bags and hard plastic containers.

“So, Harry,” Hermione said, “where am I on the list?”

“On the first page, rest assured of that. Eloise Midgen is somewhere on page two.”

“That’s comforting. Where’s Parvati?”

“Same place as Padma – she didn’t make the list.” Turning to look into her eyes, Harry continued, “Lavender didn’t make it either.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” Hermione drawled.

“There is no list, Hermione – I was just yanking your Mum’s chain because she was pulling mine. I don’t have time for a girlfriend.”

Hermione snorted. When Harry turned to engage her eyes, she looked away. Harry reached out and lightly touched her jaw with his fingertips, pulling her chin up until her eyes were locked into his. His thumb brushed across the apple of her cheek. He spoke slowly and deliberately. “You are the best and truest friend I’ve ever had – I wouldn’t want to muck up our friendship just because I can’t figure out the boy-girl thing.”

Hermione pressed her lips together briefly before speaking. ““The boy-girl thing?””

Harry snorted and stuffed his hands into his pockets. “That’s what Cho called it. She wrote me this summer, saying she was sorry that the boy-girl thing didn’t work out between us.”

“Are *you* sorry?”

“Nah, relieved is a better way to describe how I feel about Cho as an ex-girlfriend.”

“Have you thought of dating *other* girls?”

“Are we back on that list?”

“Answer my question, Harry.”

Harry squirmed as he leaned against the kitchen counter. He knew that he was not going to get out of this any more than he was able to resist her mother’s interrogation. “Yes, I have.” Holding his hand up, he continued. “Yes, I’ve thought of you that way, and yes, I crossed your name off the list for the simple reason that I don’t want to put our friendship at risk.”

Hermione face lit up as when answering a particularly stumping problem. “So, there is a list.”

Harry's reply was a restrained whisper. “Yes, there is a bloody freaking list. It’s got three names on it and you bloody well know the other two – one can see Thestrals and the other can’t.” Harry turned to the sink to wash his hands. “Can we change the subject? I’m used to your mother baiting me, I’m not used to you doing it.”

Hermione whispered too, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s all right,” he said, reaching for the hand towel hanging from the handle of the refrigerator door.

“I need to talk to you about Ginny, Harry.”

“What about her?” Harry bristled.

“She’s having bad dreams.”

Harry snorted. “Welcome to my nightmare – if I had a Galleon for every bad dream I’ve had since Cedric died, I could buy new Firebolts for the Gryffindor team.”

“She thinks that Voldemort is trying to get into her mind again. I asked her to write you, but you’ve been away all weekend.”

Harry froze, standing still in the kitchen, hands balled into fists, eyes closed, pondering the situation, weighing the alternatives. Opening his eyes he visibly relaxed. “Is your Floo connection working?”

“Yes.”

“Could you call the Burrow and ask if she could pop over for a bit? Don’t let on that I’m here.”

“I’ll ask Mum, but yeah, I think I could do that.”

Hermione walked back into the garden, returning momentarily with a canary-eating smile on her face. She threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace and moments later had her head in the fireplace, talking in turn to Molly and Ginny. Harry looked on from the kitchen, and then turned away, not wanting to get caught looking at Hermione’s shapely caboose. Hermione pulled her head out of the fire and turned back to Harry. “She’s coming.”

Harry walked out of the kitchen and into the living room. Eying the dimensions of the room around the fireplace, he positioned himself against the wall.

The Grangers’ fireplace belched a great green fireball. Ginny skidded from the fireball and across the flagstone floor. She trailed fine soot behind her. Her face froze into a mask of shock at the sight of Harry. He wordlessly bent down and pulled her first to her feet and then into a hug. Her hands were cold and she shivered as he held her. It felt wonderful to hold her, he hoped that she was getting as much comfort from this as he was. Hermione walked back into the garden, waving off the curious glances of the adults who peered past her. She shut the door.

Harry said gently, “Ginny, we need to talk.”

~+~

Ginny’s voice was muffled, which was not too surprising, as she had her face pressed into Harry’s chest. “I didn’t want you to see me like this, Harry. I swear I’m losing my mind. I haven’t slept more than an hour since Thursday night. He’s looking for me, Harry, Tom’s trying to get into my head again!”

Her tears soaked into Harry's shirt. He spied a box of tissues and Summoned it, snatching it from the air with his left hand. Pulling a wad from the box, he peeled Ginny away long enough to dab her face. The soggy tissues he Banished to the rubbish bin in the kitchen. If she noticed the wandless magic, she didn't let on. Harry walked to the couch and pulled Ginny down with him. He cleared his throat, hoping that his voice wouldn't crack. "Hermione told me a bit about what's going on."

Ginny made a brief face. It wasn't pretty. "She is so dead, calling me over here when I'm like this and not telling me that you were here."

Harry smirked. "Would you have come if you knew I was here?"

"No," she answered peevishly.

"That's why I told her not to let on that I was here. Blame me, not her. Lupin's here too."

Ginny pulled away slightly, settling into the couch. "Oooh, thanks for being noble, Harry, but *she's* doubly dead. I will figure something out; something -- humiliating."

Harry smiled broadly. "Like a singing Valentine's Day card?"

Ginny made a fist and punched Harry's thigh, hard. Speaking through clenched teeth she said, "I - didn't - send - that - card. I'll have you know that the only thing that stopped me from killing myself in front of you that day was the fact that I left my penknife back in my room."

"Well, if you didn't send the card, who did?"

All business now, she said, "I think it was the twins, but I still haven't got enough proof to prank them for it."

"Let's take care of your situation first. We can always prank the twins later."

Ginny eyed him coolly, trying to read Harry's expression. Raising one eyebrow she replied, "It's a deal, but it's my prank, so I call the shots."

Harry sighed. "As much as I'm looking forward to that, I need to change the subject. I want to help you, Ginny."

Ginny's voice was small. "What can you do to help?"

"You'd be surprised. I've learned a lot this summer."

Ginny leaned further back against the couch, pouting her lower lip so she could blow hair out of her face. "What do I need to do?"

"Right now? Just sit back - I'm going to examine your mind. I'll need to touch you."

Ginny looked down at her shoulder where Harry's hand still rested. "A bit late for that," she said wearily, "not that I mind."

Harry took stock of just where he was in relation to where Ginny was and gingerly withdrew the hand, pulling it in to join his other hand in rubbing his face. "What I meant to say is that you may feel my presence as I touch your mind. You might hear me speaking in Parseltongue to a bit of magic I've got riding around inside of me. You may even see a dragon."

Ginny snorted. "A dragon? What are you doing with a dragon, Harry?"

"I've got one guarding my mind."

Ginny raised one eyebrow. "How did that happen?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you later."

"All right then."

"I will need to touch your, uh, skin. Your hand will do." If Ginny was disappointed in this choice, she didn't let on. "If you'd feel more comfortable, I can call in Hermione or Lupin while we do this."

Ginny squirmed on the couch. "No, that's fine. I trust you, Harry."

Harry moved into his seat until his back was firmly pressing against the back of the couch. He placed his hand so that his right hand covered Ginny's left hand loosely. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. To Ginny it appeared that he stopped breathing, but after a while she could see a slight rise and fall in his chest, and she could see his eyes flicker underneath closed lids.

~+~

Harry wasn't certain just where he went inside of himself when he went looking for Mm'lau. It helped if he closed his eyes. Looking with his mind's eye, he was in a featureless, pearl grey fog. Wherever he was, the living room at the Grangers' house was elsewhere. He called out to her.

"Mm'lau?"

"Yes Harry?" she responded. At first, all he could see was a vaguely dragon shaped sheet of blue coloured light. The light wrinkled and compressed itself into a vaguely human form. With effort a dark blue-skinned, blue-haired version of Molly Weasley stood before him in the pearl grey fog.

"Why are you looking like that?"

"I thought you might be more comfortable talking to one of your own kind."

"I appreciate it, but Molly Weasley doesn't have a tail."

Mm'lau pulled her skirts back with her hand while looking over her shoulder at the lovely dragon tail wagging gently behind her. "Pity that, she'd look much better with one. Okay, how's this?" With a wrinkled expression that reminded him of Tonks, the Mollyized version of Mm'lau shimmered and became a dark blue-skinned version of Jasmine, except that Jasmine never wore a tank top quite *that* small, or shorts that were quite that short -- or tight for that matter.

Harry tried hard not to laugh. "Jasmine doesn't have wings either."

"I don't know what you see in a girl that doesn't have wings, Harry. Your memories say that you think she's quite beautiful."

"She is, she's gorgeous, and that's part of the problem."

"How can you be so stricken by a female that doesn't have wings?"

"We'll just chalk it up to human weakness, Mm'lau. Why don't you go back to being the lovely dragon that I know and we can get down to work"?

Mm'lau shimmered again and was her normal self, albeit a third of her normal size, but then size was a variable when Snow dragons were concerned. "I need your help. A friend of mine is being attacked."

"Right now?"

"No, not right now, it's been happening over the past few days. I want to look for signs that she's been possessed by darkness."

"I can do that, Harry. What is the nature of the attack?"

"An evil wizard, one of my kind, is attempting to take over her mind."

Mm'lau stood still before him, bringing her tail around to touch Harry's scar.

"The one who gave you this?"

"Yeah."

"Are we talking about the woman you're touching right now?"

Harry startled. He'd forgotten that he was sitting on the couch with Ginny. "The very same."

A translucent curtain appeared in the pearl grey fog that surrounded them. Peering through the curtain, Harry could see the Grangers' living room, with Ginny sitting primly on the couch, and himself sitting stock still beside her. Mm'lau resized herself again, until she was approximately the size of an adult human, turned and passed through the curtain. Harry followed; it was like passing into a Pensieve memory. Ginny was glancing about, looking at the doorway leading into the garden, then back to Harry. The Harry seated on the couch was the picture of concentration;

eyebrows mashed together, eyes closed. If he was breathing, the Harry standing with Mm'lau couldn't see it.

Mm'lau shot out a demure flame, less than a foot long, the dragon equivalent of throat clearing. "You are outside your body for the moment, Harry. Take care not to touch the Harry on the couch – it will cause you to return to your body whether you are ready or not. Anything else in the room may be touched, however. They can't see us or hear us, but I believe that they can sense us."

Mm'lau circled the couch, peered out the window to the garden and returned to the couch. Her tail was beating up and down in a slow rhythm, barely avoiding slapping the tip on the floor. "This is not your friend. Your friends are in the garden. This is your Krulach."

Harry clenched his jaw. He was tired of women needling him, especially one that lived inside his head. "She's not my Krulach, Mm'lau."

"It is not my place to argue with you, Harry, however mistaken you may be. Come here," she said, beckoning with her tail. Placing her hands on the couch, she hauled herself into a standing position, leaning heavily on her tail. "Open your hands like this, Harry, and place them in the air over her head. Good, now, move them in the air over her body – we are going to read her, looking for dark signs. Stop at the shoulder. Good, now move down to her waist – don't be bashful, Harry. Scan down her arm, the one that you're not holding – ah, right hand. We'll go back to that. Scan the right leg, now the left. Touch her right hand, Harry. See the mark?"

Harry looked at Ginny's palm. As he lightly touched her palm, an angry red blotch appeared, pulsing like his own scar did when it was hurting.

"That's a Dark Mark, Harry. It's old, however, maybe three years or more from the looks of it. She was touched by evil in the past, but she's healed over. Now smell her."

Harry's voice wavered. "Smell her?"

"Smell her, Harry. You are out of your body, but I am not really here, I'm just a very intelligent bit of your magic. I'd smell her myself, but Mm'lau's nose is thousands of miles from here. I'm good, but not that good." A ripple started at Mm'lau's tail, working up to her shoulders, causing her head to wag a bit. Harry supposed that this must be a dragon chuckle. The Harry on the couch stirred briefly, taking a deep breath and exhaling through his nose. The Harry next to Mm'lau leaned forward, sniffing the top of Ginny's head, moving to her neck. Harry smiled briefly before working down one arm and then to her lap.

"Now what?"

"What did she smell like?"

Harry was stumped. "She, uh, smelled like a girl."

"Elaborate."

“Her head smells like shampoo; her hands smell like kitchen soap, her lap doesn’t smell like much of anything at all.”

Mm’lau snorted a plume of fire half her present length. “It is a marvel that the Creator chose to endow your kind with magic, given the fact that you barely use what he’s given you already. Yes, her hair smells of shampoo, but her head also smells of sweat and salt from tears, and underneath those smells is the sour smell of fear. Her hands smell of soap, but they also smell of eggs and garlic and ginger and cheese. Her hands and head had masking smells, but you should have smelled it on her lap – the smell is unmistakable.”

“What smell is that?”

“The smell of Nuri.” The distain in her voice was unmistakable.

“What’s that?” he asked cautiously.

“The Nuri are creatures of the mind, but not true spirits. They prey on humans with wounded minds. They find the weak and drive them mad, feeding off of the pain and confusion. Your kind calls them Dream Hounds, for they prefer to feed while their prey is asleep. They are most often found at battle fields and in hospitals.”

“Have they hurt her?” Harry asked, a note of alarm in his voice.

“No, her mind is sound; she has repelled their attacks. As her mind is sound, I must assume that they were drawn to her by the scent of the dark mark. Unlike *some* magical creatures, the Nuri have an excellent sense of smell.”

“Is she in any danger?”

“She has resisted thus far, but she cannot hold out forever. She must sleep and if she sleeps, she will dream. If she dreams, the Nuri will return.”

Harry looked at Ginny resolutely. “How do we drive them away?”

Mm’lau’s nostrils flared. She gave him a steely glare.

“They will not come while you are with her.”

“Why?”

“The Nuri would smell me. My kind has hunted theirs for ages.”

“You *hunt* them?”

Mm’lau shivered with mirth. “Oh, yes, Harry. The Nuri are small, but they are quite tasty.”

Harry began to pace around the couch. “I don’t think her Mum would be too keen on the notion of

my sleeping with her daughter,” Harry said, hoping that his body on the couch wouldn’t blush, or something worse.

“Why not? She is your Krulach. You are of age; mark her, mount her and be done with it. It is the dragon way.”

“It doesn’t work that way with my kind, Mm’lau.”

Mm’lau was obviously biting her tongue, holding back on what she thought of human customs. She sighed, sending out another plume of flame. “You are of The People; you would not have a dragon’s Pyr’g otherwise.”

“A what?”

“A Pyr’g.” Mm’lau opened her jaw wide and breathed a slow fireball. In the middle of the fireball was an image of the lapis lazuli dragon jewel that Harry had pulled from the ashes in Abelard’s garden. The fireball popped like a bubble, disappearing from sight. “What you call an echo, we call a Pyr’g, it acts like a Glossat.”

“I’m sorry, Mm’lau, but I don’t know these words – Pyr’g and Glossat.”

Mm’lau shifted into a more relaxed stance, two hands on the back of the couch. She began in a lecturing tone, one he’d heard hundreds of times from Hermione. “A Glossat is a tutor who trains the young. We use Pyr’g with our eggs, our *children*. As they approach maturity, we will plant one in the egg’s mind. It guards them and teaches them how to use magic that they have not yet mastered. Once the, uh, child, has learned as much as it can from the Pyr’g, the Pyr’g is absorbed back into the mind of the child.”

Staring boldly at Harry, she said, slowly and distinctly, “You have a Pyr’g of The People, therefore you are *of* the People. The fact that you have no tail and no wings and can scarcely use the magic that the Creator gave you is beside the point.” Mm’lau resized herself again, shrinking to a length roughly the size of Crookshanks, climbing up the couch and sitting on the back of the couch. The miniature dragon belched out a miniature flame.

“If you will not protect your Krulach *properly*, there is an alternative. “

“I’m all ears.”

“Mm’lau, the *real* Mm’lau, gave you a Pyr’g.”

“Yes, but I haven’t got a Pensieve and I don’t think Ginny is strong enough to install the Pyr’g today.”

“The Pyr’g will work just as well outside your . . . *friend* as within, if you would waken it from its slumber.”

“What do you mean?”

“How am I different from the jewel in your pocket?”

“You’re alive and you’re in my head. The Pyr’g in my pocket is - *dormant* ?”

Mm’lau snorted, sending a hot blast of flame towards Harry. “I am no more alive than this couch. I am a bit of magic, just as the Pyr’g in your pocket. What did you feel when you brought me into your body?”

“Heat, I felt like I was burning from all the heat the magic produced. The *heat* woke the Pyr’g!”

“There is hope for you, Harry. You may not be able to smell, but at least you can think.”

Harry bent over to plant a kiss on Mm’lau, leaving a rather surprised looking dragon on the back of Grangers’ couch. He then glanced at Ginny before he touched his Doppelganger on the couch, disappearing in a wink.

~+~

Harry opened his eyes, took a deep breath and squeezed Ginny’s hand before releasing it. “How long was I gone?”

“Just a few minutes.”

“Funny, seemed way longer than that. Did you feel anything odd?”

Ginny wrinkled her nose. “Well, I could feel a bit of something on my mind, was that you?” Harry nodded. “Then I could feel something close to me, and I felt some flashes of warmth.”

“That was me too, but the warmth was the dragon – we had a rather lengthy conversation, she likes to use flame as an exclamation point.”

“She?”

“Yeah, the guardian of my mind is a lady dragon, kinda like your Mum, except your Mum doesn’t breathe fire.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that, Harry, you’ve seen her Howlers . . .”

“Yeah, I have. Maybe she’s more like your Mum than I thought at first.” Harry reached to scratch the back of his head, trying to put together the words he needed. “It’s not Voldemort that’s trying to get into your head, at least, not directly.”

Ginny paled a bit. “What is it then?”

“Dream Hounds – Voldemort is using them to track you down. You have a Dark Mark on you; it’s on the palm of your right hand.”

Ginny's eyes went wide. "I've g-got a D-dark Mark?"

"Not *that* type of Dark Mark. Relax, you're in good company. I've got one too," Harry said, pushing back the hair on his forehead, exposing his scar. "There's a way to protect you from the Dream Hounds, but I'd like to talk to Professor Lupin about it before I do anything. I wish that I could protect you and preserve your privacy, but I think we're beyond wishes right now." Harry stood up, looking out towards the garden.

Ginny squirmed and sighed. "Why are you being so cautious? This isn't the 'get the Snitch or die trying' Harry that I'm used to."

Now it was Harry's turn to sigh. "The last time I rushed blindly into something, my godfather got killed."

He swallowed hard and tried to blink away the tears that he felt rushing to his eyes. Ginny looked at him curiously and then sprang for him, wrapping her arms around him. This shocked Harry, more than if she had hauled off and slapped him. At first he just stood there, then he put his arms around her and basked in her warmth.

Holding her was brilliant. Ginny stirred and then pushed away from him, leaving both hands on his chest, looking him in the eyes. Harry had no idea what she was seeing in his face, but she could stay there looking at him like that for as long as she liked.

"Let me nip upstairs and at least make myself presentable."

"All right then."

~+~

Hours later, Harry sat at the desk in his room at Number Four Privet Drive. After a few false starts, he'd finally started the letter that he'd been thinking about all weekend. Dumbledore – how his emotions fluctuated when he thought of him. He knew on one level that Dumbledore really cared for him, but on another he still burned with rage over the deceptions, the manipulations and the mistakes they both had made. Thinking back to today's homily, Harry resolved that he had to be more open with Dumbledore if he ever expected their relationship to get better. He censored himself several times when he wanted to write snarky things, knowing that being petulant wouldn't get him where he wanted.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Although I call Number Four Privet Drive "Azkaban South," this has been the best summer here since I started school. I suppose that you need an update on life in my end of the Wizarding world. Abelard is brilliant, *scary*, but brilliant. He reminds me a lot of you. I'll apologize in advance, I'm very tired now, so if this letter is not a model of clarity, there's a reason for it.

I've been working hard at keeping busy. Biking with the Aurors has been good and the tutoring has been brilliant. If the opportunity presents itself, you should consider hiring Abelard's

assistant as a Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor. She's very clever, a great dueller, a good, patient teacher, and easy on the eyes, which is probably more important to me than it is to you. Keeping busy has kept the depression at bay. My nightmares this summer have been infrequent, and of the normal, non-Voldemort variety.

I've been writing my friends and trying my hardest to not pull into myself and wallow in sadness. Looking back at my behaviour last year, I've concluded that I was an insufferable brat, but you knew that already.

Abelard has fashioned a very good mental defence. He says that there's not much more I can learn in Occlumency. If you wish, we can arrange a demonstration with Professor Snape. I'm sure it would be most enlightening.

Thus far, I've not had any encounters with Voldemort. I'm not complaining, mind you, but after having him crawl through my head almost every night for a year, it's a little odd to have so much quiet. No enticing dreams, no stabs of pain, no seeing the world through the eyes of a snake. I could get used to this, actually. That's the good news.

The bad news is that Voldemort is looking for Ginny Weasley. She's been having dreams about writing Tom in the diary again. I met with her today after lunch at the Grangers' house. (Remind me to tell you some time what a pain Hermione's mum can be when she's needling me.) With some technical assistance from the Snow Dragon that lives in my head, I checked Ginny out thoroughly for evidence of Dark Marks or recent possession. There is a mark left on Ginny's mind from her first year. Although Ginny hasn't been possessed recently, there was evidence that her dreams are being caused by what the Snow Dragons call Nuris, which Wizards call Dream Hounds. As you probably already know, Dream Hounds work on a mental level, seeking out particular targets. Voldemort is using them to try to locate Ginny. If Tom were ever to find her again, she'd be an easy mark for his control. I told her that she was liable to be repossessed. She didn't get the joke, and after I explained it, she still didn't think it was funny.

When I met the Snow Dragons, they gave me a bit of solid magic to take back with me, saying that I would need it in the future, and that I'd know when that was. Right now, Ginny is wearing that bit of magic as a bracelet on her wrist - it's keeping the Dream Hounds at bay. She should be able to sleep, which she hasn't done for several days. I would have preferred to do a permanent installation like the one I'm currently enjoying, but a) I need a Pensieve for that, b) I'd need her parents' permission and c) she needs to be rested, as the installation is a very exhausting procedure.

I'm told that I'm visiting the Burrow for my birthday. I don't know if this is out of line or not, but you're welcome to attend - no present required. I've been thinking a lot about my friends, and I consider you one of them.

This brings me to my last topic, which concerns another of your students. I think that I'm developing feelings for a girl that go beyond friendship. I wanted your opinion, not as my friend or headmaster, but as head of the Order, as to whether or not you felt that it was wise for me to act on these feelings.

I want to do more than just survive - I want to live life as fully as I can, not an easy task, given the fact that all of the paths of my life lead to a narrow bridge where only Tom or I can pass. One of us must die.

I don't know what love is. Dad loved Mum - it made him act like a fool at times, but in the end, he died to give Mum time to run away from Voldemort. Mum loved me, and it got her

killed too. I love my friends, at least I think what I feel for them is love. I don't know for sure. This time, however, I'm inclined to let Voldemort do the dying.

Well, on this happy note, I guess I'll sign off. Anytime I start waxing philosophical, it's a sure sign that I'm way too tired to make any sense. I hope this letter finds you in good health and good spirits. Tomorrow is a tutoring day, so I'll be gone for most of the day, but I'll be back after dinner. I didn't get a bicycle ride in this weekend, but I more than made up for it in excitement.

I am ever your friend,

HP

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The disclaimer from the prologue applies here too.

Author's Note: No dragons were toasted in the writing of this chapter. Nuris are borrowed from the late James Schmitz's book *The Witches of Karres*, a Science Fiction classic from 1966. As is the case with everything I borrow, his use of the Nuri is different than mine, but I owe him big time in many ways. As to the mating of dragons: a male dragon marks his mate, usually by inflicting a ceremonial bite mark, on the back between the wings. Once marked in this fashion, neither dragon is free to pursue bonding with another, they are pledged to one another. This marking may be separated from consummation of this pledge by as little as a week or by as long as a period of several years, depending upon the circumstances of the particular dragons. For those of you who always want to know the last little detail, Harry woke the dragon by placing it on the coals of the Grangers' barbecue grill, he then sweet-talked it onto Ginny's wrist. Harry had quite the conversation with Moony on the drive back to the Dursleys' house. Ginny had quite the conversation with Hermione after Harry left. Ginny got to bed late, but slept soundly for the first time in days. Harry slept like a rock.

The Letters of Summer

Dragons, Dreams and Discussions

Chapter 15 - Dragons, Dreams and Discussions

It was a lovely night to fly. The moonlight, when it was visible, cast interesting shadows along his dark blue hide as he flapped his wings. The rain would come and go, but actually, not only did he not mind, it was to his advantage. Uncle had said that he'd smelled prey on the ridge. If true, they wouldn't be expecting him at night, in the rain. He'd been searching the ridges, flying low into the valleys and then climbing into the thermals to try to catch a glimpse of something, anything. The cloud cover thickened, obscuring the moonlight, so he had to strain his other senses if he was going to pick up any useful leads. He'd caught whiffs several times, but the scents were always cold; the prey had long since gone elsewhere. Any of his nestlings would have returned to the perch long ago to moan about the poor hunting, but he continued to fly for the joy of it.

The cloud cover broke momentarily, letting a shaft of moonlight pour down from the heavens, catching a flash of white as it shone. He smelled the next thermal and climbed higher, hoping to spot the beating of wings, anything that would give him enough information to catch up to her. Patience, altitude and another shaft of moonlight cooperated for once, and he got a fix on her direction and velocity.

Now the altitude came into play. Flying flat out, she was almost as fast as he was; in a dive, however, his weight and bulk gave him a definite advantage. He went invisible, pressing his wings against his body, the tips almost even with the tip of his tail. He was dropping at a constant acceleration with a good measure of forward velocity. With wrapped wings he was not only swift, but also silent.

Even if she were to go invisible right now, he was adept enough at true vision that he could track her aura. He closed in; he could see the sparkle of her scales in the pale light that would pierce the clouds. An unwelcome warmth spread through his belly. He knew that he would have to restrain himself again; the urge to overpower her and mark her was getting stronger every time he saw her. He was not an animal. He knew that she would not resist and would even welcome the marking, but it didn't quite feel right, not yet.

He peeled the tips of his wings away from his body, twisting them to steer. He knew that when he unfurled his wings at this speed that he'd make a tremendous racket. He had to be close enough that it didn't matter.

NOW!

His wings snapped as they unfurled, but there wasn't a blessed thing she could do; he'd matched her speed and was forced her into a dive. Her wings beat with his, stroke for stroke. They powered into the dive together: two minds, four wings, but one heart.

He saw the mesa up ahead; they had landed there before. She dipped a bit, picking up speed. He matched her, getting back into rhythm. Would she land or pop? She'd been working on a complex manoeuvre to cancel her airspeed and then pop to land. When it worked it was a beautiful sight to behold, but then everything about her was beautiful.

He felt her rhythm slow. She was going to try it tonight. She braked with her wings, cancelling her forward velocity, and then disappeared with a *pop*. An instant later she was on the ground, arching her neck, calling. He banked into a tight turn and then popped out of sight. Reappearing before her, he arched his neck, answering her. He ran his chin along the length of her glorious neck, revelling in the sensation of her scales brushing against the grain of his own.

“Enough! You are just playing with me!” she shouted as she pushed him away.

He paused. He never understood when he'd crossed the line and didn't know if the protests were serious until it was too late. “I do this for joy, but I'm not playing with you,” he said breathlessly.

“Then why haven't you marked me? Are you just waiting to get your popping skills up to the point that you can catch Au'ng?”

“I've been able to catch her for months now.”

“Then why haven't you marked her?”

“Because – because I don't want her. I want you.”

She was silent for the longest time. Finally she spoke. “You certainly have the strangest ways of showing it, Mm'ng!”

He rubbed his chin against hers, growling low. She returned the growl and entwined her neck against his. When she was this close she overpowered his senses. His belly was full of molten fire and his resolve was waning. He broke away, looking deeply into her yellow saurian eyes, the cloud-ringed moon reflecting off of her nictitating membranes. “You are so beautiful.”

~+~

Harry was familiar with nightmares, and he'd been having dreams about girls for years now, some quaint flirtatious dreams, others depraved dreams that left him wondering if he were some sort of sex criminal. This was certainly the first dream about a girl who happened to be a dragon. Maybe this was what Abelard had meant when he'd spoken of getting in touch with his inner dragon. He looked at his alarm clock, reckoning whether it was worth trying to go back to sleep for another hour, or whether he should just start the day now. Abelard's admonition that he had a duty to be

rested won out. He fell asleep thinking of a different female, one without wings, one with brown eyes.

The alarm rang. “*How rude*,” he thought, trying to capture the details of his dream, but they were fading fast; something about the Burrow and Quidditch. He was sure that Ginny was somewhere in that dream too. “*Monday*,” he thought. “*Breakfast, chores, then off to class – for a summer holiday I’m sure working hard.*” He strained to remember if he was supposed to have read anything. Nothing came to mind, although there was something about Apparation. After a quick visit to the loo, face washed and teeth brushed, he was slightly more awake and looking forward to making breakfast if only for the chance to drink some coffee. Looking in to the mirror before he left, he noted that he had a bit of stubble accumulating on his chin. If it got any more noticeable, he’d have to nip into town for a razor. The thought of dragging a sharp piece of steel across his face on a daily (or weekly) basis didn’t appeal to him. Dudley, of course, took it as a badge of manhood, but then he also enjoyed pummelling other brutes until one of them dropped. Maybe he’d ask Uncle Moony if there was a decent Wizarding alternative.

Harry smiled. The weekend with Moony had been better than a trip to Hogsmeade. Harry remembered warmly the look on Moony’s face as he woke Ginny’s Pyr’g from its slumber on the coals of the Grangers’ barbeque grill, talking the miniature dragon from the coals to its new perch around Ginny’s wrist. Ginny had been cool to him after that. He had to talk to Hermione about this – he’d done something, but he wasn’t sure what he’d done to muck things up. He knew that his relationship with Ginny, such as it was, had turned some sort of corner. She’d passed long ago from being part of the background noise at the Burrow into becoming a person and friend in her own right.

That friendship wasn’t as old or as deep as what he shared with Ron or Hermione, but it was a vital bond that could stand on its own. It hurt his head to think about these things before breakfast. Breakfast! It seemed like a month since he’d last made the standard Dursley breakfast, but it was only three days past. Toast, eggs and bacon today, along with some decent looking grapefruit that hadn’t been in the kitchen on Friday. Aunt Petunia must have shopped while he was away. Hopefully she’d spotted the note he’d left on the refrigerator to get some more laundry soap; they were almost out on Friday.

Breakfast came and went without incident, which was noteworthy when dining with the Dursleys. Dudley had actually complimented him on his cooking with a grunt of “crisp bacon” before he tossed back the last of his juice and waddled upstairs to change into his boxing workout clothes. There was no list of chores on the table, which left him with a bit of unexpected time before class began. He checked the status of the dirty laundry bags and then slipped into his room, grabbing his quill, ink and parchment.

Hey, Mate,

Greetings from Azkaban South. The only bad thing about this last weekend is that it came to an end. Like Saturday, Sunday was a Moony day too. I saw your lady friend and her family on Sunday for dinner. Instead of pudding, your lovely and charming sister made an appearance. I’ll let her discuss what happened after she came; that’s her business, not mine.

Well, I’m off to class. Be thankful that you’re not being tutored – some of this stuff is hard.

More, later,
HP

He stepped out the back door, looking down the driveway to see who might be on his detail this morning. He didn't see anyone, which wasn't all that unusual. Closing his eyes, he looked for things that he couldn't see with his normal vision. There was a bit of space two houses down that didn't look right. What might be an aura shimmered next to one of the trees on the front lawn. He dispatched Batty for a quick look-see and was promptly rewarded with an echo indicating that there was indeed a man-sized shape next to his neighbor's pin oak. He pressed the tip of his baseball cap and tipped his hat to whoever was following him, setting off for the brief walk to Mrs. Figg's house. After a while he heard a muffled step-thump combination that indicated a certain retired Auror was nearby.

"Good morning to you, Moody," Harry called out pleasantly.

"Morning Potter," he replied in his usual gruff voice. "It's one thing to spot your tail, it's another to tweak it."

"I didn't ask for this detail, you know," Harry answered peevishly.

"Whether you appreciate it or not, Potter, good men and women are willing to risk their lives to protect your scrawny body; a little cooperation is in order if you can't manage some gratitude."

Harry stopped, putting his fists on his hips. "I tell you what, Moody, a little communication is in order so that I don't poke the next person following me when I can't see them, friendly or hostile."

Moody said nothing, leaving Harry to resume his stroll to Mrs. Figg's house accompanied only by sound of his trainers and the soft step-thump of his detail. Moody cleared his throat. "I guess that's fair enough, given how you greeted Miss Knight a few weeks ago."

"Who?"

"The Ministry Auror you ambushed."

"Congratulations, Moody, you just burned her name – she's always been scrupulous that I only know her as Moey."

Moody let off a muffled curse. "Might as well do it properly, then. Maureen Knight," he said.

"Thanks, I guess," he said, wishing that he could see Moody's demeanor. Talking with an invisible man was about as complicated as talking to dragons inside your own head. "How is it that I didn't hear your footsteps until you were right next to me?"

Moody chuckled. "Like that, did you? Rubber foot on my new leg combined with a hush zone charm. Beyond a metre I could be screaming my head off and you'd never hear me."

"That could come in handy," Harry volunteered, hoping that Moody would take the hint and tell

him the charm.

“*Sphericus Silencio Tempori*,” Moody replied.

“Tempori, eh, how long does it last?”

“About half an hour – drawback is that it traps heat; all that sound gets converted into warmth.”

“Thanks, Moody,” Harry said, stepping onto the pathway to Mrs. Figg’s garden.

“Uh, Potter?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t mention the Knight thing and I won’t mention the hush charm.”

Harry grinned. “Sure thing. It’s a pleasure to do business with you.”

“Yeah, get stuffed, Potter. I’ll be back at the normal time – if not, I’ll leave word with Arabella.”

“Thanks again, Moody.” Harry heard a step-thump and then nothing – his guess was that Moody had walked away, but with Moody you could never tell for sure.

Arabella Figg’s garden was well kept and beautiful in the morning light. Harry sat on one of the benches, watching and waiting. The doorframe appeared as it always did, and Harry twisted the handle, pushing his way from one garden in England into a garden somewhere in Africa.

“Good morning, Harry,” Jasmine purred from the shadows. She came along side him, catching his hand, leading him to the kitchen. “Slight change of plans today, Harry, Abelard has visitors, so I’ll do some training while we are waiting. Ever work with swords?”

“Not a whit,” Harry replied. *Swords? I have to do swords? With her?*

“Good, I won’t have to break you from any bad habits then,” she said, opening and closing drawers until she found her tailor’s measure.

“Twenty-eight inches,” Harry said aggressively.

“What’s that?” Jasmine asked, a quizzical look on her face.

“My inseam measurement,” Harry replied, a nervous smirk on his face.

“Oh, right,” she said with a bit of a laugh. “You *were* a bit ticklish there, weren’t you?”

“Something like that.”

Jasmine smiled, arching one eyebrow. “You don’t happen to remember the other measurements, do you?”

“Not a one,” Harry said with a shrug.

“Oh, goody,” she replied, flashing a brilliant smile. She went to work measuring him, singing under her breath “I get to measure Harry again, I get to measure Harry again, what a lucky girl I am.”

“You’re not making this any easier, Jasmine,” Harry growled.

“Hard is good, it builds character.” She finished her measurements, rolling the measure into a disc, tucking it into the back of her waistband. She drew near to him again. “I’m sorry, Harry,” she said, reaching up and touching the back of his head, pulling him closer. “Abelard spoke to me on Friday.” Jasmine was brushing against him. “He said,” her nose was drawing a lazy circle on his cheek, “that I shouldn’t tease you.”

“Then what are you doing now?” Harry whispered, eyes straight ahead. If he turned his head, he’d have his lips somewhere on her face, which didn’t seem like a really good idea at the moment.

“Teasing,” she said in a high, little girl voice. “I don’t mind very well sometimes,” she said, her voice dropping an octave or two. Her breath was hot and moist on his skin. He wasn’t sure how much of this exquisite torture he could bear before things took a more steamy direction.

“Please stop,” Harry gasped.

She leaned closer, taking his earlobe with her lips, nipping it gently with her teeth. “Anything for you, Harry,” she purred breathily into his ear. “Within reason,” she said in a normal tone of voice, pushing him up against the sink, walking backwards until the kitchen island separated them. “Much better on the Occlumency – I couldn’t read a thing. Made me wonder if I was losing my touch.”

Harry gulped, turning aside to look out the window. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

“What?” Jasmine said, tilting her head.

Harry turned to face her. “You haven’t lost your touch, believe me. You do things to me.” He then crossed his eyes, tilted his head, letting his mouth slack open. Jasmine laughed, long and loud. After a moment Harry joined her, laughing until both had tears in their eyes.

~+~

Jasmine brought two suits into the kitchen; they were similar to the boiler suits they’d worn last week. These suits were made of a black, stiff, padded fabric with looser, flowing trouser legs. She laid one suit out on the floor, put the other on the kitchen island and Disapparated. With a pop she was back again, helmets and bamboo swords in hand. The flirting Jasmine was gone; the taskmaster was back. “Pay attention.” Twirling one sword in front of her, she brought it through a swift arc until its point was poised, motionless, an inch from Harry’s nose. “This is a Shinai, a practice sword used in Kendo. I’m not going to teach you Kendo, but we’ll use it nonetheless to

go through the basics of swordsmanship. After that we'll suit up and spar. These are scoring suits. Each time the Shinai hits, it leaves a mark." Poking the suit with the bamboo sword for emphasis, she explained "critical wounds are yellow, mortal wounds are red, everything else is white. Got it?"

Harry nodded. The suit on the floor had yellow gashes on the legs and arms, and a few ominous red lines on the neck and torso. *This is not going to be like broomriding, I'm sure of it.*

They moved into the garden to start with swords. They worked on stance and grip, how to move, how to hop and slide, thrust, parry, block. Jasmine's perfect hair was now starting to frizz a bit and she had a light sheen on her face. "No putting this off any longer, Harry, let's suit up."

Jasmine brought out her "delicate" wand, pointing out boundaries. There was now a silver circle on the lawn, indicating the sparring area. She tucked the wand into a pocket and nodded at Harry. They went to opposite sides of the circle, bowed and began. The first match was over in a trice. Harry advanced and took a defensive posture. Jasmine smiled at him and began with a series of slashing attacks, most of which he couldn't parry. Jasmine walked outside the circle. "Look at yourself," she said, a hint of anger in her voice.

Harry looked down. He had a bright yellow stripe across his chest, a red stripe on either side of his neck and a trio of red stripes across his belly.

"Don't think of me as a girl," she began.

"Too late for that," Harry quipped.

Jasmine covered her eyes momentarily. "I suppose I deserve that." She made a swishing motion with her free hand and the marks on Harry's suit disappeared. "Don't think of me as a girl, think of me as your adversary. Can you do that?"

Harry nodded, putting his game face on. She entered the circle again, bowed and they began in earnest. This match lasted a bit longer; by the time it ended, Harry was just as dead as before, but Jasmine now sported a yellow gash on her thigh and neck. "Better, but you're still a dead man."

"Funny, you'd think I'd stop walking around. Dead men definitely don't wonder what's for lunch," Harry commented drolly.

"Smart arse," she replied, pulling a face. She pulled her delicate wand from its pocket and turned briefly from Harry. When she faced him again, she was wearing Bellatrix Lestrange's face. "It's a glamour, I thought it might help you keep your mind on your work."

She returned to the circle and they bowed. There was a blur of blades, the sounds of clacking swords, grunts and gasps. Somewhere in the midst of all of this, she landed an elbow onto his nose. It wasn't bleeding, but it hurt like blazes. Their form degenerated into tired hacking until Jasmine walked out of the circle again. She sported a red spot over her heart, a red gash on her neck and a series of yellow stripes on her arms, legs and torso. She cancelled the glamour and

returned to her normal face. “I’m going to fetch some drinks, we’re going to take a bit of a break, and then do one more sparring session before lunch.”

Harry left the circle, looking briefly at his suit. He was still slashed with yellow and red stripes like some sort of tropical fish, but he felt that it was coming together. For a dead man, he was improving. He collapsed into one of the Adirondack chairs. Jasmine returned with a pitcher of some cloudy juice and two plastic tumblers. Leaving the pitcher and one glass with him, she plopped into her own chair.

Harry drained his tumbler of juice and closed his eyes.

Can I say something now?

Sure, Mm’lau.

Your Glossat is whipping you.

Tell me something I don’t know, Mm’lau.

She’s faster than you are – it is her nature. You must play to your strengths, not to hers.

What do you mean?

You are fighting like a human, not like one of the People.

But I am human.

<sigh> We had that discussion yesterday. You are of the People; you should fight as we fight.

What do you have in mind?

Talk to me as you fight – I will guide your magic.

All right then.

“Nap time is over, Potter,” she said, sounding more like Oliver Wood than the sultry witch that had been testing him in the kitchen this morning.

They entered the circle and bowed. Harry kept his eyes open, but engaged his Farsight as when he talked to Mm’lau. He could see the wards on the edges of the garden walls, but everything else looked much like normal. He skirted the outer edge of the circle.

You got some ideas?

Oh yes, I've got ideas. We're going invisible.

Harry felt a brief flicker of warmth and saw that his body, including the suit and sword, was covered with a faint glow of blue light. Jasmine looked puzzled, but maintained a battle stance, her eyes straining for some glimpse of her adversary. He'd disappeared, but from the look on her face he reckoned that she could still sense that he was in the circle. Looking down at his feet, he smiled. "*Sphericus Silencio Tempori*," he intoned, as quietly as possible.

Oooh, nice touch, Harry. You are thinking like a dragon.

Thanks.

He circled, silent and invisible. He swung like a Quidditch Beater, smacking her on the rump with his Shinai. She yelped in surprise and then crouched into a lower stance, ready to spring, except that she was no longer facing him. She was good. Perhaps it was the whistling sound of the Shinai as it came arcing into her space that alerted her, triggering a parry that would have been quite effective, had Harry been attacking from her left instead of her right. Once he connected, she had a fix on his location, so it was no big surprise that she would counter-attack, except that after the first tit-for-tat Harry changed his mode of attack and went for a single blow, retreat, change angle of attack, return. Jasmine was furious, but there wasn't a lot that she could do at the moment. Or was there?

She pulled her delicate wand from its pocket and waved it in an arc from east to west. They were now both plunged into absolute pitch darkness. This would have evened the score, except for the fact that Harry had been running on Farsight for this entire sparring session. Although everything had gone dark, Jasmine's aura was still visible, a pulsing, throbbing sheet of girl-shaped vermilion laced with deeper shades of red. Harry decided to put an end to this match. Coming up from behind he laced his Shinai around her elegant neck and pulled her to him. "If this were real combat, your head would be on the ground right now," he growled. Jasmine froze, dropped her Shinai and made a twisting motion with her left hand. Sunlight returned to the sparring circle. Harry withdrew from his chokehold, moving to the opposite edge of the circle. He became visible again, ending the hush charm with *Finite*. He faced her, bowed, and walked out of the circle. He looked down on his suit – he had a white nick, the first of this morning, and a pair of yellow stripes on his left arm and right leg. His suit was drenched in sweat – Moody was right, the charm trapped a lot of heat, more than the suit could offload. Jasmine's front looked like a red and black zebra. Her backside was black, except for the broad yellow stripe across her bum. She snorted when she saw that stripe.

"Is this a message, Potter?" she said, twitching her head towards her left shoulder.

"Yeah. Don't tease the dragon."

~+~

Mrs. Paprikash met them at the door. "Lunch will be served in the dining room in twenty minutes." She took a long look at the yellow and red stripes on her daughter's sparring suit,

raising an eyebrow.

“Mum, I just don’t want to go into it right now, okay?” Jasmine protested. Mrs. Paprikash nodded curtly and returned to the kitchen. Jasmine took Harry’s hand and led him down the hallway towards the loo.

“Is your mum mad at you?” Harry asked.

Jasmine shrugged. “Professionally mad, not personally.”

“How’s that?”

“Mum is ticked off that I have all these stripes and you’re relatively unscathed.” Jasmine replied, rolling her eyes. Jasmine stopped at a window that flooded the hallway with light, parking Harry so that she could see him in the full light. “How was it that you could still find me when I turned the lights out?”

“I was running on Farsight – your aura was two shades of red and throbbing – you were plenty mad. Would have been a great move against almost anyone else though, wish I’d thought of it.”

Jasmine changed the subject. “Harry, your nose,” she said, touching his face lightly.

“What about it?” Harry replied.

She ran her finger lightly alongside his nose. Harry flinched.

“That hurts?” she asked, prodding it again.

“EEEYOW! Yeah, a lot.”

“Crikey, I must have broken it – when did that happen?”

Harry sucked in his breath through clenched teeth. “During the sparring when you were wearing Bellatrix’s face – I think you got me with your elbow.”

Jasmine smacked Harry’s shoulder with the back of her hand. “You prat, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was a trifle busy at the time, you see there was this *madwoman* who was trying her best to kill me,” Harry replied drolly.

Jasmine ignited the tip of her delicate wand with a fierce blue light.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Jasmine replied with a detached expression. “It’s a diagnostic, it lets me see beneath the skin just a bit so I can see if anything needs to be reset before I mend the break. It’s bad enough that you got hurt while you were under my care, but if I were to botch the mending, I might as well turn in

my wand.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” Harry temporized.

“What do you know about injuries?”

Harry chuckled. “Quite a lot, actually. The matron in charge of our hospital at school threatens to dedicate a private room for my use. I’ve re-grown all the bones in one arm, been bitten by a Basilisk *and* an Acromantula, and burned by a dragon, along with a bunch of more mundane injuries. Then there are the injuries I’ve gotten playing Quidditch.”

Jasmine raised an eyebrow. “So, a broken nose is just…”

“Tuition – if you’re going to learn, there’s going to be bumps along the way.”

Jasmine lined up the wand with the length of his nose. He saw a brief blue flash and felt a blast of cold that sunk into the bones of his face. Tenderly touching the sides of his nose, he found it quite cold, but pain-free.

“Thanks,” he said, rubbing his nose. “Much better now. What’s the charm?”

“*Sarcio Anima*” she replied. “It’s like the *Reparo* charm, but it only works on living tissue.”

“I read about that in *Combat Cures and Countercurses*,” Harry said with enthusiasm.

“Great book,” Jasmine replied. “It was the standard for our sixth year.” She put her hand lightly on his upper arm. “Harry, I’m so sorry about the nose, really, I am. You need to get a shower and get presentable for lunch. We’ll talk about the sparring later.”

~+~

The shower was bliss. Harry felt sore and tender in a lot of spots. Notwithstanding the padding in the sparring suits, he’d taken quite a beating at Jasmine’s hands. As he let the hot water stream down his back, part of him wondered whether Jasmine had any bruises. Given her normally modest attire, he doubted whether he’d find out. Pity that.

When he finally oozed out of the shower, he found that his clothes were gone, although his trainers were right where he left them. Neatly folded next to the trainers was a stack of fresh clothes: shorts, underwear, a t-shirt and socks. To eliminate any doubt, a note was on top of the clothes: “Fresh clothes for Harry – JK.” Hanging on the back of the door was a dark-blue dress robe. The robe had its own note. “Lunch is formal – JK.” Harry looked at the robe and laughed. The dark-blue was an exact match to Mm’lau’s colour. Harry towelled off and changed into the fresh clothes. The robe was long, barely clearing the ground. It fit beautifully. “They should fit, Jasmine’s measured me more often than Madame Malkin.” Harry began humming a tune while zipping up the robes, stopping himself when he realized the tune was Jasmine’s impromptu song “I get to measure Harry again.”

~+~

Jasmine was dressed in a peach coloured sari with a long long scarf draped loosely around her shoulders. Compared to her normal attire, which disguised her figure, the sari covered her modestly, but was much more form fitting. Harry thought that the phrase ‘breathtakingly beautiful’ was written with Jasmine in mind. Her hair was in a French braid with two chopsticks pushed through the braid as it met the nape of her neck. Looking closer, Harry realized that one of the sticks was her “delicate” wand. Knowing Jasmine’s taste for combat, he supposed the other stick concealed a stiletto, or maybe a blowgun.

“You cleaned up nicely,” Harry said, flashing a smile.

Jasmine nodded and smiled. “Thank-you, I could say the same about you,” she said, her eyes sweeping over him.

“Any bruises?” he asked.

She glared at him. “None any place that *you’re* likely to see anytime soon.”

“No?” Harry asked with a smirk.

“Ah, *no*,” Jasmine replied. “Besides, I heal rather fast, bruises rarely last more than a day.”

“Handy, that. I expect that I’ll be quite tender tomorrow – you whacked me good a couple of times.”

Jasmine drew herself straight, tilting her chin up just a bit. “So, what did you learn?”

Harry stood silent for a while. “Play to my strengths, I guess, because when I was playing to yours, I was getting whipped. So – did I get that right?”

“We said it differently at the Institute: ‘a superior adversary cannot be overwhelmed directly; you must change the circumstances to eliminate your adversary’s advantage.’”

Mrs. Paprikash appeared behind them, nodding her head to Jasmine, placing her palms together and bowing slightly to Harry. “Lunch is ready to be served,” she said, opening the ornately carved doors to the formal dining room.

The table was set for six, which meant that Abelard had two guests. Feeling a bit awkward, Harry stood behind a chair away from the head of the table. Jasmine drifted to the seat opposite him, placing her hands lightly on the back of her chair. Harry mouthed at Jasmine “who’s visiting?” when they heard the sound of voices come through the doors leading to the other wing of the house.

Abelard came through the door, dressed in silvery grey Wizarding robes, followed by Albus Dumbledore and Remus Lupin, both wearing fine robes.

“Hello Harry, I’m glad that I could join you for lunch.”

Harry nodded at them both. “Headmaster, Uncle,” he said in turn.

Jasmine’s eyes opened wide. “Remus is your uncle?”

Harry replied, “I have no blood relatives in the Wizarding world. Remus is my guardian.

Jasmine stared at Remus, who in turn took a deep breath. “Yes, Harry knows that I am a werewolf.”

Jasmine took a sudden interest in her dinner plate and didn’t look up until it was time to bring in drinks and the serving dishes for lunch.

Harry spoke up. “I transformed with him at the last full moon. He was a wolf; I was a dog. It was the most meaningful night of my life to date.”

Remus smiled.

Abelard spoke for the first time. “What made it memorable?”

Harry pondered his response. “There are certain emotions that can be expressed as a canine that are much harder for me as a human. Plus, I like to chase deer,” he said, smiling broadly.

“Did you catch them, lad?” Abelard asked.

“Nah, but we sure had fun chasing them.”

There was a brief pause in the conversation. Abelard cleared his throat. “Albus, would you say grace for us?”

Dumbledore looked astonished. “Grace? Ah, yes, grace, well, uh, let’s see.” Dumbledore closed his eyes and held his hands in the air, raising them slightly higher than his shoulders. “Blessed are thou, oh Lord our God, king of the universe, who causes the earth to yield food for all. We thank thee for food, friendship and magic. Make us mindful of the fact that none of it is ours, and all of it comes from thee. Amen.” He had the satisfied look of a schoolboy who had accomplished a particularly difficult feat of transfiguration when called upon by a teacher who thought him unprepared.

At least that’s how Harry interpreted the look.

Lunch was plain, but tasty and filling. The main dish was some sort of stew made from shredded carrots, raisins and unidentified, strong-flavoured meat, simmered in a savoury sauce, poured over a bed of rice. A large plate of steaming flat bread called Nan accompanied the stew, along with a platter of chutneys, sauces and spices. Remus asked for the name of the dish, but Mrs. Paprikash’s answer wasn’t quite intelligible. Jasmine spoke for the first time during the meal.

“It’s a dish from Northern Afghanistan, the title basically translates as ‘lamb stew’.”

The lunch table was unusually quiet. Whatever Abelard had been discussing with Dumbledore and Lupin prior to eating, they certainly didn’t carry the conversation any further. They were in fact remarkably quiet. Dumbledore broke the silence.

“Remus, do you remember if James ever worked with swords?”

Lupin didn’t answer immediately as he had a mouthful of food. With a chew and a swallow, he took a sip of water. “Yes, he did work with swords.”

“How does he compare to Harry?”

“Favourably, I’m sure. When it came to Defence against the Dark Arts and martial skills, James was a blooming sponge,” Lupin stated. “The very definition of a quick study.”

“Happy with your student, Miss Kadakia?” Dumbledore asked.

Jasmine assumed a deer-in-the-headlights look.

“Uh, pretty much,” she replied.

“What was deficient in his performance?” Abelard inquired with a bemused expression on his face.

“There was nothing deficient.” Jasmine took a long drink from her cup. Putting the cup down, she delicately wiped her lips with her napkin. Peering into Abelard’s eyes, she said, “Master, you were correct.”

Abelard lost his bemused expression. “What do you mean?”

“Harry was not supposed to win the fourth round of sparring.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I cannot fight what I cannot see.”

Abelard pressed his point, “Yet he did win.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you both learned something.”

“I suppose so, sir.”

~+~

Dessert was a selection of fruit sorbets. At the end of the meal, Harry got up and helped clear the table, loading the dishwasher. Jasmine came up behind him.

“So, Harry. Is your guardian seeing anyone?”

Harry stood still and stared at her.

“You know, does he have a – a lady friend?” Jasmine turned away from Harry, holding her hands to her face. “I can’t believe that I’m pumping a sixteen-year-old student for information on his bloody guardian – I must really sound pathetic.” She turned to face Harry. “Forget I ever asked, okay?”

“Yes,” Harry said.

“Yes what?”

Harry gave a slight snort as he smiled. “Yes, he’s seeing someone.”

“Oh, Suffering Shiva! It’s probably some Muggle intellectual – maybe an English teacher.” Jasmine began to wind up for a rant.

“Actually, she’s an Auror, a Metamorphagus. She’s a friend of mine,” Harry said in a quiet voice.

Jasmine put the heels of her hands on her forehead, brushing the wisps of hair back from her face. “I’m sorry, Harry, I shouldn’t be dragging you into my business.” She looked embarrassed.

“Why not?” Harry asked, leaning up against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms. “That’s what friends do.”

Jasmine cocked her head and looked at him quizzically. “Are you my friend?”

“I’d like to think so.” Flashing a dazzling smile, he continued. “If I were older, I’d try to be more than just your friend, but there’s not much I can do about my lot in life right now.”

Jasmine grabbed a dishtowel and began to wipe the counter, not looking at Harry. She sniffed. Turning to him, she said, “Harry, that’s very sweet. Thank you, that means a lot to me.”

Harry replied. “I meant it, both parts.”

“I know. I believe you.”

~+~

“Your headmaster would like to see you in the garden,” Jasmine said, pulling the chopsticks out of her braid. Harry watched her fuss with her hair. “I can only stay dressed up so long before I start wondering when the musical sound track is going to kick in – people only dress like this in the movies you know.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “You did look very pretty, even if it’s for the movies.”

Jasmine flashed a brilliant smile. “Thank you, Harry, now get going. It’s warm out there. You might want to ditch the robe.”

Harry looked down at the robe, pulled it off and hung it on the cloak rack that stood by the back door, plucking a baseball cap from the rack in return. He fiddled with the adjustment as he walked into the garden. Dumbledore was inspecting the climbing roses, sniffing deeply from a scarlet blossom.

“You asked for me, Professor?”

“Yes, I did. Let’s walk.”

They walked through the gates and into the meadow. Goats were grazing there. Dumbledore smiled at the goats and headed for the forest on the far side of the meadow. There was a road that led through the forest that wound underneath the canopy provided by the trees. The shade would be welcome.

Dumbledore began speaking as they both reached the shade. His voice was quiet, almost hypnotic. “Lupin says that you have a list. Does this have anything to do with the topic you raised in your letter?”

Wow, nothing like a point-blank direct hit. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Harry, I realize that this is awkward, but as leader of the Order of the Phoenix, I have a need to know. How many names are on the list?”

Harry looked down at the ground as he walked. “Three, no two. I took one name off of the list.” Harry balled up his fists, wishing that he had something to do with his hands.

There was a long pause as they continued to walk. “That would be Miss Granger?”

“That would be correct.”

“Why is that?” Dumbledore asked as he placed his fingertips together.

Harry frowned. “She fancies someone else and I really don’t want to muck with that. Besides, if things didn’t work out, I’d risk losing both of my best friends.”

Dumbledore turned to face him, his expression grave. “That would not be good, Harry. You need those friends, and they need you.”

Harry smirked. “I don’t know about the last part of that, but I do need them both.”

Dumbledore slowed his pace as he took a fork in the road.

“Is Miss Kadakia on the list?”

Harry laughed. "I never gave her serious consideration, sir. I think I'm a little young for her. She's the scariest woman I know, and besides, I might become her boss if anything happens to Abelard."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Many men before you have taken War Witches as mistresses."

Harry pulled a foul face, making a gagging motion with his finger. "Not this man, Professor. I'm pretty sure that's not what I'm looking for. I'm not sure I have time for *any* relationships. I'm not really any good with any of this feelings stuff. It might have something to do with growing up with people that hated me and stuck me in a cupboard under the stairs."

Dumbledore winced. "Point well taken. What *are* you looking for, Harry?"

Harry picked up a stick and tapped tree trunks as he passed them by. "I want to do more than just survive; I want to live." He sighed deeply. Gesturing with his free hand, he continued. "I want to have a life beyond being Voldemort's murderer-in-training. I want someone to care for, someone who cares for me, Harry Potter, not the bloody Boy-who-lived." He stopped, turning to Dumbledore. "So, I thought I'd ask you if you thought this was wise," he asked, his face calmed with his best game face.

"Wise? In what sense?" Dumbledore parried, his face was unreadable too.

"Is it possible that I could live something like a normal life while training as an assassin?" Harry asked, his voice getting a little reedy.

"First, you're not training as an assassin; second, you're not likely to live a normal life, ever." Dumbledore began walking again, Harry followed. "But to answer your question, not only is it wise, I believe that it is necessary."

Harry frowned. "I don't know how I feel about that." He whacked the next tree trunk repeatedly until the tip of his branch shattered, sending shards of wood flying out into the forest. "Are you saying that I *need* to have a *girlfriend* to defeat Voldemort? How fair is that to her?"

"That's not exactly what I'm saying." Dumbledore Summoned the wood shards back to Harry's stick, making a faint gesture with his left hand. Harry was now holding a stout hickory walking stick. "Voldemort understands fear and power and greed. He was unable to possess you for more than a moment at the Ministry because of the power of your heart, specifically the love you had and have for Sirius. You have powers that he has never developed, but the one power that he cannot comprehend is love. You don't need a girlfriend to develop that power; your love for your friends is both powerful and profound." Dumbledore dug for a handkerchief to wipe his brow. Even in the shade the woods were warm. "There are however certain bits of your personality and of your powers that will not blossom properly until such time as love begins to heal the hurts that you have endured in your short life." Dumbledore extended his palms, making a pantomime scale. "The right girl would make that possible. The wrong girl would only make things worse."

Harry assumed a mirror of Dumbledore's scale with his hands. "So how do I know?"

“How do you know what?”

“How do I know the right girl from the wrong girl?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Get to know her as a friend and see what develops.”

“Great, just great, I’ve already taken my best friend off of the list,” Harry replied, exasperated.

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow. “Then work your way down the list. Ask Abelard about *Potentis Amicae* – he and I are the only ones old enough to remember that. It should prove to be quite – ah – instructive.”

Harry whirled around when he heard the faint “pop” behind him, only to stagger in relief when he realized it was Lupin.

“Albus, we need to be off. Do you need more time?”

Dumbledore looked at Harry. “I think that Harry and I have talked about this topic sufficiently. If I am wrong, Harry, write me, or perhaps we can discuss it further after your Birthday. Good day, Harry. And by the way, good show on the sparring.” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. He nodded, first to Harry then to Lupin. With a slight syncopation, there were two pops as the older wizards disappeared.

Harry began to trudge back to Abelard’s villa. “Yeah, right, work my way down the bloody list.”

A voice called from the garden. “Harry, get your scrawny bum in gear, Abelard is ready for the afternoon lesson!”

He smiled and started a slow jog. “Coming, Jasmine!”

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Oh, yeah, right, the disclaimer from the prologue? Still true.

kokopelli20878@yahoo.com - write me, I write back.

Author’s note: Mm’lau’s father was a dark-blue dragon named Mm’lng. Mm’lng had a thing for a white dragon named Au’lh. They eventually worked things out, Mm’lau being the first fruit of their union. Under certain circumstances, Snow Dragons can recall the memories of their ancestors. Useful trick that.

The Letters of Summer More Letters

Chapter 16 – More letters

Harry was exhausted when he came home to Privet Drive. This was not surprising. He'd spent the morning sparring and the afternoon learning how to Apparate, which had drained copious amounts of magical energy from his body.

The morning of the next day started with a cold, drizzling rain. If it hadn't been for his alarm, he would have slept through breakfast, which would have started a delicious row. Vernon Dursley had let his wife know that while he was delighted with Harry's tutoring schedule (it kept the boy away and out of sight three days a week), he was uneasy in the prospect that in some way, Harry might be enjoying his summer. Harry had overheard this conversation when he'd been visiting the loo in the middle of the night. Uncle Vernon was looking for a fight. Harry was resolved that he was not going to provide provocation for an incident this summer, large or small, so notwithstanding his enormous desire to silence the alarm and roll back over, he dutifully marched down the stairs to put breakfast in order.

Breakfast did not present any opportunity for a row, so Uncle Vernon left the house disgruntled. No good deed goes unpunished; Aunt Petunia rewarded his diligence with a lengthy list of chores next to his place at the breakfast table: laundry, cleaning the bathrooms, and mopping the kitchen floor and entryway.

"Well, no time like the present to work on the *Scourgify* charm," Harry said to himself as he bounded up the stairs to tackle that bathroom first. That charm was a bit tricky without a wand, but it paid off handsomely. Aunt Petunia seemed a little surprised when he was done with everything in under an hour; these chores normally took most of the morning to do correctly. She came by to inspect each area he'd scrubbed and looked for something to criticize, but found nothing. Harry reckoned if the Wizarding thing didn't work out, he could always fall back on domestic service, although he really didn't fancy wearing a tea towel.

A look out the window confirmed what his ears were already telling him – it was still raining. He silently cursed the rain as he pushed the door to his room open. *At least there's mail in the Passbox*. He pulled open the Weasley door first, figuring that the Hogwarts door could wait. He smiled when he recognized Ginny's neat hand, but then began to frown as he read the letter, uttering several choice curses under his breath when he'd finished.

Dear Harry,

We still need to talk – about us, I mean. I learned a few things yesterday, including the fact that I’m still a Parselmouth. Although the dragon dialect is a little different from what little Parseltongue I remember from my terrible first year, I understood almost every word of what you said to my Pyr’g. Speaking of Pyr’gs, it’s lovely – Charlie will flip when he sees it! I slept last night, which for most people isn’t news, but for me was very good news. I knew that I was going to come totally unwrapped if I had to stay awake another night. I did have an odd dream this morning, odd, but nice. It was about dragons – I was a white dragon flying with a dark blue dragon.

Well, the good news from the Burrow is that Ron and I aren’t grounded any more. His scalp is still smooth as an egg, but hey, being able to go places and do things is a big improvement, even if you’re wearing a cap everyplace you go.

Thanks, Harry. I owe you, again. I think I’m beginning to see a pattern here. I don’t mind, just so long as you keep showing up when I need saving.

Mum says that Lupin and Dumbledore are dropping by for dinner and I’m supposed to be “presentable.” Somehow I doubt that this is about adding the Scalping Hex to the D.A. syllabus. Little by little I’m getting a tiny taste of your life: discovering that people are having lengthy discussions about me without letting me know; presenting me with decisions that I’ve had no say in.

It stinks.

Well, ungrounded or no, I’ve got chores to do. More later.

Love from,

Ginny

Harry strained his recollection, trying to recall just what happened when he woke the Pyr’g.

~+~

It was mid-afternoon, but the coals in the barbecue grill were still smouldering. Mm’lau had suggested that once the Pyr’g woke up Ginny should command it to guard her, but that was rubbish, as she couldn’t speak Parseltongue. Harry would have to do that. He placed the Pyr’g gently onto the grate of the barbecue grill, taking care to not singe his fingers as he did so. The carved surface shimmered in the heat and expanded slightly, until the dragon opened its jaws, released its tail and stretched out, catlike, on the grate, pausing to shrug his wings as he stretched, first one, then the other. The miniature dragon screwed up his face and then opened his eyes.

“So, who are you?” he asked impudently, speaking in the cultured accent of Parseltongue Harry associated with the Snow Dragons.

“I’m Harry, Harry Potter,” he replied.

The dragon blinked. “Never heard of you. You’re obviously not mine.”

Harry nodded his head in Ginny’s direction. She was sitting at the patio table, the round one with the umbrella stuck through the middle of it. “You’re hers, you’re going to be guarding her.”

“Surely you jest,” the miniature dragon replied, burping out a tiny, marshmallow-sized ball of flame. “I am a Pyr’g, I serve the People. I do not guard mammals.”

Harry had half a mind to slap the tiny dragon, but the calmer portion of his mind pointed out that the dragon in question was hot enough to melt cheese and was presently sitting atop live coals. He swallowed his irritation, silently counting to ten while he tried to think back to his discussions with Primus on the Plains of Meeting. “I am the Servant of the Light. You are of the Light. You are obliged to render aid to me.”

The dragon stretched his wings again, folding them against his body as he twisted into a sitting position atop the grate. He closed his eyes briefly. Harry felt a familiar brush against his mind; it felt like Primus, only more faint and delicate. The small white dragon opened his eyes, which appeared as red jewels in the afternoon sun, measuring Harry’s appearance. “You speak the truth. What may I do to assist you?”

Harry motioned to Ginny with his left hand. “You are supposed to guard her.”

The Pyr’g snorted toothpick sized flames from its delicate nostrils. “What is this pale spotted mammal to you, Servant of the Light?”

Harry paused, trying to put the words in some meaningful sequence. “Mm’lau, krulach of Primus, says that this girl is my krulach.”

“And what do you say?”

“I say that I require assistance of the People and that she be guarded by the Pyr’g provided for the purpose.”

“Very well, summon her. Ask her to extend her arm over these coals.”

Harry turned to Ginny, making a conscious effort to speak to her in English rather than Parseltongue. “Ginny, come here please. Stick your hand over the grill. If you keep it about a foot over the grate it shouldn’t be too hot.”

Ginny walked over to the grill, eyes riveted on the crouching white dragon. As if in a dream, she extended her left arm, palm up.

The dragon stretched, stood on its tiny feet and unfurled his wings. With a brief flap, he jumped up to Ginny’s extended wrist, alighting none too gently. Ginny’s sudden grimace indicated that the dragon’s feet seemed to have very sharp claws. Harry started, wondering if the Pyr’g would be hot enough to burn flesh.

“All right now, Ginny?” he asked.

“Nothing worse than Pig as far as the claws go. I expected him to be quite hot, but his feet are like little shards of ice,” she said, flashing Harry a brief smile.

In a blink the dragon twisted around Ginny's wrist twice, resizing himself slightly, placing his tail gently between his jaws. Closing his eyes, he went dormant again, changing in an instant from a living, miniature dragon to a carved ivory bracelet.

Ginny looked to Harry with glistening eyes. "He's gorgeous, Harry. Is that all there is to it?"

"For now. He'll stay put until we work out a more permanent solution," Harry replied.

~+~

Harry collapsed back onto the bed, covering his eyes with the arm that wasn't holding the letter. He was silent for a while, and then he laughed silently for a bit. Calming himself, he shook his head, eyes still covered. Oh, by the way, Ginny, I think I fancy you and I'd like to get to know you better. You know those dragons that we both have, yours on your wrist and mine in my head? They think that you're supposed to bear my children. Be a good girl now and shuck your top off so I can nip you on your back, yeah, right there between your shoulder blades. You can resist if you want, it's a traditional part of the game.

Harry turned over on the bed, looked at the letter again and groaned.

"I'm toast," he said with a dispirited sigh.

~+~

Dear Harry,

Thanks for the tip on the memory charm. Once we got that reversed, I was able to undo Granger's hex. That was some hex! I no longer have "SNEAK" written on my face seven days a week. I'd wanted to apologize to Luna, her being a Ravenclaw and all, but she was still in Sweden when I got out of St. Mungo's with my memory restored. I ended up running into the Patil girls when I was coming out of St. Mungo's, so I jumped in with both feet. The hex boils leave as fast as they come. Before I got my whole spiel out of my mouth about how I was a treacherous worm, my face was back to normal. If I'm not mistaken, I think my skin is a little bit nicer now, but as odd as it may sound, I'm having trouble remembering what my face used to look like before the hex. Since then, I've been on a bit of an apology tear. I've repeated my spiel with as many D.A. members as I can find. For some reason, I can't find Granger or any of the Weasleys. I suspect it's because they are under some sort of security, but I'm not holding my breath waiting for anyone to tell me. If you know how to get in touch with Granger, let her know that I want to talk to her.

I don't expect to be welcome back to the D.A., but if you meet again this year, I'd like to talk to the whole group if I could. I was shocked, really, when Parvati looked me in the eye and said, "I forgive you." That was a wonderful, life-changing moment. Slightly less wonderful was the moment that followed when Padma told me that she too forgave me, but then went on in excruciating detail as to what she would do to me if I did it again. That was typical Ravenclaw. Gryffindors can be tough when they need to be, but Ravenclaws are brutal just to keep in practice – it's the house sport. It's a tough house, but I wouldn't be in any other. Thanks for writing back to me, Harry, it meant a lot to me.

Have a nice summer.

Marietta Edgecombe

Dear Ron,

I hate travelling by Floo; more than Portkeys, more than Thestrals, but still, I do envy you for having a Floo connection on your fireplace. I'm not complaining, really, I'm not. Having the Passbox has meant a lot to me this summer. All the same, as much as I like receiving and writing letters, I'd love to be able to pick up the telephone like the Muggles do, or just stick my head in the fireplace like the Wizards do and just chat with my mates whenever I'd like.

I learned to Apparate yesterday – that's the good news. I'll have a foreign license by the end of the summer, which will be good in the U.K., but for strategic purposes, I'll be keeping this new skill under wraps. Bummer, so close and yet so far. It's really different, but it sure beats Floo! There's so much cool stuff that I've been learning this summer. I can't wait until I can talk to you face-to-face.

McGonagall says that my Quidditch ban has been lifted, so you'll have to put up with me again on the team this year. Hopefully I can avoid another post-match spat with my good friend Mr. Malfoy and not repeat my Quidditch ban this year. I've been thinking about the line-up - you should too. There's not much of the old Wood team left. What's here? Just you, me, Katie, Ginny, and maybe Kirke and Sloper. We either need to get some better Beaters, or drastically improve the ones we have. The playbook is pretty tired too, Angelina having essentially used Wood's old book without any revision. Even though we did win the Cup with that old book, I don't think the other teams are going to sit still and let us beat them with old plays.

Ginny says you are no longer grounded. Hurray! Everywhere I go this summer, I've got a security detail. I half expect to find them in the loo with me. With Moody, you never know. (Now there's a scary thought!)

Save some Butterbeer for me – Coke just isn't the same thing. More later. I gotta get back onto my bicycle, but the bloody rain is keeping me trapped in this frigging house.

Your friend,

HP

~+~

Hermione was finishing the breakfast dishes when the morning post came through the door slot. There was the usual assortment of bills, journals, advertisements, and one pale yellow envelope with five first class stamps crammed into the upper right corner. It was addressed to Miss Hermione Granger, in a familiar handwriting. Her hand shook gently as she slit the envelope open. She sat down at the breakfast table to read it, sipping the last of her tea. Moments later she sprayed a mouthful of tea on the table, erupting in a chorus of coughs and laughs. Thumping herself on the chest, she coughed one last time, composed herself and finished the letter.

Dear Hermione,

Lavender here, checking in on my roomie. I hope you've done something this summer other than just read, although, truth be told, I've done some reading this summer too. Mum wanted me to teach her how to do a Patronus charm. She was big time impressed when I could show her how to do it, even if mine is just a silvery cloud.

I had the Patils and Susan Bones over for lunch last Saturday. We talked about the usual: boys, shopping, clothes, and music, then classes (last year's and next year's) – that took all of twenty

minutes. Then we spent the rest of the afternoon talking about Harry. Susan's aunt is well connected at the Ministry, and she gave us the inside scoop on what happened when all of you were at the Ministry when V-mort invaded. Why didn't you tell me, girl? I'm your roomie, people expect me to know things! But I digress.

We were talking about Harry. It doesn't take a Ravenclaw to figure out that Harry has a big role coming in the next war. Padma thinks he's the one who can defeat V-mort. Parvati and I swear that it's Dumbledore, but I'll also bet my makeup allowance that either way, Harry's got a big part to play in the final act. We're certain that Dumbledore is training him for that part, but we're worried about how Harry's going to hold up for the next two years. Last year was the pits for everyone around him, and it must have been entirely miserable for Harry. We discussed at great length the FACT that Harry needs – ta da – a girlfriend, if for no other reason than the fact that he can't think about V-mort 24/7 without cracking up. Padma says that a good snog should cheer him up when he gets so grumpy, but then she doesn't have to run into him in the dorm- she thinks it's bad, but we know how bad it really is. He can be sooo miserable! It might take more than a good snog.

Having reached this conclusion, we then all agreed that you needed to be brought into this project. Why? Because a) you know Harry better than any of us (no, I do not now, nor did I ever believe the Rita Skeeter articles – they're rubbish, right?) and b) because we need your logical, methodical mind. We need to winnow the field of candidates. We agreed first and foremost that it has to be a girl that Harry finds attractive, but we don't know what does it for him. Ok, he did like Cho Chang, so we know that drop-dead pretty, smart and athletic work, but on the other hand, we also know that relationship went down in flames, so maybe that's not the right combination for winning Harry's heart. It's flipping obvious that membership in the D.A. (or being eligible for the D.A. if it meets next year) is a must too – Death Eaters or wannabes need not apply. Finally, we figure it's pretty much limited to girls in the class of 1998 and 1999 – which leaves this year's crop of seventh year girls out (sorry, Cho, you had your chance.). Before we filled out the list of girls that met these criteria, we decided that your help was necessary to make sure we weren't missing something. So, let me know what you think – it's an important project, and it's the least that we can do for our side in the war.

Changing the subject, how's your favourite Weasley? No, I don't mean Ginny. Susan says he's a nice dancer, although he let her know that those dances were a "just friends" type of encounter, and that he'd really prefer dancing with a certain Gryffindor prefect.

Well, ta-ta for now. I hope to see you before the end of the summer. I am looking forward to your response to our deep thinking on this get-Harry-a-girl project.

Kisses,

Lavender Brown

"Mum? Can I call Ginny on the Floo?"

"Certainly, dear," Monica replied absently from her study.

"Wait'll she reads this," Hermione said with a smirk on her face. "What would we do without our good friends, the Glamour Girls of Gryffindor?"

The rain continued unabated. Harry paced the floor in his room looking out the window when he came near to it. No change. He slipped down the stairs. Aunt Petunia was reading some thick woman's magazine. "Aunt Petunia, I need to call one of my minders."

"Fine, Harry, just keep it brief," she replied, not taking her eyes from the magazine for an instant.

He dialled the number.

"Hello, Harry," Moey answered, her voice a flat monotone. "Wait a minute, surely you're not thinking of going out in this weather," she said, her voice picking up emotion the longer she talked.

Harry chuckled. "Even *I* am not crazy enough to go riding in this weather. I do need a favour though."

"Go ahead."

"Who's doing security for my party?" He asked, hoping that he wasn't trespassing in asking the question.

"What party?"

Harry snorted. "Ha-ha, very funny. My birthday party, woman."

"Mind your manners, squirt. Last I checked, that was Tonks' job."

"Do you know if there's a list of guests who are expected to be there?"

"I'm sure that there is."

"Can I get a copy of that list?" he asked, trying to keep the pique out of his voice.

"Why, worried that your old girlfriend is going to show up and start fighting with your new girlfriend?"

"Yeah, I should have such problems," Harry said, pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand. *Why does everyone think it's open season on making jokes about my love life?* "I'm thinking of having gifts for my guests, and I want to be prepared," he explained in an even tone.

"Sounds nice, can I come?"

"That's up to Shackbolt."

"Fine – can you set me up with a date with Ron's brother Bill?"

"Is that what you want for your present?"

“Yeah,” she replied with the faintest hint of a giggle.

“Sorry, Moey, no can do – Bill already has a steady girlfriend from what I hear. How about the next Weasley in line: Charlie? Same wicked sense of humour, nice collection of burns on his arms from working with dragons in Romania?”

“Now you’re talking, Harry. What else can I do for you?”

“I need to nip into Diagon Alley this afternoon. Can you give me a lift?”

“I think not, but I can see if Tonks is available – she might be able to borrow her *boyfriend’s* car.”

Harry didn’t say anything in response to the word *boyfriend*, but he smiled broadly. “That would be great.”

“Fifteen minutes, usual place.” The line went dead. Moey was never much for niceties on the phone.

Gathering up a rain slicker, Harry called out to his Aunt. “I’m going out for a walk – I’ll be back before dinner.”

Aunt Petunia never answered. Harry adjusted his cap and walked out the door.

~+~

“Ginny, get down here. I want to see what you look like before our guests arrive!” Molly called up the stairwell.

“Geez Louise, mum! I’m not an infant, can’t you trust me to wash my face and comb my hair out by myself?” Ginny barked from the loo.

“It’s not you I’m worried about, Little One, it’s your brothers Fred and George . . .”

“Oh, good point.”

~+~

Dumbledore wiped his mouth with his napkin, crossing his knife and fork on his plate. “Excellent dinner, Molly. It’s a pity that Arthur couldn’t join us for such an excellent meal.”

Molly looked at the family clock, clearly visible from the dining table. Arthur’s hand read “At Work – Still!” She sighed. “Thank you, Albus. He’s been working such wretched hours. I thought I’d live a quiet life when my husband chose such a mundane office in the Ministry, but it appears that I was wrong,” she said with a crooked smile.

“I’m afraid it can’t be helped, Molly,” Lupin said, speaking for the first time since the meal began. “The Aurors are working terrible hours with all the raids and counterstrikes – Arthur’s office has been providing technical assistance.”

Ginny smiled, thinking to herself, “*and just how do you know so much about the hours the Aurors are pulling these days, eh, Uncle Moony?*”

Molly stood, standing behind her chair, shooting a glance at Ron and then Ginny. They rose and wordlessly cleared the table while Molly put a kettle on for after-dinner tea. Within moments the table was cleared, a simple tea service was set, and the dinner dishes began doing themselves in the sudsy water-filled sink. This was Ron’s cue to leave. The twins had volunteered to drop by after dinner to test out the new wards in the family Quidditch pitch, letting Ron work on his Keeper skills now that he was no longer grounded. Ginny suspected that this altruism on the part of the twins might have something to do with getting Ron out of the house while the oldest and youngest Weasley women had a nice after dinner chat with the head of the Order of the Phoenix and the Order’s security chief, but as Hermione was fond of saying, “knowing that it’s so and being able to prove it are two different things.”

Molly stuck her head into the pantry and pulled out two small glass vials that she put down next to Lupin’s mug. Lupin looked at the vials, then at Molly, raising an eyebrow.

“You know very well what they are for, Remus John. You need all the help you can get with the waxing moon,” Molly said tartly.

Lupin poured half a mug of tea and then carefully decanted two drops from the red vial and one drop from the yellow vial into his tea, closing his eyes and sniffing with satisfaction the flavoured steam that billowed up from his mug. He cradled the mug in his hands for a moment before swallowing the mug in one long draw. The tea seemed scalding hot, but if it was, Lupin didn’t let on. The yellow tint that had shaded his complexion faded and a bit of colour returned to his cheeks. He refilled his mug with tea, filling the mug this time, adding two lumps of sugar. Ginny wondered if he had taken ill suddenly, as he’d looked much better on Sunday when she’d seen him at Granger’s house, but then, he’d been with Harry for the weekend. She suspected that being with Harry had a restoring effect on him; it certainly had one on her.

“Thank you, Molly,” Lupin began with a surprisingly raspy voice, “you are too kind to me.”

“Nonsense, you’re almost family, Remus. Now, what is this all about that it couldn’t wait until Arthur came home?”

Lupin swallowed, looked at Dumbledore, then at Ginny, then at Molly. He reached into his robes for his wand, casting a series of charms on the room. Ginny felt her ears pop with the change in air pressure. *That must be some Imperturbable charm*, she thought, impressed. He pulled a long draw from his mug and then solemnly intoned, “Molly, we’ve got a security problem.”

“Fine,” Molly bristled, “but what’s that got to do with Ginny?”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "I'm afraid, Molly, that Ginny *is* the security problem."

Ginny felt her eyes begin to prickle. *I will not cry in front of all these people, I will not.* She knew what was coming. Without needing to be prompted, she pulled her right hand from under the table where it had been resting on her lap and placed it in front of her mother, palm up. Lupin traced the tip of his wand over her palm in a complex pattern. Her hand grew warm and inexplicably began to itch. The itching subsided and then she noticed a pale green glow across her palm and the inside of her fingers: almost all of it was aglow except for the ugly gash mark that was normally invisible.

"And what is this supposed to signify, Remus?" Molly asked sceptically.

"That's a dark mark, Molly," Lupin said quietly.

"My daughter," Molly said, gripping the table with a white knuckled hand, "IS NO *DEATH EATER* !"

"No one said she was, Molly," Dumbledore answered quietly. "There are a variety of marks left by evil, all of which are properly called dark marks. The scar on Harry's forehead is a prime example. This mark has nothing at all to do with Death Eaters, except for the fact that like Harry, she got this mark from Tom Riddle."

Molly said nothing, bringing her fist to her mouth.

Lupin touched Ginny's palm lightly with his wand, ending the Revealing Charm. "Voldemort has been looking for Ginny. He's been sending Dream Hounds out to find her. That's why she hasn't been sleeping well of late. The dark mark reveals a weakness in her natural defences. Molly, she's particularly vulnerable to being possessed again by Voldemort. Much more vulnerable than Harry is, even in his weakest moments."

"But she slept fine last night, I let her sleep through breakfast," Molly protested.

"That's because of this, Mum," Ginny said, holding up her other hand, jangling her ivory bracelet.

"What's that, young lady, and where did you get it?" Molly inquired, a bit of steel creeping into her voice.

"It's a Pyr'g, Harry got it for me, and I got it Sunday when I went to the Grangers' in the afternoon," Ginny explained, wishing all the while that the earth would open up and swallow her. Molly stared at her as if she'd just announced that she was living in sin with unwashed minstrels.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Molly, a bit of background is in order. I engaged a tutor for Harry this summer to assist him with Occlumency. I engaged Abelard," he said, looking at the bottom of his coffee cup with great interest.

Molly was silent for a long time. "Abelard's dead. He died in the first war," she said at last, eyes unfocused, voice flat.

Lupin placed his hand lightly on Molly's arm. "Actually, Molly, that's what he wanted people to think. I've been in contact with him, off and on, mostly off, since the end of the first war. He is alive and well."

Dumbledore continued, looking between Lupin and Molly. "Ginny's bracelet is a bit of solid magic from the Snow Dragons. Harry went to visit them this summer on a field trip with Abelard. They gave this to him, saying that he would have need of it in the near future. It's keeping the Dream Hounds away from Ginny right now."

Molly abruptly stood up and walked to the pantry, bringing out a dusty bottle of brandy. She plunked the bottle onto the table and summoned three small glasses from the kitchen, one at a time.

"Start at the beginning, Albus. Leave nothing out," she said as her shaking hands pulled the stopper from the brandy.

Dumbledore waited until his glass was full, and then took the smallest of sips. Clearing his throat again, he said, "There are three people who know the details of this story in full. What is spoken at this table tonight shall not be repeated, is that understood?"

Everyone at the table nodded.

Dumbledore began his explanation, talking as he drank his way through a stout glass of brandy and two mugs of tea.

~+~

Dear Diary,

Lupin and Dumbledore came to dinner tonight. I didn't cry at dinner, and I didn't start speaking in tongues or show signs of possession, but I did have to explain to Mum that her only daughter has a dark mark left over from first year, and oh, by the way, Voldemort's trying to possess me again, and yeah, I'm wearing a bit of solid magic that Harry got for me from these intelligent dragons that are keeping the Dream Hounds away for the moment. I think that having the earth open up and swallow me would have been less painful, but I'm not quite sure. Mum knew that I hadn't been sleeping, but she didn't know why. Now that she knows why, she's keeping an eye on me like I'm going to have fits or something. Why can't I just be normal?

Lupin looked much worse for wear tonight than he did on Sunday. I talked to Mum about it – it's the Wolfsbane. It keeps him from the rages when he transforms, but the stuff is toxic as hell. Apparently he's on a rotation schedule where he does Wolfsbane for three months and then takes a month off. The time off is enough to allow his body to recuperate from the effects of the Potion. Mum spotted the jaundiced look in his face when he showed up for dinner; his liver functions are pretty low. She brought out some Sunseed Oil and Essence of Tarcick – two drops of one and a drop of the other. Alone they don't do much, but together they brought a good measure of relief to Professor Lupin. It was amazing, really. He's such a good man, and he loves Harry so much. I'm so proud that Mum knew what to do to bring him some comfort.

Third-hand through Hermione I'm told that he's getting some comfort of the physical sort from my favourite Auror. I'm glad for that, too. It's hard to figure out who's lost more in the wars, Harry or Remus. They seem to be good for each other though, so I'm glad he's Harry's guardian.

Watching Mum treat Remus crystallized something in me. I want to do what she did tonight – maybe after Hogwarts, maybe after the war is over, maybe sooner, maybe later, but I want to be able to comfort the suffering and bring healing. I think I've got the grades – whether or not I could stand those putrid lime green robes at St. Mungo's is another question entirely. Given my colouring, I'd look like a garish lollypop, but that's not something that I need to deal with tonight, and it's such a petty issue, one truly worthy of Lavender Brown.

Speaking of Lavender – Hermione sent me the most wretched letter! The Glamour Girls of Gryffindor have determined that Harry needs a girlfriend. HAH! Where were **they** when Harry was coming unwrapped after Sirius died in the ambush at the Ministry of Magic? Okay, I admit it, my chain has been officially yanked, and hard.

Hermione, bless her soul, points out that according to the selection criteria, I'm actually a good contender. Here's my take:

- I'm short (Harry's way shorter than Ron, thank goodness - I can't see Harry going out with a girl who towers over him.)
- I'm athletic (hey, I beat Cho to the Snitch, didn't I?)
- I'm smart (ok, I'm not on academic probation, but I'm doing better in Potions than Harry is!)
- Harry thinks I'm attractive (God knows why, but I'm not questioning that point, really I'm not.)
- I'm in the right year group,
- I'm in the D.A., and
- I can cast a corporeal Patronus.

By Lavender's list, I should be a finalist for sure. HAH!

Well, dear diary, I need to get to bed. Mum says that we're going out tomorrow morning and I need to be "presentable." What's with this? You'd think that I was going to a dog show as her prize Crup, they way she worries about whether or not I'm "presentable."

I wonder if I'm going to dream about the dragons again tonight. I'd really like to know what happens between Au'lh and Mm'lng.

For a dragon, he's really quite attractive. Those eyes are something else. Like someone else I know.

Well, diary, that's all for tonight.

GMW

~+~

Number Four Privet Drive was quiet and dark. The only light visible from the outside came from the small bedroom on the second floor, the one facing away from the street, through the window that was visited from time to time by Postal Owls and once by a flying Ford Anglia. Inside the room, Harry put the finishing touches on letters that he sealed and stuffed into the Hogwarts door of the Passbox. The door clicked shut and let out a muffled slurp. He stood, stretched, wiped his glasses, and stripped down to his shorts, thankful that the day was over. He extinguished the light, turned back the covers and stretched out, his hands behind his head. Before he could finish his relaxation exercises, he was asleep.

Dear Professor McGonagall,

Miss Tonks suggested that I enlist your assistance in one of my summer projects. Enclosed you will find a list of books that I'm interested in finding. I looked at Flourish and Blots, but they weren't in stock. Normally a student would ask the Potions professor for these titles, but for obvious reasons, I'm not going to bother your colleague with this request. If you can find these titles before my birthday, I'd be much obliged. They can be charged to my Gringotts account. You'll find the account number listed after the titles.

Thanks in advance for your help.

HP

P.S. – I don't have an address for Miss Chang – can you forward this note to her? Thanks.

Dear Cho,

I was glad to get your note, and felt horrible when I got your second note, realizing that I hadn't replied to the first. I have no excuse – I'm a lousy correspondent. Yes, I'd love to chat on the Express, and if that doesn't work out, as soon as possible thereafter.

I've not worked out all the details, but Professor Dumbledore has asked if I'd keep the D.A. going next year. I don't know that we'll need it. Hopefully we'll have a non-wretched DADA instructor. Hope springs eternal, I guess.

I'm glad to hear that things are working out with Michael. He's a decent enough fellow. He certainly has good taste in women!

A friend pried into what happened with our torrid romance last year, expecting no doubt to hear some sordid story of how we had a falling out. I replied that things just didn't work out and we stopped seeing each other. They seemed surprised, but that's my story and I'm sticking with it. Rest assured that there's nothing that I say about you to others that I wouldn't say to your face. I still like you, respect you and hope that we can remain friends, even after you leave Hogwarts. I don't have so many friends that I can afford to toss any good ones away.

Years from now when we're both old and you're famous, you can say that you dated that famous nutter, Harry Potter, and I can say that I kissed the prettiest girl in Ravenclaw.

Have a great rest of the summer,

HP

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See the Prologue for disclaimer language.

I'd write a pithy author's note here, but KC thinks that I talk too much, so I'll let him tell you what Dumbledore explained to Molly and Ginny after dinner at the Burrow. Many thanks to Full Pensieve for his pre-Beta edits and pithy comments; you make this a much more pleasant experience, Mike.

Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com - write me, I write back (most of the time.)

The Letters of Summer Dragons Made Small

Author's Note: It's been a while since Chapter 16 – this chapter covers a lot of ground. To understand the end of this chapter, you should probably re-read Chapter 15, particularly the conversation that Harry has with Dumbledore whilst walking in the woods. Chapter 18 is underway, but the next two chapters will be very long, so it will take a while to produce these under the best of conditions. So, without further delay – *Dragons made small* .

Life at Abelard's was governed by routine. Jasmine's mum left in the afternoon to go home and prepare dinner for her husband. After dinner if there were no clients, Abelard would putter in his study for an hour or so and then retire to his chambers, meditating if he were working a big project, or reading himself to sleep if he didn't feel like working. Rosie would follow Abelard around after dinner until she was convinced that it was finally time for the evening walk, when she presented herself to Jasmine. The witch in question would change into workout clothes and go for a nighttime run with the shaggy dog. After the run the dog would curl up on her pillow by the fireplace, leaving the witch to do her rounds.

The last station on the rounds was checking on Abelard. She entered Abelard's chambers, finding him asleep (as she already knew he was), took off his reading glasses, and covered him up with a quilt. She kissed the top of his head, feeling him relax slightly. She knew that he knew this ritual was part of her nighttime rounds, but they never spoke of it. This assignment was like no other; she was living in the place she thought of as home, guarding the man she thought of when she thought about what a father should be.

She closed the door to his bedroom and opened his study. When she'd entered his service he'd offered to supply her with her own, but the thrifty side of her nature objected to this – the only time she could have used a study was when Abelard was asleep or engaged with clients. Clients were always met in the parlour. The notion that Abelard might want his study undisturbed never occurred to her. Unless directed otherwise, when Abelard was awake, she was within easy reach of her principal; to be a bodyguard required being close to the body.

Most evenings, she worked her way through a computer-assisted Czech language course. Abelard's office had a computer and a fibre-optic line that ran to the University ten miles down the road. Several years ago, Abelard had made the donation to connect the University to the outside world. Shortly afterwards, technicians had quietly laid a cable, burying it in a trench beside the road leading to Abelard's villa. His study had a phone, fax, something she didn't quite understand called a data connection, and her beloved computer.

Despite reaching her 20s before touching an electronic device, she'd adopted typically Muggle attitudes to technology, including irritation at the ringing of the phone. *If that phone wakes Abelard I'm really going to be steamed.* She bolted out of her chair and dove for the phone, which was inconveniently across the study. "Hello," she said breathlessly.

"Miss Kadakia? Remus here."

Jasmine looked at her watch – it was almost 1:00 a.m. "What is so important that you are calling at this hour, Mr. Lupin? Wait a minute, how *did* you get this number?"

"Fr. Martin gave it to me – I just roused him at the Friary. Is Abelard awake?"

"No, he's been asleep for three hours."

"Drat – what's on his calendar for tomorrow?"

Jasmine didn't have to look at the calendar; she had his week memorized. "Breakfast, prayer and meditation, a client meeting at 8:00 and tutoring at 9:00."

"Can the client meeting be rescheduled?"

"Afraid not – that one's been rescheduled twice already, and Abelard said to not let it slip again or the Ambassador would be calling to complain."

"Which Ambassador?"

"Nice try, Mr. Security Officer; you attend to the Order's business, and I'll attend to Abelard's, okay?" She regretted the peevish tone, but this phone call was taking her off her stride; she wasn't used to interacting with people at this hour of the night.

"Listen, we need to meet with Abelard this morning. Can we bump the tutoring?"

"Depends. Who is this 'we' you're talking about?"

"Ginny Weasley, her mum Molly Weasley, and me."

"Ginny Weasley?" There was a long silence as she ran through the portfolio she kept in her mind of all of Abelard's clients. She wasn't a client. Then there was a belated flash. "Oh, you mean Harry's girl?"

Remus chuckled. "I don't think that's quite how Harry would describe the relationship, but yes, Harry's *friend* and her mum."

Jasmine smiled. She *knew* how Harry felt about Ginny – one of the unintended perks of Legilimency was picking up the stray thoughts of those around her. Whenever Jasmine was particularly close to Harry, he was thinking of Ginny – which led her to believe that as much as he enjoyed her company (and he *did* enjoy her company) he'd prefer being with a different girl, one

with tomato-red hair.

She turned her attention to the matter at hand, committing Abelard to a course of action. “Give me the Apparation coordinates where you want the portal to touch down. It’ll be 8:05 your time. I’ll be travelling hot, so don’t be surprised if my wand is out when I pick you up. If we have to scrub, I’ll let you know, but otherwise I’ll tell Abelard that you’re coming in after his client meeting. Do I need to push Harry’s tutoring back?”

The phone line was silent for a while. “No, I think he should be there as well.” Remus read her the Apparation coordinates, which she carefully wrote down and read back to him.

“Okay, now that we’ve got the logistics worked out, what am I going to tell Abelard tomorrow as to why he’s getting unscheduled guests?”

Remus told her. She wrote down notes furiously.

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Harry awoke before the alarm sounded. When the first sound came from the dreadful box, he snatched up the alarm and silenced it. The house was now quiet as the proverbial tomb. The gentle sound of falling rain had gone away, replaced by the chorus and counter-chorus of the morning birds. Harry wiped the grit from his eyes and ran his feet back and forth over the rug next to his bed before slipping his glasses onto his face. The knob on the Hogwarts door of the Passbox was lit.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I have procured the texts, although I was surprised that the first title is into its third edition. They have been charged to your account. I knew the author when he was your age and struggling as a student in my N.E.W.T. Transfiguration class the first year I taught it. Kroch’s will drop-ship the titles to your address by evening owl. Do let me know if you are going to attempt anything out of either text, as the magic involved is rather *fussy* for first-time practitioners.

My offer to tutor you still stands.

I regret to inform you that Order business will necessitate my absence at your party, but I do believe that our House will be well represented.

Fond regards,

Minerva McGonagall

Harry sighed. Uncle Moony was right. Most decent people were more than willing to help out if only given the chance. *I’ve got to work on asking for help when I need it .*

The morning unfolded into another Vernon-free morning. Aunt Petunia explained something about a business breakfast, but Harry paid no attention past the point of “Uncle Vernon won’t be here

this morning....” Harry supposed that Aunt Petunia had intended for him to cook less for breakfast, but he blithely ignored her. He set three plates on the table, but cooked the normal rations of eggs, bacon, toast and tea. Dudley said nothing when extra rashers of bacon appeared on his plate; Harry smugly buttered and ate the extra toast. By the time Aunt Petunia woke up (which usually occurred sometime into her second cup of tea), the evidence of Harry’s disobedience had disappeared. Dudley winked at Harry, belched, and excused himself from the table. Aunt Petunia seemed to realise that something was amiss, but apparently couldn’t quite put her finger on it. She poured a third cup of tea and pondered. Harry loaded the dishwasher, wiped the table and countertops, and disappeared up the stairs.

He jotted off a quick note of thanks to Professor McGonagall, but he wasn’t ready yet to write any reply to Ginny’s note. He had an odd feeling in his stomach when he thought about its implications. *I just want to get to know her better, we’re not planning a handfast; at least I’m not planning anything like that. Why can’t I just be normal? Why does everything have to be so bloody complicated? Why am I asking myself pitiful questions on such a beautiful day?* He laughed at himself. He straightened his room, quickly visited the loo, and raced out the back door before Aunt Petunia could think up more busywork.

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Remus finished his errands at 2:00 a.m., Apparating into the Burrow, specifically into the kitchen. The kitchen was the heavily warded, designated Apparation point. The wards would selectively allow the family and a few other individuals to come and go at will. Remus was proud to have made it onto that list. The house was dark and quiet. He looked up at the famous Weasley family clock, which showed all the Weasleys in residence as “In bed – asleep.” He stepped out of his shoes, pulled a throw off the living room couch, and stretched out.

Molly found him three hours later when she came downstairs to start the coffee. She checked him for obvious wounds or signs of trauma. Finding none, she adjusted the window shades so that the morning sun would not strike the couch. She knew that he would wake soon; this wasn’t the first time that he’d shown up at their house unannounced.

After starting the coffee, she put the teakettle on as well, pulling out the red and yellow medicinal cruets from the pantry. The teakettle beat the coffeepot in the morning race this day. Remus woke to find Molly standing over him, carrying a steaming mug of tea already dosed with the balm he needed this close to the full moon.

“You are an angel of mercy, Molly,” he said, carefully sitting up and pulling the mug from her hands.

“How long have you been here, Remus?” Molly asked with a note of concern in her voice.

“I arrived at 2:00 this morning; finding no one awake, I figured that my news would wait until morning,” Remus answered, stifling a yawn as he did so.

“I appreciate your devotion to duty, Remus, but couldn’t you have left me a note and let me call

you by Floo at Grimmauld Place?” Molly asked as she returned to the kitchen to begin her morning’s work.

“You presuppose that I could think clearly at 2:00 in the morning, or that I cared where I slept for a few hours,” Remus replied while he stretched. “It’s not like I have a family waiting for me at the end of the day. ”

“No one is sharing breakfast with you at Grimmauld Place these days?” Molly asked with a hint of a smile in her eyes.

Remus set his mug down on the kitchen table, apparently deciding between tea and coffee. Coffee won out this morning.

“Winky and Dobby have returned to Hogwarts,” he replied obliviously.

Molly snapped at him with her dishtowel. “That’s not what I meant and you know it!”

Remus drained half a mug of coffee before answering. “From time to time a certain member of the Order will come by for breakfast after the end of her shift, before she goes home, *alone* , to her flat. On other occasions, said member of the Order will come by Grimmauld Place and I’ll fix dinner or lunch for her before she goes out. Is that sufficient disclosure, *Mother* ?” Remus answered with a defiant glare.

“That will do for now,” Molly said, returning to her mixing bowl.

“Actually sleeping arrangements were the first major argument we had as a couple. She wanted for me to either move into her flat, or move herself into Grimmauld Place. That was a most unpleasant conversation. I am, at heart, a very old-fashioned Wizard, Molly.”

“It’s nothing to apologize for, Remus, I would that more of my children were equally old-fashioned. I worry as we adopt more and more Muggle customs that we’ll be falling apart the same way they do,” Molly sniffed as she scooped dough for buns into the cooking pan.

“Well, if it’s any consolation to you, Molly, I think that Bill is just about ready to settle down,” Remus said with a conspiratorial wink.

“What? When? – Oh Remus! Enough of this gossip, you’re just winding me up again. Why are you here?” Molly asked.

“We’re going to meet with Abelard today to take care of Ginny’s situation,” Remus replied.

“He’s agreed to meet us?” Molly asked with wide eyes.

“His assistant has cleared a spot on his morning calendar.”

“Is it still that woman, Snik Something-or-other, you know, the War Witch?” Molly asked, pressing her hand to her forehead as she strained to remember.

“Snik Paprikash still works for him as his housekeeper; her daughter Jasmine is Abelard’s assistant and bodyguard, and yes, she’s a War Witch.”

“I didn’t know her as Paprikash – did she have another name?”

“Right in one – she lost her husband and remarried. Her daughter’s surname is Kadakia. It took me a while to figure out that Miss Kadakia is the daughter of Mrs. Paprikash. She’s a really sweet lass and quite fetching. She gets along *very well* with Harry.”

The colour drained out of Molly’s face as she put on her mask of indifference. “She’s been working with Harry this summer?”

“The boy’s been spending about thirty-six hours a week on his tutoring with Abelard. Jasmine’s never far from Abelard’s side – she’s responsible for about half of Harry’s tutoring, I’d hazard.”

“Oh,” Molly replied, blinking rapidly.

“Don’t let your buns burn in the oven, Molly. I’m going back to Grimmauld Place for a shower; Jasmine will be by around 8:00 to bring us to Abelard’s villa. We will be travelling by Portal.” Remus stood, stretched, drained the rest of his coffee, Disapparated with a muted pop, and returned to the kitchen an instant later to fetch his shoes. With a sheepish expression on his face and his shoes firmly in hand, he Disapparated again.

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Her morning briefing with Abelard at breakfast had gone fairly well – he rarely tolerated disruptions in his schedule, but took this one with an unusually placid calm. “While I’m working with the client, you will need to make sure that the girl has sufficient control of wandless magic that she can capture the Pyr’g. Harry will be there; he can assist. It will be good training for him,” Abelard said to her before nodding, wiping his mouth. He walked into the study, only to open the door again, sticking his head out. “You *will* need to make clear to the girl where you stand with our student. I expect that she will have her own notions which may or may not have a basis in fact,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” she replied to the now closed door. *Oh great, why can’t I get simple assignments like detecting arson attempts or deflecting assassins?* She composed herself after uttering a choice string of curses that made sense only in Pashtun.

Hours later she Apparated to a spot close to the designated Apparation point, wand out. Her senses strained to take in 360 degrees of terrain as she took a quick survey of the scene. There were people over the rise, two women and a man. She had already identified the man; there weren’t too many werewolves operating in polite society, especially this close to the full moon. She walked over the rise and announced herself. “Good morning, all. I’m Jasmine Kadakia and I’m taking you to see Abelard this morning.”

Introductions were made and Jasmine called the Portal. The doorframe appeared, then the door

proper, and last of all, the doorknob. The Portal gleamed in the morning sun, yellow and gold and brown streaked through the door. She grasped the doorknob, pushing forward until Abelard's garden could be seen beyond the open door. "Welcome to my employer's humble abode, we are at your service this morning," she said with a practiced cadence.

Leading the entourage into the dining room, she introduced her mum as she appeared from the kitchen. She was somewhat surprised when Mum squealed and grabbed Molly, hugging her as she did her own sisters. They began to speak in a rapid-fire conversation. Jasmine turned to Lupin and said, "You can wait here or in the study. Abelard is in the parlour with a client and will not be available for an hour. I need to do some drills with the guest of honour." Lupin nodded and disappeared down the hall to the study. Jasmine turned to Ginny, who looked more than a little cowed. "C'mon with me, I promise I won't bite. Abelard wanted me to make sure that you are sufficiently proficient in wandless magic that we can do some very delicate work later today; we're going to be working out in the meadow. It's already set up."

They walked silently out into the garden and towards the gate leading to the meadow.

Ginny broke the silence first. "I didn't know that our mums knew each other."

"It was a surprise to me, too. Look, Ginny, before we get started today, I want to clear the air. My mum aside, your mum doesn't think much of War Witches, and I suspect that she has certain notions . . ." Jasmine started, at a loss for how to continue.

"What are you going on about?" Ginny asked.

"I wanted to talk to you about Harry," Jasmine said, speaking faster than normal.

"What about Harry?" Ginny asked with an icy tone.

"We've been working together a lot this summer."

"And?" Ginny asked with a look that would peel paint.

"And we've become good friends. But that's it."

Ginny stood silently. She had the 'you expect me to believe that?' look on her face. Jasmine didn't need to rely upon her highly trained senses to know that Ginny was about to blow. "Do you know what a Legilimens is?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, that's someone who can read your mind," Ginny replied.

"Well, I'm a Legilimens. When I'm working my gift is turned on all the time. I can read the hostility you're putting out, and I've been picking up Harry's thoughts as well this summer. I want to assure you that nothing untoward has gone on between us; Harry has been a perfect gentleman."

Jasmine turned on her heel and began walking toward the gate. Ginny followed. They walked

together in silence for a moment.

“Harry thinks about you,” Jasmine continued as they walked.

“What?” Ginny blurted.

“Harry thinks about you *a lot*. When I get close enough to pick up his surface thoughts, I find him thinking about you. He thinks you’re very pretty,” Jasmine said in an even, friendly tone.

“Oh.” Ginny said, her shoulders relaxing and her demeanour brightening.

Well, Jasmine, you certainly read that situation correctly. I think now that the girl is convinced that you’re not a rival, maybe we can get some work done rather than just howling and scratching at each other. Although if things were different, I would fight her for him: men of Harry’s calibre don’t come along too often.

By the time they reached the meadow, Ginny was almost skipping.

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There was nothing and no one in the garden when Harry arrived, except a light-coloured shaggy dog seated attentively on the lawn. The dog’s mouth was open, its tongue hanging out. Dogs didn’t smile, but this one certainly appeared to be smiling as she came along beside Harry. “Hello, Rosie,” he said, reaching down to scratch between her ears. Harry began to walk towards the house and Rosie began to bark. He kept walking; Rosie nudged his knee with her head.

“Am I going the wrong way?” he asked.

Rosie wagged her tail, her smile wider than before, and barked once. She sauntered toward the gate that led into the meadow. As she reached the gate, she turned to watch Harry, no doubt checking on his progress. Once through the gate, Harry heard Jasmine speaking. From the tone of her voice, Harry gathered that she was in teaching mode. He followed the sound of her voice, not noticing that Rosie had returned to the garden. There were ten target pillars in the meadow, laid out in a semi-circle. Harry was reminded of his first lesson at Abelard’s house. Harry could see that Jasmine’s student was a girl, a bit shorter than Jasmine, wearing a mint green sundress with matching kerchief – quite the contrast to Jasmine’s blue and black uniform of baggy t-shirt and shorts. They were both facing the pillars.

“Target one,” Jasmine commanded.

Her student called out the splitting charm. “*Fractus.*” The voice was tantalisingly familiar, but he couldn’t place it.

“Target two with a whistle,” Jasmine intoned sharply. The student tucked her wand behind her ear.

He heard a whistle, but there was no sound of breaking wood coming from the pillar.

“Oh, damn.” Harry knew the student’s voice now, and he smiled. It was Ginny. *What’s she doing here?*

“Enough of that,” Jasmine countered. “You can do this. Whistle again,” Jasmine said, ever the patient teacher.

There was another whistle.

Jasmine wrapped her arms around Ginny from behind. “Again,” she commanded. As Ginny complied, Jasmine squeezed. The target downrange shattered. “Target three, spoken charm.”

“*Fractus*,” Ginny intoned, producing a sharp crack downrange.

“Good, very good. Target four, whistle charm.” Jasmine looked over her shoulder as she released Ginny and flashed Harry a quick smile. Harry placed his fingers to his lips, and crept up quietly behind Ginny. Jasmine shifted to his right as he approached.

Ginny whistled, but there was no discernible effect downrange. Harry nodded at Jasmine, and placed his arms around Ginny, smiling as he clasped his hands into position. *She’s so focused on the exercise she doesn’t know I’m here.* Jasmine barked, “Again.”

Ginny whistled, and Harry gave a gentle squeeze. He felt a flash of energy surge in Ginny as he pressed against her diaphragm. There was another loud crack downrange. In the midst of all of this, Harry noted that her hair still smelled like apples. *Keep your mind on the exercise, Potter.*

“Target five,” Jasmine commanded. Ginny whistled. As he felt her diaphragm contract, he gave her another squeeze. Without waiting for the dust to clear, Jasmine commanded, “Target six.” Before Ginny could whistle, Harry released his grip entirely. Although he was no longer touching her, he could still feel the surge of energy pass through her small frame as she whistled. It made the hair on his arms stand on end. “That’s it, you lot,” Jasmine cracked. “We need to let the dust settle.” As the air cleared downrange, Harry noticed that the pillar at position five was missing. Ginny startled as she turned to find Harry behind her. She cleared her throat, and gave Harry a wan smile as a bit of red crept into her cheeks.

Looking to Jasmine she asked, “Am I in trouble? I seem to have broken one of your pillars.”

Jasmine looked first to Harry, then Ginny, and back again to Harry. “No, you’re not in trouble,” she said. “Provided that there are ten pillars at the end of the day.” Turning to Harry, she said, “Ten minutes, back in the garden.” With that statement she Disapparated with a gentle pop.

“Hey, Ginny,” Harry said with a broad smile. “I didn’t know you were going to be here today.”

“Hiya, Harry, I’m a bit surprised to see you!” Ginny said, looking him in the eye as she returned the smile. “I was told I was coming this morning before breakfast, but they didn’t tell me that you’d be here.”

“Welcome to my life,” Harry said, his smile at odds with his eyes.

“Thanks... I think,” Ginny replied.

Harry walked downrange to inspect what was left of target pillar five. Harry pulled his wand out, and imagined the pillar whole again. “*Reparo* .”

“Aren’t you worried about the Underage Use of Magic Office?” Ginny asked, placing the tips of her fingers on Harry’s shoulder.

Harry turned, giving her a bit of a smirk. “We’re in Africa. That’s a bit far afield for Madam Hopkirk’s sensors and, I believe, outside of her jurisdiction as well.” He began to walk back towards the gate to the garden.

“Africa? Huh. Well, I figured we weren’t in England any more, but I had no idea we’d gone so far. Is this where you’ve been coming for tutoring?”

“Pretty much. Three days a week; twelve hours most days. I’m pretty knackered by the end of the day,” Harry said, looking past the gate into the garden.

“So...what do you think of Jasmine?” Ginny asked.

“I only have her for the practical stuff – the theoretical stuff is with Abelard. She’s a good teacher. I didn’t take her seriously at first....”

“Because she’s so pretty?” Ginny wondered aloud.

“Yeah, she’s that and then some,” Harry admitted, missing the sour face that Ginny made, “but she knows what she’s talking about. She’s murder as a sparring partner.”

Ginny’s eyebrows rose. “What were you doing sparring with a War Witch, Harry?”

“Swords, last time we did it; very good for my humility. Snape would be pleased,” he said with a faint smile.

“So, how did you do?” Ginny asked, skipping to get into step with Harry as they walked.

“Well, she killed me in each of the first three rounds, and she broke my nose in the third round as a bonus.”

“How could she break your nose if you were using swords?” Ginny asked, wrinkling her forehead in concentration.

“I think it was her elbow – things were a bit muddled at the time, so I still haven’t worked out how she managed to do that.”

“What happened after that?”

“I killed her cleanly in the fourth round. Her mum was a bit bent out of shape about that – she’s

not accustomed to having her daughter lose to school boys.”

“Good show,” Ginny said, with a contented smile.

“Thanks,” Harry said with a grin. He pushed his hair back with his fingers, not because it did anything, but because it gave him something to do with his hands. “So...not that I mind seeing someone my own age, but what brings you to Abelard’s place?”

Ginny laughed. “I think it was a pretty golden door.”

Harry gave Ginny’s arm a light backhanded thwack. “You know what I mean, why are you here?”

Ginny raised her left arm, twisting her arm to shake the ivory coloured bracelet into position. “I guess is that it’s time for my guardian to come inside my head like yours, but that’s only a guess on my part. Nobody tells me anything any more.”

“I’m sorry, Ginny. I know how that feels.”

“I know you do, Harry,” she said, reaching up to touch his arm as they passed through the gate. “Thanks.” They paused briefly under the gate, green eyes looking into brown. Harry wished that they could be a thousand miles away, without tutors or minders. Ginny’s touch and her small smile warmed his heart. This was not the time, however, to explore what was behind that smile.

“They’re expecting us,” Harry sighed.

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Mrs. Paprikash was sitting at the end of the dining room table, sipping tea and munching biscuits with Molly Weasley. Her carrying on with Molly was the most animation that Harry had ever seen with the senior War Witch. From the tone of their chatter, they were either old friends catching up on days past, or they had really hit it off this morning after the Weasleys’ arrival. Jasmine and Remus were in the kitchen, getting stuff prepared. Abelard was nowhere to be seen. As they entered the dining room, Harry put his hand on Ginny’s shoulder as he moved his mouth close to Ginny’s ear whispering, “You’re a guest here, have a seat at the table. I’ll see if they need any help in the kitchen.” Walking into the kitchen he nodded at Remus and Jasmine.

“Anything that I can do to be of help?” Harry asked cheerfully.

Jasmine bustled about, pouring water into the coffee machine, pulling some flat, round loaves of bread from the oven. “Plop some ice into those pitchers, then pull the fruit tray from the refrigerator, okay?”

“Sure,” Harry replied. He caught Jasmine’s eye as he twisted the ice cube tray. “Where’s the boss?”

“He’s out doing boss things,” Jasmine replied in a non-committal fashion. “Which is a polite way of saying, ‘I don’t know, he didn’t brief me as my schedule went to shreds this morning.’”

Jasmine flashed Harry a smile as she pulled the last loaf from the oven, pushing a tendril of shining black hair back from her forehead with the back of her hand. She tossed the wooden peel on top of the cabinet, took off her apron, nodded at Remus and Disapparated. Harry brought out a tray laden with pitchers of juice and ice water, tumblers and coasters. He began to pour a glass for Ginny as the door leading in from the garden opened.

The room went silent.

“Molly?” Abelard boomed. “Molly Prewett? Do you remember my last words to you?”

Molly stood at end of the table, facing Abelard. She drew herself as straight as possible. “It’s Molly Weasley now, Abelard,” she said in a voice not much louder than a whisper. “Of course I remember your last words to me: ‘You will come to my house in dark times seeking aid.’ You were right, of course.”

Abelard scanned the rest of the room. As he did so, Jasmine silently entered the room, standing beside Remus. She had changed into a short-sleeved navy-blue tea-length dress with white piping on the collar and sleeves. The front of the dress was held together with a dragon brooch. Abelard’s scan stopped at Ginny. He advanced and placed his hand on the top of her head, tilting it back so he could study her face.

“I’ve been looking at your face for almost eighteen years now. It’s quite gratifying to finally meet the girl that goes with that face. I can see it now, of course. You’re Molly’s girl.” Abelard’s voice was stiff with emotion. He was blinking faster than normal. He gave Ginny’s head an avuncular pat and moved to Molly’s end of the table, taking her hand and briefly kissing the back of it. “You are always welcome here, Molly.”

Harry was surprised. Abelard never touched strangers, and here he was pressing the flesh like a cheap politician. There was a story here.

“Wait a minute,” Ginny interjected. “I’m fifteen, how could you have been looking at my face for almost eighteen years?”

Abelard looked at Molly, who flushed as she sat down, and then at Jasmine, then Harry, all of whom returned his glare with innocent looks.

“Do you know who I am, child?” Abelard asked in a quiet voice.

Ginny visibly bristled at being called ‘child’ but she seemed to set it aside. “You’re Harry’s tutor and Jasmine’s boss,” she replied simply.

Abelard chuckled. “I suppose that if that’s how I’m remembered, history will have been kind to me indeed. I am a seer and teacher of seers. One of my students had a vision many years ago; you played a significant role in that vision, which was preserved in a Pensieve. I haven’t the time to go into the details, as I am severely behind schedule already. Your friend Harry can tell you that story another day.”

Harry looked down at the floor, hoping to evade Ginny's gaze.

"Are you teaching Harry how to be a seer?" Ginny asked.

"Lands no, child. I'd love to, but I've been teaching him far more mundane, applied skills. Hasn't anyone told you anything about what's going on this summer?"

"In a word, no. Apparently I'm a mushroom, to be kept in the dark and fed copious amounts of -"

"Ginevra Molly Weasley!" Molly hissed.

"- compost," Ginny said with a wicked smile on her face.

Abelard nodded, as he appeared to try to keep from grinning himself. He filled a small plate with fruit and freshly-sliced bread, pouring a strong cup of tea. Arranging this before him, he looked up at Ginny and spoke gravely. "Remus Lupin says that Harry discovered a dark mark on your palm, that you've been pursued recently by Dream Hounds, and in years past you were possessed by a memory of Tom Riddle. Is this all correct?"

The smile disappeared from Ginny's face. "Yes, sir," she said in a small, little girl voice.

"Have you had any problems with the Dream Hounds since Harry placed the stone dragon on your wrist?" Abelard asked, in a quiet, even tone.

"None, sir," Ginny answered, squirming slightly in her chair.

"Not at all surprising. The Dream Hounds are mortally terrified of Snow Dragons, even in that form. If Riddle is trying to get back into your mind, you'll need protection of the stoutest nature. I intend to replicate with you what we've done with Harry. Remus, have you discussed the particulars of this with Ginevra and her mother?" Abelard was looking out the window with unfocused eyes. His body was here, but his mind was obviously elsewhere.

"Call me Ginny, please," Ginny said with a flash of irritation.

"No, I haven't," Remus replied. "I don't understand the mechanism enough to explain it cogently."

"Let's take advantage of these refreshments, and I'll tell some stories, old and new, then we'll need to get on with the day's work."

Abelard was energised and launched into several stories that dovetailed into one another, explaining the history of the Snow Dragons, how he'd spent time studying advanced topics of Divination with them, a very summary explanation of his involvement with the First War, and how he'd become Harry's tutor. He then concluded by explaining what a Pyr'g was, how the Snow Dragons used them, and how he was using it to protect Harry's mind from Voldemort's invasions.

“Ginny’s situation is not all that different from Harry’s. She is a target for take-over. Mere Occlumency would not be sufficient to protect her, and without protection she presents a security risk to the Order, to her family, and to everyone at Hogwarts. With protection, she would be effectively immune to hostile mental invasion, she would gain potentially useful skills and abilities, and all around her would be more secure. Are there any questions?” Abelard asked.

Ginny shook her head slowly from side to side. Molly finished chewing a biscuit, sipped some tea, and then, looking at Harry, asked, “What are the side effects?”

Harry laughed. “I have dreams about dragons. The other guardians are pretty much invisible, but the dragon Pyr’g is somewhat intrusive and very intelligent. I can talk to her, mine’s a lady dragon named Mm’lau. She reminds me a bit of you, Mrs. Weasley, she’s a mum herself. The Snow Dragons are very adept at a number of different forms of magic. Mm’lau shows me how to perform magic that I’m almost ready for; she’s really a good teacher,” Harry paused. “The other three don’t speak to me.”

“Who’s in control?” Molly asked.

“I am. Mm’lau does what I tell her to do, although she’s certainly vocal about her opinions,” Harry explained with a smile. “That’s about it for the side effects.” He paused. “Then there’s the bit about mating, but perhaps Abelard should explain that,” he added, his neck beginning to flush with colour.

Abelard cleared his throat, reached for his teacup and drained it. “Snow Dragons mate for life, and their relationships are far more durable than Wizardkind on that front. The only occasion for taking a new mate is the death of their first mate, and even that is rare. I have reason to believe that this trait transfers with the Pyr’g.” Abelard looked from Molly to Ginny and then poured another cup of tea, draining it in two long draws. “So Mrs. and Miss Weasley, are there any objections to installing the guardians?”

Ginny sat silently for a long while. “I - don’t – ever - want to be controlled by Tom again,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “I’d rather die first.”

Abelard turned to Molly. “Your thoughts, Molly?”

“I have discussed it with Arthur. We are reluctant, but I think it’s for the best,” she said, wiping her forehead with her napkin.

“Jasmine, could you fetch my spare Pensieve from the study?”

Jasmine stood, shaking her head briefly to get her braid situated, and then Disapparated.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Harry said, his voice cracking slightly.

“Why is that, Harry?” Abelard asked, using his academic tone. Lupin stared at Harry.

“A Pyr’g needs to be made from the magic of the host, otherwise there are *problems*. My Pyr’g is

made from my magic,” Harry said flatly.

“What sort of problems, Harry?” Molly asked nervously.

“Best case would be that there would be a clash between the magic of the Pyr’g and the person, the host. The Pyr’g would attempt to dominate the host,” Harry explained.

“And the worst case?” Molly asked.

“If the magic is incompatible, it could be fatal,” Harry said. *And I couldn’t live with that on my conscience.*

“How do you know, Harry?” Molly asked.

“Mm’lau,” he answered.

The adults at the table were silent. Ginny put her hands on her forehead and closed her eyes.

Jasmine returned, carrying a grey stoneware bowl.

“Where did you get this Pyr’g, Harry?” Remus asked.

“I told you before. When I was visiting the Snow Dragons, Mm’lau, the real one, not the one that lives in my head, made it, or summoned it, I’m not quite certain. She said it was for a *friend*, and that I’d know when I’d need it,” Harry said, glancing at Jasmine.

Jasmine raised one eyebrow lightly, but was otherwise silent and inexpressive.

Remus turned to Jasmine. “Have you any bright white parchment to spare? I’ll need two sheets.”

“Are you thinking of casting the signatures, Remus?” Jasmine asked.

“Yes, actually. It’s been ages since I’ve done it,” Remus replied, but Jasmine was no longer there – she’d Disapparated. “Ginny, can you take the bracelet off?”

“I can, but I’d rather not,” she replied peevishly.

“You’re not at risk, not right now,” Harry said, fiddling with his cup of tea.

“Why not?” Ginny asked, locking onto his eyes with her own.

“First, you’re awake. The Dream Hounds would have a difficult time finding you, and second because they wouldn’t dare come into this house, much less this room,” Harry replied.

“Why is that?”

“Because I’m here. To a Dream Hound I smell like a dragon,” Harry said, his lips breaking into a gentle smile.

“Well, this will be the first time that I’m glad that boys smell,” Ginny replied with an impish grin.

“Hey, some of us work hard to smell this good,” Harry rejoined, glad that the tension had abated a bit.

Ginny wiggled the ivory bracelet off of her wrist. It was a snug fit, but at last it came off. She handed the carved stone to Harry, who marvelled that it was cool to the touch. He expected it to carry Ginny’s warmth, but then again, dragon magic was rarely predictable. Harry handed the carving to Remus.

Jasmine was back in the room, slipping some brilliant white parchment onto the table next to Remus – whether she walked in or Apparated, Harry couldn’t recollect. Remus took a sheet of paper and began to draw on it with the tip of his wand. The pattern didn’t resemble any letters that Harry was familiar with; instead, it appeared as if he was drawing brush strokes or writing Chinese pictograms. The fact that he was drawing without ink or paint, merely tracing the forms on the brilliant white parchment, made it all the more difficult to follow.

Finally after tracing several more characters, Remus was finished. He took a sip from his tumbler and then picked up the carved ivory ring, smacking it down, hard, upon the parchment. Light flashed. Remus gave a crooked smile. “I’m sorry, I should have warned you to look away.”

Harry blinked. There were still spots of light clouding his vision.

The parchment had a ring shaped dent in the middle of the sheet, surrounded by a pattern of coloured lines that radiated out from the ring. Tracing his finger across the lines, Remus started at one particular scarlet line, tracing with his finger to another, brilliant blue line. “That’s the signature, there, it repeats itself thereafter.”

Remus took another sheet of parchment and traced patterns upon it with the tip of his wand. After repeated strokes, he stopped, looking up at Ginny. “Do you have your wand?”

Ginny moved to her sleeve, brandishing her wand with a flourish. “I never leave home without it. What am I doing to this paper, Remus?”

“Cast the revealing charm on it.”

“Will there be a flash?”

“Only after the charm has done its job.”

Ginny flicked her wand at the parchment, intoning “*Aparecium* .”

The characters that Remus had traced upon the paper began to appear and then fade away in the sequence in which they had been traced. As the last character faded, the sheet of parchment glowed briefly and then flicked out with a brilliant flash. Harry had the presence of mind to look away this time. When he opened his eyes he saw a similar circular pattern of coloured lines, this time arrayed from a single point in the centre of the parchment. Remus placed the two parchments

side by side, tracing the line sequences with the index fingers of either hand. He took a deep breath and then covered his eyes with his hands. “Hellfire and damnation . . .” he muttered. He placed his hands flat on the table, looking round to the adults and then to Ginny and Harry. “They don’t match.”

~+~

There was a long stretch of silence. Abelard refilled his cup again. “Harry, think back to our first lesson here. What has your uncle done wrong?”

Harry’s mind blurred as he searched his memories. He smiled – he had the answer. *The magic is in the witch, not the wand.* He reached past Remus to pick up the remaining sheet of parchment, tracing the figures he’d seen just moments before with the edge of his thumb, pausing momentarily for the last two characters. As he finished, he noticed Remus letting out his breath. He held the parchment between finger and thumb, walking to the end of the table, furthest away from Ginny. “Ginny, wandlessly summon the parchment, if you please.”

Ginny closed her eyes and opened them slowly. She faced Harry and the parchment, held out her hand and said, with a smirk on her lips, “*Accio parchment .*” The parchment zipped the length of the table and landed in her grasp. There was a brief flash of light and the parchment fell to the tabletop, now imprinted with the outline of Ginny’s hand surrounded by a corona of coloured lines.

Remus brought the parchment alongside the first parchment, inspecting the patterns of coloured lines. He took a deep breath and then smiled. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have a match.”

Harry brushed his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Oh my,” he said, eyes opened wide. He looked for a chair and sat down, letting the significance of the match sink in. Mm’lau had seen Ginny with enough detail to match her wandless magic when she’d created the Pyr’g. Abelard believed that the Snow Dragons were never wrong in their visions of the future. He couldn’t deal with that, not today. If Mm’lau were right, it wouldn’t be so bad, but enough things in his life were already driven by Prophecy that he wasn’t willing to surrender one more piece of his life to a vision, no matter how much he might like the outcome.

The adults and Ginny filed out of the dining room, through the kitchen and out into the garden. Harry stayed put in his chair. “Are you coming, Harry?” Jasmine asked as she entered the room.

Harry looked up.

“You checked out for a few minutes there. We’re reconvening in the garden. Abelard wants you to harvest Ginny’s memories; he says you need the practice.” Jasmine stopped, looking carefully at Harry. “No one else knows, Harry, just you, me and Abelard.”

“Knows what?” he asked, still slightly dazed.

“That the Pyr'g was built for your *krulach* , not for your friend.” She crouched down, putting her

eyes level with his. “Visions are not Prophecies. You – Abelard – those dragons – you all can only see *possible* futures in a vision, not certainties. Your life is still your own. You don’t have to figure it all out today. Be here and now, Harry. Meet today’s challenges; the rest of it will fall in place when it needs to.” She patted his hand and stood up, walking back into the kitchen.

“Jasmine?” Harry called.

She looked back over her shoulder. *Damn, she’s pretty when she does that.*

“Thanks, I needed to hear that just now.”

Jasmine smiled, winked and walked out into the garden, saying, “That’s what friends are for, Harry.”

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Abelard, Molly and Ginny assembled in the shade in the garden. Remus, Mrs. Paprikash and Jasmine were missing, presumably doing other, more pressing tasks. A ceramic bowl was sitting on the table next to Ginny, a glowing, milky fluid filling it half full.

“Are you up for this, lad?” Abelard asked.

“I reckon so,” Harry replied. He turned to Ginny, sitting down on the ground before her, looking up slightly to look into her eyes. “We’re going to harvest three memories today and turn them into guardians to join your Pyr’g. When we take these memories, you’ll still have them in here,” Harry said, touching his temple. “But we’ll also have a copy in here,” he said, touching the rim of the ceramic Pensieve. You need to bring a specific memory to mind, and while you’re holding that, I’ll pull the thought and pop it into this bowl. We’re going to copy your memory of Fawkes the Phoenix, the orb-weaver spider that lives next to the kitchen door outside the Burrow, and the house bats.”

“This will keep me safe?” Ginny asked incredulously.

“You’ll be surprised – I know I was,” he answered wryly.

“Let’s do it then,” Ginny said, squirming in her chair.

“Relax now, this part doesn’t hurt a bit.”

Ginny stiffened. “What part hurts then?”

“We’re two steps removed from that part,” Harry said quietly. “I lived – you will too.”

“You’ve such a bedside manner, Healer Potter,” Ginny teased.

“I learned from the best,” Harry said, pushing his eyebrows together while he hunched his shoulders and put on his best Snape expression.

Ginny pushed him gently. “Stop it, I’m going to embarrass myself if I start laughing again.”

Harry gave her a wink. Ginny took a deep breath, smoothing her dress with her palms. “I’m ready now,” she said.

“Let’s start with Fawkes, always a happy memory for me,” he said.

“Really?” Ginny asked with a hint of surprise.

“Really,” he answered. He couldn’t read her expression, but she sat a little straighter.

“Think of Fawkes, singing and flying. Think of him on burning day; think of when he was running errands for Dumbledore the night your father went to St. Mungo’s. Got all that?”

Ginny nodded, biting her lower lip in concentration.

“Good. *Fiat Memoriam*,” he said, tracing the tip of his wand against Ginny’s temple. He drew the wand away, and a thread of shimmering pearly goo came with it. He delicately lowered the thread into the Pensieve, which began to swirl slowly with the added memory.

“Next the orb spiders.”

“Those are the big brown and tan ones that spin such huge webs?”

“The same.”

“Ron wouldn’t like this.”

“We don’t have to tell him, do we?”

“No. Okay, I’ve got it.”

“*Fiat Memoriam*,” Harry intoned, pulling another glistening thread from her head. Ginny licked her lower lip where she’d been biting it. Harry almost dropped the strand, but recovered without looking too much like a hormonally addled prat. He was glad that Uncle Moony, or worse yet, Jasmine wasn’t watching. “Now the bats.”

“Okay, bats flying at dusk coming right up. I’ve got it,” Ginny said quietly.

“*Fiat Memoriam*,” Harry intoned, pulling a short thread from Ginny’s temple. This thread plopped into the Pensieve. He could now see three competing patterns swirling in the bowl; it was almost hypnotic.

Without saying anything, Abelard measured a bit of powder into his hand and leaned over the bowl. He tilted his hand, letting the powder fall in. Harry carefully picked the swirling bowl up and carried it to a pavement block in an open area of the garden. “Look aside, this is going to be bright,” he said. “*Incendio*.”

He pointed his wand at the Pensieve, looking away after he had done so. The fireball whooshed straight up, burning brightly for several seconds. Harry tried to remember the spell for fire quenching charms, but drew a blank. A moment later the fireball had consumed itself, the Pensieve and half of the pavement block. Jasmine came in from the kitchen, carrying a slotted spoon and a pitcher of water. Harry squatted down next to the still radiant pile of ashes and began to scoop solids into the pitcher. The pitcher spat and sizzled as the extremely hot clinkers hit the water. Without looking at himself, he knew he was covered in grit. When he was finished with the ashes he looked up at Jasmine. “Could you *Scourgify* me, please? I’ve never used it on myself before and don’t fancy blasting my clothes off in mixed company.”

“Pity that,” she replied with a wink. “*Scourgify*,” she intoned as she pointed her delicate wand at his head with a flicking motion.

Harry felt as if he’d been blasted by a tidal wave, but when that feeling passed, he was clean, dry and ready to proceed.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen that charm used on a person,” Ginny observed as she slipped out of her sandals and tucked her feet under her, looking particularly feline as she curled up in the garden chair.

“There’s a reason it’s not often used on people, it’s a little . . .” Harry paused.

“Bracing?” Jasmine suggested.

“I was thinking a bit more along the lines of *overwhelming*, but bracing will do in a pinch,” he said, fishing around in the pitcher with his spoon. With some effort he pulled several bits of solid material from the bottom of the murky pitcher, laying them carefully out on the grass.

“You going to need some more water, Harry?” Jasmine asked helpfully.

“Yeah, I will. I ‘m not keen on sticking my hand in this pitcher; it’s still quite hot.”

“All right then,” she said as she turned and walked back to the villa. Harry tried hard not to watch her backside as she receded into the background. Holding the back of his hand over the solid bits he’d plucked from the pitcher, he searched for the pieces that were not hot. Finding three, he began to wipe the muck from them, revealing the shapes of a bat, a bird and a spider. Jasmine returned quickly, fresh pitcher in tow. Harry nodded to her as he took the pitcher, pouring water into his palm over the jewel carvings. The spider looked as if it has been carved out of tiger-eye, glinting yellow, brown and gold in the morning sun. The bat resembled obsidian, while the phoenix was garnet the colour of fresh blood. Shaking the excess water from them, he handed them one at a time to Ginny.

“Harry,” she gasped, “they’re gorgeous – look at these, Mum, have you ever seen anything as delicate and beautiful as these things? I can see the expression on Fawkes’ face!”

Molly left her chair and kneeled beside her daughter, oohing and aahing appropriately. “What are

they made of, Abelard?"

"Nothing but your daughter's magic, Molly. They appear to be as delicate as spun glass, but I assure you that they are close to indestructible." Abelard gripped the arms of his chair, looking as if he were about to rise, but turned his gaze on Ginny instead. "How are you feeling, lass?"

"Just corking, sir. The next bit is the part that hurts, isn't it?" Ginny asked, looking from Abelard to Harry. Molly put her hand on Ginny's knee while Ginny crossed her arms, looking defiant. "I won't break, I assure you. If Harry could do it, I'm certain that I can – he's only a boy, after all," she said, shooting her mother a proud look.

"Yeah," Harry said, scooting his chair closer to Ginny's chair. "This part hurts, but it's over quickly enough."

"Let's do it then," she said, shifting her feet out from under her, lips pressed together.

"This is where the wandless magic comes in – you're going to make a ring. We're going to use that ring to capture the big and little Pyr'gs, and then you're going to pull all of that magic back into you. That's the bit that hurts – it generates a tremendous lot of heat too. I'll be guiding you through the process, and Jasmine will be standing by in case things get out of hand."

Ginny screwed up her face. "What's to get out of hand?"

Jasmine kneeled down next to Ginny in the spot recently occupied by Molly. "The heat, Ginny – if it gets too high it can pose a risk, but I doubt that I'll need to do a thing. You seem adept at wandless magic, better than Harry – more control," Jasmine said, winking at Harry.

"Ready now?" Harry asked. Ginny nodded in reply. "Let's go. When you were doing the whistle charm, we squeezed your middle to direct your *chi* for the charm. That's where your magic is, and that's where you need to focus your attention. Now close your eyes – calm yourself and think of your middle, where all the magic flows. Think of a ring – a simple circle. Got that? Okay, now, push that ring up from your middle, into your chest, out your arm and into your hand – push from your diaphragm. Great job, Ginny, now open your eyes," Harry said, a grin fixed on his face.

Ginny's right hand was open, palm to the sky. Floating half an inch above her palm was a delicate platinum circle. Ginny looked at the circle and then up at Harry, a matching grin on her face. Harry restrained her left hand as she moved to touch the ring.

"This is a look-but-don't-touch operation," Harry explained. "Command the ring to become larger."

Ginny raised an eyebrow at Harry and then looked back at the platinum band. "Larger," she barked. The band expanded to the size of a very small saucer. Ginny looked up to Harry, who pantomimed a circle the size of a dinner plate. "Larger," she commanded again. The circle expanded to plate size, all the while floating above her palm.

“Command it to sit up,” Harry explained, moving his hand from horizontal to vertical.

Ginny did so, marvelling when the band shifted in space. Abelard held the ivory-coloured Pyr’g out to Harry, who floated it from Abelard’s palm into the space within the platinum circle where it hung gently in the air. Harry floated the remaining, smaller Pyr’gs into the circle and then used his wand to start the circle spinning clockwise, faster and faster until it was a shimmering platinum sphere. Leaning closer to Ginny he nodded at Jasmine. “Now, command the sphere to contract, to become smaller.”

“Smaller,” Ginny intoned, watching with wonder as the spinning sphere shrank to the size of a Snitch. Sweat was beading up on Ginny’s brow. Jasmine filled a cup with water and held it to her lips. She gratefully drained the cup while glaring at the sphere.

“Now pull the magic back into your hand, pulling it down into the centre of your magic,” Harry directed in a whisper.

Ginny bit her lower lip as she concentrated on the shimmering ball. She winced when it touched her palm, whimpering softly.

“Steady now, you can do this, Ginny,” Harry encouraged.

The ball sank into Ginny’s palm and when it was halfway into her hand it stopped. “Ach! Harry, it hurts!” Ginny gasped, the fingers of her right hand curling slightly while her left hand made a fist. Harry laid his hand on top of her left hand, recoiling slightly as he felt a wave of pain enter into his arm.

Harry felt Mm’lau’s presence before he heard her. “Don’t let go now, lower your guard and take her pain. The dark mark is fighting her,” his Pyr’g explained, her voice like a soothing cool breeze.

Harry relaxed inside, letting the pain flow into him, at first a trickle, then a stream, and finally torrents of pain. He could feel it swirl within him, but oddly enough each wave of pain faded away until the flow of pain entering ebbed and stopped. A wave of sadness passed. Looking up at Ginny he saw that her eyes were half closed now, leaving a bit of the whites of her eyes showing. Harry felt something lurch within him. She was still biting her lip in concentration. The sphere wobbled briefly and then began to disappear into her palm. Within a moment it disappeared completely.

“Bring it down your arm and into your centre,” Harry whispered. Ginny nodded in reply. She stiffened as if she had swallowed a particularly hot bite of food, and then relaxed. She closed her eyes, balling both hands into fists and then relaxing them. Opening her eyes, she fixed her gaze on Harry.

“You took my pain,” she said, a statement, not a question.

Harry nodded. “The mark was fighting you.”

No one spoke for a moment until Abelard broke the silence. “Jasmine, please cast a revealing charm upon her palm.” Jasmine did so. Nothing changed on Ginny’s palm. “It seems, Molly, that your daughter has lost her dark mark,” he commented, as if noticing that she had changed her earrings or something else of little to no consequence.

Harry cast his own revealing charm on her palm. It flickered briefly with a pale blue light, but likewise showed nothing but the lines that she’d been born with.

Jasmine moved from Ginny to Abelard, helping him rise from his chair. “Let’s get back into the house. Watching you two work has made me hungry,” he said with a mischievous smile. Abelard extended an arm to Molly, who took it regally as she walked with him back to the villa. Jasmine poured two more tumblers of water and wordlessly handed them to the young witch and wizard. Giving Harry a wink, she turned on her heel and headed after her principal.

“Help me up, Harry?” Ginny asked with a crooked smile.

Harry pushed himself off of his chair and then extended a hand to his friend. She was a bit wobbly as she stood, so he put a hand on either shoulder. Ginny leaned forward into him, resting her cheek on his shoulder, reaching around him to press her palms into the small of his back. Harry stiffened at first and then relaxed, enjoying the warmth, the touch, and the smell of the wonderful small person before him. He moved his hands down her back until they were resting on her waist. “If we had music we could dance,” he murmured.

Ginny murmured something unintelligible in reply.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that,” he said.

Lifting her head slightly, Ginny said, “I said, ‘shut up, I’m too tired to dance,’” and then returned her cheek to his shoulder. She stood motionless for a moment before she gave him a squeeze. “People are going to talk if we don’t come in for lunch.”

Harry reluctantly released her, turned and offered her his arm. Ginny gratefully took his offer, as she was a bit wobbly on her feet. They walked a less than direct path to the back door. “A bit faster, please. I’m not an invalid, and I’d like to get there before lunch is over with,” Ginny carped.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry replied sassily. “Anything else?”

“This will do for a start,” she replied cryptically.

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Lunch was the usual sumptuous fare at Abelard’s house. Fresh bread, fruit, salad, a cold soup and a meat and noodle dish that smelled of garlic, ginger and cilantro. The adults were carrying on an innocuous conversation on gardening, which Harry mercifully tuned out. He’d pay attention to Herbology in September when it became relevant again. He ate in silence, oddly exhausted from

the morning's events. Midway through lunch, Remus joined them, whispering something into Molly's ear before he sat down. Harry caught Ginny's eye, mouthing the word "mushroom." Ginny laughed into her napkin.

Ginny picked at her food at first, but as she ate she discovered her appetite and went for seconds on everything but the soup. Looking up as she finished her last bit of bread and fruit she spoke to Jasmine, "Blimey, you pack in the food faster than my brother does – where do you put it all?"

Jasmine smiled, wiped her mouth with her napkin and drained her water glass. "Extremely high metabolism – one of the nicer side effects of my state in life," she said wryly.

"What's the down side?" Ginny asked.

"Nothing I'm going to discuss over lunch," Jasmine replied, looking furtively at Abelard, then at Harry. She looked at Ginny for a moment. "Might I have a word with you, privately, before you go?" she whispered.

"Certainly," Ginny replied. "When are we going?"

"After lunch, I believe. I've still got a full syllabus to cover with your chum this afternoon," nodding in Harry's direction. "How about now?"

Ginny nodded and the pair stood. "Excuse us please," Jasmine said to Abelard. "I'll have her back before coffee is done." He nodded and smiled.

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Jasmine led Ginny into Abelard's parlour. His family members never spent time there; that was where Abelard did business with clients and would-be clients, people he didn't want to invite into the more intimate living areas of the house. The room was filled with formal furniture; artwork and sculpture adorned the walls. All of the artwork came into the house as gifts or payments from past clients; most of it deserved to be in museums, or had in fact been in museums before coming to Abelard's villa. Jasmine charmed the door and activated a fountain. Sweeping the room with her eyes, she turned to Ginny.

"We can't be overheard here. I don't have much time, so I'll get to the point and ruin mum's image of me as a perfect lady. I know how Harry feels about you. I need to know your intentions towards him," she said, softly in a matter of fact tone.

"Isn't that the question that Dad is supposed to ask Harry?" Ginny replied flippantly.

"Don't toy with me girl; answer my question," Jasmine hissed.

Ginny's bantering demeanour vanished. "My intentions . . . ?"

"Yes, your intentions – not what is, but what you wish to be."

“Harry and I are - friends. I’d like us to be much more than that, but – he’s a hard person to get close to. He’s like a dog that lets his family near him and growls at the rest of the world. Ron, my brother, and Hermione are his family and the rest of us are – somewhere else,” Ginny replied in a weary tone.

“If he lets you in, do you intend to get close to him, emotionally and physically?” she asked, gazing at Ginny without blinking.

“Yes,” Ginny whispered in a barely audible tone.

Jasmine reached out towards Ginny, bringing her hand up to Ginny’s face, stopping just before she touched her cheek. “I shan’t make that mistake again,” she said, shaking her head. “I’ll take your word for it,” she said, turning away.

“What are you going on about? What gives you the right to ask these questions? You said that Harry was simply your friend. Did you tell me the truth?” Ginny spat out questions rapid-fire.

“Harry is - my master’s student. If my master dies while I am pledged to him, Harry becomes my new master. Accordingly I have a professional interest in what happens to Harry, quite apart from what I feel about him personally. Personally, I’m jealous of you, of your opportunity to get closer to him. I can’t do that, not while I’m pledged. If things were different, I’d want to get close to him as badly as you want to. He’s really an exceptional person.”

“Why did you try to touch me and then stop?” Ginny asked.

“The strongest form of my Legilimency requires touch; your dragon would see that as an attack and would defend you. The last time I tried something like that, Harry’s pet dragon scorched my hand,” Jasmine replied as if explaining a mundane fact.

“Scorched you? Like with flames?” Ginny asked incredulously.

“I had a rather nasty blister within a minute or so – it might be all in Harry’s head, but it was quite real to me.”

“And I can do that too?” Ginny wondered.

“The basic equipment is the same, even if the *packaging* is a bit different,” Jasmine replied with a smile. “You’re not ready,” she said, changing the subject. She wasn’t smiling any more. “You need to be harder, stronger, faster. Being close to Harry Potter is a very dangerous proposition.”

“Harry would never hurt me,” Ginny protested.

“I never said that he would, but he draws danger the way spilled treacle draws ants. You’ve got to be prepared for that. Until your wandless magic is up to snuff, you’ve got to carry your wand at all times. It’s always good practice to have a knife for backup. Your earrings are fetching, but they could be used as weapons against you; I’ll give you a few of mine – they have breakaway bits built into them. Your knickers are okay, but your brassiere would get you injured in any number

of fights. If you're planning on getting close to Harry and staying there, then you've got to be prepared for violence raining down on you without warning." Jasmine stood, staring at Ginny for a moment. *I'm going to ask Abelard if I can start training you this summer, and I don't know what I'm going to do if he says no*, Jasmine thought to herself.

She nodded, as if concluding some inner discussion. "Come with me. I have things to send home with you." Turning in a sudden flurry of motion, she cancelled the charm on the door and with a backhanded motion as she cleared the door, she turned off the fountain. A moment later, Ginny followed, trying to catch up with her as she strode down the hallway.

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"Mrs. Paprikash, could I trouble you for some tea?" Abelard asked pleasantly.

Mrs. Paprikash glared at him briefly, then nodded to Molly as the two witches exited to the kitchen to prepare the requested beverage and continue their conversation, uninterrupted.

"I take it that the Pyr'g quartet was installed without problem?" Remus asked, looking first at Abelard, then Harry."

"They're installed," Harry temporised, "but we had a snag when they were going in. It was a bit painful for Ginny." Harry pulled an unhappy face.

"But you took her pain successfully?" Abelard asked.

Harry startled. "Yeah, how did you know?" he asked.

"It's an old dragon trick. I saw Mm'lau do it twice when I was living among the dragons. They call it *fa'czhng*, which means 'eating pain,'" Abelard explained.

"It's a healing technique then?" Remus asked.

"No, it's more or less just a matter of pain relief. Their healing charms are much the same as ours, but this technique is uniquely their own. It was an odd feeling; having Mm'lau make contact with my mind and then feeling the pain drain away. What was it like on the other end of the equation, eh, Harry?" Abelard asked in a chipper fashion.

"Odd," Harry replied. "It's painful, but it's not my pain, so it's not debilitating. I felt sad, sad for Ginny that she was suffering."

"So, how do you feel now?" Abelard inquired.

"I dunno, in what way?" Harry said with a shrug of his shoulders and a spreading motion of his hands.

"Do you feel weak or strong? Tired, fresh? How do you feel, lad?"

Harry thought for a moment. “I feel strong, rested. Probably better than I felt after breakfast, which is when I feel best during the day. Why do you ask?”

“I’d always wanted to do research on this magic, but never had the brass to propose studying it whilst living with the dragons. I suppose there’s no time for it this summer either. Pity that, life is short and the art is long,” Abelard complained.

The tea arrived.

“Abelard,” Molly began in sweet tones normally reserved for family, “have you a notion why the dark mark disappeared on Ginny’s palm?”

“I can, at best, offer speculation,” Abelard began.

“Many clever men pay thousands of Galleons for your speculating,” Molly interrupted.

“Men with too much money to begin with,” Abelard replied. “The dark mark was a sign of desecration – an artefact of Ginevra’s unwilling possession by Tom Riddle. She was not made for dark magic. When something is desecrated, there are two paths that can be pursued: the object can be destroyed, or it can be used for its intended purpose again. Installing the Pyr’g was a powerful act of light magic, especially when performed with the correct motivation. For the precise details, I suggest that you will have to wait until I have the opportunity to ask our Creator that question.”

“Hopefully not anytime soon,” Molly replied with a smile as she brought her teacup to her lips.

“Not soon enough,” Abelard replied.

“Don’t be so dour,” Molly chided, “if you’d been more chipper I would have said ‘yes’ instead of ‘no.’”

“Molly,” Abelard rejoined, his voice beginning to flare, “you know full well that my *demeanour* had nothing to do with that – that decision.” Abelard glared at Molly, drumming the table lightly with his fingertips.

“As much I would love to stay and watch you two bicker, the Ottery St. Catchpole group needs to be going,” Remus said as he stood, looking at a weathered wristwatch. Jasmine opened the door, ushering in a watchful Ginny, laden with a small canvas tote bag

Abelard stood as well, tugging his waistcoat into position. “Molly, my home is a sanctuary. You and yours are welcome here, any time, day or night,” he said, looking to Jasmine, who nodded serenely. “Don’t wait so long to see me again,” he said, looking first at Molly then at Ginny. “Jasmine, please escort our guests to the meadow and call the Portal.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, looking as if she had more to say.

Mrs. Paprikash followed the group out the door after Abelard made a point of shaking everyone’s

hand. Molly shook his hand and then quickly kissed him on the cheek before turning to leave. "Again, thank you, Abelard," she said.

Harry waved to Ginny and nodded at Remus at their departure, standing behind his chair at the dining table. Abelard returned after a while, noting that Harry had not moved.

"You look troubled, lad," he began.

"Confused and bewildered," Harry replied.

"Her mother evoked many of the same feelings in me, lad. Still does," Abelard said with a laugh.

"So it doesn't get any better?" Harry asked.

"Depending upon what 'it' is, I assure you that it does get better. If you're talking about your friendship with young Ginevra, it will have its ups and downs. But when you are at the end of your life, looking back, you will find that you are far richer for having made the effort to connect with your friends rather than hiding from them."

Jasmine opened the door, looked at the two wizards and then quietly closed the door again, sealing it from the outside.

"So, what is troubling you, young friend?" Abelard asked, pouring another cup of tea.

"It's my birthday tomorrow," Harry answered flatly.

"So it is. I wish you Happy Birthday in advance. Now then, what is truly bothering you? I haven't seen you this distracted since the day Jasmine broke your nose."

"You knew about that?" Harry asked with a smirk.

"I am merely old. I am not blind, lad."

"My friends will be there – all of them," Harry began.

"That is the notion – one usually tries to reserve a different venue for one's enemies," Abelard quipped drolly.

"I'm thinking of letting them know about the prophecy," he said in a monotone.

"Towards what end?"

"I'm tired of the secrets. If they want to steer clear of me, I want to give them a chance."

"So you're hoping to scare all of your friends away," Abelard asked, looking over the rim of his glasses.

“Yes – no – I don’t know what I want to happen, I just am *so tired* of the secrets. I want them to know the truth,” he said in a bone-weary voice.

“Are you planning on doing this before or after you give your guests their gifts?”

“How did you know about that?”

“I figured there must be a reason for all the shopping you’ve done in the past few weeks. Jasmine talks to the Aurors and the others from the Order who are doing your security.”

“After, I guess.”

“You’ve discussed this with Dumbledore?” Harry nodded in reply. “Do you have all the gifts?”

“All but Mrs. Weasley’s – I couldn’t think of anything that would really express how I feel about her and her family.”

Abelard looked down at the table, pulling on his beard for a while. He summoned a box from the kitchen, pulling out a sheet of ivory coloured parchment out, folding it and folding it again. Pulling a fountain pen from his waistcoat pocket, he scrawled something in his unique hand, passing it across the table for Harry’s inspection.

“Is this true?” Harry asked.

Abelard nodded.

“I can’t think of anything that would make her happier,” Harry replied.

“Well, now that we have that preliminary matter dealt with, how about you tell me what’s really bothering you, lad.”

“I’m thinking about asking Ginny’s parents about getting to know her better.”

Abelard said nothing for a while, stroking his beard. He fiddled with his now empty teacup, looking up at Harry. “They will perceive that as initiating courtship. Is that what you intend?”

“I - I don’t know. Dumbledore said that I should ask you about ‘*Potentis Amicae*’.”

“A truly useful charm – however it’s not much called for these days.”

“What *is* it? Dumbledore said I should ask you about it, said something to the effect that it could help me out in my situation,” Harry said, his eyes beginning to flash.

Abelard smirked, then began to chuckle. He tried to compose himself, but he continued chuckling. “I suppose that I am struck by the irony of the Wizarding world’s most eligible bachelor getting lonely heart advice from two men who have never married. *Potentis Amicae* is a ***courting*** charm,” he said, reaching for another biscuit.

“It’s supposed to make me irresistible or something?” Harry asked in annoyance.

“Actually, just the opposite, lad,” Abelard said, gripping the table with one hand while he slapped his thigh with the other. His chuckling gave way to another round of laughter. Taking a deep breath, he finally composed himself. “In a much earlier time, courtship was expected to be a rather quick affair. A gentle wizard would let his intentions be made known, much as you are planning on doing, and a lady witch would either accept or reject his attention. This worked rather well when the witch and wizard knew each other well, say if they’d grown up in a small village together, but not so well when they were comparative strangers, which was often the case with arranged courtship. If the courtship dragged on too long, certain assumptions were made about the behaviour of the couple, and the witch was regarded as *damaged goods*, which certainly would put a damper on subsequent suitors if the courtship didn’t work out.” Abelard swirled his teacup, draining it with a sigh. “A most unfortunate time to be a witch, but even now our society has a double standard in place. *Potentis Amicae* is, or was, a solution to this perceived problem. It is a charm placed upon the wizard. Simply put, he is unable to initiate certain *behaviours* until such time as he could make clear to the witch his true feelings for her. The charm was placed either by the witch’s parents, usually the father, or by the wizard’s mother, although a father or guardian would do when circumstances would warrant. It would take a certain pressure off of the wizard, and guard the reputation of the witch. It was, for a time, a very fashionable part of Wizarding courtship. I remember the courting cloaks from my childhood. A witch who were being courted by a wizard under the *Potentis Amicae* charm would customarily receive a lovely black wool cloak, which she would wear as a badge of honour, indicating that she was courting, and the honourable circumstances of that courtship.”

“I’m sorry Abelard, you lost me,” Harry said with annoyance barely under control. “What behaviours are we talking about?”

“Kissing.”

“Kissing?”

“You could be kissed, but you could not initiate a kiss - at least with your intended – until such time as you make plain your feelings.”

Harry opened his mouth only to shut it again as he searched for words. “But I’m rubbish at talking about feelings – half the time I don’t even *know* what I’m feeling,” he complained.

“You are not like other young men, Harry. You will mate for life, whether you like it or not. You must be very cautious about getting emotionally involved with any woman. You will only bond once. You must be cautious,” Abelard warned.

“What do you mean? I thought that meant that if I got married, I’d stay married,” Harry sputtered.

“That is a true statement as far as it goes, but dragons don’t marry as we do. In the early stages of their courtship, they will flirt amongst themselves, but after a time of that the male will sort

things out and mark a particular female. The marking is their betrothal, recognised by all. The mating as we think of it comes later.”

“So how does that affect me?”

“I don’t know. We’re not sure, Harry. Dumbledore and I have had extensive correspondence on this point. No one has ever done this mixture of interspecies magic before. We knew that the Pyr’g would keep you safe from Voldemort. I had assumed, apparently incorrectly, that you were a few years away from needing to worry about the effects of a dragon Pyr’g on courtship, although I did point out the issue, to him and to you. It’s singularly odd that the young lady you are interested in is similarly situated, eh what?”

“So this bonding thing – how will I know what will trigger it? Holding hands? Kissing? Proposing? Something more?” Harry asked with a bit of a growl.

“Simply put - we’re not sure, Harry. Holding hands, probably not. Dragons mark by biting; so kissing, given the oral nature of marking, maybe, maybe not. Sometimes ‘I don’t know’ means just that. I’m sorry. I think you’ll agree that the benefits outweigh the damage here. You have to be alive to court.” Abelard gestured at the door, causing it to unseal and open in a slow swing. “So, having dropped more on your shoulders than you were ever meant to bear in one day, would you rather work on sparring or on advanced Apparation this afternoon?”

“I don’t think I’d be very fair to Jasmine sparring with her in my present frame of mind,” Harry said quietly.

“As you wish,” Abelard said, rising from the table. He called for Jasmine.

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Harry’s guards were up higher than Jasmine had ever felt them before. *He must be upset about something.* She could tell that he was distracted by his own thoughts, but she couldn’t sense anything other than the Occlumency shield that covered his mind. They performed timed drills, Apparating and Disapparating according to pre-determined co-ordinates. Next they did similar drills, with Harry attempting to carry larger and larger weights with him as he Disapparated. He got as high at 1,000 pounds of additional weight, but couldn’t do that consistently. Half that amount he could consistently carry with him without regard to distance or refresh times between Disapparations.

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“Harry, take five. You’re doing brilliantly on this exercise, by the way,” Jasmine said, moving into the shade.

Harry panted for a while, nodding when Jasmine handed him a tumbler of iced water. “Thanks.”

“Harry, look at me. Lower your Occlumency shields, tell your dragon to stand down and then tell

me what the hell you are so angry about,” Jasmine commanded in her best take-charge voice.

Harry stared at her in silence for a while. Part of him wanted to tell her to bugger off, but one did not say such things lightly to this particular witch. “I’m mad at Abelard, I’m mad at Dumbledore,” he said counting off fingers on one hand. “I’m probably equally mad at myself because I can’t figure out what’s going on.”

“So what did the old men do to make you so mad?” Jasmine asked quietly.

“Giving me advice on my so-called love life,” Harry said with exasperation, running his fingers through his sweat soaked hair. “Dumbledore wants me to take you – uh – as a mistress. Abelard wants me to become a eunuch if I start seeing more of Ginny,” Harry looked down at the ground, red flushing up the back of his neck. “It’s not fair – Dumbledore thinks that you’re some sort of disposable tart and Abelard thinks that Ginny’s reputation will be perpetually soiled if I kiss her,” Harry growled.

“So, I’m not suitable mistress material? Pity, all that time wasted in passing my class in Courtesan Studies. Don’t you find me attractive, Harry?” Jasmine purred in a husky tone

“Don’t look at me like that – I can’t think straight when you do that!” Harry shouted.

“Do what?”

“Give me *the look* – the one that makes water boil. Merlin, Jasmine! You are the hottest woman I know – and the scariest. You’re also my friend. I like you – I like you a lot, but – but for yes to mean yes, you have to be able to say no.” Harry paused to swallow. “And if I were your boss, you couldn’t – say no I mean.”

“And that’s a problem for taking me as a mistress?” she said quietly.

“It’s a problem for me. Look, I’m rubbish at talking about feelings and I botched up my first boy-girl relationship, but even I know that it’s wrong to use people, and that’s what Dumbledore was getting at.”

“Was he? Maybe he was testing you,” Jasmine suggested.

“Maybe so, but it still rubs me the wrong way – I mean, you’re a nice girl.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Jasmine said sweetly. “You don’t find nice girls attractive? Is Ginny a nice girl?” Jasmine asked in a voice that sounded like perfume on a moonlit night.

“Stop it! You’re doing it again. And yes, Ginny’s a very nice girl,” Harry said, crossing his arms across his chest, looking away from Jasmine.

Jasmine walked up to Harry, stood on tiptoe and pecked his cheek. Stepping back, she looked around and then back at her friend. “Harry, you are the sweetest wizard I know, which is something considering how powerful you are already and how powerful you will become. You’re

also a lot of fun to wind up – did you know that? Now, listen carefully, Harry. Part of being an adult, and you're almost there, is learning how to see things from someone else's point of view. You don't have to agree with them, but it helps if you can see things from their perspective. Dumbledore was testing you, I'm sure of it. You passed, by the way. I'm jealous of Ginny; I told her that today in fact."

"You don't strike me as the jealous type," Harry said with a small smile.

"You weren't around me when I was growing up with my sister," she replied, rolling her eyes. "Just what was Abelard suggesting with you and Ginny?"

"Potentis Amicae ."

Jasmine snorted, "Oh, that old thing. It had its place, I guess, but on the whole I'm glad it's gone."

"Then why is Abelard pushing this?"

"Knowing Abelard, I think he's not pushing it at all. He's probably trying to tell you to be careful with your heart and not go too fast – the same things he's been telling me since I turned twelve."

"Now that you mention it, Abelard was just answering my question – it was Dumbledore that set me up to ask about *Potentis Amicae*," Harry said, pulling on his chin.

"Another thing, Harry: *Potentis Amicae* doesn't make you a eunuch."

"I know that, I was just carping that Abelard thought I was untrustworthy or something."

"Believe me, Harry. You are *very* trustworthy," she said, laying her fingertips on his arm for emphasis. "Let's do one more drill and then break for the day and make dinner."

"Sounds like a plan."

After concluding the drill, they repaired to the kitchen where they prepared the evening meal together in relative silence. Jasmine observed that his mood had lightened considerably. Once he was no longer furious, his performance on the Apparation drill had improved as well. Dinner went about as normally as possible at Abelard's table. The food was good; the conversation was eclectic, ranging from philosophy to magic to music. After dessert there was a satisfied pause in the conversation. Abelard broke the silence.

"Harry, tomorrow is your birthday. The day after that is a regularly scheduled day for tutoring, but you have been making terrific progress. Take the day off – be sixteen, play Quidditch, enjoy your friends. We'll set a new schedule for the week following. Enjoy your birthday."

"Thanks, Abelard. I'll try to enjoy it, *cautiously*," Harry said, smiling freely for the first time in hours.

“You do that,” Abelard said, rising from the table and dismissing himself from their company, “you do that.” As he passed into the hallway he said, more to himself than to Harry, “Good luck, lad.”

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Authors Notes: As always, thanks to the pre-betas on my list for their helpful and somewhat pointed comments on where I’m taking this story. Special thanks go to Full Pensieve, who, as always, pokes me when I’m most complacent. Yes, gentle reader; Abelard and Molly have a past. Molly Prewett interviewed with Abelard and spent time at his residence (back when it was in England), where she first met Mrs. Paprikash. She ultimately declined to apprentice with Abelard, having a different relationship in mind with young Arthur Weasley.

The Letters of Summer Birthday at the Burrow

Author's note: my pre-beta readers have advised me

that one should not read this chapter while eating or drinking.

Harry's last night as a fifteen-year-old boy was spent reading himself to sleep. There were three books on his bed. The first he'd actually finished that evening: *Disguise, Deception and Disillusionment – an Auror's Field Guide*. Tonks had slipped him that book weeks ago, and had surely bent several rules by doing so. It was chock-full of very useful spell work, most of which he'd mastered wandlessly. He had simply memorised a few of the more Transfiguration-intensive spells, for fear of bringing the wrath of Madam Hopkirk down on number four, Privet Drive. The next book in the stack was one that Professor McGonagall had obtained for him: *Advanced Transfiguration – Animagus Theory and Practice*. Harry had considered giving it to Hermione, but had decided otherwise when he'd happened upon the perfect present for the classmate he now thought of as the sister he never had. He'd stumbled through another chapter in that book before concluding that he needed to read it when he was fresh to have any hope of understanding the contents.

The book clutched in his hand as he slept through midnight, glasses perched on top of his head, was a slim volume that Jasmine had slipped him as she bid him goodnight: *Clues for the Clueless – A Guide to Modern Wizarding Courtship*. After spending the past few days being severely bent out of shape over his feelings and just what he should be doing about them, the book was positively cathartic. It was informative in the way that self-help books should be, but beyond that, it was howlingly funny. The writer explained several scenarios from the point of view of the witch, the wizard and their respective parents. Some of it was enlightening, some of it was positively frightening (especially when he tried to figure out how that would work with a probable couple, say Ron and Hermione) but most of it was so absurd that he burst out laughing. He'd laughed so hard that he had to cast *Imperturbable* and *Silencing* charms on the room to keep from waking the Dursleys.

The faint pop of the Passbox woke him. The Weasley knob was lit. Harry sat bolt upright, sending his glasses flying in one direction and the book in another. He bounded for the Passbox, and withdrew a single sheet of parchment folded in half.

Dear Harry,

I crashed when I got home today – Mum never lets me take a nap these days, but today she sent me to bed after we got back to the Burrow. Evidently she tried to wake me for dinner. I woke an hour ago to find that everyone but Dad had turned in for the night. A quick tour of the cold pantry showed that Mum had about 100 pounds of potato salad made up for your birthday. She now has 99 pounds of potato salad, as one pound *somehow* went missing. Imagine that. Mum saved my dinner, but Ron apparently had it for a snack. I know where he sleeps and have learned a smashing charm for attracting spiders.

I'm not too tired to dance now, but you're nowhere to be found; story of my life, it seems. I've been experimenting with the Pyr'gs. The bat and spider are fairly straightforward. The twins will never sneak me up on me again. Fawkes comes when I call and sings sweetly, but I don't have anything remotely phoenixy at hand for him to do, so he just sings away. The dragon is playing hard to get. I don't know his name, and when I call "dragon?" I get a whole lot of nothing.

Well, look at me rambling along – I started this letter so I could be the first one to wish you "Happy Birthday." Happy Birthday, Harry; for once you'll be somewhere decent for your birthday. The Burrow will be packed tomorrow between all the guests coming for your special day and the Aurors and members of the Order providing security. Maybe we can slip out and get in some flying between waves of guests?

Well, as there's nothing here to do and no one to dance with, I'm going to turn in. I'm sure that Mum will be up at the crack of dawn and will be expecting some quality time with her only daughter (read 'free labour for the special day' – whoo-hoo!). Hermione will be arriving before noon – it will be grand to have another girl around, although part of me thinks that she'll be hogged by her favourite bickering partner, also known as bald brother number one.

Happy Birthday, when I see you next you'll be out of that awful place -welcome home – I miss you.

Love from,

Ginny

There was a grease stain near the edge of the letter. It smelled of potato salad. Harry chucked the letter into the portfolio with the rest of his summer correspondence and pulled a sheet of paper from his desk, writing a quick reply with a Muggle pen.

Dear Ginevra (just kidding),

Your senior Pyr'g is a bit of a pain. His name is Tk'lch (Parseltongue doesn't lend itself to spelling in English – but you knew that already). It's pronounced "Tick-Lock" with a throaty "ch" at the end of each syllable. He will obey direct orders (such as "Tk'lch, show yourself and answer this question") but will try to evade if you give him a break. Show him just who the "pale spotted mammal" is in this outfit.

Me? I'm too tired to dance right now, although if you were here I might be willing to make an

exception. I'm looking forward to the Burrow, and getting away from all things Dursley. I don't know if I can handle the attention involved with a Birthday Party – I've never had one, really. The closest I've come was the night that Hagrid broke down the door at the cabin my Uncle was renting to deliver my Hogwarts letter and a hand-made Hagrid cake, but that's a story for another time.

I miss you too.

Harry

Harry stuffed the note into the Passbox before he could second-guess any of the wording. He checked the clock to be sure that it was armed to go off in the morning, ran his fingers through his hair, stripped off his trousers, hopped back into bed, pulled up the covers and extinguished the light. Tomorrow was now today, but it would be a lot more pleasant with some more sleep under his belt.

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“Your minder is here,” Mm'lau said, waking him from a sound sleep.

“Whatever happened to ‘good morning?’” Harry asked.

“Have it your way. Good morning, Harry. Your minder came while you were sleeping and changed into your clothes. She's downstairs with those wretched mammals. I have a hard time believing that you are kin to those creatures.”

“Some guardian you are, Mm'lau.”

“You went off duty, you didn't set any perimeter guard, and you didn't leave any instructions. I was left to my own best judgment. You'd instructed me that Tonks would never be a threat to you, so after I ascertained that it was truly her, I decided that you needed your sleep more than you needed to know that she was garbing herself with your clothing and taking on your appearance,” Mm'lau said. Harry knew that if he closed his eyes again that he'd see her assuming the dragon equivalent of Molly Weasley's legendary chewing-out posture; hands on hips, head thrown back.

“So, why are you waking me up now?”

“She's coming up the stairs. You might want to put your trousers back on,” Mm'lau said with what sounded suspiciously like a giggle.

Harry reached for his trousers, which were on the back of his chair and froze.

Lying neatly folded on top of the trousers he wore yesterday were a smaller pair of blue jeans, a pair of socks, a light blue shirt, pale blue knickers that had “Victoria's Secret” woven into the waistband, and a matching pale blue brassiere.

“They won't fit you, you know,” a familiar voice said behind him.

Harry spun around quickly, drawing his wand. “Keep your hands where I can see them and tell me something that only Tonks knows,” he said to his exact duplicate. “I was planning on wearing the trousers, not the girly stuff you left on the back of my chair.” He could hear Mm’lau clucking in the back of his consciousness, but quickly concluded that his ‘better safe than sorry’ reflexes were not out of line - yet.

“Whatever you say, Harry - I saw you reaching for my knickers. Let’s see... I pricked your left ring finger to set the Passbox knobs. You blushed like a Weasley when I showed you my Harriet Potter, and according to Jasmine you’re a great wizard but need some work in the kissing department.”

“What?” Harry shouted.

“All right, I made that last bit up, but the other two are genuine Tonks-only facts. Would you lower your wand, so I can tell you what we’re doing this morning?” Tonks said, shifting into her normal voice.

“Turn around, I want to get dressed.”

“*Harry*, transgender morphing here – I’m a *boy* now,” Tonks whinged as she spread her hands in dismay.

“Yeah, right. No matter how much you look like me right now, I’m certain that I do *not* want to get dressed in front of my big sister, who will figure out some way to embarrass me later.”

“I don’t need facts to embarrass you, Harry. If I don’t know it, I can just make it up,” Tonks said smugly.

“Thanks, you’re filling me with confidence, Tonks,” Harry replied.

“All right, I’m turned around now, and I promise I won’t peek,” Tonks said as she moved her hands over her eyes in an exaggerated gesture.

Harry gingerly pulled his trousers out from under the girl clothes, slipped into his trousers, and uttered a mild prayer of thanksgiving that last night had not been a blistering hot night that would have caused him to sleep on top of his covers in little to no clothing.

“Ok, I’m decent now. What’s up?” he asked, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

“Can’t a girl come visit her very own brother on his birthday?” she asked sweetly.

“Maybe I’m missing something, but *most* sisters don’t morph into their brothers on the occasion of their birthdays,” Harry said drolly.

“You have a point there. I’ve been working on holding your form and perfecting a charm that lets me hold your voice as well. I figured I could test it on your Aunt Petunia,” Tonks explained

“What was your plan if she caught on?”

“I’ve got a really good *Obliviate* charm, almost as good as Lockhart’s.”

“Well, did you pass?” Harry asked with a smile.

“She reamed me out good when I dropped a coffee cup, and prattled on about how ungrateful you’ve been for the past fifteen years for all the sacrifices they’ve made to keep you in such a level of safety and comfort. When she wasn’t looking, I repaired the cup and put it into the dishwasher,” Tonks reported.

“Sounds like you passed one off on her. Was that before or after she had her second cup of tea?” Harry asked.

“Let me think – afterwards, I’m sure of it. I almost dropped the sugar bowl when she asked me to pass it at breakfast.”

“What of my Uncle and cousin?”

“They ate, grunted and left,” Tonks said, pantomiming Dudley’s table manners.

“Yeah, that’s normal too. So, what’s the plan?”

“You’re going to the Burrow today.”

“Yeah?”

“Your decoy is going to the Burrow too – we’re trying to suss out whether or not Death Eater intelligence has figured out where you are when you’re not at Hogwarts,” Tonks said, her tone changing from light-hearted to all business.

“Nice job on the morphing. Tonks, what are you wearing under my clothes?”

“Pervert! You’re expressing a lot of interest in my knickers today. Is there something that we need to discuss?” Tonks as Harry looked at him for a moment before continuing. “Your socks and underwear, of course. The boys in the technical department aged a pair of trainers for me – they’ll do nicely for you when I’m done with them. It wouldn’t do for the decoy to be captured and found wearing ladies’ foundational garments – people would talk, and it would only end up in the B section of the Daily Prophet, or, worse yet, Teen Witch Weekly.”

Harry made a frame with his hands for the front-page of an imaginary tabloid paper. “Oh yeah - I can see it now ‘Boy–Who-Lived – bent or just a cross-dresser?’ – Page two: exclusive interview with housewitch who saw him snogging his former DADA professor.”

Tonks was silent and then suddenly serious. “That’s not a problem, is it Harry? My – uh - snogging Remus? Molly thinks that I’m something of a ‘Scarlet Woman’.”

Harry too was silent for a while, searching for the best way to express himself. “I think what Remus thinks is what’s important here, and he’s overdue for some happiness. You make him very happy. Just make sure that you change back into something recognisably female before you show him how happy you are to see him today, okay?” Harry answered with a smirk.

“I think I can manage that,” Tonks replied with a wink.

“So, what’s the plan?” Harry asked.

“It’s simple, really. We’re going to take this fabulously sexy, talented, dangerous witch and turn her into a scruffy looking teenaged boy, and then ship that ersatz boy off with a trained Auror to the Burrow and see what comes out of the woodwork when we do so,” Tonks explained with an airy gesture.

“Sounds good,” Harry replied. “When’s the fabulously sexy talented and dangerous witch showing up? I haven’t seen Jasmine since late last night.”

Tonks as Harry stood staring at Harry, her mouth open. She grabbed the pillow off of Harry’s bed and smacked him. “You prat! *I’m* the fabulously sexy talented and dangerous witch.”

“That’s funny, you look like a scruffy boy right now,” Harry said, diving for Tonks’ waist, sweeping her to the ground.

“You’ll pay for that, Potter!” Tonks screamed as she tried to avoid being pinned to the ground. The two Harrys wrestled on the floor, sending Hedwig out the window with a dignified “hoot.” Neither of them heard the click of the door.

“Which one should I stun?” Moey asked.

“Do both of them and we can sort it out later,” Jasmine replied.

“Moey?” cried one Harry.

“Jasmine?” croaked the other Harry.

“We can explain,” they said in unison.

“You know, Moey, it’s a pity we aren’t getting this on video – no one is ever going to believe us if we tell this story,” Jasmine drawled.

“I’m Harry, she’s Tonks and she started it,” blue-shirt Harry exclaimed.

“What? Tonks, you fibbing fleabag, you started it,” tan-shirt Harry replied.

Moey turned to Jasmine. “Well, they are in agreement on one thing,” she said.

“What’s that?” Jasmine asked.

“Tonks started it. Sounds like the girl I know. You there in the blue shirt – get on the bed and stay there. You in the tan shirt sit on the chair and mind the knickers.” Turning to Jasmine she adjusted the patch on her eye (dark blue, matching her slacks). “How well do you know Harry?” she asked.

“Fairly well. How well do you know Tonks?” she replied.

“We were mates in my first flat after school for a year. A Galleon says you can’t tell them apart.”

“I’m willing to give it a go. Whichever one of you is Harry, shield up, dragon down, ok?” Jasmine asked.

Both Harrys nodded.

“Stand up,” she commanded.

Both Harrys stood.

Jasmine walked around both boys, looking deeply into their eyes, tracing the tips of her fingers across their foreheads, pulling down on their shirt collars and smelling their hair. She pulled Moey aside and invoked a hush charm, speaking softly. “Damn, she’s good. Looks like Harry, smells like Harry, she’s wearing Harry’s clothes, and with a pretty decent Occlumency shield, I can’t tell which one is the bluffer,” Jasmine exclaimed. Moey nodded.

Moey moved to the open window, looking for something in the yard as she made an odd clucking noise. A moment later Hedwig alighted on the window frame returning her clucking with an odd chatter. Moey scribbled a quick note on a scrap of parchment and tied it to Hedwig’s leg. “Take this to Harry, please.” Hedwig gave Moey an odd look, walked sideways along the windowsill and jumped into the room, walking stiffly to the two Harrys.

“That’s not fair,” said Harry in the blue shirt.

Hedwig looked up at this Harry for a moment before waddling to Harry in the tan shirt. She hooted politely and held out her leg to the other Harry.

Harry took the note from Hedwig that read “Jasmine owes me one Galleon. I know which witch is which. (signed) Moey.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m busted,” said Harry in the blue shirt, her voice shifting from Harry’s voice to her own. She squinted for a moment; growing her hair until it was shoulder-length and then completed the transformation into Harriet Potter, this time complete with scar. Looking down at her chest she exclaimed, “It’s a good thing you like your shirts loose, Harry, otherwise I’d be positively indecent.”

Harry goggled briefly at the now transformed Tonks. “I just don’t look like that in my clothes. Lupin was right,” he said.

“How’s that?”

“You *are* fetching in all your forms – except when you’re me,” Harry said with a smirk.

Moey crossed her arms and shook her head. “I don’t know about that, Harry. I was having all sorts of grownup evil thoughts about what I could do with two blokes when the two of you were bookends.”

“Don’t finish that thought, please!” Harry cried, making a show of shielding his ears with his hands.

Moey checked her wristwatch and then prodded Tonks with the tip of her shoe. “We need to get going – let me transfigure your clothes, and you get back to being Harry again. I don’t want to see you as a girl until I deliver you, safe and sound, at the Burrow,” Moey chided.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Tonks said, giving an exaggerated salute before screwing up her eyes again and transforming from Harriet to Harry Potter.

Moey tossed Tonks’ clothes on the floor and changed the garments into sickles, knuts and galleons with a flick and a swish. She scooped them up off of the floor and handed them to the newly reconstituted blue shirt Harry, who put them into his pocket. “What time do you have, Jasmine?”

“Half-past seven,” she replied.

“We need to go – let me nip into the loo then we’ll hit the road. Remember, meet us at the border at 10:00 sharp,” Moey instructed. “Come along, *Harry* – you can use the loo downstairs, the Dursleys are all gone for the morning.”

“Yes, Ma’am – say, why is it that you’re always being bossed around by women?” Tonks as Harry asked.

“It’s the natural order of my life,” Harry replied. “Get used to it.”

“So,” Jasmine said, looking around. “We’ve got a bit more than two hours to kill – any suggestions?”

“Well, I’ve got to pack, and I’d like to make breakfast, as Tonks the impostor turned off my alarm before she raided my dresser and took my breakfast downstairs,” Harry complained.

His rant was interrupted by a pop from the Passbox. The Hogwarts knob lit up.

“Is that what I think it is?” Jasmine inquired.

“Depends – what are you thinking?” Harry quipped.

Jasmine cuffed the back of his head. “That’s a Passbox. I haven’t seen one of those since my first pledge – my principal was the Resident Director of the Gringotts branch in Sri Lanka. Man... this takes me back,” she exclaimed.

“This one’s sealed so I’m the only one who can open the doors,” Harry explained.

“Clever – who thought of that,” Jasmine asked.

“My friends,” Harry answered evasively.

“Wouldn’t happen to be a stunning little redheaded friend, stands about so tall, carries a dragon inside her head?” Jasmine asked, holding her hand up to the tip of her nose.

“It might be,” he answered with a smile.

“Well, aren’t you going to open your mail?” she asked, one hand on her hip while the other pointed to the Passbox.

“All right then,” he replied.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Let me wish you a most Happy Birthday. My plans have changed a bit, and I am still uncertain whether I will see you later today, but in any event, I expect that you will be mobbed with well-wishers, and if I obtained the chance to speak with you, I doubt that you would remember what I had to say, given the competition for your attention today. It is imperative that Mr. Weasley begins to plan the next season’s training plan and roster. If you were not planning on giving him notice of his Captaincy today, please make sure that he knows by tomorrow.

The Headmaster has prevailed upon the Governors to do what he can to improve morale during the school year, so there will be a few more Hogsmeade weekends than is normal, and there will be a school ball on All Hallows' Eve. Although I know the date is not a particularly happy one for you and yours, but for the sake of the school, I implore you to attend and plan on opening the ball. Although you are not a prefect, you are a recognised leader among the student body, and we must all do our part for the common good. In simple and plain terms, you need to have a date for that evening, and it would be a good idea to brush up your dancing skills. Although your dancing was much better at Sirius’ wake than at the Yule Ball, this is a skill where a little bit of practice will yield good results.

Please ensure that Mr. Weasley does not procrastinate as he did during your fourth year. Girls with choices don’t wait forever.

Sincerely yours,

MM

Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress
Head of Gryffindor House

“Ooh, sweet,” Jasmine exclaimed as she read over Harry’s shoulder. “Let me guess, you need help deciding who you’re going to ask to this ball.”

Harry glared at her.

“It’s coming to me now – I should *mind* my *own* business,” she said, placing the back of her fingers onto her forehead. “Tell you what, Harry, you make breakfast for two and I’ll pack up your stuff. Nothing embarrassing hidden here in the room, is there?”

“Not here. For that you’d be wanting my cousin’s room, two doors down the hall,” Harry quipped. “Two breakfasts, then – coming up.”

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“You know, a girl could get used to this, having a handsome lad making her breakfast. Dad used to make breakfast when Mum was working on assignments. My sister and I could never agree on anything for breakfast, while my sister and my brother always agreed, so Dad was stuck making two breakfasts. I never got up on time, so he’d make something for Ravi and Roopangi, then I’d get up and he’d make a second breakfast. Man, I haven’t thought about that for years.” She had a far away look in her eyes and began to sniffle. “The hurt never goes away, but you know that already, don’t you?”

Harry sat quietly, pushing the last bit of egg onto his toast. “Yeah, I do. Sometimes it comes at me without warning and I get so sad I can’t do a blessed thing. It’s been good to keep busy this summer – less time to wallow in self-pity and condemnation.”

Jasmine looked lost in thought. She collected herself and stood up. “I’ll clean up, Harry. You wash up and join me back down here. I’ve figured out what we’re going to do for the next two hours.”

Harry didn’t say anything, but wiped his mouth on his napkin, finished his coffee and walked up the stairs. Everything was packed into his school trunk, except for his toothbrush, which was thoughtfully placed on top of his trunk. He checked his hiding hole under the floorboard. It was empty. Not a speck of his belongings remained in the room apart from Hedwig’s cage, his trunk and a satchel he’d packed the day before. He brushed his teeth, drying the brush as best he could on the towel before sticking it into his valet bag, which he tucked into his school trunk. He pulled a shrink dot and a feather patch out of the satchel and shrank his trunk until it was the size of a tissue box. He did the same with Hedwig’s cage, shrinking it to the size of a walnut, tucking it into his pocket. Tucking his trunk under his arm, he lifted the satchel and took off down the stairs without a backward glance at the room. It was a place to sleep, but it wasn’t home.

Jasmine wasn’t in the kitchen when he came down the stairs, but it was neat, tidy and capable of passing inspection from his constipated Aunt. He heard music coming from the living room and decided that she’d gone in there. He was a bit taken back when he passed through the door; the room had been completely Transfigured. The floor was now a weathered red oak instead of its usual covering of beige Berber carpet. The furniture was gone; the room was three times its original size and had mirrors covering the length of one wall. Jasmine had been Transfigured as well. Instead of her usual uniform of blue shorts and black tee shirt, she was wearing the navy blue dress he’d seen just the day before. Her hair was up in a French braid, held in place with chopsticks, or what looked like chopsticks.

“Dance with me, Mr. Potter?” Jasmine said, holding out her hand.

Harry glared at her.

“It is a skill where a little bit of practice will yield good results,” Jasmine said, affecting a Scottish burr. “Would you dance with Hermione?” she asked, a slightly hurt tone in her voice as she dropped her hand, moving it to her hip.

“Well, yeah,” Harry admitted.

“She’s your friend. I’m your friend too, or were you just kidding when you said that?”

Harry said nothing, but took Jasmine’s hand, assuming a waltz position. Looking into her eyes he replied, “I meant what I said.”

“Well, now that’s settled, let’s dance,” Jasmine said with a wink.

Jasmine talked as she danced - a steady patter to relax Harry and keep him on the fine edge of being aware of what he was doing, but not fixated on the mechanics of dancing. “Counting ‘one-two-three’ is for beginners, Harry,” she said. Harry said nothing, nodding, keeping time with the music. As the lesson progressed, the patter tapered off.

After an hour’s worth of instruction Jasmine paused the music briefly. “The instruction is over now. Dance like you mean it, Harry.”

They danced for another half-hour, mainly waltzing, but improvising here and there as the tempo changed. Harry’s mind was on the here and now, enjoying dancing with a pretty girl who happened to be his friend. He knew he wasn’t holding Ginny – Jasmine was denser, more powerful, and alien in a way that he couldn’t quite describe. Holding her close while they danced did a lot to change his attitude about her, about his lot in life, and about the day.

The music slowed and stopped. Jasmine pulled away until only the tips of her fingers rested on the edge of his palm. She curtsied; he bowed. Jasmine shook her left hand, producing her thick wand from its hiding place. With a flick the room had changed size again, restored to the neutral, boring living room decorated by Petunia Dursley. “Let’s go get your things, Harry,” Jasmine said in a voice tinted with sadness.

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Moments later they were back at Abelard’s villa, walking to the carriage house. Jasmine slid the door aside on its track, walking into the dark interior for a moment long enough to wheel out a low-slung racing motorbike. “Harry, you’re riding pillion today,” Jasmine said with a smirk. She pulled out a small roll of parchment that she unrolled on the seat of the motorbike.

With a wave of her hand the parchment was filled with lines and text. Looking down at the parchment, Harry saw that it was a twenty-kilometre map of the area surrounding the Burrow. Jasmine tapped the map with her stout wand, causing markings to appear noting the locations of

people. She tapped it again, revealing a complex design of what appeared to be defensive wards. “The Burrow is heavily protected right now, for obvious reasons. This line here—” she traced it with her finger, “—designates the outer limits of the Anti-Apparation border. Moey and Tonks will be coming into the Burrow from the main road, which crosses the border here. We’ll be taking the Portal to an area outside the border, and meeting them here, just inside the border,” Jasmine said, stabbing points on the map with the little finger of her right hand.

“On a motorbike?” Harry asked.

Jasmine walked back into the carriage house. She raised her voice as she walked away, “We could walk, which would be boring, or hitch a ride, which would be risky... or we can travel in style.” When she returned, it was with two leather suits and matching helmets, one red, and one black. She held out the black helmet and suit.

Harry slung the suit over his arm, and turned the helmet slowly in his hands. “Why can’t we fly in?”

Jasmine shook her head. “It’s a no-fly zone. If it flies, it dies. I don’t pretend to understand all the layered defences that they’ve put up around the Burrow, but Bill Weasley was quite clear on that point – travel by land after reaching the border. The only exception to that is right here,” Jasmine said, pointing to an area on the map close to the house. “What’s in this area?”

Harry chuckled. “That’s the orchard. The Weasleys have been playing Quidditch there for ages.”

“Well, I guess they intend to play some more this week,” Jasmine mused. She picked up her red leather suit, and let the helmet dangle from the handlebars of the motorbike. “Your suit should fit over your clothes.”

“What? You’re not going to measure me again?” Harry teased.

“I only ever needed to measure you once, silly.”

“Why do I need the leathers?” he asked.

“Ever run into a cicada at 200 kilometres an hour? It stings a bit. Some favour it for fashion, but in my mind, it’s pure protection,” she said, walking back towards the house.

Harry slipped out of his shoes and slipped into the leathers, trousers first, then the jacket. There was a tangle of zippers and straps that took some time figuring out. Once he snapped the fastener at the neck he felt the suit begin to hum as a wave of refreshing coolness spread through the suit. Before long, Jasmine reappeared, clad in her leathers. Her suit glistened in the tropical sun as it hugged her every curve. She unzipped the neck a bit, tugging the collar off of her neck. Her braid came down and she shook her hair loose. “Do me a favour, Harry? Tuck my hair into my collar. I can’t wear my helmet with a braid of any kind and if I wear it loose, I’ll never get the knots out.” She turned around, swishing her hair one last time. Harry plucked back her collar, exposing an expanse of smooth light brown skin. Her hair was not as soft as it looked, having a dense body

unlike anything he'd ever touched. He deftly tucked it into the collar, catching a few rebellious wisps that tried to escape. Jasmine reached back and tugged the collar, rolling her head, trying to get the hair situated just so. Evidently it came to rest, allowing her to rezip her leathers. She turned and inspected Harry's suit, tugging on a strap here and there, loosening one strap he didn't even know existed in the first place.

"Ah, much better," he said. "Thanks."

Jasmine smiled and nodded. "All right now, Harry, riding a bike in the pillion position is not much different from riding on a broom. Once we get going, I'm going to lean forward. You'll be most comfortable if you just snuggle into me. The helmets are charmed so we can talk without shouting. Keep your hands on my waist," she said, moving her hands to her waist for emphasis, "and I'll not have any reason to toss you off the bike before we get to the Burrow," giving him a smirk and a wink.

"I think I can control myself, but just to make sure, drive fast," Harry quipped.

"Not a problem, Harry," she replied with a dazzling smile. "I always drive fast." She pulled her helmet on, watching Harry to make sure that he snugged the strap properly. Harry felt her toggle his com switch to the 'on' position – it worked the same way as the helmets they'd used to visit the Plains of Meeting. She straddled the bike, twisting the ignition key. The gauges lit up as power flowed into them. She inspected the gauges and then patted the seat behind her. He awkwardly straddled the bike as well, sliding down the seat until he was nestled against Jasmine. Not for the first time he was glad that his dragon-enhanced Occlumency blocked Jasmine from his mind. Dancing with her was one thing; being pressed against her from his knees to his shoulders was another.

She twisted the key once more and the motorbike barked to life. As Jasmine let out the clutch, they rolled forward smoothly. The path to the meadow was bumpy, as was the meadow itself until they reached the road. As they picked up speed, Harry noted that her battle wand was dangling freely from a leather thong on her left wrist. Flicking her hand, the wand jumped into her palm. Jasmine hunkered down, giving Harry a clear view of the portal as it appeared in the distance in the road in front of them. He bent forward as she gunned the engine. Harry guessed that they were travelling something faster than 90 miles an hour as they approached the portal. He flinched, hoping that she could thread the needle better than she could execute the Wronski Feint.

"What are we riding, Jasmine?" he asked, hoping that he wasn't talking too loud on the comlink."

"A somewhat modified Honda Interceptor," she replied in a voice not much louder than a whisper – a point-blank whisper without the breathy feeling, thanks to the comlink.

"What will she do, speed-wise?"

"Without magic, I can do a bit over 240 kilometres per hour."

"And with magic?"

“I’m not really sure – the clock stops at 260 kilometres per hour – something above that I’m sure.”

He couldn’t see her face, but he knew her well enough to know that she had to be smiling. Jasmine liked speed. Harry snuggled in closer, making sure that his hands didn’t end up anywhere that would get him slapped, or, worse yet, tossed from the motorbike. She opened up the throttle, and the English countryside whipped by at dizzying speed. The English carriageway was not much wider than the Ugandan road, but it was in much better repair; still, there were bumps and bounces and even an occasional bit of flight when Jasmine gunned the throttle as they passed over a rise in the carriageway.

“Harry?” she asked.

“Hmm?” he replied.

“You know that dragon trick where you disappear?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“How much can you make disappear? Can you vanish the bike plus me?”

“Probably – how long do I have to hold it?”

“I want to pass that Volkswagen without being seen and then reappear in front of them before we lose the pavement and hit the gravel road going into the Burrow,” Jasmine answered, her voice shifting to the take-charge mode.

Harry bent his mind to the task, feeling the energy surge from his centre. He could hear Mm’lau humming in the background.

“Ready now?” he asked.

“Ready... suffering Shiva! I can’t see the bloody bike!” she hissed.

“Well, yeah, there is that problem.” Harry answered drolly. “When I was duelling with you I had my Farsight turned on, otherwise I couldn’t see my own sword,” he explained, engaging his Farsight, returning Jasmine and the motorbike to his vision.

“This takes some getting used to,” she muttered.

“Welcome to my life,” he replied, thinking about all the drastic changes that had entered his own life recently. Adjusting to invisible motorbikes was definitely one of the smaller modifications.

After five minutes of hard riding, they’d caught up to the blue Volkswagen. Harry noted with some amusement that notwithstanding the fact that Jasmine couldn’t see her own motorbike, she flicked the turn indicator on as she passed the car on the right.

“Harry, on my mark, make us visible again. Three, two, one, NOW,” Jasmine said.

Harry released the bit of magic he’d been holding in place, turning off his Farsight at the same time. He felt a snap of energy rebound to his centre about the same time as he heard the squeal of the Volkswagen’s brakes behind them. He felt the laughter in Jasmine’s diaphragm as she burred with satisfaction.

“Oh, yeah, that was worth one Galleon for sure,” she said as she began freewheeling, letting their speed dissipate before they ran out of carriageway and turned off onto the gravel road that led to the Burrow. They were travelling at a much slower rate, Harry estimated 30 to 40 miles per hour, when they hit the gravel, raising a good-sized cloud of dust behind them. Minutes later the Burrow was in view. Dumbledore and Remus Lupin were sitting under a spreading oak tree, Dumbledore dressed in periwinkle blue robes with silver stars, Lupin in a white linen suit with a matching Panama hat. Jasmine killed the engine and parked under the shade of the tree. After they’d both hopped off of the motorbike, she opened the seat to hand Harry his belongings, which she’d placed in a canvas bag with handles. She motioned to Harry to go on ahead to the Burrow.

“Albus? Could I have a word with you, in private?” she asked.

Dumbledore flicked his wand, engaging what Harry guessed was a hush zone, walking with Jasmine, head bent down to catch her rapid-fire comments accompanied by broad hand gestures. Dumbledore’s hands were clasped behind his back. The Volkswagen pulled up alongside the oak tree, discharging an animated Harry Potter, who darted over to the figure seated by the tree.

“Hey old man,” she said, her voice rising in pitch as she lifted the charm that disguised her voice. “Did you miss me?”

Moey motioned to him from inside the car. “Want a ride? I don’t think those two are going to come up for air any time soon,” she said.

Harry looked back. Harriet Potter was straddling Remus Lupin under the oak tree, his hat now fallen to the ground. Her hair was shoulder length again, throbbing as it changed colour from red to brown to black. Evidently she was very happy to see him. Harry snorted as he threw his bag onto the floor as he folded into the car’s passenger seat. “Take me to the Burrow, Moey,” he said with a satisfied smile. “Take me home.”

The drive to the Burrow was short and uneventful. Harry had hoped to slip into the house quietly and deposit his things in Ron’s room. That hope was dashed the moment he opened the screen door, walking into the kitchen. There was an ear-splitting cry of “Harry!” from Hermione. His cheeks were kissed, his ribs squeezed, his hands shaken heartily and his back slapped as he was passed from Hermione to Fred to Molly to George and finally to Ron. In the midst of this gauntlet, he caught Ginny’s eye as she sat against the sink, giving her a smile and a wink. When he came up for air, she was no longer there, having been snatched away by Jasmine who had slipped into the kitchen, relieved him of the canvas tote bag and spirited Ginny up the stairs. Moey was standing by the back door, looking lost. Harry made introductions to all the red-haired inhabitants of the kitchen.

“Mrs. Weasley, is Charlie here?” he asked pleasantly.

“Yes, Harry, he’s in the meadow, setting up tables with Arthur and Bill,” Molly replied.

“Moey really fancies dragons, so I wanted to make sure that she got a chance to meet him so they could talk shop together,” Harry said, doing his best to ignore the death glare coming from the one-eyed Auror. He figured that with one eye she couldn’t really kill him with a look. He gave her a nod and began to walk out the door, looking behind to see if Moey was following him.

“Harry, kind investor, “ George cried out. When Harry turned around, he saw that George had Ron in a headlock. Fred was now wearing a turban that he’d fashioned out of a dishtowel. “Would you care to see the latest Weasley Wizard Wheeze? We think that Ron has great potential as a walking crystal ball. If you hold his head just right in the sun you can see the clouds pass by – isn’t there some sort of divination that you can do with cloud patterns?”

Harry chuckled. “Dunno. I made it all up for that class. I don’t care for fortunes and prophecies – wonder why?” he asked, reaching out to buff Ron’s shiny, pale pate.

“Not you too!” Ron cried. “I should start charging for all the people who think that rubbing my head will bring them luck or something.”

“Tickle Ronnykins didn’t mind when it was Hermione doing the rubbing,” George cooed as he rubbed Ron’s scalp vigorously. Ron began to turn red, whether it was a blush or impending rage was uncertain. Hermione found something of great interest out the window, refusing to look Harry in the eye.

“Out, the lot of you!” Molly exclaimed, “I want you in the meadow helping your father!” Changing her tone abruptly she said, “Hermione, dear, could you check in on Ginny and see that our guest has what she needs?”

“Yes, Mrs. Weasley,” Hermione answered helpfully, giving Harry a knowing smile as he squeezed through the back door, Moey in tow.

“Is it always like this here, Harry?” Moey asked.

“Oh, no,” he replied. “When the twins are in top form it’s demonstrably better. C’mon, let me introduce you round to the rest of the red-haired terrors. You should fit right in.”

“Oh, thanks, Harry,” Moey said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Not at all, a promise is a promise,” he said, being careful to give the biting rose bushes a wide berth on his way to the meadow.

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The chat with Dumbledore had gone about as well as expected. It was time to get changed for the party. The Burrow was filled with red-haired Englishmen, so keeping tabs on Harry shouldn’t be

too difficult. She tried to remind herself that she wasn't on duty right now, but the habits of half a lifetime of training resisted being easily quashed. The kitchen was loud, but they were happy, familiar sounds. Jasmine slid into the crowd, relieving Harry of his tote bag, catching Ginny's eye. "I need a place to change into more normal clothes, can you help me with that?" she asked the petite teen.

"Yeah, c'mon upstairs – you can use my room," she said pleasantly. "What is it with the red leather, Jasmine?" she asked.

"Racing leathers – I brought Harry here on my motorcycle," the older witch explained.

"Well, that explains why he's in leather too. He looks good in leather, but not quite as – uh, exotic as you do," she replied with a brief wiggle in her eyebrows.

"He's wearing touring leathers – they're made to go on over his street clothes. Racing leathers are a bit more snug. Which room is Harry staying in?" she asked.

"He's here for tonight, sharing a room with my brother, Ron. After tonight he'll be moving to Percy's old room," Ginny explained.

Jasmine pushed the door open, scanning the room quickly. The camp bed was obviously Harry's perch for the night. With a practiced flick, her stout wand appeared in her left hand. She muttered a string of spells, waving the wand in a circle around the room, then in an arc, north to south, followed by west to east.

"What are you doing?" Ginny asked with some alarm.

Jasmine didn't reply immediately, passing her wand over the pillow on the camp bed, then up and down the legs of that bed. "I'm doing my job. Abelard's not here, so my first priority is protecting Harry. Officially I'm not on duty, but it's easier to give in to this urge than to fight it. No major jinxes or hexes here, but I am picking up a few oddities. Close your eyes, I'm going to flash the room," she warned. Taking care to seal the door and make the window opaque, a bright blue flash came from the tip of her wand. Ginny opened her eyes, looking around at the now darkened room. Jasmine produced a knife from somewhere and began digging at a bright spot on the wall, pulling thread out of the wall. "Any idea what this is?" she asked Ginny.

Ginny snickered. "That would be an Extendable Ear, an invention of brothers Fred and George – it's a listening device," she explained.

Jasmine went over to the windowsill and extracted another foot of Extendable Ear from that location. She searched the room minutely, stopping at Harry's bed. Pulling back the pillow, a round spot the size of a Knut was glowing underneath the sheets. Turning to Ginny, she peeled back the sheet, exposing a thin white disk. "And this would be?"

"This would be a Whisper Patch – it's like a Muggle wireless speaker – you can transmit sound to this from another patch. If you've got a pair of them you can use it like a two-way

communication spell over fairly long distances, say half a mile or less. Another Fred and George invention – they haven't done much with that one recently – they couldn't think up any decent jokes that would use the technology," Ginny stated.

"Well, it appears that they were preparing to prank Harry tonight. Is that out of the ordinary?" Jasmine asked.

"Well," she said, putting her hand on her hip as she assumed a thoughtful pose. "Normally they prank Ron or Percy, but Percy's not been home for over a year. I don't think they meant anything beyond their usual joking," Ginny said.

"I'll tip Harry off at an opportune time before I go. Make sure he knows about these, ok?" Jasmine said, smoothing the sheets back down and placing the canvas bag of Harry's belongings on the pillow of the camp bed.

"Sure Jasmine."

"Let's get back to your room – we're missing the party," she said with a smile.

Jasmine scanned Ginny's room with a practiced eye. "No guests tonight?" she asked.

"Nah, not tonight. Hermione will be coming to stay for the last two weeks of August, before school starts up again – at least that's the plan right now," Ginny stated.

Jasmine pulled a thin rectangle out of her suit. She unfolded this until it was several times larger and then tapped it with her wand. It sprang up into a medium sized valise, which she unlatched, pulling out sandals, a tee shirt, a grey tunic, trousers and a matching long silk scarf. Ginny began to move towards the door when Jasmine looked up from the trousseau she was assembling on Ginny's bed. "You needn't leave, Ginny, I'm not that modest, at least among girls," she said, first peeling off the red leather boots and then the racing leathers. Standing before Ginny's mirror dressed in tan knickers and brassiere, she stretched before turning to her clothes. "See, no tattoos, just a well trained girl with an impaired attitude."

"You're gorgeous, Jasmine, you make me look like a stick," Ginny complained.

"Ginny, I've got what, ten, eleven years on you? Believe me, I didn't look like this when I was fifteen. Besides, you're the one that Harry wants, not me," Jasmine replied.

Ginny picked up a reading pillow and tossed it at Jasmine, who batted it away with ease. "Likely story – I've not been riding around the countryside with him snuggled into me on the back of a motorbike," Ginny retorted.

"There's a reason I put him in touring leather rather than racing leather, my friend, as there are limits to even my discipline," she said, fixing Ginny with a high wattage stare.

"You're terrible," Ginny exclaimed with a shriek.

“Nah, just incorrigible,” Jasmine replied, pulling her tee shirt on over her head. The trousers and tunic were made from a thick opalescent silk, shimmering several colours in the sunlight that streamed into Ginny’s room. Jasmine unfurled the scarf, letting it snap as she shook it straight. The scarf was taller than she was. She draped it loosely in front, letting the ends fall over her shoulders. “Are they even in back? They should be flush with the hem of the tunic,” Jasmine asked.

“Not yet,” Ginny replied, kneeling down behind her. “There, now they are even,” she stated.

“Ok, now for the colour consult – what colour should I be today?” Jasmine asked, flicking her wand at the front of her tunic, changing the colour from bright scarlet to jade to white to orange to tan.

“The scarlet is smashing, but a bit showy – the rest of them are fine, but I really like the pearly grey colour,” Ginny opined, feeling the edge of the scarf. “This is gorgeous stuff, Jasmine.”

“Thanks, Mum made it for me last year. How’s this?” Jasmine asked, putting a thin row of blue piping on the edge of the scarf and the hem of her trousers and tunic.

“Splendid,” Ginny said. There was a knock at the door.

“Come on in, Hermione,” Ginny shouted.

“How did you know it was me?” she asked.

“Mum would open the door *while* knocking, and the rest of the family would open *without* knocking,” Ginny explained.

Hermione walked up to Jasmine, extending her hand. “Hermione Granger.”

Jasmine took the proffered hand. “Jasmine Kadakia, I’ve been working with Harry this summer.”

“He speaks highly of you,” Hermione said.

“So, Ginny, what does Harry do when he enters your room?”

“He’s never been in my room,” Ginny complained.

“Isn’t it a bit early for that?” Hermione quipped.

“Early implies that *something* is going on, Hermione,” Ginny said.

“And?” Hermione asked.

“Nothing is going on, Hermione,” Ginny said flatly.

“That’s why we must stick to The Plan,” Hermione said with forced enthusiasm.

“Yeah, right. ‘Make plenty of eye contact, smile, and make sure that he’s well fed,’” Ginny said, opening her eyes wide, smiling grotesquely, screwing her fingertip into the dimple on her cheek.

“Actually that sounds like the syllabus from intermediate Courtesan Studies,” Jasmine observed.

“What?” Ginny barked.

“Courtesan Studies – it’s a mandatory part of the curriculum, how to act, whether you are trying to blend into the background or stand out like a scarlet woman outside a navy base,” Jasmine replied with a slight giggle.

“How did you do in the class?” Hermione asked.

“I barely passed. I have a problem sucking up to men I don’t respect,” she replied blandly.

The three women burst into a fit of laughter. Jasmine folded up her leathers, placing them into the valise. Tapping the valise with her wand it became a flat rectangle that she then folded down into a smaller rectangle, placing it in the pocket of her tunic when she was done. “Ginny, let me put your hair up and then we’ve a party to attend to. Let’s get going, ladies.”

Molly was working in the kitchen when they came down the stairs, setting one knife to slice a loaf of bread while setting another to carve a ham. She turned to Jasmine. “I’m told that Harry fancies Mango and Pineapple, so I got a few of each, but I’ll be hanged if I can figure out how to peel them.”

“Oh, that’s easy, Mrs. Weasley,” Jasmine began.

“Call me Molly.”

“All right, Molly, it’s still easy – I started doing it for Mum when I was ten. Both of them make a bit of a mess, you see. The mango is sliced along the side of the seed – there’s a big hairy pit inside the fruit that’s flat like a pumpkin seed. Then you take the two halves and score them, like this, and then you score them again perpendicularly to the first scores, taking care that you don’t pierce the skin. Then you fold the fruit inside out – you can either eat the little cubes off of the skin or you can slice them off. You can do long spears if you don’t care for little cubes,” she said, demonstrating on the other half of the fruit.

“What do you do with the fruit left on the pit?” Molly asked.

Taking the pit over to the sink, Jasmine laughed. “That’s the cook’s fee for processing the rest of the mango – you peel the skin off and nibble what’s left off of the pit. But you have to lean over the sink unless you fancy wearing dribbles of mango juice on your clothes!” Jasmine then launched into an explanation of proper pineapple peeling.

Ginny tuned out the ensuing conversation, building a sandwich out of the freshly sliced bread and ham. Spreading a bit of mayonnaise and dark brown mustard on the bread, she considered whether or not the sandwich needed cheese. She ultimately concluded that it did, pulling a wheel

of cheddar from the cold pantry where 98 pounds of potato salad waited for the evening meal. She built a second sandwich, considering briefly whether or not she should eat it herself or give it to Hermione for Ron. *Screw it*, she said to herself, *let Hermione work out her own bloody plan*. She took a savage bite out of her sandwich, loaded some pineapple and mango onto the plate, pinched a napkin from the stack and left the kitchen in search of Harry. *Eye contact; smile; keep him fed. Oh, the things I do for love*.

“Hey, you lot!” Ginny yelled. “Lunch is building your own sandwiches in the kitchen.” The crowd of Weasleys looked up from their conversation. Bill and Charlie were standing under the Oak tree, accompanied by Fleur and Moey. Arthur, Remus and Tonks were sitting by the table covered by the most shade whilst Harry, Ron and the twins were standing around, apparently discussing Quidditch from the way they were zooming their hands around like broomsticks.

“Sandwich, Harry?” Ginny asked, thrusting the plate in his direction. It wasn’t all that hard to smile when she locked onto his brilliant green eyes.

“Thanks, Ginny. Is this one as good as that roast beef sandwich?” Harry asked quietly.

Ginny didn’t have to rack her memory, she knew exactly which roast beef sandwich he was discussing. “It’s better,” she replied, not knowing that she was wrinkling her nose as she smiled. “It’s fresher.”

Ron and the Twins had disappeared at the announcement of sandwiches in the kitchen. Charlie, however, sauntered up to Ginny. “Where’s my sandwich, Gin-gin?”

“You’re family, make it yourself, loser,” she giped, making an L with her forefinger and thumb on her forehead. Charlie patted her shoulder as he passed by, walking up to the house.

“What about me? I’m not family.” Moey asked with a smile.

“Get your own Weasley,” she replied with a conspiratorial wink.

“I’m working on it,” Moey quipped under her breath, breaking into a jog to catch up to Charlie. “Believe me.”

“Great sandwich, Ginny,” Harry said, swallowing a bite.

“Thanks,” Ginny said. “Say, Harry, after lunch we’re going to be playing a spot of Quidditch – did you bring your broom?”

“Yeah, it’s up in my room – all my stuff is shrunk down smaller than pins.”

“Speaking of which, Jasmine did a sweep of your room when she dropped your stuff off – the twins have planted Extendable Ears in two locations and a little sound patch under your pillow.”

“Thanks for the warning. Did she sweep your room too?” Harry asked.

“No,” Ginny said, slapping her forehead with her palm, “why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you are a nice person, not a suspicious old grump like me.”

“Yeah, well, you’d think that I’d have learned by now.”

“*Constant Vigilance!*” they said together, laughing as they did.

Sitting at the table, they munched their sandwiches together in silence as they watched people arrive. Apparently people were arriving at an Apparation point outside the border and then taking what appeared to be empty Coke cans as Portkeys across the border. Harry mentioned what he suspected was the arrangement to Ginny.

“Yeah, that’s about right. Staggered arrivals – some people are just dropping in before dinner, and then leaving. The rest are staying then splitting after dinner. The logistics are incredible,” Ginny said.

“Think your Mum will have enough potato salad?” Harry teased.

“Probably not – she’s down to 98 pounds right now,” Ginny bantered.

“Anyone who leaves your Mum’s table hungry is either fasting or just a fussy eater. Lord knows she’s tried her best to fatten me up every time I’ve visited,” Harry said, touching his belt buckle.

“You look better than normal, Harry,” Ginny said seriously.

“Does that mean that I look like a wreck most times?” Harry asked.

Ginny nodded nervously. “Pretty much.”

“It’s been an odd summer – I think keeping busy has kept the depression at bay, most of the time at least. I’ll live. I have to,” Harry said with a wan smile.

Looking down at his now empty plate, Harry sighed. “I suppose the guest of honour must circulate. I’m going to go get my broom and squeeze in some Quidditch before I have to start playing politician and shake everyone’s hand,” Harry said with resignation.

“You don’t strike me as the touchy-feely type,” Ginny observed.

“I’m doing it for Mm’lau – she wants me to touch the guests – she’s building a card file of known friendlies. I’m surprised the Tk’lch hasn’t made a similar request,” Harry said with a brief frown.

“Yeah, well, thanks to you he’s answering me now when I call him by name, but we aren’t exactly the best of friends yet,” Ginny said.

“Turn on the Weasley charm – no male can resist that,” Harry said, rising from the table. Without asking he picked up Ginny’s now empty plate to carry it to the rubbish bin by the back door.

“Thanks, Harry,” she said to his back as he walked away. “I think I will turn on the charm,” she purred.

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The Quidditch match was more of a practice than a real game. An apple had been charmed and enlarged to Quaffle size while a Transfigured pair of golf balls served as Bludgers. Ron played Keeper for the north end of the field while Bill played Keeper for the south end. One twin played Beater for Bill’s team, the other playing for Ron, with Charlie and Harry playing Chaser. Ginny and Hannah Abbot played Chaser for Ron’s team. There was nothing serving as a Snitch substitute, so neither team needed a Seeker. Ron hooted wildly each time Harry shot and missed the goal, humming something that sounded a whole lot like *Weasley is our King* .

“This is good for him, Harry,” Ginny said, nodding in Ron’s direction as they took a water break.

“How’s that?” Harry asked.

“If he gets an abnormally big head he’ll make a better Keeper,” Fred said.

“All the better for blocking those Quaffles,” George added.

Harry walked up alongside Jasmine. “Having a good time?” he asked.

Jasmine put her hand on her chin, looking up at him. “Yeah, I am. Your friends are so nice,” she concluded.

“You sound surprised,” Harry said quietly.

“They’re so *normal* ,” she concluded. “Are most of these from your House at school?”

Harry surveyed the crowd that stretched from the orchard to the back steps of the Burrow. “Not exclusively – pretty much all of Dumbledore’s Army is here. Dumbledore’s Army was a Defence Against the Dark Arts club we started last year. No Slytherins to speak of, although a few of the adults from the Order were in that House when they were in school. Can I interest you in taking my place in Quidditch?” he asked, holding out his broom.

“Thanks, but no, I’ve got to get back to Abelard’s – formal dinner tonight and I’ve got to dress up like an adult,” she said, pulling a face.

“This isn’t dressy enough?” Harry asked, touching the edge of her grey silk scarf.

“Nah, tonight is a pearls, black dress and four-inch-high heels event. Bloody pain is what it is, but work is work. By the way – your room is bugged – the twins set up some sort of prank. Extendable Ears and a loudspeaker under your pillow,” Jasmine said, looking past Harry to scan the crowd. “You could start a nice juicy conversation and then light off a firecracker on each Extendable Ear,” she suggested.

“Thanks, but I’m fresh out of juicy – don’t worry, I’ll think of something. See you next week when the tutoring starts up again?” he asked.

“I’ll let you know when Abelard sets the new calendar.” She pulled his head down for a quick peck on his cheek. “Happy birthday, Harry. Enjoy the time off. I’ll see you next week,” she said, turning on her heel, walking back to the Burrow.

Harry gave his broom to a delighted Dean Thomas and began to work the crowd, shaking hands, laughing at lame jokes, taking an occasional hug from the more courageous female members of the D.A.. He could hear Mm’lau cluck at more than one of the students and several of the adult members of the Order. He made a mental note to ask what that was about.

Tell me about the one heading your way, Harry.

She’s a friendly – ex-girlfriend, to be precise.

You’ll have to explain that one to me at a later time. What about the one behind her?

Oh, her. I suppose she’s a friendly too.

Both of them are very worried. The one in front is apprehensive, but the one in back thinks you’re going to attack her.

Thanks for the warning, Mm’lau.

I live to serve.

Yeah, right. Well, the best defence is a good offence, I suppose.

“Cho!” Harry exclaimed in a voice slightly louder than was necessary, holding an arm out for a hug. Cho nestled in for a brief one-armed hug. “So good to see you. Marietta! I’m glad you came. Have people been treating you all right?” he asked in what he hoped was a friendly tone, looking at Marietta, who blinked and nodded.

“I didn’t think that I could get here, Harry, but Marietta insisted that we had to come if you invited us,” Cho explained.

“Actually, it was Mrs. Weasley that sent out the invitations. I made clear to her that I wanted all of the old D.A. to be invited,” Harry explained. Lowering his voice and bending his head lower a bit he said softly, “As far as I’m concerned, you’re still a member in good standing of the D.A.; we’re going to be starting up again next school year. Do you still have your Galleon?”

Marietta nodded, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Whether or not you come is up to you, but you’ll be welcome if you do,” Harry said soberly, reaching out to shake her hand.

Marietta burst into tears. "Thank you, Harry, happy birthday," she sobbed.

"Walk with me, Cho?" Harry asked.

"Certainly, Harry," Cho said with a puzzled look on her face. "What's up?"

"Luna Lovegood," Harry replied.

"Ravenclaw, two years behind me," Cho answered.

"Ravenclaw girls have been stealing her stuff."

"Oh? And why are you concerning yourself with Ravenclaw matters, Harry? What's she to you?"

"A friend; a friend who went with me to the Ministry of Magic last month. She acquitted herself well – she was the only one who wasn't injured by the end of the night. Listen, I know people think she's barmy, but as far as I'm concerned she's a credit to your house; her heart is good and she knows what's important," Harry concluded.

"And that's what is important to you, that she chose the right side?" Cho asked cagily.

"Yeah, I guess," Harry replied.

"I'll see what I can do," Cho answered.

"Thanks," Harry said, reaching down to give her hand a squeeze. To his surprise when he tried to let go, Cho intertwined her fingers with his, refusing to relinquish his hand.

Shall I scorch her, Harry?

Nah, I think I can handle this, but thanks for the offer.

Anytime.

They walked back to the Burrow together, Harry feeling incredibly self-conscious.

"I've got to go now, Harry," Cho said sadly, "prior engagement with my family. What you did with Marietta was very sweet, Harry, very Gryffindor." Cho released his hand and pivoted on one heel until she was facing him. Pushing her fingers lightly across his chest she pulled his head down for a sloppy kiss, releasing him and pivoting away towards the house. Looking over her shoulder she called out "Happy Birthday, Harry," flashing a brilliant smile.

Didn't see that one coming did you?

No, my shield is up what with the crowd that's here and I'm trying hard to not engage my Legilimency.

Privacy is one thing and survival is another. You can practice both Occlumency and Legilimency at the same time.

But these are my friends . . .

Better to practice with them than your enemies .

We'll talk about the ethics of that later, Mm'lau.

You have to be alive to feel guilty, Harry.

I'll think about it.

That's all I ask, Harry.

“Someone trying to mark her former territory?” Hermione asked as she came up and took him by the arm.

“Is that what it looked like?” Harry asked.

“Sure enough, my dim-witted brother. I think someone wants another chance to be Harry Potter’s girlfriend,” Hermione hissed.

“But, but what about Michael Corner?” Harry asked in a bewildered tone.

“Harry, she’s a Ravenclaw – they’re almost as bad as Slytherins when it comes to calculating the *utility* of relationships,” Hermione observed tartly. “I was standing next to Lavender Brown when that happened. She almost swooned from excitement. She’ll be talking this up for a while, Harry.”

“Oh, joy,” Harry moaned.

“Think of the bright side of this, Harry, at least this should put to rest the rumours that you prefer the attention of boys to girls,” Hermione said sweetly.

“Thanks ever so much, Hermione, you’re just making my day here,” Harry retorted.

“Anything for my darling brother, “ she said, reaching up to pinch his cheek. “Did you ever figure out if I was the big sister or the little sister?” she asked drolly.

“Tonks has the big sister gig tied up already. Notwithstanding the difference in our ages, I figured you more as a fraternal twin, given the way that you can figure out what’s going on inside my head,” Harry quipped.

“Oooh, Mum’s not going to care for that, that would mean that she was in labour for almost a year.”

“You’re a witch, figure something out,” Harry said.

Molly Weasley, ringing a hand bell, interrupted their conversation. “Can I have your attention, please? Dinner will be starting in five minutes,” she called. She swished her wand over the tables, which were now set with colourful table clothes (red, gold and green) and were heavily laden with food.

Harry dashed into the house, racing up the stairs to Ron’s room. He realized that Jasmine had already returned his satchel and school trunk to their normal size. He grabbed the satchel when he heard a commotion outside.

“Fred Weasley, you unhex my bike this instant!” Jasmine growled.

“What’s he done this time, dear?” Molly asked solicitously.

“A whoopee cushion is not standard equipment on this model!” Jasmine complained.

Fred and George were nervously looking for cover.

“Set it right, George,” Molly said, her lips held firmly together.

“But Mum,” he protested.

“I’m not interested in your finger pointing right now,” Molly said, raising her voice a notch in volume. “Just set it right. Jasmine is an honoured guest in this house and is not to be pranked, do you two understand?”

“Yes, Mum,” they chorused. The twins performed a tandem motion with their wands.

Jasmine turned the key again, getting a far more conventional noise from her motorbike as she rode away. Harry smiled as she rode away. The twins were in fine form, all was right in the Burrow – it was such a marvellous place.

~+~

Mum had outdone herself with dinner. There were two meats, five vegetables, numerous fruit trays, flagons of cold milk, pumpkin juice and Butterbeer, and never-empty baskets of fresh, warm rolls. Ginny had worked the seating so that she was seated between Hermione and Neville, directly across the table from Harry. Harry was flanked by Ron on one side and Luna on the other. Keeping Harry fed was not problem from this vantage point, provided that Ron didn’t empty the platters before they reached Harry. On more than one occasion she poked her brother’s hand with a fork to remind him who was the guest of honour at this meal. The smiles were no problem, she was genuinely happy. It was the eye contact that was proving troublesome. Harry’s green eyes made her want to bolt from the table, blushing like only a Weasley could. She struggled for poise, managed to return eye contact from time to time, and even winked once or twice when it seemed right.

Ginny was an accomplished people watcher and eavesdropper extraordinaire. There were a number of very interesting conversations going on that she desperately wanted to follow. She tried to let them pass, to keep her focus on Harry, but she simply couldn't resist listening around.

"We ran surveillance for the better part of a week until we figured out that it was the House Elves lighting and extinguishing the fireplaces; there were no humans at the house and certainly no Death Eaters," Tonks complained to the stout lady Auror to her left.

"Previously I'd thought that having someone else's tongue in my mouth would be singularly unpleasant, but I was wrong," Luna confided to someone – was it Lavender or Parvati? – seated just beyond Ginny's peripheral vision. *Well, someone's been having an eventful holiday*, Ginny thought.

"Needless to say, I was caught by surprise. I haven't been slapped by a lady for nearly 100 years," Dumbledore said in a breathy voice to someone unseen behind her. *What? Someone slapped Dumbledore?*

"Actually, Ron, your Mum's breasts are much better," Harry confided, and Ginny's attention was instantly recaptured. "The ones at school are often dried out and stringy." Ginny stifled a chuckle; she *did* agree with Harry that Mum's chicken breasts *were* much better than those served at Hogwarts. She resolved to get her mind out of the gutter and to keep her attention on the conversations that mattered.

The feeding frenzy subsided and the entire room seemed to relax, satisfied. Ron was eyeing the chocolate cake with sixteen emerald green candles that sat on the buffet table, next to the overflowing bin of birthday presents. If Harry was going to unwrap all of those, Ginny worried that it might take past midnight.

"I'm not going to open them tonight," Harry said in a stage whisper, catching Ginny's attention completely. "It would take too long."

"Are you practicing Legilimency right now, Harry?" Ginny asked in a softer whisper.

He furrowed his brows. "I don't think so. I saw you looking at the bin of presents and then you pulled a face," he explained. He closed his eyes briefly. Ginny felt a delicious warmth brush briefly against her mind and then withdraw. She saw him open those gorgeous green eyes again. "Ginny, you need to pull your shield up. If you're around this many people and you start to use your Legilimency, even unconsciously, you'll go bonkers."

"I'll go mad?" she asked, alarmed.

"Well, not mad as in loony, but you *will* get a whanging headache," he answered.

"How do I do that?" she whispered.

"Tell Tk'lch to pull your shield up for the evening. At your convenience you can tell him to show

you how it's done," Harry explained.

Ginny nodded. She made sure that she looked him in the eyes when she smiled. *This is going to kill me before the night is over*, she decided, and closed her eyes.

Tk'lch ?

Yes, Mammal?

Call me by name. I don't call you 'dragon' any more.

Yes, Ginevra?

I walked into that one, I suppose. As far as you are concerned, my name is Ginny. Pull my Occlumency shield up for the evening, would you please?

As you wish, Madam.

Thank you, Tk'lch.

A calm passed across Ginny's consciousness as the buzz she'd felt inside her head disappeared. She opened her eyes again.

"It worked. I felt your shield go up," Harry said with pride. Ginny mouthed 'Thank you'.

Mrs. Weasley banished Harry's plate, and floated the truck-tyre-sized cake into place in front of him. With a flick of her wand the sixteen candles ignited. A hush fell over the crowd as all eyes turned to Harry. Ginny noted the glistening in his eyes – Harry wasn't far from losing it. Arthur appeared at his elbow, looking across the table at Ginny.

"I'd like to thank you all for coming today. Harry's asked that we skip the happy birthday song, but I will take this moment to say how happy Molly and I are to have the opportunity to recognize Harry. We couldn't love him more if he had been born to us. Happy birthday, son," Arthur said, his face beaming.

Mrs. Weasley placed her hand warmly on Harry's shoulder. "You know what to do, dear."

Harry took a deep breath and blew out the candles. He looked at Fred and George tentatively; Ginny figured that he was waiting for the candles to relight or the cake to explode. When all remained still, he broke into a broad smile. The guests cheered, and Fred led a round of 'huzzah's.

Harry passed the cake knives and serving tools to Ron and Hermione. "Would you do me the honour of cutting and serving?" he asked formally.

Hermione nodded, but asked him,. "Where are you going?"

Harry's smile seemed inextinguishable. "I've got presents to give out."

“You nutter,” Ron interjected. “It’s *your* birthday! You’re supposed to *open* the presents, not *give them out* !”

“Yeah, well, I never let things like rules stand in the way of having a good time,” Harry replied with a smirk.

Hermione looked longingly at the satchel. “That’s a Dyson’s bag, isn’t it?”

Harry smiled and nodded. “Much bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.”

“I’ve wanted one of those for ages, but they are frightfully expensive,” Hermione said as she skilfully cut a wedge of cake.

“Maybe Christmas will come early this year, eh Hermione?” Harry said over his shoulder as he moved down the table, pulling neatly wrapped presents out of the bag as he went. Some of the packages were normally sized while others had shrink dots affixed; Harry tossed the dots into the satchel as he removed them. He appeared to be having the time of his life, as he joked, talked and passed out gaily-wrapped packages to the D.A. members and adult members of the Order seated at the table. When he got to the spot where Arthur and Molly sat, he pulled out a good-sized package for Arthur and two envelopes for Molly. He whispered something into Molly’s ear, and Ginny wished – not for the first time that evening – for an Extendable Ear.

Harry made his way back to his place at the table, chatting away with Neville and Luna while Ron and Hermione continued to cut apart the enormous cake. Harry pulled out a slender package for Hermione, and a thick package for Ron accompanied by another envelope. Ginny tried to read the outside of the envelope; but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t get her eyes to focus. *Humph. Eyes-only ink – the charm’s supposed to be incredibly difficult. I wonder if Harry had help with it?*

Harry stopped in front of Ginny. “I didn’t get a chance to wrap yours, I’m sorry,” he said. She was oh-so-glad that there were no butter dishes on the table at the moment.

“That’s okay, Harry, I wasn’t expecting a present in the first place,” she replied. Eye contact was not an option; she stared resolutely at the satchel.

“Well... here, I thought you’d like this,” he said awkwardly, as he pulled an odd looking miniature broom from his bag and thrust it into Ginny’s hand.

“Thanks, Harry, this will go nicely with my doll house,” Ginny improvised, hoping that Ron wouldn’t tell Harry that Ginny’s doll house had been the casualty of a Fred and George experiment when she was twelve. She kept her eyes lowered, but forced a smile. *Why did he go and get me a toy broom?*

“It’s not a toy. Hold onto the broom while I pluck this thread,” Harry said. He deftly pinched a dark black thread stuck against the handle. Ginny shrieked and nearly dropped the broom as it transformed into its full size. She goggled at the racing broom in her hands. Her mouth moved,

but no sound came out.

“You’re welcome,” Harry said. His eyes twinkled as he smiled at her, which assured that she remained speechless. “That’s a Fashir – it’s an excellent racing broom – I hope you like it.” He turned away, and added, “Budge over, Luna; I’d like to get some cake.”

Harry broke off a large chunk of cake, shoving it into his mouth and closing his eyes as the frosting and the cake began to dissolve together, opening his eye again as he swallowed. “No one cooks like Mrs. Weasley,” he said to no one in particular. He looked up and down the table, and suddenly stood on his chair. “Fred, George?” he called. “Could you pass out the cake?”

“Sure thing, Harry,” George said, giving Fred a knowing glance. With a choreographed swish of wands, slices of cake on paper plates raced around the table and settled down in front of amused and thankful guests. Ginny thought her mother showed something much closer to relief.

“They’re getting better at that,” Ron said to Hermione.

“Er, could I have your attention?” Harry called out in a loud voice, “I’d like to thank the Weasleys for doing this, with special thanks to Mrs. Weasley for the wonderful food. If you leave hungry today, it’s your own fault. There’s more of everything, including potato salad,” he said, giving Ginny a faint wink. A brief round of applause started and Harry joined in. Molly rose quickly, blushed, and then sat down again. “It’s time to eat this wonderful cake. If you haven’t already, open your presents. I’m going to open mine tomorrow,” he said, nodding his head in the direction of the overflowing bin. “After cake and presents, I’d like to say a few words, and then I guess that’s it.”

Harry sat down, and speared another forkful of chocolate cake. “You are going to help me open all those tomorrow, aren’t you?” he asked Ginny.

“Yeah... sure... of course,” she stammered.

Tonks came up from behind Harry, two large bowls in hand. “Harry, a word please?” she asked.

“Sure thing, Sis,” Harry replied with a smirk.

“Whydja give me bowls, Harry?” Tonks asked plaintively.

Harry screwed up his face, looking much like Tonks did before a transformation. “Give them a tap with your wand,” he said.

Tonks tapped the rim of the top bowl. As she did so, bold white lettering began to appear on the blue border that ran around the rim. The lettering read ‘Moony’s Kibble.’ Harry pulled the top bowl out and Tonks tapped the rim of the bottom bowl. The lettering on that bowl spelled out ‘Moony’s Water.’ Tonks flushed slightly and snorted loudly.

Harry reached into the second bowl and handed Tonks the book that lay flat on the bottom of the bowl. Tonks opened the book and began to read aloud the title. “*Taming the Moon ... a guide to*

the brewing and handling of... Wolfsbane Potion..." she said. Her jaw quivered, and she swallowed hard.

"Take care of him, Tonks, he's all I have left of my folks," Harry whispered.

Tonks and gathered the book and bowls together, and looked around desperately for someone who wasn't there. She glanced at her watch, muttered something, and Disapparated.

"Harry, that was... really something," Hermione sniffed. She held up a slender book, and added, "While you're offering explanations, Harry, what is this?" The cover was ornately embossed with the letters D – H – B. She turned the book in order to read the spine.

"I'm shocked! You don't recognise *Deductore Hogwartis Bibliothecalis*?" Harry teased.

Hermione frowned. "I can *read* the title, Harry. Why have I never come across this before?" she wondered aloud, and her cheeks pinked.

"I'm not sure that Hogwarts has a copy, and if they do, it's surely not the sort of thing that Madam Pince would let out to students," Harry smirked. "It's from Abelard's private collection. You hold the book, speak your question aloud, and then open the book. It'll show you a list of books in the Hogwarts library that answer the question."

"Wicked," Ron breathed.

Harry reached out and placed his hand on the back of the book. "How can I safely breathe underwater?" he asked. He gave a sidelong glance at the list that formed on the parchment page.

"One of them must be *Magical Plants of the Mediterranean*," he said. "I *really* could have used this fourth year."

"That's right," Hermione said, without tearing her eyes from the book. "That's odd... it also lists *Hogwarts – A History* ... but it's referencing... a new edition, due in November!"

"Put it on your Christmas list," Harry volunteered.

"I don't think so, mate; she's already got three copies," Ron complained.

"So?" Hermione snapped.

Harry sighed at his two friends. "I would so appreciate it if you two could restrain yourselves until after we're done here. Is that too much to ask?"

Hermione nodded, but Ron protested weakly. "Just a healthy discussion, Harry – where's the harm in that?"

"Yeah, right. You goad her with something you know she can't resist. She comes after you in the way that only she can, and before you know it, the two of you are both red in the face and the rest

of us have floppy eardrums from all the shouting,” Harry groaned.

“We’re not that bad... are we?” Ron asked.

Neville reached across the table twining his fingers with Luna’s. “Erm... Ron... you are. The first years were calling you Lord and Lady Bickers.” *Okay, so that’s what’s happening for Luna*, Harry thought. *Good - she could do a lot worse than Neville.*

Luna sniggered. “Open your present, *Ronald*,” she said, looking past him in a distracted way.

“What’s this, Harry?” Ron asked as he ripped the paper off of a large binder.

“What does it look like?” Harry replied glibly. “It’s the play-book from Puddlemere United – Oliver Wood got it for me.”

“*Puddlemere?*” Ron gasped. “I mean... it’s brilliant, of course, but... it *had* to be Puddlemere, didn’t it...?” He seemed torn between revulsion and desire, but settled on the latter and flung open the cover.

Harry dug deep into his pocket, and pulled out a thumb-sized silver shield. He plunked it down atop the first page of the playbook. “I figure you’ll put it to good use, *Captain*,” he grinned.

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. Ron’s eyes widened, and he waved the shield furiously. “*Bugger all! I’m Gryffindor Quidditch Captain?*” he shrieked.

“Ron, language,” Hermione protested in a half-hearted manner, before she took the badge from him and looked at it closely. She smiled at Ron with pride.

The bell-like sound of silverware tapping a drinking glass began to chime, spreading across the table.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“It’s a Muggle custom. At a wedding supper it’s a sign for the bride and groom to kiss; at any other affair it’s a signal that the guest of honour is supposed to give a speech,” Hermione explained.

Harry looked right and then left. “Well, I guess it’s time for me to have my say.” He stood up on his chair, and then sat lightly on the top of the chair’s back. He took off his glasses, fiddling with them for a moment before putting them into his pocket. Everyone quieted when he began to speak. “I guess the joke at Gryffindor Tower is that no matter how lousy things are, if you ask me how I am, I’ll tell you that I’m fine.”

“How are you, Harry?” Laurel shouted from under the tree. She was nursing a tall-necked bottle of something blue.

Harry took a deep breath. “I’m not fine, but I’m getting better. Thanks for asking, Laurel. A very

wise witch told me once that I needed to stop shutting out my friends when things got bad, and I've been trying to take her advice. I... I want to thank everyone who has been writing over the summer – you really have no idea how much your letters have meant to me. I'd also like to thank the members of the Little Whinging Bicycle Club. I've enjoyed your company as I've been riding the roads of Surrey.” He paused, and surveyed the crowd of well-wishers. “All of you are my friends. Some of you I've just met this summer, others I've known for as long as I've been a part of the Wizarding world. One of the things that friends do for each other is tell the truth. I need to tell you the truth about something now – about a prophecy that was made before I was born.”

Harry fidgeted. “Voldemort's back –” he started in, provoking a few gasps and a shriek from somewhere in the audience. “For those of you who don't care for *that* name, he was a boy named Tom Riddle when he studied at Hogwarts –”

“Blimey, Harry, you sure know how to set the mood for a great evening, don't you,” Ron whispered forcefully.

“ – and even the Daily Prophet and the Ministry of Magic admit that he's back after what happened at the Ministry of Magic. What the Ministry of Magic won't tell you, and what the Daily Prophet doesn't know, is that Riddle broke into the Department of Mysteries to steal the official copy of a prophecy that concerns two people: me and Tom Riddle. That's who Voldemort really is, you see? Anyway, the copy of the prophecy was destroyed in the scuffle, but I've heard a bootleg copy of it just the same. Before I was born, it was predicted that I would have the power to destroy Riddle. In the end... it's got to be either him or me.”

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The previously attentive crowd began to speak all at once. If a bomb had gone off just then it would not have been noticed in all the confusion. Ginny felt sick. She wanted to scream, she wanted to grab Harry and shake him until he told her everything, but most of all she wanted the clamour to stop. She stuck her fingers in her mouth in the way that Bill had taught her when she was five, and let loose an ear-shattering whistle. “All right, you lot, settle down!” she shouted in the calm that followed her whistle. “Five questions, max, then we're done,” she said, looking briefly to Harry, who seemed visibly relieved.

Padma Patil spoke first. “Can you tell us the prophecy verbatim?” she asked.

“That wouldn't be a good idea,” Harry answered. “There are bits that he knows and bits that he doesn't know. I'd like to keep him in the dark about the bits he doesn't know thus far.”

“Can you say who wins in the end?” Anthony Goldstein asked.

“I wish I could, but the prophecy doesn't say. It says that I have the power to vanquish him, but it doesn't tell me how, or even if I'll succeed. But in the end, one of us has to die. In Quidditch terms, he's been having a lousy season; he's tried to kill me five times thus far and failed each time, so he's Five-Nil down so far,” Harry said calmly, as if he were discussing the prospects of the Canons.

Neville raised his hand. Harry gave him a nod. “Why are you telling us all this, Harry?” he asked plaintively.

“Because I’m tired of secrets and lies,” Harry said firmly. I’ve had a lifetime of that, all from people who thought they were *protecting* me. Because I’d like to know if the shoe were on the other foot and it was a prophecy about you, Neville. Because - because I want to give you the chance to stay away if you want, rather than being sucked into this just because you’re my friend.”

Ginny watched the telltale signs. Harry was gripping the back of the chair, hard. His knuckles were white. He was blinking rapidly; he was coming very close to losing it just then.

“I’m with you, Harry,” Neville volunteered, raising his glass in a salute.

“To Harry, I’m with you, mate, always have been,” Ron shouted, raising an echoing chorus of raised glasses and voices. “To Harry!”

“I move,” said Fred Weasley in an old codger’s voice, “that any dying be done by Tom Riddle, seeing as he’s a wretched loser who’s lived long enough.”

“I second the motion,” said George Weasley in a tremulous falsetto.

“The motion has been moved and seconded – the chair calls for a vote,” Fred Weasley said in a spot on impersonation of the Muggle Prime Minister.

“All in favour of Tom Riddle doing the dying instead of our good friend, Harry Potter, say ‘Aye,’” said Ron, joining in the spirit of the twins’ levity.

A rousing chorus of “Aye” came from the crowd with some clapping and table thumping to accompany the vote.

“All opposed?” Ron called.

There was an instant silence across the crowd.

“Let the secretary so record the vote,” said George in a wheezy voice.

Ginny leaned over to Hermione. “Did you know about any of this?” she asked in a whisper.

“Not a clue,” Hermione said. “Birthday or no, that boy owes me an explanation.”

How long has this been hanging over his head? Ginny wondered. All his life, I guess, but I wonder how long he’s known about the prophecy. If Hermione doesn’t get him to talk, I certainly will , she resolved.

“Thanks, guys,” Harry said to the twins, “I can always count on you two. No more questions, no more remarks. For all you students, if I don’t see you in Diagon Alley, I’ll see you on the train. You’ve still got four more weeks of holiday – make it count!”

Harry climbed down from his chair, wiping his forehead before he put his glasses back on. Bill Weasley stood, clanging his own water glass with a fork.

“Before you all head off tonight, I’d like to make an announcement,” Bill said, loud enough to be heard. “Most of you know that I’ve been seeing Fleur Delacour over the last year.” Fleur stood, linking her arm with Bill’s arm. “Last week I asked her to marry me. She said yes.” Several gasps and squeals were heard from various parts of the crowd, along with a few cries of “well done” and “about time.” Lavender Brown’s distinctive voice could be heard above the din as she examined Fleur’s hand, commenting on her engagement ring to Parvati.

Ginny looked to Harry’s place, but he was gone. Ron was plodding back to the house, no doubt stashing his playbook and badge for safekeeping. Ginny shrugged and moved into the queue to congratulate her brother and sister-in-law to be.

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Ron slipped into the kitchen; his Mum and Dad were already there.

“Mum, Dad, you got notes from Harry?” he asked. Molly nodded. The note had read “Meet me in the kitchen after Bill’s announcement.”

“So, Dad, what did you get from Harry?” Ron asked, trying to make conversation. He still felt odd in light of Harry’s stunning disclosure. Part of him knew that it was coming, but another part of him felt like he was a failure. How could he not know what burden his best friend had been carrying over the past month? What kind of friend was he that he missed something this big?

“A marvellous book on how to repair Muggle appliances. You?” his dad answered.

“Puddlemere United playbook. Harry dropped off my new badge too,” Ron said with a beatific smile.

“Did you lose your prefect badge, Ron?” his mother asked solicitously.

Ron’s smile grew even brighter. “No, it’s my Quidditch Captain’s badge, Mum. Harry dropped it off for Professor McGonagall.”

“Oh, Ron, I’m so proud,” Molly gushed.

“Well done, son!” Arthur exclaimed.

“How about you, Mum? What did you get?” Ron asked.

Molly reached into her apron pocket and passed a folded piece of parchment to her son. There was a single line, written in a bold and unfamiliar hand: “Percy will be home for Christmas.” The note was signed “Abelard.”

“Abelard’s Harry’s tutor, right?” Ron asked.

Molly's lip quivered. "If Abelard saw it... it will happen," she said quietly.

"You're... you're okay with that, Mum?" Ron asked tentatively.

"We're more than okay with that, son," Arthur replied, and gently slipped his arm around Molly's waist.

"I'll talk to the boys about it then," Ron said seriously. "We were planning on using Percy as a human Bludger if he ever showed his face again."

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"Hello, all," Harry said, pushing the door from the dining room open. "Could you please seal the door, Mrs. Weasley? I don't want to be interrupted and I don't want to be overheard."

"Certainly, Harry dear," Molly replied, flicking her wand at the window and doors.

Ron nudged Harry as he told him seriously, "Hermione's going to have your head for keeping the whole prophecy thing from us all summer."

"Yeah, tell her to get in line. I wasn't ready before, and this is not the sort of thing that you share in a letter," Harry explained.

"But with the entire party?" Ron protested.

"I had my reasons, Ron, trust me on this one," Harry said gravely.

"Your note said that you wanted to see us, Harry?" Arthur opened.

"Yeah, I needed to talk to you all – and the longer I put it off the greater the chance that I'd lose my nerve," Harry said, swallowing hard. He looked around the room, avoiding direct eye contact, resting his gaze at last on the Weasley family clock. "It's about your daughter."

"Ginny, " Molly asked, her voice cracking slightly. "Is she okay?"

"Uh, she was fine when I left her at the table," Harry replied obliviously. He looked down at the floor and then at his hands. "This isn't easy to say . . ." he began.

"What about Ginny?" Arthur asked, placing his hands over each other on the edge of the table.

"I guess – I – uh – fancy her," Harry stammered. "I wanted to ask what you lot thought of my – uh – getting to know her better."

Arthur relaxed his grip the table, taking a deep breath. "I take it that we are not discussing dowry tonight."

Harry blushed. "Uh, yeah, that would be correct, sir," Harry said, voice cracking.

“Are you informing us, Harry, or asking our permission?” Arthur asked thoughtfully.

“I guess I’m – uh, the latter,” Harry replied.

“And if we say no?” Arthur countered.

“Arthur!” Molly exclaimed.

“Does this have something to do with dancing with Ginny at Sirius’ wake?” Ron asked.

“Something to do with that, yes,” Harry said evasively. Looking back at Arthur he replied, “If you say no, that will be the end of it, I reckon. I’m not going to try to come between Ginny and her family.”

“Does this have something to do with the Prophecy?” Arthur asked quietly.

“Dumbledore thinks so,” Harry said, looking down at his feet. “I prefer to think of it as getting on with my life rather than putting everything on hold while I figure out how to rid the world of Tom Riddle.” Harry reached out for a glass, filling it with water. He fiddled with the glass like he didn’t know what to do with his hands.

“Harry, Ron, could you excuse us for a moment? Molly and I are in need of a private discussion,” Arthur said, running his hand through his thinning hair.

“Sure, Dad,” Ron said, leaning against the door. “Uh, Mum, could you unseal the door, please?”

Harry followed Ron out the door wordlessly.

Ron turned, placing his hand gently on the door. “Sealed again,” he said, smiling broadly. “I don’t need the ‘inner eye’ to know that Mum and Dad will be having a blazing row within minutes.”

“What?” Harry asked, blinking furiously.

“You look like Hedwig when you do that,” Ron said, leaning against the dining room dish cupboard.

“When I do what?” Harry snapped.

“When you stare at me, blinking away like mad,” Ron replied. “I said they’d be having a row. Mum’s wanted to match you up with Ginny since our first year. If I know her, she’s already knitting tiny booties and jumpers. Dad, on the other hand, is probably pitching a fit about putting his only daughter one step away from - from - Tom Riddle. Crikey, Harry, you scared the stuffing out of us with the prophecy!”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, his eyes glazing over.

“Stop it!” Ron hissed.

“Stop what?” Harry said, looking as if he’d been slapped.

“Being sorry for everything, you pillock.” Ron was silent for a while, and then he coughed. “So, you turned McGonagall down when she offered you the Captaincy?”

“Katie Bell turned her down first, she’s studying for N.E.W.T.s. I turned her down because I thought I’d make a rotten captain, plus I can’t play Seeker, teach the D.A. and try to be Quidditch Captain with L-plates. It’s like you said – I’m tactics – I know nil about strategy. That left you, mate,” Harry said, looking up at Ron.

“Thanks,” Ron said quietly.

Harry snorted and smiled.

“No, I mean it, “ Ron said with exasperation. “I’ve got to start working on the training schedule.”

“That’s what McGonagall said,” Harry replied. “Oh, yeah, before I forget. There’s going to be a dance or a ball or something at the end of October. Professor McGonagall wanted me to remind you that prefects are supposed to have dates. I think her exact words were: ‘Please ensure that Mr. Weasley does not procrastinate as he did during your fourth year. Girls with choices don’t wait forever.’”

“Blimey!” Ron said, “I don’t know what’s scarier, knowing that she said that or that you can mimic her voice perfectly.”

“Better ask her tonight,” Harry said.

“Who?” Ron asked nervously.

“Now who’s sounding like an owl? Who? Hermione, of course - that’s who! If you let it go until the last minute, I think she’ll bust every window in the castle when she lets go on you,” Harry snorted.

“Do you think she’d say yes?” Ron asked.

“I’m going to hurt you if you ask me that question again. In fact, I’m going to put spiders in your bed if you don’t ask her tonight,” Harry said, looking over the rim of his glasses.

“You going to ask Ginny?” Ron asked.

“Depends on what happens when your mum and dad stop screaming at each other,” Harry said wryly.

“Usually they make up and then – well, they start snogging,” Ron said soberly. “Weasley temper is a furious thing, but they don’t like to stay mad at their mates.”

“So, they could be snogging away in there right now and we’d never know it,” Harry complained.

“Yup, privacy’s hard to come by when the house is small and the family is large.”

“Ron, that is way too much information,” Harry said, taking his glasses off, polishing them on his shirt.

“All of us Weasley kids have stories about times we’ve stumbled onto Mum and Dad being uh - *friendly*. They are pretty irrepressible actually,” Ron said proudly.

Ron startled as he heard the sound of someone tripping in the hallway. A moment later, Tonks poked her head into the dining room.

“Ah, there you are, Harry,” she said, giving Ron a wink. “You up for being a dog again tonight? Moony wants to go out to play.”

“He’s transformed already?” Harry asked with concern in his voice.

“Yeah, he’s up in Percy’s old room. We’re waiting for the crowd to thin out from the party before we let him out,” Tonks replied.

“Might as well,” Harry said, looking at the kitchen door. “I don’t think they’re coming out anytime soon. Ron, let them know that I’m not just haring off. We’ll finish this up in the morning, eh?”

“Sure thing, Harry,” Ron replied.

“C’mon, Harry, it’s time to get *beastly* for your birthday,” Tonks said saucily.

“Sure thing, Tonks,” he said.

He followed Tonks up the stairs, maintaining his distance in case she tripped. Percy’s old room was dark when she opened the door, illuminated only by moonlight. The only piece of furniture in the room was a mattress lying on the floor. On top of the mattress was a large silver coloured wolf, panting slowly. As they entered the room, he raised his head and gazed at them with intelligent, golden eyes. Tonks knelt and pressed the massive head against her. The wolf gave a high-pitched whistling sound.

“Shhh, Moony, we’ll have you out of the house in a moment,” Tonks said soothingly.

The wolf placed his head on his paws, closed his eyes and sighed loudly.

Tonks stood, unfolding a parchment from her pocket. Sticking it quickly to the wall, she tapped it several times with her wand. Lines, figures and dots appeared on the parchment; it was a fifty-kilometre map of the area surrounding the Burrow. Tapping the map once more an irregular green line appeared that surrounded the farmland adjacent to the Burrow. “This line, more or less, is the security border. Among other things, it’s an Anti-Apparation border. Before we let you out, both

you and Moony will be wearing collars. If things get dodgy, we activate the collars and you'll Portkey back to the Burrow. When you're a dog you'll be able to see the border. If Moony's memory is correct, you're a fair sized dog," Tonks said with a smile.

"I'm still small compared to Moony," Harry complained.

"Relax bro, you're still growing." She took Harry's glasses from his face, tucking them into a pouch on her waist. At the same time, she fished a small round tin out of the pouch.

"Transfiguration salve," she explained as she carefully daubed some onto his forehead, taking care to rub it into his scar.

Harry heard Mm'lau gasp at the back of his consciousness before he felt the now familiar stinging as the salve took hold. He was a dog again.

~+~

Getting the now-Transfigured Harry and Remus out of the house and safely released into the open country surrounding the Burrow was not particularly easy. In the twilight she looked like a woman walking two dogs: one large, one enormous. She almost got away without comment when Ginny and Hermione waylaid her.

"Tonks, what are you doing walking Abelard's dog?" she asked, kneeling down to pat the shaggy white dog. Harry lolled his tongue and wagged his tail, like a good-natured dog.

"This isn't Rosie," Tonks replied.

Hermione stared at the two canines. "That's Harry and that's – uh – Moony, isn't it?" Hermione whispered.

"Right in one," Tonks replied. "You needn't worry, both of these are fairly harmless if left alone. I'd love to chat, but Moony has to get away from all these people and *Roscoe* here needs to keep him company." She knelt down and unlatched the leashes from both collars; first Moony's leash then Harry's. The wolf took off like a greyhound with the dog following in close pursuit. A moment later the sound of barking was heard far off in the rolling hills leading away from the river.

"Oi, Hermione," Ron called. "Your Mum fire-called saying that you need to be getting home. Can I walk you back?"

"Sure, Ron," Hermione answered. "Ginny, I'll write tomorrow morning – we need to finish this conversation.

"Sure thing," Ginny replied with a bit of a sad note to her voice, falling back to match Tonks' languid pace as Hermione and Ron beat a quick retreat to the Burrow.

"Care for a bit of a walk before you turn in?" Tonks asked pleasantly.

“I’d love it,” Ginny replied.

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Molly sat alone at the kitchen table. Her discussion with her husband had been exhausting. She’d argued, begged, pleaded, cajoled and discussed the issue to death. Arthur’s *rational* arguments had been fairly easy to dispatch; it was his fear of Ginny getting hurt, by Harry, or by being close to Harry, that had been hard to dispel. She pointed out – after she stopped screaming – that Ginny would be of age in eighteen months, and it was a foregone conclusion that if the War were still ongoing, she would be inducted into the Order of the Phoenix. Next she played the guilt and honour card – but for Harry, there wouldn’t be a Ginny Weasley to worry over; their daughter would be dead on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets. Harry was an honourable lad, and he appeared to have feelings for Ginny and she for him. It was better for things to be out in the open where they could keep an eye on the relationship, wherever it may go. She’d ended the discussion sitting in Arthur’s lap. *Thank goodness for Silencing and Imperturbable charms .*

After concluding their row, they walked the grounds together, hand in hand, making sure that the house was ready to close down for the night. She’d suggested that he take a shower before she joined him in bed. She had a lot of energy left and wasn’t particularly interested in sleeping. As the pipes to the upstairs shower began to clank, she summoned quill, ink and parchment, and dashed off a quick note.

My dear Harry,

I hope you enjoyed your birthday. It was certainly a memorable event, even if it was much larger than you would have preferred. Arthur and I finished our discussion after you’d already left to be with Remus, so I thought I’d jot down this note to let you know how things turned out.

Arthur and I are extremely fond of you, and grant you our blessing on getting to know Ginevra better. We can discuss practical concerns later this week, perhaps after dinner some night over coffee. It seems odd to be writing a note to someone living under my roof, but I’m realistic enough to know that with tomorrow’s schedule I may not see you again until after lunchtime and I didn’t want to leave you in suspense.

With all my love,

Molly

Molly blotted the parchment, folded it in half and then in half again, carrying it up the stairs. She nipped into Ginny’s room, and slipped the note into the Passbox. She bent over to kiss Ginny’s forehead; Ginny stirred contentedly in her sleep.

“Goodnight, dear... do we ever have things to discuss in the morning.”

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It was Molly's practice to wake early. She could count on one hand the number of times she had slept past 5:00 a.m. since the birth of her youngest child. Today was no exception to that trend. She pulled her summer-weight dressing gown on over her very comfortable night-gown and padded down the stairs towards the kitchen. Something was amiss; to her great surprise, Tonks was sitting at the kitchen table, parchments spread out in front of her, quill scratching away. The kitchen smelled of coffee, tea and fresh scones. Tonks looked up as Molly entered the kitchen, flashing her a crooked smile.

"G'morning, Molly. Coffee's in the carafe, tea's in the pot, scones are in the basket. None of it is as good as yours, but this is as good as it gets when I'm feeling domestic," Tonks said wearily.

"Why aren't you in bed?" Molly asked with concern.

"Remus came in with Harry at 2:00 a.m. – I stayed with Remus until he transformed, then I came down here," Tonks said, looking away from Molly's gaze, slightly embarrassed.

"I thought that you and Remus . . ." Molly said, interrupting herself.

"Molly, I'm madly in love with him but I – I wouldn't, not under your roof. Besides, we haven't, you know . . ." Tonks said haltingly, rolling her eyes towards the stairwell.

Molly nodded, sitting down carefully. She poured a cup of tea and reached for a scone. It wasn't as good as her best scones, but it was tasty, warm and had a wonderful texture; definitely a good scone. "So, how did the transformation go?" she asked after washing down a bite of scone with some hot tea.

"About as well as can be expected. They classify it as a curse for a reason," Tonks said, sipping from her own coffee mug.

"How's Harry?" Molly asked, feeling a pang of guilt for not staying up to finish their interrupted conversation. She took a long swallow of tea.

"He's fine. He's in bed with Ginny right now," Tonks said with the straightest of faces.

Molly sprayed tea across the table.

Tonks looked up with an innocent expression. "Did I mention that he's still a dog?"

"No!" Molly shouted, throwing the remainder of her scone at Tonks. Tonks caught the scone but managed to knock over her nearly empty coffee mug while doing so.

"Here, let me," Tonks said apologetically. "The whole mess is my fault anyway. The expression on your face was priceless though," Tonks said with a broad grin.

Molly arched one eyebrow. "Is there a reason my daughter has a dog sleeping on her bed?"

"Ron wasn't home when Remus and Harry arrived. I figured that Harry shouldn't be alone while

he was Transfigured, so I pushed Ginny’s door open. Harry got the hint, hopped to the foot of her bed, turned around three times and was out like the proverbial light,” Tonks said.

Molly nodded.

“Ron came in at 4:00 a.m.; he went home with Hermione and ended up spending the night playing a Muggle game with her dad – table tennis. Seems he wanted to ask Hermione to the next Hogwarts dance, but had to beat her dad at this game before he’d give his permission. Ron played twenty-one sets before he finally beat Albert,” Tonks reported.

“Ron told you all this?” Molly asked incredulously.

“Nah, Monica called by Floo about five minutes after Ron came stumbling home, hoping to catch you – I took good notes and told her that you’d call her after 9:00 a.m. – I hope I wasn’t being too presumptuous,” Tonks said with a wink.

“No dear, that’s fine,” Molly said, staring off into the distance. “Go to bed early one night and my youngest children start carrying on,” she complained.

“Molly! I would hardly consider Ron spending the night with his girlfriend’s *dad* as carrying on; as to Ginny, she probably doesn’t even know that Harry’s there,” Tonks protested. “I’m going to go move Harry, transfigure him back to his normal form and let him sleep it off in Ron’s room.”

“Thanks, Tonks,” Molly said, furrowing her brows. “Tonks?”

“Yes, Molly?”

“Should I serve his breakfast in big ceramic bowls on the floor?”

Tonks stood still for a moment as if she were giving the notion serious thought. “I’ll let you know how his guardian takes to that notion,” she said with a smirk. “But it is good to plan ahead – the best pranks are very well planned.”

“Yes, I know,” Molly said sombrely, “I have plenty of experience on that front.”

“I imagine you do.”

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Author’s notes: Yup, this is still covered by the disclaimer in the Prologue.

In England novice drivers have a red “L” affixed to the front and rear bumper of their cars, indicating that they really don’t know what they are doing. These are called “L-plates.”

For my view of lycanthropy, I am greatly indebted to *The Compleat Werewolf* by Anthony Boucher. In traditional mythology, werewolves were big wolves, not wolf-man characters. Lupin says in PoA (p. 353, American Edition) that with Wolfsbane, he retains his mind after the

transformation and is a peaceful wolf. Real wolves *are* peaceable, unless threatened or engaged in hunting; most wolves will avoid humans if at all possible.

Yeah, it's been a while since I last updated. Hopefully the length of this instalment makes up for the delay. I started writing this tale to give me something positive to work on in the midst of a turbulent family situation. June was a bit rough at our house. No promises on the next instalment, but I think by now you can trust me that I'm not just popping Prozac and sipping drinks with paper parasols.

Thanks, as always, go to my valiant pre-Beta readers, you know who you are and what you did. Special kudos go to Full Pensieve, for chopping through my blocks on this chapter and putting up with me. Lissa gets an IOU for a chocolate cookie for a lightning fast turn-around. Welcome back from vacation.

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The Letters of Summer Cooking with Harry

Harry's first morning as a sixteen-year-old began with the sound of screaming. Ron had been awakened by an overly-full bladder and thus ran smack into a web of Gossamer wards, which he assumed in his groggy state to be spider webs. This, of course, meant that somewhere, probably on his person, a spider (or perhaps a gang of spiders) was present.

All of this, of course, was explained later, after all of the screaming had died down.

"AAAAAAaagh! Harry!" Ron screamed, flailing at the air. "Whydja go and do that? I told her! I asked her! She said yes!"

Harry was sitting upright in bed, his wand clutched tight in his hand. "What *are* you on about, Ron?" Harry asked, his eyes squinting against the morning light.

"You put spiders in my bed, just like you threatened last night!" Ron accused.

"I did no such thing, mate," Harry replied. Then he blinked, and understanding began to rise like the dawn. "Oh, those aren't spider webs, Ron, those are Gossamer wards." Harry put his wand down and then flicked his hand in Ron's direction, cancelling the magic. Opening one eye wide while squinting with the other, Harry said, "You told who and asked who what?"

"Hermione," Ron replied, a blush spilling across his scalp. "Listen Harry, I'd love to chat, but I need the loo..."

Harry whistled at the door, which sealed itself with a stout locking charm. "Talk fast, Ron," he said wickedly.

"I *told* her how I felt about her," he explained as he squirmed and bounced from leg to leg. "Then I *asked* her if she would go to the All-Hallows Eve ball with me. She *said* yes. *Now* will you open this bloody door before I leave a puddle?"

Harry flicked his hand at the door, which unlocked with an audible click. Ron disappeared so fast that Harry wondered if he'd witnessed his friend's first Apparation.

"Well done, Ron, well done," Harry mumbled as he lay down, pulled the sheets up round his chin, and closed his eyes again.

An hour or so later, Harry woke again. Ron was making quiet sleeping noises, not quite snores, but not regular breathing either. As he rounded out of bed, a flood of memories came back from the previous day – and night. His human memories were mainly visual, but his canine memories were of sound and scent. The scent of the night air; the sound of Moony howling at the impossibly full moon; the chase that ended when the deer crashed through the security border; the hot breath in his face when Moony knocked him down to prevent him from following after the buck.

It had been an exhilarating, but increasingly odd, evening. The memories continued to flow: Moony whining and whistling as he licked Tonks' fingers, Tonks kicking open the wrong door on her way to Percy's old bedroom. Smelling *her* in the darkness, jumping up onto her bed and curling up against her small frame, only to be prodded awake hours later by a grim-faced Tonks who was bound and determined not to let him outside the house where he belonged, but instead wanted him in *another* room with *another* human. Finally, there had been the return to his proper frame, and Tonks' retelling of Molly's thoughts about his choice of accommodations.

After a stop in the loo, he dug out his battered flip-flops, slipped into his jeans and pulled on a polo shirt. The Burrow was prone to visitors at all hours, and he didn't quite feel bold enough to chance breakfast in his pyjamas.

Mrs. Weasley was bustling in the kitchen when he entered. "Harry, dear, good morning. I hear you had a late night," she said, looking up from the clipboard in her hand.

"Yeah, and an early morning too," he replied with a broad smile. "Ron is still pressing his pillow case. At least he isn't talking about *her* in his sleep again."

Molly paused for a moment, a smug smile passing across her face. "How long have you known, Harry?"

"That he fancied her? Since fourth year, I guess," Harry said, looking around for cups and plates. Turning to Mrs. Weasley, he began gesturing. "She's been talking to me," he said, holding out one hand, "he's been talking to me," he continued, holding the other hand out. "Evidently last night they decided to cut out the middleman and talk to each other," he said, bringing both hands together. "He asked her out to the All Hallow's Eve Ball."

"Another ball? How delightful!" Molly squealed. "Have you arranged a date yet, Harry?" she added with a sideways glance.

"Uh, no," Harry said flatly, trying to keep the sour expression from his face. He wandered to the cold pantry, retrieving a flagon of pumpkin juice and the remaining container of potato salad. "Is the potato salad fair game, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Oh, Harry, let me fix you a proper breakfast," Molly protested.

"You've been cooking for days, and besides, I've been cooking breakfast at the Dursleys' for

years,” he protested.

“You know your way around the kitchen?” Molly asked with a bit of surprise.

“A Muggle kitchen – and yes, as long as we’re talking about breakfast or lunch – I might know how to cook two or three things for dinner, but that’s it. But breakfast? How hard is it to screw up eggs and toast?” Harry asked rhetorically. “I like to eat, therefore I cook,” he said sagely.

“There are a couple of scones left in the basket,” Molly said pleasantly. “Tonks made them this morning before she went to work.”

“She’s gone?” Harry asked.

Molly nodded. “She took Remus back to Grimmauld Place about an hour ago. Poor thing, he could barely swallow the draught I made for him. Speaking of which, how are you faring?”

“Other than being a bit shy on sleep, I’m good. My transformation is a lot less painful than what Remus goes through every month. I don’t think Ginny is going to care for it when she wakes up, though,” he said slyly.

Molly arched her eyebrow.

“I think I was shedding last night,” Harry said sheepishly.

Molly cleared her throat. “Uh, yes,” she said with difficulty. “Harry dear, you’ll find a note in your Passbox. After a very long and tiring discussion, Arthur saw things my way,” she said, looking intently at a spot above Harry’s head. “You have our blessing,” she said quietly.

Harry exhaled.

“This does not extend, however, to repeating your sleeping arrangements from this morning – shedding or otherwise,” Molly said, her eyes twinkling.

“I understand,” Harry mumbled as he reached for a scone. *Why do I feel so busted?*

The sound of the fireplace igniting distracted him as he poured a glass of juice. He glanced at the clock – all the Weasleys were accounted for, minus Percy, whose hand was now labelled “in exile.” Ron’s hand, along with Ginny’s hand, pointed to the spot on the face marked “at home-asleep.” Molly moved to the living room, answering the raspy call that issued out of the fireplace. After a brief bit of unintentional eavesdropping, Harry identified the voice as Hestia Jones.

“Molly, I need you here, sooner would be preferred to later,” she croaked before lowering her volume to the point that Harry couldn’t understand her without pressing up against the doorframe. He walked over to the stove instead, and wondered how it was operated without knobs or controls of any sort. *This could be a challenge* .

Molly re-entered the kitchen, laying her clipboard on the table as she removed her apron. “Harry

dear,” she said, “I’ve got to go to Order Headquarters. You can manage breakfast for yourself and make sure that Ron and Ginny get something to eat before they hare off out of the house?”

“Uh, sure, Mrs. Weasley,” he replied.

“Your minder is in the garden. She’d probably appreciate a fresh cuppa. I’ll be back around lunchtime,” she said, pulling a small mirror from the drawer next to the sink and checking her hair before she picked up her clipboard. Moments later the sound of the Floo flared again, leaving the house in silence.

~+~

Harry had forgotten how peaceful the herb garden was in the early morning, the leaves still bowed down with glistening dew. He walked out to the bench underneath the pear tree, one of two trees at either end of the garden.

“Good morning, Ms. Laurel,” he said, hoping to not take her by surprise.

“Morning, Harry. How is it to be back on two legs?” she asked with a chuckle.

“Not bad,” he replied, shaking his hand with an equivocal gesture. “I still have the occasional urge to take a leak on some of the trees, but I’m sure that will pass,” he said with a grin.

Laurel laughed.

“I’ve missed you, Harry. I’d certainly rather ride with you than go over any more of these blasted ledgers,” she said, pointing to a stack of leather bound books spread out across her lap.

“Eat yet?” he asked.

“No.”

“Care for some more coffee?”

“Bless you, child, that would be lovely.”

“Know how to work a magical stove? It’s not covered in Charms class,” he said, sheepishly. *I hope I don’t look too pathetic.*

“I might,” Laurel temporised.

“I know how to cook, Ms. Laurel, I just need a spot of help getting the stove started.”

“I think I can tear myself away from these spell-binding tales of credit and debit long enough to share some practical education. How’s your lady friend?” she asked.

Harry considered giving an evasive answer, but figured that Laurel would see right through him.

“She’s asleep, I guess. Yesterday was such a zoo that we didn’t get much time to talk.”

“Who needs to talk? I saw the way you two were looking at each other last night at dinner,” Laurel said, shoving the ledgers into a large canvas tote bag.

Harry didn’t respond, turning on his heel to return to the kitchen.

~+~

There were plenty of eggs in the cold pantry, but not much bread. Harry had finished the last of Tonks’ scones while looking for the makings of breakfast. Laurel suggested buns or more scones, pointing to a richly illustrated cookbook when he asked if she knew how to make either. With a bit of grumbling, Harry thumbed the book open and found the scone recipe, concluding that it wasn’t much more difficult than a third year Potion assignment. With Laurel’s instruction he ignited the oven, setting it to pre-heat while he assembled the ingredients. He’d helped Jasmine make yeast rolls once, so he figured he could pull this one off too. After a bit of confusion, the first batch went into the oven as he fired up the stovetop to cook some scrambled eggs. While the eggs were cooking he started the second batch of coffee, all under the watchful gaze of Laurel, who was scanning the inside page of the Daily Prophet. “Smells like breakfast, Harry,” she said before returning back to the newspaper.

“Yeah, well, the real challenge is getting it all done at the same time – I just started getting the hang of that late last year with simple breakfasts at the Dursleys’,” Harry said, as he pulled the drawer open, looking for a hot pad. In a flurry of activity he pulled the first batch of scones out of the oven, gave a final stir to the eggs before removing the pan from its burner, turned down the coffee and started lifting the scones from the cooking sheet to cool on a wire rack.

Laurel began clapping politely. “Bravo,” she gushed. “Coffee, scones, eggs – all done at the same time. My boy, some day you’re going to make a lucky witch very happy.”

Harry stuck out his tongue, pulled a mug from the dish cupboard and poured a fresh mug of coffee.

“My Winston was the cook in our family when we were first married,” Laurel said. “I didn’t really learn how to cook much of anything until after he was gone,” she said wistfully while she poured fresh coffee into her tumbler, pulling a scone from the rack.

Harry said nothing, tumbling eggs out of the frying pan and into a covered bowl, carefully placing a warming charm on the bowl before he found a lid that matched the bowl. He looked over his shoulder at Laurel. “Is the Ministry still watching the Burrow for underage magic?”

“Bill will be taking down the wards on the border tonight, after dinner; after that he’ll be mucking with the Anti-Apparation wards and goodness knows what else. That’s Order business, not Auror business,” she said, slurping some coffee. “He did mention that Malfalda’s sensors would be working again after the changes though, not that that will help any. The poor old biddy, she’s got

no staff and what with all the dark magic going on, there's lots of students home from school, practicing defensive magic. Her alarms are going off left and right."

"What dark magic?" Harry asked, hoping that his voice sounded calm.

Laurel held up one finger, having just crammed a large bite of scone into her mouth.

She swallowed, and then she sighed. "I suppose you have a right to know, maybe more than anyone else. Most of the Dementors have left Azkaban, the Ministry doesn't know whether or not to trust the ones that remain, and the Aurors are spread thin. The Death Eaters are recruiting and training – Intel says that at least a dozen have taken the Mark in the last month, although I'd hazard that the number was higher, much higher. No big operations just yet, but there are enough hit and run skirmishes that the Ministry is truly running scared and looking more and more incompetent with each passing day. Fudge, God bless his incompetent soul, is finally letting the Aurors cooperate with the Order, but he's still trying to keep any bad news from escaping into the public domain, like that's going to help anything." She snorted dismissively, and asked, "Is that more than you wanted to know before breakfast, Harry?"

Harry drank a quick swig of coffee. It tasted terrible, as he wasn't used to drinking it black just yet. "It's always better to know, Ms. Laurel. I've had enough of being in the dark."

"I imagine you have," she said sadly, "I imagine you have."

Breakfast was a quiet affair, munching scones, drinking coffee, and wiping up the last bits of egg from the plate with the last piece of scone. Without speaking, Laurel stood and cleared the table, stacking the dishes in the sink. With a complicated series of wand swishes on her part, the dishes began to clean and dry themselves, standing at attention in the dish rack by the sink one by one. Laurel then claimed the end of the kitchen table, spreading out two of the ledgers from her book, making notes in the margin with a long sharp pencil.

There was a loud thud from upstairs. Laurel looked up at Harry, who raised an eyebrow but kept on with his labours, putting the last batch of scones into the oven. The upstairs toilet flushed, there was the briefest sound of running water, and then Ron came bounding down the stairs, making as much racket as a crate of Bludgers being poured down the stairwell from the top step. He was dressed, somewhat, in pyjama trousers and a fresh t-shirt, having changed from his clothes of the day before. He grabbed a plate and fork from the dish rack and began scooping eggs onto his plate while he eyed the cooling scones.

"Morning, Harry, Ma'am," Ron said with the briefest of nods before shoving a forkful of eggs into his mouth. He reached for a scone, but paused halfway. "Your bed was empty this morning when I came in – where did the blonde dog sleep last night, Harry?"

Harry leaned back against the countertop, cradling his coffee mug. "Me? I was in bed with your sister."

Ron coughed furiously, spraying bits of scone and scrambled egg across the table. Harry poured

some water for him, which Ron gulped down with abandon. “Blimey, Harry, you don’t waste much time, do you? And here I thought I was ahead of you!”

“It’s not like that, Ron,” Harry smiled. “I was just winding you up. I came home with Moony before he transformed. Tonks took him to Percy’s room so that he could transform in safety, and I kipped on the foot of Ginny’s bed. I was a dog, all right? I’m not even sure she knew I was there. Tonks woke me up a couple of hours later, moved me to your room, and transformed me back, full stop, end of story.”

“Pity that,” Ron said, reaching for another scone. “It could make for some great stories at the next family dinner. I could get a t-shirt printed up: ‘I slept with Harry Potter on his Birthday – what did you get him for a present?’”

“G’morning everyone,” Ginny said with a yawn. “Now who would be wearing that t-shirt, Ron?”

“Ginny, you’re up,” Ron said with a bit of panic in his voice.

“Yes, I’m up. Now what’s with this bloody t-shirt?” Ginny asked with a note of exasperation as she poured coffee with her left hand while raking her hair back with the fingers of her right hand. “Who slept with Harry last night?”

Her voice had a raw edge to it that Harry found a bit frightening. He was certain that she was seconds away from serious Wandless magic– the air bristled with energy. “Uh, Ginny,” he said hesitantly, trying to reach his wand on the countertop without raising too much suspicion. “You did.”

Ginny’s eyes widened for a moment before she staggered over to Harry, hooking her thumb into his belt as she bowed her head down until her forehead rested on his chest. “Thank goodness,” she exclaimed. “I had the most lurid dream that I was sleeping with a large stuffed animal – it was quite nice actually, but rather much unlike any of the dreams I’ve ever had before, which is saying something.”

Harry put one arm around her waist, marvelling at how right it felt to be this close to her. “Uh, you’re not mad?” he asked quietly, wishing that he could have a bit of privacy just then.

Ginny stepped back one pace, looking up into his eyes. “No, Harry, I’m not mad. I trust you. Just – just wake me next time, okay?” she said with a wink. Turning aside, she plucked a plate from the dish rack, loading it with a healthy portion of eggs and two scones. Standing on tiptoe, she snagged a juice glass from the dish cupboard and within moments she was eating her breakfast while perusing the front page of Laurel’s now abandoned Daily Prophet.

Harry was trying to figure out the mystery that was Ginny Weasley (with very little success) when his train of thought was derailed by the by now-familiar sound of the Floo fire igniting from a call initiated on the other end. A male voice rang out tentatively. “Molly? Arthur? Is this thing working?”

Ron dropped his fork and ran from the table so fast that his chair tipped over. It would have smacked into the floor but for a quick save by Ginny, who looked up at Harry, then at Laurel. “It’s Mister Granger.”

“Maybe he’s reconsidering,” Harry said with a smirk.

“What are you on about?” Ginny asked.

“Oh, sorry – a lot has happened since we last had a chance to speak – Ron went home with Hermione last night,” Harry began.

“Did he sleep with her?” Ginny interrupted with an impish grin.

“No, he’s much less forward than his famous friend,” Harry replied sardonically. “I didn’t get all the details, but evidently he asked Mister Granger if it was okay to take his daughter to the All Hallow’s Eve dance at Hogwarts this upcoming term.”

“We’re having a dance this fall? Never mind that - what happened?” Ginny asked indignantly.

“What happened is that Mister Granger made him play Table Tennis--that’s a Muggle game. Ron had to beat him before he’d say yes,” Harry said with a snigger.

“You know,” Laurel said from the end of the table, looking up over small reading glasses, “that is terribly romantic in an awkward sort of way.”

“And?” Ginny repeated. “You definitely don’t know how to tell this story, Harry Potter,” she said, shaking her head.

“Ron played twenty-one games of Table Tennis until he finally won a game. Mister Granger gave his permission and Hermione said yes,” Harry said, picking up a scone to nibble on as he cleaned up the last of his baking mess.

“Yes!” Ginny shouted, thrusting her fist into the air as her feet beat out a happy tattoo on the kitchen floor. “Go Hermione! Go Ron!”

The Floo gasped again as the connection closed. The stairwell echoed with the pounding of Ron’s feet as he clambered upstairs. Within a minute he was back downstairs in the kitchen, dressed in jeans and a coloured t-shirt, carrying a pair of socks and his trainers. “Where’s Mum?” Ron asked.

“She’s at Headquarters,” Harry replied.

“Blast, I hate calling there by Floo – unless someone’s in the kitchen, you can yell all day and no one ever hears you,” Ron grumped. “Here’s the way it is, mate,” he said, looking up at Harry while slipping his socks on and tying his trainers, “Hermione and her mum are out doing the Muggle Dentist thing – I guess Hermione is helping out at the office. A pipe has burst in their basement and Mr. Granger needs some help fixing the pipe and cleaning up – so that’s where I’ll be. Tell Mum when she calls next, will you?” Ron said, snagging another scone from the rack.

“Oh, Ron, what a dutiful boyfriend you are, coming to the aid of your future father-in-law in his time of need,” Ginny gushed, giving Harry a wink.

Ron didn't rise to the bait. “Yeah, brilliant, isn't it?” he said before he ducked out of the kitchen. Before Ginny could come up with a retort, the sound of the Floo igniting let them know that her brother was already gone. Ginny finished her breakfast, looking carefully at her plate, at Harry and at the accumulation of dishes in the sink.

“You made these?” she asked, waving her hand at the basket of scones.

“Yeah – we were out of bread, so I couldn't make toast,” Harry explained.

“They're marvellous. Mum's scones are either plain or just raisins – she's never combined peaches and cinnamon,” Ginny observed.

“Yeah, well, I couldn't find your raisins,” Harry said, throwing his hands up.

“Mum hides them in the cellar,” Ginny replied.

“Why?”

“Mum has a serious thing for raisins. When she's nervous she'll start eating them like crisps, one after the other. I watched her do two pounds in an evening, waiting for Bill to come home from a date. Stupid bint dumped him that night – Mum made an enormous batch of hot chocolate when he finally got home and then shooed me off to bed. I never got to hear the really juicy details when they were fresh and his resistance was low,” Ginny said.

“Wouldn't that have been well past your bedtime?” Harry asked.

“Being the youngest and the only girl has its advantages, Mr. Potter,” Ginny said with a wiggle of her eyebrows. “When she gets all wound up, she often forgets things like bedtime, or chores. Speaking of which, I need to get into the shower now that my brothers are not likely to chase me out of the bathroom, after which I'm sure that Mum has left me a chore list. Am I still helping you open your bin of presents?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. Actually, I'd forgotten all about it,” Harry said.

“I didn't,” she said, flashing him a brilliant smile before she twirled around and darted up the stairs.

~+~

Harry surveyed the kitchen, figuring out what needed to be washed and put away when he heard a cough in the back of his consciousness.

You're awake, you're fed, may we talk now? Or do I have to wait until after you've groomed yourself?

Uh, we can talk. What's up?

What's up? What's UP? Wretched Mammal, I'll tell you what's up! I was not aware that your kind could transform into different creatures. I can touch your mind and access your magic when you are a human, but I can not touch your mind when you are a dog! It took me most of the night to figure out how to form enough of a link that I could tap into your dog consciousness sufficiently to see the outside world. You scared the scales off of me, Harry. No magic, no contact with my host, and no way of knowing what was going on outside of you; I didn't like that one bit.

I'm sorry; I didn't know that would happen. The last time I was transformed, you weren't living inside my head.

What if you had been attacked? I couldn't DO anything. Do you know how helpless that made me feel?

Look, I said I'm sorry – I didn't know that would happen. I should have warned you or something. Will you forgive me?

Of course – I – I am sorry, Harry, it's not my place to berate you, but I was truly frightened when I couldn't touch your mind. Let me change the subject – what's all this fuss about nesting with your Krulach?

Uh, she's not my Krulach, for one thing, and – uh – nesting - that's something our kind reserves for a more intimate, committed relationship.

You're committed to your dogs?

No! Not that, I mean two humans, a male and a female. Let me see if I can put it into Dragon terms – you wouldn't mate with anyone other than the one that marked you.

No, I couldn't. And even if I could, it would be indecent.

Well, that's kind of how it would be perceived if I were nesting with a female – unless we were recognized as belonging together, it would be seen as indecent.

Yet you were grooming each other just now in the kitchen.

Yeah, well, that felt odd too, wonderful, but odd. It was bad enough that her brother was right there, but my minder was there too.

There's hope for you, Harry.

Thanks, Mm'lau .

~+~

Laurel had returned to her bench in the garden, jabbing notes into the margins of the ledgers, dog-eared a page here and there. Whatever the project was, she seemed to be resigned to finishing it, taking breaks from time to time to look at the magical map of the grounds surrounding the Burrow. Harry was cleaning up the kitchen, putting the last of the dishes away in the dish cupboard when he heard the upstairs shower stop – Harry had no idea what she’d been doing all that time – he reckoned that she was pretty small, therefore she shouldn’t take long in the shower. He concluded that it probably wasn’t a healthy thing to be pondering when he heard the Floo ignite, again.

“Ginny? Come to the Floo, I need to talk to you,” Molly called.

Harry went into the living room to see Mrs. Weasley’s face in the middle of the dancing green flames. “She’s not available right now, Mrs. Weasley,” he said, hoping that he didn’t say anything awkward.

“What do you mean, Harry?” Molly asked with a quizzical expression.

“I just heard the shower stop – I think she’s getting dressed. Would you like me to go roust her?” Harry asked with a barely raised eyebrow.

“No, that’s all right,” Molly said, pulling a sour expression. “Listen, Harry, all the family,” Molly interrupted herself after wincing. “All the family but Percy is coming to dinner tonight. I was supposed to be cooking with Ginny today, but some Order business came up, so I was wondering if you’d have the time to call them all by Floo and send them my regrets.”

“As in cancelling the family dinner?” Harry asked.

“Exactly,” Molly answered.

Harry pondered this for a moment. “Might I make a suggestion, Mrs. Weasley?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Ginny and I can cook tonight’s dinner – it won’t be as fancy or as good as one of *your* meals, as after all, you’re the best, but at least you could still have a family dinner,” Harry suggested.

“That’s not necessary, Harry dear,” Molly protested.

“Please?” Harry wheedled.

“Why is this so important to you, Harry?” Molly asked.

“Your family is important to me – who knows when you can get them all together again? Besides, it will give me – it will give me some time with Ginny,” Harry stammered.

Molly gave a crooked smile. “All right, Harry. Dinner is still on for 7:00 sharp – eight Weasleys, one Potter, one minder and one fiancée,” Molly said, ticking off the dinner guests on her fingers.

“So, if Ron’s there, I should cook enough for thirteen or fourteen people?” Harry asked.

“I’ve never had a problem with leftovers, Harry,” Molly said, the corners of her eyes wrinkling as she smiled.

“Right then,” Harry said, “anything else?”

“Yes,” Molly said as she turned away to say something to someone behind her, causing her head to disappear from the green flames briefly. Her head popped back into the flames. “Let Ginny know that the usual morning chores need attention, along with laundry – oh, fiddlesticks! You’ll have to talk to your minder about shopping – I’d meant to do it this morning, but we’re fresh out of a lot of things,” Molly moaned.

“No problem, Ms. Laurel’s cool – I’m sure we’ll work everything out, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said confidently.

“Thanks, Harry, this means a lot to me, not having to cancel the family dinner,” Molly said.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Weasley,” he said, but the Floo connection had already broken; he was now speaking to an empty fireplace.

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When Ginny came down the stairs, hair still wrapped in a towel, Harry was a bespectacled dervish in the kitchen, opening and closing doors and drawers, writing notes on a scrap of parchment from time to time.

“Potter, what are you doing?” Ginny asked as she pulled the towel off of her hair and began attacking the ends with a broad-toothed comb.

“Looking,” he replied.

“For what?” she asked, her voice sharp.

Harry looked at her from behind the door to the dry pantry. “For ingredients,” he said in a voice reminiscent of their Potions instructor, “Weasley,” he said with a scowl, “Ten points from Gryffindor for not knowing.” For a moment, Ginny felt small and afraid until Harry sniggered and smiled at her.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, looking like he was searching for words.

“Your mum called just after you got out of the shower – I offered to go get you, but she said I could just take a message instead,” Harry said with a deadpan expression.

“It was kind of you to offer,” she said.

“Harry exists to serve, Ma’m,” he said in a squeaky falsetto, dropping a clumsy curtsey similar to Winky when she was inebriated.

Ginny picked up a towel from the dish rack and snapped it at him.

“Stop it! I much prefer you as a boy, but if you’re dead set on being something else, you weren’t bad as a dog either,” she snapped.

“Uh, thanks, I guess,” he said.

“So,” Ginny said, reaching back behind her head, pulling her damp hair into a ponytail. “What did Mum have to say?”

“What?” Harry said in a distracted fashion.

“Mum,” Ginny said with a knowing smile. “What – did – Mum - say?” she asked, enunciating slowly and clearly.

“Oh, yeah, right, sorry,” Harry stumbled. “Mum’s out on some sort of Order business and won’t be back until just before dinner. I’m to help you take care of the usual chores, whatever that might entail, and then we’re making dinner for your family tonight,” he said, squinting slightly as he laboured to recall the now-distant Floo conversation with Mrs. Weasley.

“Are you mad? We’re making a family dinner?” Ginny fumed. “Harry, I can’t cook,” she protested.

“Nonsense – you can cook – I’ve eaten your ginger biscuits,” he said confidently.

“Harry, let me make a fine distinction for you – I can bake a few things, but – I - can’t – cook, understand?” she said as she began pacing in the kitchen. Turning on her heel, eyes blazing she said, “You volunteered us for this, didn’t you?” Harry nodded mutely. “May I ask why?” she said coolly.

“Your mum was going to cancel dinner otherwise,” he said.

“So?” Ginny asked rhetorically. “Gred and Forge and Charlie and Bill certainly won’t starve if Mum doesn’t feed them tonight.”

“That’s not the point,” Harry said, pushing his fingers through his hair again. “Look, do you have any idea what I’d pay to get a chance to eat dinner with *my* family? I’d give up Quidditch and Hogwarts and every last coin in my family vault at Gringotts. You Weasleys don’t know how good you’ve got it,” he fumed.

Ginny stood silent, rubbing her cheek as if she’d been slapped. Flipping her ponytail back, she straightened her back and took a deep breath. “Right then. What fine things are we making for

this dinner?" she asked, tossing her towel onto the stairs.

The two teenagers had a hurried discussion of the night's menu, which resolved itself based upon the ingredients at hand: spaghetti, a green salad from what was available in the vegetable garden, green beans and peach cobbler. A brief wheedling session later, they'd convinced Laurel that she could step into town to pick up the few ingredients that they lacked upon the promise that they'd stay within the confines of the house while she was away. They made a chore list and divided the labours upon the condition that Harry add opening his presents to the list of chores. That chore they did together after lunch, while Laurel was in town.

They divided the gifts into piles: Gryffindor students, other students, and non-students. The non-student pile was smallest. Harry picked up a square box, reading off the information on the outside for Ginny to record on a notepad, for subsequent thank-you notes. Ripping off the paper, the box was a stack of small flat plastic boxes. Harry fanned them out for a moment, looking at the pictures and printing on the boxes.

"What are those, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Compact disks," he said, opening one of the boxes, pulling out a shiny rainbow coloured circle.

"Okay, they *are* small. What do they do?" she asked inquisitively.

"They hold music," he explained.

"Really?" Ginny asked, picking up another of the boxes. "How do you let it out?"

"What?"

"How do you let the music out? Do you break them like eggs or what?" she asked.

Harry snorted, "You're doing how well in Muggle Studies class, Ginny?" pulling back his hand in time to avoid a not-so-gentle smack. "There's a machine that goes with the disks that reads the music stored on the disk. You can play the disk over and over again as many times as you want while the machine plays the music."

"Brahms, Bach, Beethoven, Byrd, Chicago, Handel, Vivaldi, some group called Steely Dan, the Beatles, Rachmaninov, the Weird Sisters and Mozart," Ginny said, reading off the labels. "I'm not getting a theme here, Harry."

"It's quite obvious – the music is from Uncle Moony *and* Tonks," Harry explained, sorting the disks out into two piles.

"Moony likes Steely Dan?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"Hey, if Tonks can crush on Mozart, Uncle Moony is allowed to listen to something written in this century too," he said.

“Bewitch me, I never knew,” Ginny murmured.

“Yeah, it’s always the quiet ones you have to watch out for,” Harry said.

“Which one likes the Beatles?” she asked.

“As far as I know, they both like the Beatles, but for the most part, Moony fancies composers who have been good and dead for a while. When we were out taking a walk once, he sang me some songs from the Yellow Submarine album. I guess you would have had to have been there, but it was a real hoot at the time,” he replied.

Not surprisingly, the next package contained a small CD player with headphones and a slightly larger machine with built in speakers. There was a note enclosed indicating that both machines were charmed so as to be able to work in magical environments. Moony’s lean, neat script concluded with an admonition to “surround yourself with beauty.” Below that in a left leaning block print was advice from Tonks to the effect that he should “kick back and let ‘er rip.” Harry read the note aloud, chuckling when he finished.

“Well, that shouldn’t be too hard today,” he said, giving Ginny a wink.

“What?” she asked.

“The surround myself with beauty part,” he said with a smirk.

Mister Potter, are you flirting with me? Ginny thought to herself.

The next package was yet more CDs, this collection largely, but not entirely, Muggle bands from the 1980’s and 1990’s, along with an odd disk here or there that leaned more towards Moony’s tastes.

“It must have been a scream watching them shop together,” Ginny observed.

“You think they did this together?” Harry asked. “Yeah, they probably did. They’re fun when they’re together. I went out with them one night last month, I didn’t figure out until afterwards that I was supposed to be the chaperone,” he said.

“Did they need one?” Ginny asked with a giggle.

“Not as far as I’m concerned. I did accidentally catch them snogging in the library. It didn’t bother them in the least, which is good, I guess.”

“Do you mind?” she asked.

“Heck, no! I think they are good together – you know, in a sweet-and-sour kind of way; black and white; water and fire; yin and yang; studious werewolf and raging party witch. As far as I see it, the only drawback is that if they end up together permanently, I’ll probably have to call her ‘Auntie Tonks.’ But heck, I got used to ‘Uncle Moony’, so I’m sure I can weather that transition

too.”

“You don’t like change, do you?” she asked suddenly.

Harry was silent for a while. “No, I don’t. The only change I’ve ever welcomed is leaving the Dursleys’ house.

“But *you’ve* been changing a lot,” she said.

“I reckon I have been changing – that’s the good part about hitting the bottom,” he said.

“I think they are serious,” Ginny observed.

“Who? The Dursleys? Yeah, they’re seriously committed to letting me know that I’m a blight in their otherwise blissful existence,” Harry complained.

“No, you pillock,” Ginny said, giving his arm a stout punch. “Lupin and Tonks. They’ve been taking a class together on Thursday nights at St. Simon’s,” Ginny said.

“What class?” he asked.

“Something called Alpha,” Ginny said. “Tonks was talking to Kingsley Shacklebolt on our Floo one night, trying to figure out some dates for swapping duty shifts. After that class ends, they’re taking something called a ‘Pre-Cana’ class, whatever that is.”

“Sounds serious,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ginny said dreamily, “I think it’s grand. No weddings yet in the immediate Weasley family, and all of my cousins that were going to get married got married when I was a baby. It’s something nice, even in dark times.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he groaned.

“You’ll live. You might even have some fun,” she said with a smile that reached up to her eyes.

The rest of the packages were opened, the wrapping was roughly folded and put into a box for the twins’ shop, and Harry put the presents carefully away in his trunk, along with a list in Ginny’s neat hand of the presents received and who had given what. Laurel arrived; stepping out of the Floo with a large armful of wrapped packages, most of which expanded in size six or seven fold when she placed them on the kitchen counter.

“Thank you both for staying inside while I was out – I don’t fancy getting written up this early in my career,” she said gruffly.

“Well, you’ll get a good dinner out of it,” Harry explained.

“I think not,” Laurel said. “My shift ends just before dinner. Moey will be relieving me.”

“Oh, Charlie will like that,” Ginny cooed.

“Yeah, I imagine he will,” Laurel said with a snigger. “Amazing things you see on this map when you know how to read it,” she said, pulling a folded parchment out of her robes, slapping it into her palm.

“So, what were *they* doing last night?” Ginny asked.

“They went for a walk along the river – their respective dots were very close together for a long time without moving at all,” Laurel said, sighing deeply. She had a pleasant smile on her face.

“That’s always a nice place to watch the stars,” Ginny said wistfully. “When my brothers would come home from school, they’d take me out there on warm summer nights and tell me what they’d learned in Astronomy class – well, the older brothers would. I wouldn’t go out with Fred or George because Mum couldn’t hear me from out there, and Ron never paid any attention in Astronomy and didn’t want to spend time with me after he went to Hogwarts. Well, enough gossip. We have a dinner to make, Mr. Potter.”

“Indeed, Miss Weasley,” Harry replied.

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After cleaning up the lunch dishes, he lined up bowls, cutting boards, knives, pans and ingredients, looking for the entire world like her brother did when he was surveying the chessboard at the beginning of a game. He handed her a bowl of green peppers.

“Could you remove the stem and seeds and then slice them into bits the size of your thumbnail?” he asked, holding up his thumb.

“Sure,” she replied cheerfully.

He took a slightly larger bowl of onions and began to peel the papery outer skin from the first onion. Using steady, slow strokes, he halved the onion and then diced it into small bits.

“Where’d you learn to cook, Harry?” she asked, more to make conversation than to learn anything.

“I learned all the breakfast stuff at the Dursleys. I figured the quicker I learned, the quicker Aunt Petunia would stop screeching at me,” he replied, making a face as he halved the next onion.

“What about lunch and dinner?”

“Everything else I learned in Abelard’s kitchen, except for making sandwiches – everyone can do that, I reckon,” he replied.

Ginny’s eyes were wide. “Abelard teaches cooking?” she asked incredulously.

“Most of the time it was Jasmine that taught me, but Abelard knows his way around the kitchen

too and I made a meal or two with him. She says her mum is the real cook, but she's no slouch in the kitchen. She's a pretty good teacher, and she's a lot easier on the ears than Aunt Petunia," he said with a smirk.

"Easier on the eyes, too, I imagine," Ginny said saucily.

"Yeah, well, that has its own problems. It's kind of distracting to work around her. After I started working on the Occlumency stuff, you know, after I got Mm'lau installed in my head, Jasmine began testing me. That wasn't very pleasant," Harry said, brushing his forehead with the back of his shirtsleeve.

"What did she do?" she asked.

"Um, it involved teasing," Harry said haltingly.

"Like calling you names?"

"No, more like brushing up against me," he said, a flush appearing in his cheeks. "She'd do that to see how well shielded my mind was."

"You must have liked that," she said, trying to keep the smile off of her face.

"Actually, no," he said, brushing his forehead with the back of his hand. "Things are complicated between us. She's way older than me, but she treats me like a peer in a lot of ways. I think she's lonely being Abelard's bodyguard, and I don't think she gets out much when she's off duty. There's a bit of attraction there, but I think we both know that it's not going anywhere, plus I'm kind of next in line to be her boss if anything happens to Abelard," he rambled.

"Uh-huh," she murmured.

"Then there's the scary factor. There's lots of girls I'd really rather not have angry at me: you, your mum, Hermione, but with Jasmine, I always have the feeling that not only could she get angry enough to gut me like a fish with an old kitchen spoon, but that she probably knows seven different ways to do it too," he said, dumping the next pile of onion bits into the bowl. "She stopped doing that after I convinced her that she couldn't read anything through my Occlumency shield. Thank God for small favours, I guess."

Ginny began savagely slicing the next pepper.

"I'm sure she's the right girl for some lucky bloke, but not for me," he concluded.

He halved the next onion with a swift stroke and then dispatched it into smaller bits with a series of smooth, energetic strokes.

"Who's the right girl for you?" she asked, startled that she'd said what she was thinking.

He said nothing, dispatching the last onion as handily as he'd dismembered the others. "We need

to get this sauce cooking,” he said, nodding in the direction of the stove. “When you’re done with the peppers, we can start browning the meat,” he said before he turned to the sink to wash his knife and his hands thoroughly with soap. He then began peeling and slicing peaches.

Ginny kicked herself mentally. *Stupid cow, you just had to open your mouth and let fly whatever comes into your little pointy-head, didn’t you?*

Harry began chattering again after he’d peeled and sliced the peaches.

“This year’s going to be different,” he said.

“Yeah, no Umbridge,” she said cheerfully.

“Fudge is still in office, so we might get someone worse,” he said, making a face. “No, it’ll be different, no matter who teaches Defence. You’ll be going mad with the O.W.L.s, Neville and Luna have paired off; Ron and Hermione are heading in that direction. It’s going to be different,” he sighed.

“You worried about being lonely?” she asked playfully.

“I’ve had lots of practice with that,” he said. “I’ve been alone for most of my life.”

“That’s not good,” she replied.

“Yeah, but it’s safer for everyone around me,” he countered.

Ginny slapped the countertop with her left hand as she set the knife down with her right. “Damn you Harry! Don’t push us away,” she shouted, leaning across the counter. “Haven’t you learned anything yet? I thought we were getting somewhere, I thought you’d called off the pity party,” she said, drilling him with her gaze.

“Is the butter soft?” he asked.

“What?”

“I said, is the butter soft?” he asked again, gesturing to the plate with the block of butter.

“How soft does it need to be?”

“Can you poke a hole in it with your thumb?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“It’s soft enough then, thanks,” he said, reaching past her for the butter.

“That’s it then? You’re changing the subject, or are you just running away?” she asked,

“I’m not changing the subject or running away, I’m just finishing this crisp topping so we can finish our chores and have some free time to go for a walk before dinner,” he fumed, mashing the pastry knife into the butter, cutting it into the bowl of dry ingredients.

She went back to the peppers, slicing them into thumbnail sized bits.

“You are right,” he said, as he sprinkled the topping onto the sliced pieces of peach.

“Of course I am,” she replied. “On what topic are you conceding?”

“It’s not good to be alone,” he said with a smile before he turned to the stove, pulling a large frying pan onto the back burner. He rubbed thumb and finger together as he made a small circle with his hand. A blue flame erupted under the frying pan.

“You did that wandlessly,” Ginny said. A statement not a question.

“Yeah?”

“I can only do the Summoning charm without a wand, along with those whistles that Jasmine taught me,” she said.

“Most everything you can do with a wand, you *can* also do without, - if you’re willing to practice. The added benefit, of course, is that except for the high-energy transfiguration and conjuring stuff, the wandless magic doesn’t trip Madam Hopkirk’s underage magic sensors,” he said with a smile.

“So I don’t have to live like a Squib come tomorrow?” she asked.

“Not if you’re willing to practice,” he replied.

Ginny’s expression passed from satisfaction to annoyance. “I’m still mad at you, you know,” she said.

“That’s okay,” he said, reaching for the bowl of chopped peppers. He dumped the bowl into the frying pan with bits of ground meat and onions. Soon the pan was hissing happily as the smell of browned meat and cooking onions filled the kitchen. “You’re pretty when you’re angry,” he said, washing his hands yet again before he ducked into the loo in the hallway.

I just don’t know how much more of this I can take, she thought to herself. The boy is driving me crazy.

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The spaghetti sauce was in the slow cooker; the salad was in the enormous salad bowl; the green beans were washed, stemmed and snapped, waiting to be steamed; the peach crisp was cooling on the counter. Aside from boiling the water for the pasta, dinner was done. The cooking dishes were washed, dried and put away, the table was set and the counters were wiped clean. She’d been

working like a house elf, but there was some small satisfaction in knowing that she'd pulled off the whole meal, with Harry's assistance, and the kitchen didn't look like a post-Gred and Forge disaster scene. Harry was looking at her, probably thinking of what he wanted to say.

"Up for a walk?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied.

Laurel was in the parlour, yet another journal spread across her lap with the magical map to the area surrounding The Burrow spread out on the arm of the chair.

"We're off for a walk before dinner," Harry said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Laurel smile, and then looked at them over the rims of her reading glasses. "Not so fast," she said, digging into the depths of her tote bag. She extracted two coppery strips from the bag. Grabbing Ginny's hand she snapped one of the strips onto her wrist where it curled into a bracelet. She then held out her hand, beckoning for Harry to extend his hand so she could equip him in a similar fashion. Harry complied, reluctantly. As Laurel snapped the second strip onto his wrist, she muttered, "Remote Portkeys," before she picked up her ledger again.

"Uh, thanks," Harry mumbled.

Laurel looked up and smiled. "Have fun, kids. I'll probably be gone when you get back," she said as she turned her attention back to the ledger, tapping it with her pencil. They left the house in silence, walking through the herb garden.

"I wore one of these when I was a dog," Harry volunteered, tapping his bracelet.

"On your foreleg?" Ginny asked with a giggle.

"No," he said, pointing to his neck. "On my collar."

"Was it a little tag that said 'if lost, please return this scruffy dog to Albus Dumbledore?'" she asked.

"Dunno," he grunted. "Maybe it said 'return to Ginny Weasley's boudoir,'" he said, ducking before she swatted at the back of his head.

They walked past the vegetable garden, and through the pasture, hopping across the tiny brook that meandered through it before joining the river that represented the eastern border of their property.

"You were flirting with me yesterday, weren't you?" he asked.

"And if I was?" Ginny replied in a noncommittal fashion.

"It's not necessary, you know," he said, hopping over a fallen tree limb. Ginny took a sharp breath. She wasn't sure where this conversation was going.

“I’m not trying to push you away,” he began.

I hear a “but” coming , Ginny thought, or maybe ‘it’s not you, it’s me.’

“You’ve been a very good friend this year,” he said.

And I hope that we can always remain friends after this . . .

“I talked to your mum and dad last night,” he continued.

Yeah, good old dad wants me to be a little girl forever.

“I’d like – I’d like to get to know you better,” he stammered.

Whoa! Back up! That’s not a ‘dump Ginny’ line!

“**What** did you say?” Ginny hissed.

“Did you not hear me or not understand what I just said?” he asked.

“Uh, both. I thought this conversation was going in a different direction, sorry,” she mumbled as she reached behind her to pull her pony-tail out of its elastic, letting her hair fall loose.

Harry’s Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, but Ginny missed this.

“Can you repeat what you just said, please?” she asked.

“Sure. I’d like to get to know you better,” he answered.

“Harry, I’ve known you since I was ten,” she replied.

“Yeah, and I’ve been noticing you since that time, but I don’t really know you, not really,” he said.

“Why me, why now?” she asked. “Why not Hermione? She’s smarter. Why not Cho? She’s prettier. Or Jasmine? She’s a hotter witch any which way you look at her. Why me?” she asked plaintively, hoping that she hadn’t run all her words together.

“Okay, let me take a stab at that,” Harry said gamely. He began to walk, Ginny following alongside. He talked in fits and spurts. “Hermione is probably smarter than any witch that’s passed through Hogwarts in the last 100 years, and . . . and . . . I love her so much that it hurts sometimes, but it’s probably just like what you feel for Ron. . . . When I get angry, she’s afraid to cross me, no, I take that back, she’s just plain afraid of me,” Harry snorted. “Besides, I’m not the one that makes her heart go pitter-patter. I think she’s partial to redheads or something,” he said with a grin.

Ginny didn’t say anything. Her eyes were wide as they walked and talked.

“Cho? Cho’s the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen that didn’t have Veela blood running through her veins, and she’s in Ravenclaw by right – she’s very smart; but she’s also been a prefect for two years and done nothing to stop the hazing that the other Ravenclaw girls have inflicted on Luna, and when the chips were down last year, she sided with Marietta. Other than Cedric and Quidditch, we didn’t have anything to talk about. Jasmine? We’ve already talked about Jasmine. If there wasn’t the age difference and the whole Master thing, I’d still be afraid that I’d torque her off some day and she’d pull my guts out with a spoon,” he said as if that were patently obvious.

“So why me?” she whispered.

“Who else can I talk to about how annoying it is to have a dragon in my head without lots of tiresome explanations? Why you? Because you’re not afraid of me; or in awe of me; you’re not impressed that I’m the Boy Who Lived. Because you can knock me down a peg or two when I’m being insufferable; because you know when to talk and when to just let me be. Because you’re pretty, and smart, and brave, because you believe that anything is possible if you just have enough nerve. Because you’re not eight inches taller than I am; because your laughter sounds like music; because you know what it’s like to be me and you aren’t horrified and you don’t pity me,” he said softly.

“What’s it mean to get to know me better?” she asked, her voice sounding very small.

“Uh, you know, going for walks, talking, pranking the twins; friend stuff. Weekends at Hogsmeade, be my date at the All Hallows Eve Ball, that sort of thing,” he said, swallowing several times when he’d finished.

“You’re daft,” she said, walking away.

Harry leaned up against a tree, covering his face with his hands. “Good Lord, I’ve messed it up somehow,” he mumbled. He stayed in that position for a long time. He flinched slightly when he felt Ginny standing near him.

“You haven’t messed up a thing,” Ginny said, leaning her forehead into his chest as she hooked her thumbs into his belt. She sniffed loudly and looked up at him, tears quietly flowing down her face. “Let’s keep walking,” she said, “If I stand here and look at you I’m going to start blubbering and you’re going to think that you’ve done something wrong,” she said, wiping her cheeks with her fingers and then brushing them off on her jeans.

They walked in silence for a quarter mile, Ginny finally breaking the silence when she cleared her throat. “Did you ever hear the expression ‘be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it?’” she asked.

“A time or two,” he replied.

“When I was with Michael, things were grand at first. I knew it wasn’t deep, and it probably wouldn’t last, but it was fun. And then we began to do things, things that a boyfriend and girlfriend do,” she said, pausing to swallow several times. “I’d, I’d stop it, not because it was

wrong or over the line, but because I was afraid - afraid that I was losing control. One of the things that Tom left in me is a deep fear of not being in control of my actions and stuff with Michael left me afraid. I think that may have been why he dumped me," she said.

"I thought you dumped him," Harry protested.

"Yeah, well, it was confusing, let's leave it at that. My story is that I dumped him, but he may tell the story just a wee bit differently," she said. Harry handed her a handkerchief, which she used, tucking it into her pocket when she was done.

They walked in silence for a while.

"I'm going to change the subject a bit. How long have you felt this way?" she asked.

Harry snorted. "Ask Hermione, I never know how or what I'm feeling. When Teen Witch Weekly runs a listing of *Teenaged Wizards Not in Touch with their Feelings*, I'm sure I'll be a candidate for the top ten list," he said dismissively.

"No, seriously," she replied.

"The night I danced with you," he said softly.

"That recently?" she said incredulously.

"I'm a bloke, blokes are slow - remember that," he said sagely.

"Why did you ask me to dance?"

"Because I didn't want to dance with Luna?" he suggested.

"No, really," she protested.

"I didn't. I knew that she was going to ask Ron, and Ron would rather chew his arm off than dance with her. I knew that after Ron turned her down, she'd most likely ask me. I didn't want to be someone's second choice," he said wistfully.

"I know that feeling," she said.

"When I was dancing with you it all started fitting together; you'd been a great friend that year, you were smart and pretty and brave and funny, and you were some other bloke's girlfriend, no, worse than that, you were my roommate's girlfriend. After that night I got a letter from Dean. He went on and on about his current girlfriend, who, I might add, is not you, and I felt terrible. Was I supposed to rip Dean's arm off and beat him to death with it for cheating on you, or just do nothing and hope for the best? It's kind of difficult to defeat Voldemort if I'm sitting in Azkaban for killing my roommate. Without a doubt I was very glad to get Ron's letter letting me know that he was bald and you were unattached," he said with a chuckle.

“Well, good, I’m glad some good came out of all of that,” Ginny said cryptically.

“So, where does that leave us?” Harry asked hopefully.

“I’m not saying ‘no’ but I’m afraid to say ‘yes,’” she replied.

~+~

Harry tried to think up an appropriate response to that when he heard a loud “pop” nearby. His first thought was to push Ginny down, putting himself between her and where he heard the popping sound while he pulled his wand from its hiding place. Next, reaching behind his back, he fumbled for Ginny’s hand. Once he had a good grip on her hand, he vanished them both, sending Threads and Batty out to find the intruder.

“Harry, what’s wrong?” Ginny asked in the quietest of whispers, not commenting on the fact that she was now invisible.

“Someone just Apparated into this area; with Bill’s security barrier that shouldn’t be possible,” he replied in a terse whisper.

“Haaaary! Ginnny!” an unfamiliar voice called.

Batty pinged a man-shaped object about twenty-five feet away. Harry stood, pulling Ginny to her feet. He considered gesturing, showing that he was going to loop around behind the intruder before he remembered that she couldn’t see him. He didn’t have enough time to engage in a tutorial in Farsight, or as the dragons called it, true vision. This would have to be done the old fashioned way.

“Ginny, we’ve got someone we don’t know about twenty-five feet away from us in the direction of The Burrow. We’re going to stay invisible and circle around behind them. As long as you’re holding on to me, I can keep you invisible, ok?” he asked in his quietest whisper.

Ginny squeezed his hand in reply. He invoked the silencing charm and at the same time energized his Farsight. They were silent and invisible; other than scent and the footprints that they’d make in the grass; they were undetectable. They circled around behind – his Farsight showed a man-shaped aura, but nothing else – the intruder must have some sort of vision cloaking – perhaps a Disillusionment charm. Harry strained to remember the spell to cancel that charm, casting it in the direction of the shifting aura.

Like water being poured into a person shaped glass, the figure appeared before them: trainers, trousers, dark shirt and shoulder length dark hair.

“Oh crap,” Moey said as she turned around, wand in one hand, folded up map in the other. “I don’t have time for this, Harry, where the dickens are you?” she called impatiently, taking care to point her wand straight up.

Harry chuckled, giving Ginny’s hand a squeeze before he released his Farsight, cancelled the

silencing charm, made them both visible and let go of her hand.

“Moey, we’ve got to stop meeting like this,” he said, trying to restrain his laughter.

“Yeah, if word gets out that you’ve done this to me twice, I’m going to have to put in for a transfer,” Moey said. “Molly’s home – she’d like to get dinner underway within half an hour,” she said, nodding her head in the direction of The Burrow.

“How were you able to Apparate out here?” Harry blurted.

Moey looked at him with her single eye, shaking her head slightly when she comprehended his question. “You can’t Apparate *through* the barrier, but once *inside* the barrier you can Apparate again, unless you try to cross the barrier; that gets messy,” she said with a frown. “See you two back at the house then, eh?” she asked.

“Moey?” Ginny asked.

“Yes, Ginny,” the dark haired Auror replied.

“Stargazing nice last night?” she asked innocently.

Moey smiled, raised one eyebrow, and mouthed the reply “yes” before Disapparating.

The two teenagers walked back to The Burrow at a brisk pace, their conversation on hold for the moment.

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“Ginny, Harry,” Molly said, nodding to each in turn, “That was a marvellous dinner.” Molly was smiling broadly. “One of the prerogatives of being cook in this house is that you will not be washing up. Why don’t you take those brooms out for a go in the orchard? You’ve got almost a good hour of daylight left,” she said, nodding her head in the direction of the hallway.

Harry began to protest before Ginny tapped his ankle under the table with her shoe. “Sure, Mrs. Weasley,” he said, wiping his mouth with his napkin. Pushing back their chairs from the table, Ginny and Harry headed up the stairs while the post-dinner hubbub resumed at the dinner table.

Ginny leaned into Harry, whispering, “We are being dismissed, Harry.”

“Why’s that?” he asked once they were standing in her room.

“Oh, I dunno,” she replied, rolling her eyes, “perhaps Mum has something to say that she doesn’t want to say in front of us,” she whispered before savagely grabbing the handle of her broom. “Bugger all, I haven’t flown this broom yet and I’m not going to let the nattering of a circle of Weasleys stop me from having a bit of fun,” she said, smacking Harry’s backside gently with her broom. “Last one to the orchard is a Squib!” she shouted over her shoulder as she thundered down the stairs. Harry slammed the door to Percy’s room open, grabbed his own broom and hesitated

briefly in the hallway. Carefully pulling the hallway window open, he ducked his head as he flew out of the house.

“Whoo-hoo!” he shouted, knocking a few leaves off of the top of the pear tree as he accelerated into the sky, pulling a hard turn to loop back towards the orchard. Ginny pushed off from the garden, getting off to a wobbly start on her new broom.

“Potter, you cheater!” she shouted, desperately searching for an argument. “Mum says no flying in the house!” she called out to him. “Sweet Merlin, that’s lame. How old are you, Ginny, fifteen going on five?” she asked herself.

Harry laughed, slowing briefly to watch Ginny as she mastered the nuances of her broom. Before she caught up to him, he accelerated into the orchard, threading between the trees at high speed. By the time she caught up to him, she was out of breath. She pulled alongside him, giving him a gentle bump.

“Harry, this broom is fabulous, it makes Ron’s Cleansweep look like a scow!” she said. Her cheeks were coloured and her hair, normally plaited for serious flying, was whipping behind her like a pennant. Catching Harry’s eye, she blew him a kiss. They flew some lazy loops together and then played an impromptu game of tag, weaving through the orchard.

While Ginny was hovering over the orchard, Harry pulled alongside. “Let me show you something,” he said, pointing to the back of her broom. “Move your heel back and catch that peg, yeah, like that. The boots we wear for Quidditch have a notch made for that peg, but your trainer has enough of a heel for today,” he said.

“What does that do?” Ginny asked as she began to bend forward awkwardly.

“Move your grip forward until your belly’s on the broom. Now dive,” he said.

Ginny disappeared as she dove, leaving behind only the delighted sound of her whooping scream. She pulled up from her dive, circling back to Harry’s position. “Oh, yeah!” she shouted. “That will do nicely, no Keeper in his right mind would defend against me at that speed!” she said breathily. The game of tag resumed, climbing, diving, corkscrew loops, sudden stops and gentle banking curves. After the frenzy of flight, Ginny landed by the bench on the northern border of the orchard. Before Harry landed, she’d wandlessly Summoned a pair of water bottles from the back porch, handing Harry a cold one when he arrived.

“I think I’m going to get used to this,” she said.

“Used to what?”

“Being able to do magic when I want,” she said, leaning up against the bench. “Well, not much I can do about being underage right now. If I’m going to work like a house-elf all day, at least I can get a good fly in before nightfall – what a corking broom!” she exclaimed.

Harry drained his bottle, catching Ginny's eye when he put the empty bottle down on his lap.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Of course I trust you," she replied, her demeanour going serious in an instant.

"Do you trust my flying?"

"What kind of question is that?" she asked. "You might be a total loon, but you're a brilliant flyer," she replied.

Harry reached down for her broom, holding both broomsticks together in his left hand. Tapping the broomsticks with his wand, he uttered the spell "*Iugalis*," transforming the two brooms into one larger, longer broom.

"What did you just do?" Ginny screeched. "That's my new broom!"

"Keep your shirt on, miss, it's reversible," Harry said. "Fancy a flight with a well-known loon, reputed to be a brilliant flyer?"

"Front or back?" Ginny asked with a grin, one eyebrow raised.

"Passengers ride in back, unless they're titchy," Harry said, holding his thumb and finger apart. "You're petite, but you're not that small," he said with a grin as he straddled the broom.

"I'm game," she said, grabbing hold of his shoulder as she pulled herself onto the back of the broom. "You know, this would be problematic in a skirt," she muttered.

"Just think of it as a healthy breeze," Harry replied with a grin as he shoved off into the darkening twilight sky. Accelerating over the treetops, Harry exclaimed "Oh, yeah!" Knowing that they were approaching the barrier, Harry engaged his Farsight. The barrier appeared as a luminous sheet, not quite green, not quite yellow, but somewhere in-between. Harry turned the broom on its tail, accelerating straight up. Ginny gasped, digging her fingers into his sides as she gripped his shirt. She relaxed a bit, reaching for her wand. Once it was out, she touched his leg, her leg and then their heads with her wand.

"Communication Charm?" he asked, hoping that she could hear him.

"Yeah, and a Sticking Charm too, so I don't fall off this monster," she said, snaking her arm around his middle after she put her wand away.

"The fusion will do things that neither the Fashir nor the Firebolt can do alone, like straight-up acceleration," Harry explained, levelling out to fly in a loop that curved along with the security border.

"Say," Ginny said mischievously, "was that manoeuvre a devious boy plot to get me to grab a hold of you?"

stuffing out of Ginny as he saw the objects on the ground get larger and larger. If they were going to plough into the ground, they'd be in it together. Harry turned his head to the side, minimizing his wind resistance. His ear was pressed against Ginny's back, giving him an earful of sounds that he soon figured out were the sound of laboured breathing and a fairly rapid heartbeat. He heard her count down "Three, two, one, NOW!" before feeling the jolt that came as she pulled them out of the dive, fighting to control the momentum that wanted to press them violently into the dirt. Once she had control, she began to roll from side to side, bleeding off speed until she was flying in a fairly straight line, the tips of her trainers now touching the grass in the meadow next to the orchard.

"Still with me, Harry?" she asked. He replied with a slight squeeze on her shoulders. "How was the ride?"

"It was different," he snorted. Ginny stopped the broom and carefully dismounted. Harry did the same, handing the broom back to Ginny. "I had to learn how to ride in back without being in control, which was terrifying at times. It was fear and wonder and pain and pleasure all rolled into one, but it was okay, because I was with you. Come to think of it, my life has been a lot like that this summer," he said quietly.

Ginny stared at him. "You understand," she whispered.

What Harry understood was that they probably weren't talking about the Wronski Feint any more.

"Being with you is pain and pleasure and fear and wonder all rolled into one, but it's okay; because I'm *with* you," she echoed, dropping the broom.

They looked at each other in the last rays of daylight. Harry felt his stomach lurch when he saw her nervously bite her lower lip. There was something wrong; his peripheral vision was fading, he was certain that he'd stopped breathing. If anyone had told him that the world had stopped spinning on its axis, he'd be inclined to believe them. He was falling into her eyes like he'd been falling towards the earth, but he was fairly certain that this time he wasn't going to be able to pull up in time. The distance between them vanished; he didn't know whether he moved or she'd moved, and frankly, he didn't care. One hand was on the small of her back and the other moved up her back until it was cradling her head. He felt a small spark as his thumb brushed against her neck, making skin on skin contact. The spark ignited an explosion as Ginny's mind brushed against his own, triggering an avalanche of emotion, sensation, memories and thought. He stood frozen for an instant until he did *something* to pull Ginny's Occlumency shield up before he raised his own.

"Bloody hell, Harry," she exclaimed as she staggered away from him, breaking contact. "What was that?"

"Dragon magic," he snorted. "Your shield was down, my shield was down, I suspect that each of us was turning on the old Legilimency when we made skin contact. Your mind touched my mind, two-way Legilimency I guess you'd call it," he said.

Ginny held up her hand, looking at her palm. “Will it always be like that?” she asked.

“Probably not,” he said, raising his own hand. “You game to find out?”

Ginny nodded, biting her lip again.

“Shields up,” he said, holding up his left hand. Ginny mirrored his action, holding up her right hand. *Merlin, her hands are small*, he thought to himself as he slowly moved his hand towards hers. When their fingertips touched, he felt the slightest of tingles, hearing Mm’lau murmur a low growl that was answered by a deeper rumble from Tk’lch. He looked into her eyes again, sliding her fingers between his own as he clasped her hand. Without breaking his gaze he said, “Lower your shields a bit.”

Ginny blinked and nodded. The rush of *other* thoughts and emotions returned, flooding his consciousness without overwhelming it this time. “Apparently we can do this at will,” he said.

What are we doing? Ginny thought without saying aloud.

You are touching my mind; I’m touching yours.

“But I’m not a Legilimens,” she said aloud.

“Apparently you are,” he answered with a smirk. “It’s been a summer of discovery,” he said.

The swirl of thought and sensation and memory and emotion was quickly becoming overwhelming.

“I think we need to break this off, Ginny,” he said reluctantly.

Ginny nodded as she pulled her shield up. She began to pull her hand away when Harry held it firm. His eyes locked on to hers again. *She’s so pretty*, he thought, letting go of her hand as he pulled her into him. She rested her cheek on his shoulder, wrapping her arms around him. The dragon magic double Legilimency thing had been just plain weird, but this was equally magical and wonderful. Harry breathed in her scent, the smell of her shampoo, the faint hint of honeysuckle and other scents too subtle to tag and catalogue. She was warm and curved and wonderful, and if his read of her emotions was at all accurate when their minds had been linked, she was chuffed to be where she was at the moment, which was enough.

They stayed in place a while longer until she sighed.

“It’s dark, Harry. I think we need to go in,” she said sadly as she pushed away from him.

He said nothing, picking up the broom from where it had dropped an eternity ago. Reversing the spell, he now had two unyoked brooms in his hands. He handed the Fashir to Ginny, carrying the Firebolt over his shoulder. As they walked back to the Burrow, he captured her small hand as it swung at her side, lacing her fingers between his own. She sighed again, but this time there was a crooked grin on her face. The dragon magic would wait for another day. At the moment they

were exploring another magic closer to home.

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Ginny stopped as they entered the herb garden. Harry stood still. She was still holding his hand, but she was facing him now, until she dipped her head, resting it again on his chest. She shivered slightly, then looked up, staring into his eyes. "You said you'd like to get to know me better," she said softly.

"Yeah, I did."

"I'd like that," she said, "I'd like that a lot." She gave him a brief hug before she peeled away to dart into The Burrow's kitchen door.

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Author Notes: Disclaimer still applies. Happy now?

The heel pegs on the Fashir are homage to *After the End*, the Fan Fic that got me started on this voyage. Arabella, it's your entire fault, you know. You'll find the pegs in Chapter 27 of *After the End*.

Oliver had returned, holding out the most beautiful broom Harry had ever touched. Its dark, polished cherry wood handle had a slimmer grip than his own broom, and there were slender, golden rods sticking out a few inches in either direction, just under the spot where Harry knew the cushioning charm to be. The tail swept and curved into what had to be the most aerodynamic shape on the market. "*Firebolt 5*" it said in gold script on the handle.

"She had these put in," Oliver explained, pointing to the golden rods. "Footholds. You've seen her do it - bend her knees and keep her feet pulled up under her bum for speed. These keep her feet up the whole game without tiring her out - just rest the tops of your feet there. Dead useful speed strategy."

"She won't mind?" Harry asked doubtfully, not sure he'd want another Seeker riding his broom, if it were as nice as this one. Especially a Seeker who didn't know what the hell he was doing.

"She's unconscious," Oliver replied. "Take the broom. You're going to run drills on it for half an hour before the game starts so you can get used to it. But first, Harry, listen close. The Kestrels had a by last game - that means they didn't play. It's been four weeks since their last match, and while that doesn't mean they're out of shape, it means they've lost competitive momentum." Oliver began to pace. "Plus which, they're two and two - two wins, two losses. Their last game before their by was a loss. Not in a good mental state, I'd say. We, on the other hand, are undefeated." He gave Harry a meaningful look. "Undefeated. Five-oh."

There is another line in this chapter that's also homage to *After the End*. I will mention by name

the first reader who spots the line, correctly identifying the particulars.

As is usually the case, many thanks to the many sets of eyes that have gone over the multiple iterations of this chapter, bearing with me as I fought with writing over the summer: Art Mulder, Mr.Intel, Full Pensieve come to mind as the readers who have suffered with me the most to get this chapter out. Thanks also to my ever-patient Beta, Lissa at PS.net. To all those readers who post reviews along the line of "Great Chapter, when's the next one due out?" be assured that Chapter 20 will be out in due time - I've already got two sections of that chapter on paper - but the next chapter will be a long one, so be patient.

There is a *Goblet of Fire* homage in this chapter to Archie - like the other homage, I will mention in writing the first reviewer to get this reference correct.

The Letters of Summer

Daze of August

The Letters of Summer

Chapter 20 – Daze of August

1 August 1996

Dear Diary,

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, - no wait, that's Mr. Dickens' opening line, isn't it?

Well, I did it – I spent the entire day with Harry Potter without making a fool out of myself. Not that I didn't have my moments, mind you, but I did maintain the composure for which I have become a legend in my own mind.

Who am I kidding? I was as nervous as a long-tailed kneazle in a room full of rockers.

After the most curious dreams last night, in which I was sleeping with a large blonde shaggy dog (we do not have a dog, we have never had a dog, and if Mum has any say in the matter, we never will have a dog) I discover at breakfast that Harry Potter slept with me last night – no, not like that! He spent the night last night transformed into a large blonde dog so as to be Remus Lupin's companion when he transformed in the light of last night's full moon. After running around our estate, he apparently kipped at the foot of my bed. Well, at least now, if anyone ever asks if I've slept with a boy, I can truthfully answer 'yes.' Not that I would, mind you. (Answer that question, I mean.)

So there I was standing in the kitchen next to Harry, leaning my forehead on his chest the same way I always used to lean on Bill, when he puts his arm around me for a moment. The day could have ended there and I would have been happy, thank-you; but wait, there's more.

After breakfast everyone cleared out of The Burrow, leaving us alone (well, alone with an Auror as a minder – beggars can't be choosers) for the day.

In retrospect, it was pretty ordinary – I was doing laundry, cleaning, weeding in the garden, washing tonnes of dishes and cooking with Harry. The latter took a great deal of the day. We'd been dancing around each other since yesterday, when I was flirting outrageously with him – why

Mum didn't just paint a scarlet F on my jumper is beyond me. Today it seemed from time to time that Harry was actually flirting with me. Now that's certainly a novelty.

Before dinner, well, actually, after we'd made dinner, all but boiling the pasta, we went for a walk. I started picking up odd notes from Harry's posture, his voice, etc. Secure and saucy wench that I am, I was certain that he was leading up to the "I'd really like to remain friends, but we're through as anything more than that" speech.

It turns out that Harry was not trying to dump me, but in Mum's words, he was "declaring his intentions."

To say that this took me aback is an understatement.

Harry.

Wants.

Me.

This, of course, did not make sense. It still doesn't make sense.

Silly cow that I am, rather than coyly standing still and letting him lavish my hand with kisses (or anything else that he takes a fancy to kiss) I started bickering with him, asking him why he wasn't chasing after Hermione, or Cho, or Jasmine. What's worse is that the silly, simple boy answered my questions with rather detailed arguments. I did not want to hear that he loves Hermione so badly that it hurts, or that he thinks that Cho is the most beautiful non-Veela he's ever seen. That being said, it was with little Ginny Weasley, flat-chested, broad-bummed, prominent-chinned and tiny-handed Ginny that he was having this most important conversation, not the brilliant future-sister-in-law Hermione, the human hosepipe, nor that War Witch. HA! Take that, ladies!

We talked more that afternoon – serious heart-to-heart stuff – than I've talked to him the five years I've known him. I used to think that if Harry Potter showed more than a passing acknowledgment of me that I'd jump him right then and there and kiss his lips off, but the reality is always far weirder than the fantasy – at least in my life it is.

I panicked. Being close to Harry means losing control. Next to losing one of my family in this dark war, losing control is what I fear most. Thank you, oh so much, Tom Riddle.

Then the evening got weirder. Moey came out to fetch us so we could start dinner (which meant putting the pasta on to boil – why Mum couldn't do this is beyond me, but hey, I'm only the daughter around here).

Harry thought we were being ambushed, so he turned us both invisible. Neat trick that. Tk'lch says that he can show me how it's done. Next we ambushed the Auror, not the usual accomplishments of a newly sixteen-year-old boy.

Dinner was grand, but for the life of me I can't tell you anything that went on tonight when we

were sitting at the dinner table. Mum dismissed us after dinner (I found out later it was to have an impromptu family meeting at which she threatened my brothers with dire consequences if either Harry or I are pranked, teased, molested or otherwise harassed this summer while Harry's "exercising some initiative." Thanks, Mum.)

We went for a fly in the orchard after dinner.

My new broom is brilliant.

I am so going to kick major Quiddich arse this year.

Harry yoked his broom to mine and we took a tandem ride. On the first go, I was riding pillion, on the second, he was riding pillion. I tell you, both provide plenty of opportunity for a lot of delicious full body contact.

Ummmmh.

Pardon me while I blot up the drool that's accumulating.

After the ride, Harry started being emotionally deep, which surprised me, but I don't know why. I mean I know he's capable of many things, but he was speaking to where my heart was with the whole "getting to know you" thing. I was convinced that he was going to kiss me. What followed was ten times better and one hundred times worse.

Everything I know about Legilimency I learned from either Hermione or Jasmine, who, come to think of it, are two of the most competent witches I know. Hermione explained what it was when she explained what Occlumency was and why Harry was studying it. I picked up the dragon that lives in my head because I needed a crash course in Occlumency to keep Tom out. I say better to have Tk'lch in and Tom out – but I digress. Evidently it's a package deal – get the dragon, get the Occlumency, get Legilimency too. When my Occlumency shield is down and I'm around Harry, it's like all of my senses are on fire – which, when you are trying to do something that requires concentration, like slicing peppers without dicing your fingertips, is difficult, but when you're out under the moon on a brilliant night is pleasure that bleeds into agony, it's so intense. I wanted to touch Harry, I wanted him to touch me – no reasonable offer would have been refused tonight.

Be careful what you ask for – you might get it. I touched his mind when we made skin contact. To say that I was blown away is like saying that Tom is a naughty boy.

I could hear snippets of thought and feel shards of Harry's emotions – it was the phantom threads of memory swirling in and out that were the most distracting – seeing things that my mind knows are not there – complete with phantom touch, smell, taste and sound. Any one of them would have been bearable, but all of them at once, in a never-ending gush was just too much. Once again, the black-haired knight rescued me – somehow he pulled up my Occlumency shield, restoring my poor, abused sanity.

Mad loon that he is, he tried it again to see if it was a fluke. It wasn't. Clever girl that I am, I

realize that Harry has feelings for me – I could feel them after all! The downside, of course, is that unless we learn how to control this, the only way I can get close to him is with my Occlumency shield up.

Damnation.

I'm still afraid; now more than yesterday. But even though I'm afraid, I want it all. I don't want to wait. The longer I stretch things out, the greater chance I have to screw things up.

The sensible girl says "Whoa! Slow down!" The fearful girl says "What if he tells me it was all a mistake tomorrow morning?" and the impulsive girl says, "Go knock on his door – maybe he's still awake." Yeah, wouldn't Mum give birth to dragons if she found me in Harry's arms, in his bedroom, wearing not much more than an oversized Chudley Canons t-shirt.

Yeah, right.

Like I could pull that off.

I think it's time to listen to sensible girl tonight.

Tomorrow's another day – after all, he's going to be in that bedroom –

- all alone -

- every night -

- for the rest of the month.

Hee hee.

GMW

2 August 1996

Dear Diary,

Notwithstanding my naughty thoughts upon retiring, I slept like Ron last night. I'm fairly certain that I was snoring for part of the night because my mouth has that flavour like a small animal used it as a hotel for the evening.

I had another Dragon Dream last night – actually, it was the last dream of the morning – I woke up with a start at the end of the dream. After I stopped twitching, I put on a dressing gown, visited the loo and returned to this desk, mouth suitably minty-fresh for close encounters, to inscribe my immortal thoughts within your ivory-coloured pages.

One of the more entertaining side effects of having an intelligent, alien piece of magic reside within your brain are the dreams. I've had recurring dreams since I acquired my sentient

passenger. There are these two dragons. Mm'lng is this clueless boy dragon who doesn't know the effect that he's having on this sweet girl dragon named Au'lh. Au'lh thinks that she has no chance with Mm'lng, because she thinks that he fancies this other, hot girl dragon named Au'ng.

Confused now? Okay, Mm'lng is a blue boy dragon, Au'lh is a white dragon, Au'ng is a gold coloured dragon. They had words two dreams ago, and Mm'lng let slip that it's not Au'ng that he's interested in, but it's Au'lh, but since then he hasn't DONE anything about it. Crimeny, sounds a lot like Ron and Hermione for the past two years. Tonight started off easy enough – Au'lh was stuck baby-sitting some of the neighbourhood children – well, not exactly. She was sitting on a clutch of eggs, keeping them warm. She was actually filling in for her rival, Au'ng, who had recently left the neighbourhood to join her new mate, nesting with another clan. Evidently dragon mums don't sit on their own eggs, but instead rope the younger, less senior, single girl dragons to do the dirty work for them. They aren't all that different from us, I suppose.

The nest is on this beach near a marsh – which is odd, since all of the other Dragon dreams have taken place in the mountains, but I'm only reporting this dream, not critiquing the continuity. It's kind of boring there, and Au'lh would really rather be hunting than sitting on eggs. Mm'lng drops by, bringing this antelope-like thing with him, which is quite tasty. I don't think I've ever eaten raw meat before, especially when it still had its hooves and fur on, but in the dream it was tasty. Evidently Mm'lng's mum is reading from the same playbook – eye contact, smile, and make sure you keep that girl fed! (Okay, so the metaphor breaks down with an animal that can't smile because it doesn't really have lips, but you get my point.) Mm'lng goes off to do whatever tragically handsome boy dragons do when they are not distracting girl dragons, leaving Au'lh drowsy and well fed on top of the eggs.

Enter stage right a monster slinking in from the marsh, a nasty, stinky, slimy, multi-headed snake that bears a passing resemblance to a Basilisk. Did I mention that there are several of these monsters? Silly me, I overlooked that. Au'lh can defend the eggs, or defend herself, but there are too many of them to effectively do both. She starts bellowing sweetly for her friend, who pops back in the nick of time. They fight back-to-back, protecting the eggs and sending many snakes to their eternal reward (whatever that may be for dream monsters). The snakes aren't particularly good to eat; at least that was Au'lh's opinion. After they roast all of their defeated enemies until their bodies burst, they stand there looking at each other. Au'lh has loved him forever, but she has always figured that nothing was ever going to happen (don't ask me to explain – remember, I'm just reporting this). Mm'lng is mightily impressed with her courage, how she stood and defended the eggs at the cost of her life, and he has suddenly run out of excuses for why he can't express his feelings for Au'lh. So, like any romantically inclined boy dragon, he knocks Au'lh down and takes a big bite out of her back, right between the wings.

Now's the time for a little translation – I am, after all, a 'pale spotted mammal' with a dragon inside her head. If any boy did that to me, I'd hex him into next week and then come back to roast his carcass until the wind carried away his ashes, but dragons see this differently - way differently. It was the most erotic thing that's ever happened to me in a dream. I woke up just after the bite between my shoulder blades; I was in that just waking up twilight between being asleep and awake; I was still twitching from what just happened.

Wow.

That being said, if Harry ever knocks me down and tries to bite me between the shoulder blades, I am going to hex him into next week.

Well, enough of this. Someone's in the shower; I'm going to go see if Mum has made breakfast yet.

GMW

~+~

"Morning, mum," Ginny said, bussing her mother's cheek lightly as she walked past her, intent on getting the last of the coffee from the pot.

"Sleep well?" Molly asked, a slight smile accompanying the twinkle in her eyes.

"Not bad," she replied, pouring the dregs of the pot into her mug. "Weird dreams this morning, but the night went well," she said flatly.

"Did it now?" Molly asked coyly.

"You know what I meant," Ginny said, raising an eyebrow.

"How was the flying?"

"Brilliant, it's a lovely broom," Ginny said, smiling broadly.

Molly snorted. "It should be, given what it costs," she said.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked, the smile now gone.

"Ginny, that's a custom racing broom, it's what the National Teams use across most of Asia, it goes for a fair pile of Galleons," she remarked.

"Harry didn't buy it," Ginny replied coolly.

"Whatever do you mean?" Molly asked.

"Sirius bought it before he died, Harry got it as part of settling the estate," she said, making herself busy preparing the percolator for a fresh batch of coffee. When she finished, she set it down on the stove, lighting the burner wandlessly as Harry had shown her the day before.

"Did you just light the stove?" Molly inquired.

"Yeah, sure, Mum," Ginny answered.

"Without a wand?" Molly asked incredulously.

"Yeah," Ginny replied, a sly smile on her face, "isn't it great?"

"Where did you learn that?" Molly asked.

"Harry," she said, simply, as if that were a complete answer.

"So, you and he are . . ."

"Haven't a clue, Mum," Ginny replied, blowing a wisp of hair out of her eyes. "I think we have an understanding," she continued.

"Which means?"

"Which means that he's interested in getting to know me better and I'm okay with that," she replied. "What's for breakfast?"

~+~

Harry looked at his fuzzy image in the mirror as he towelled off in the privacy and comfort of his own room. It was grand having the space, but part of him missed rooming with Ron. Pulling a coloured t-shirt from the dresser, he put his glasses on, sharpening his view of the world. This morning's dream had been disturbing in a lot of ways, which is one of the reasons he'd snuck into the shower before breakfast, hoping that the hot water could wash away some of the discomfort that he felt. No such luck. Slipping into his flip-flops, he opened the door.

You are troubled.

Yeah, I'm troubled. It was the dream.

Yes, lovely wasn't it? Au'lh told me tales about that when I was but an egg. It was quite an honour to see it in this fashion.

That really happened?

Yes, Harry, it really happened - it is a memory of Au'lh that is passed along to her eggs as part of our inheritance. If it had not happened, I would not exist. Au'lh was my mother.

Is marking always like that?

Like what?

So violent, so bloody.

Without the shedding of blood, there is no bond, Harry. It is our way. That being said, that region of a girl's back is fairly rich in capillaries; the bleeding is showy, but it poses very little risk to the Krulach; we heal quickly.

Does it leave a mark?

Of course it leaves a mark. That's the point! I bear my mark quite proudly - it is a testament to all that Tk'lch chose me above all others and that I accepted and chose him in turn.

That you chose him in turn?

Certainly, you don't think I'd let just any dragon knock me down, do you?

Why am I having these dreams?

<Laughter> Because you need those dreams.

What do you mean?

Why am I in your mind, Harry?

To protect me?

No. That is a secondary effect; I exist to train the young of the People, to bridge them into their latent skills, magical and otherwise. The skills that they are capable of performing, but as of yet remain untested.

I don't need to mark any woman as my Krulach, Mm'lau.

<Silence>

You disagree?

There is no lasting bond without blood, young dragon.

I'm not a dragon!

This discussion is tiresome; we have had it several times before. Do you not think her worthy?

Of what?

Worthy to be your Krulach.

She's not my Krulach; it doesn't work that way among my kind.

We are not so different, you and I.

Yeah, right.

Go eat, Harry, you will think more clearly with food in your stomach.

They're down there.

Who?

Ginny and her mum.

Of course they are; this is their nest.

What do I say?

How about 'Good Morning?'

*No, I mean, what do I say to Ginny – things are **different** now.*

Well, if you're not willing to mark her just yet, I suggest grooming her.

Grooming her?

Yes, as you did yesterday, in the kitchen, before breakfast. Putting you hands where her wings should be and squeezing. It seemed to be calming for both of you. You will have to maintain your shields, of course, as you won't be able to touch one another unshielded until after you mark her.

Whatever.

Relax, Harry, it is far easier than you make it out to be .

Thanks.

I live to serve, young dragon.

~+~

“Good morning, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said brightly, hoping that he sounded more confident than he felt.

Mrs. Weasley nodded in reply. An awkward silence passed for a moment. "She's in the parlour, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said with a slight lilt of music in her voice.

"Thanks."

She was looking out the window facing the herb garden, sipping a mug of coffee. *God hates a coward.* He padded over to her side, slipping one arm around her waist. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey yourself,” she replied, turning into him, placing her forehead onto his chest. She inhaled

deeply, relaxing visibly.

“Any regrets about last night?” he asked.

“I would have liked to have flown longer before you de-yoked the brooms,” she said.

“Nothing else?”

“No, nothing else,” she replied.

“The rest of it will come with time,” he said.

“It had better, Mr. Potter,” she said, looking up into his eyes as she cradled the mug of coffee with both hands.

“Breakfast, Harry?” Mrs. Weasley called cheerily from the kitchen.

After a moment, Harry turned to look into the kitchen, slowly taking his arm away from her daughter. “Yeah, that would be great. Anything I can do to get breakfast going?”

“Why don’t you set the table with Ginny? Set it for five; Bill and Charlie said they’d pop in for a bite before they both leave again. When that’s done, you two go for a walk and let me cook without you under-foot,” she said with a wave of her hand.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said, trying hard to conceal a smirk.

Moments later, the breakfast table was set. The sound of the screen door slamming shut echoed through the kitchen. Molly looked up from her labours, gazing out the window. Harry’s hands were in his pockets, but Ginny’s hand was in the crook of his arm. They looked as if they had been doing this for years. She sighed, contentedly. “Thank-you,” she murmured as she cracked a few more eggs into the bowl.

~+~

4 August 1996

Sunday Morning

Dear Diary,

I think Mum believes that I’m losing my marbles again. It’s not like I’ve spent the last three days joined with Harry at the hip - I mean, we have been apart now and then. I’ve been getting the hang of just how shielded I have to be around him. When we’re in the same room, my Occlumency shield needs to be about halfway up; when we’re within touching range, another notch higher, let’s call it three-quarters. I can hold his hand or hug him at that level without getting *too* much bleed through from his mind, but if I start thinking *those* thoughts (or acting on them) the shield has to be all the way up. Holding the shield up is tiring, but do-able. I feel funny when I’m doing it,

however. When I'm not in the same room with him I can let my shield down all the way.

I've discovered that I can sense him when my shield is down, which gives me a very warm feeling.

Sometimes too warm, but that's most likely my own fault.

On Saturday, Harry mentioned something about Remus dropping by on Sunday – I was not paying attention for some reason or other, and that little fact dropped off the table of my conscious mind.

I've been sleeping in on Sunday mornings since I started Hogwarts – it's the only time other than my birthday that Mum has ever allowed me that luxury. So, I slept in today, woke up, pulled down my shield (I find that I sleep with it half-way up – the unpleasantness with the Dream Hounds probably explains that, but I've not asked Tk'lch one way or the other yet) and started screaming my head off. Harry was gone! With my shield all the way down I couldn't sense him at all.

I panicked.

The first thing I thought was that he'd been captured by Death Eaters.

The second was that he'd decided that the past three days was all some gigantic mistake.

Either way, he wasn't at the Burrow or anywhere on our grounds. I'm still not sure which thought frightened me more.

I came tearing into the kitchen like my hair was on fire. Mum calmly informed me that Harry was at church with Remus, and would be back promptly afterwards for lunch. I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me, but I recovered sufficiently to put on a happy face for mum, who gave me the oddest of looks in return. I wanted to be mad at him for giving me such a scare, but once mum said where he was, I remembered that he'd told me on Saturday.

The pillock should have made certain that I was listening.

I was by the river when he Apparated onto the grounds. I couldn't hear anything, but the pleasant warm feeling suddenly washed over me and I knew he was back. Before I knew what was happening, I found myself sprinting up the trail leading to the Burrow. Not wanting to look totally desperate, I forced myself to walk from the orchard to the back door. I didn't know what I was going to say when I met up with him, but that problem was solved for me; he looked into my eyes, placed his hand on my waist and said that he'd missed me.

Today that was better than red roses.

GMW

~+~

Tuesday, 6 August 1996, early morning

Dear Diary,

It's official: first, I'm glad that I finished all of my summer homework; second, I hate Jasmine .

Sunday afternoon I discovered that Jasmine had pulled strings to tutor me for the rest of the month before school starts. I'll be going to Abelard's on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, same schedule that Harry has. It was okay with my parents; Dad was impressed; Mum was amused. Jasmine, apparently, enjoys seeing me in pain; we spent the morning running, climbing and duelling. The afternoon was Apparation, which, thankfully, came about as easily as my first lesson in Wandless magic. I did get to see Harry briefly at lunch, but I was so fagged out from the morning's endeavours that I ended up taking a strategic nap before the afternoon session began. I don't think that Harry carried me though the portal at the end of the day, but I do remember having some troubles making it through our back door. While we did have lunch, we'd worked through dinner, both of us. I fell face down onto the couch and slept for a half-hour. Harry woke me up with a bowl of Mum's soup and some toast. I managed to stay awake long enough to eat the toast and slurp down the soup. Whatever regards he'd had for my table manners is now probably shot. I remember Harry cajoling me up the stairs, steering me into my room, taking my shoes off and putting me under the covers, fully clothed. I woke up several hours later to use the loo and change into something more comfortable. Before I slip off into Morphia's blissful embrace, I wanted to jot all of this down, if only to alert the rest of the world as to my cause of death.

I am going running this morning when I get up again.

I refuse to let that woman get the best of me!

The house is quiet now, apart from a gentle buzz coming from Ron's room. With my shield fully down I can feel his presence – he's sleeping now. I'm going to grab onto that feeling like a teddy bear and get back to sleep – morning is going to be so bloody early.

GMW

~+~

6 August 1996

Dear Hermione,

This is the third draft of this letter from your moody, black-haired correspondent; the first two are crumpled in the bin because I couldn't write anything that didn't sound like I'd fallen on my head one too many times. As you may have heard, things are different now between Ginny and me.

It's a bit odd, but nice. Really nice. I could get used to this. My only regret is that it took me this long to figure out that I could have more than two friends who knew me well.

After a bit of a break for my birthday, I'm back with the tutoring again. I'm at Abelard's on

Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Although I'm staying at the Burrow, I'm not seeing much of the Weasleys due to the tutoring schedule. I am sleeping and eating better, which is definitely an improvement over the first half of the summer.

This letter is so frustrating to write - the things I want to say just aren't the sort of things that I would ever write in a letter.

Ginny would no doubt do a better job at this - duh - she's a girl, talking about feelings is second nature to her, rather than ranking up there with sparring with dragons or taking out my own appendix with a dull pen knife.

Tell your mum that the picnic on Saturday would be excellent. The logistics, of course, will be interesting. Tonks and Lupin will be coming along with us. The new rule of thumb appears to be that one Auror or two members of the Order cover me at all times, unless I'm at Privet Drive (ugh!) or at Abelard's. Ron will be coming (yeah, I know, try to hide your disappointment) and I might bring along that other red-haired kid who lives here. You know, the one who looks good in a dress. Maybe your mum can start on a new topic of conversation as the old one has been overtaken by events. Sunday brunch with your folks seems like it was a lifetime ago; a lot has changed this summer. I think most of it has been good.

Well, this letter doesn't look much better than the two that came before it, so I'm going to call it a day and send it off before I turn in for the night. Before I do, I'm going to assign some homework. Topic: Breaking rules - I imagine that you haven't done much of that over the summer - you need to keep in practice; September will be here before you know it. Break one rule a day between now and Saturday - I'll expect a report.

HA!

Yours,

HP

~+~

6 August 1996

Dear Neville,

I'm glad to hear that the new wand is working so much better. I don't know why your gran insisted on you using your dad's old wand - I very much doubt that I could have done a thing with my dad's wand. According to Dumbledore, we'll be starting up the old Defence Association again - in light of current events, I think we'll have a good turn-out. I'd like your help in teaching the younger students, say the first through third years. If you promise to behave yourself and not frighten the children, I'd be willing to have you team-teach with Luna. The two of you look good together, by the way. She's well worth your time.

I'm still engaged with my tutor this summer, magic-ing my brains out. It's a wonder I have any magic left at the end of the day.

I'd like you to look at your calendar and see if you're free on Tuesday, the 27th. I'm thinking of having a picnic or something here at The Burrow - you, Ron, Hermione, Luna, Ginny, you know, the Ministry of Magic gang. Life is short - I want to keep my friends close these days. Speaking of friends, you know how we've always wondered about Ron and Hermione? Well, it appears that they finally have moved beyond denial and are experimenting with something deeper than friendship.

There's going to be a ball at Hogwarts on All Hallow's Eve - Ron's already got a date. You might think of asking a certain Ravenclaw to reserve the night. Speaking from experience, if you wait too long, you'll find that the good ones are all taken.

More later.

Your friend,

Harry

~+~

7 August 1996

Dear Harry,

Likewise, things are different here. I've always thought that Ron and I could be more than just friends, but I could never steel up the courage to talk about that topic with him. Frankly, I don't know if this is going to work, long term, but I felt that I had to try. I didn't want to end my years at Hogwarts not knowing .

Ron told me that he was spurred into action after watching you talk to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley about getting to know Ginny better. Thanks - you don't know how much agony you've spared me. We're going to have a nice small group here this Saturday, but I'd still like to get a chance to talk to you. Just because I'm seeing Ron now, it doesn't mean that I'm not still your friend too. In addition to catching up with what's happening in your life, I'd like to talk to you about the Defence Association. I've taken the liberty of outlining what I think should be covered with the younger students (1st through 3rd years) and I'm taking a stab at a similar syllabus for the older students; but enough business for now.

I miss you, and I look forward to seeing you again.

Study hard, stay safe and have fun with the Weasley of your choice.

(Uh, you do prefer the one that looks good in a dress, don't you?)

Love from,

Hermione

~+~

8 August 1996

My dearest Harry,

It was grand seeing you again on your birthday. I've been tracking things down since then, trying to find out who has been behind the pranks against Luna. I've talked to the ringleaders and let them know that if this continues, I will personally make their life more than unpleasant. I might even consult with Hermione - the woman has a flair for that sort of thing.

I think the hazers have now been enlightened; the hazee should have a much better year; it might be spent fraternizing with a certain Gryffindor, but hey, nobody's perfect.

I still want a chance to talk to you once school starts. I'll look you up on the train.

Love,

Cho

~+~

8 August 1996

Dear Hermione,

I have fun with all of the Weasleys, to tell you the unvarnished truth.

I had a lot of time to think when I was growing up with the Durselys - being locked in a cupboard does that. I had a very rich fantasy life. I had a long-running fantasy that Mum and Dad were alive and I had brothers and sisters - we'd do things together as a family - go to the zoo, go sledding in the winter, go to the shore. I guess the common theme was that we were always going places. Eventually that fantasy stabilized and I had one brother and one sister. My memories have corrupted a bit, and now I can't remember what my fantasy brother and sister looked like any more. The only thing I can remember now when I try to recall those fantasies is that my sister has bushy brown hair and my brother has bright red hair like my mum. So living here at the Burrow is a bit of a dream come true.

As to which Weasley I prefer, well that all depends upon the activity. I'm not much for holding Ron's hand.

Sorry about that.

You're going to have to step into the breach and remedy that deficiency. Try not to suffer too much. ;-)

Seriously, though, don't worry about how things with Ron will affect me - set your own boundaries for affection. I'm not much on public displays of affection, having been traumatized by Roger Davies whilst with Cho at Madam Puddifoot's cafe, but I am a sucker for being touched - I guess growing up in a cupboard can explain some of that.

How's the homework coming along?

Your friend,

HP

~+~

10 August 1996

Dear Diary,

What a week! Duelling, Apparation, First Aid and enough physical training to make me want to puke. I would have slept in today except that a certain gentleman was tapping on my door this morning, wanting to know if I was still going running. Harry's been joining me this week for my morning run; afterwards, if Mum's not there, he makes me breakfast. Somehow, I forgot to make it clear on Friday night that I'd intended to skive off running today. Oops - too late.

Saturday was filled with chores - things pile up when you're gone three days a week. We (me, Ron, Harry) did every blooming chore on the list and then went into town with George and Fred (they have a WWW cargo lorry now - very cool paint job!) to restock the pantry. I tell you, Harry knows his way around the supermarket, that's for sure.

Dinner was at Hermione's place. We Flooed to a safe house the Aurors use not too far from the Grangers'. Why we couldn't Floo to the Grangers' is beyond me; I've stopped trying to make sense of security matters. It was a nice walk to the Grangers' house. Ron was on Harry's right, I was on his left, Tonks and Lupin were walking behind us.

Harry had his hands in his pockets, brushing up against me enough times that I figured out that he wanted me to link my arm in his. I didn't mind. As we walked up the sidewalk to the Grangers' front door, I began to slip my hand out from Harry's elbow. He trapped my hand between his elbow and his ribcage. He said, "Leave it. I'm not ashamed of you, you know." For a guy who doesn't say much sometimes, he can be downright eloquent.

It was interesting watching Harry in action - he's very comfortable with the Grangers. He kissed Monica's cheek and gave Albert a hand-crushing handshake and then went to the refrigerator and began pouring drinks for everyone. Hermione came bustling down the stairs with a hug for Harry, a kiss on the cheek for Lupin and Tonks, and a chaste peck on the lips for my no-longer-quite-bald brother, which I'm not entirely sure he was expecting. Me? She smothered me in a trademark take-your-breath-away hug. I would have been happy to barricade myself in her bedroom and spend the night yakking with Hermione, but noooooo, we were one big group for the entire evening.

I guess you could say that this was a kinda date. Albert and Monica are married (duh), Tonks and Lupin are about a centimetre away from being engaged (if they aren't already), and Ron and Hermione are an official item, leaving me and Harry. Towards the end of the evening, Monica pulled me aside and said that Harry and I made a lovely couple. I corrected her and

said that we were "just friends." She gave me the gimlet eye and said something about being the Duchess of Windsor. Go figure.

Social awkwardness aside, it was fun. Dinner was great, we played doubles Table Tennis (Mr. Granger is an awesome player - if he could fly he'd make a decent Keeper) and a very long round of Trivial Pursuit. I'd never played the game before. Evidently the game comes in a number of versions, including a magical version. Tonks brought the magical version and we shuffled the cards together with the Muggle set that the Grangers owned, making for an interesting mix. We made sure that the distribution of Muggleborns and Magicborns were fairly even, with Albert heading up one team and Monica the other.

Harry cleaned up on literature, with a perfect record on all of the questions on Dickens and a few other writers. As it turns out, he spent a lot of time reading when he was under the stairs at the Dursley household. Live and learn. We would have played to an even draw, except that no-longer-quite-bald brother pulled ahead in the last round with some Quidditch trivia, naming all the teams Dai Llewellen shut out in 1956 when he was with the Catapults. Ron disappeared towards the end of the evening, no doubt snogging Hermione in private somewhere. I don't mind that, really I don't. It's just that - well, I'm jealous. He gets to kiss his significant other, and I can't - at least I can't without running the risk of having my head blow up. It's almost painful to touch Harry without my Occlumency shield up these days.

This, of course, plays into my insecurity big time. Harry's a bloke, I'm sure he'd like to get snogged - so why should he hang around with a girl he can't snog? Delayed gratification is one thing, deprivation is another. Excuse me, I need to go burn my Cho Chang doll in effigy right now - I'll be right back.

On the walk back, Lupin mentioned something about picking Harry up for church. In another classic example of speaking without thinking, I invited myself along, so tomorrow morning, instead of sleeping in, I'll be up, bright and early, to attend services at St. Simon's. I suppose that long-term this is a good idea if this is a part of Harry's life, but for the life of me, I don't know what I'm in for - I've darkened the door of exactly one church in my life, and that was for Sirius' memorial service, which didn't turn out so bad in hindsight. I made one thing clear with Harry though, before I turned in this evening.

I'm not going running tomorrow.

GMW

11 August 1996

Dear Diary,

I went to services at St. Simon's this morning, a.k.a. the further adventures of the girl who couldn't keep her mouth shut. Harry tried to brief me on what to expect. Normally, Harry and Remus attend the early service, but today we went to the 10:30 service. Tonks showed up with Remus, popping up the stairs to knock on my door. I did not recognize her at first - she looked completely adult and normal. She said she wanted to give my wardrobe a once-over, which I appreciated, as I had no idea what I was getting into. According to Tonks, services at St. Simon's are fairly formal, and without exception, all of the women have something covering their heads. The options are broad: hats of all varieties, scarves, shawls, bandanas, snoods, so long as the head is at least partially covered. Me, I own a baseball cap with the logo of the Harpies, and a straw sun-hat that I use when I'm working in the garden, neither of which stood out as a good fashion choice. Tonks transfigured a scarf for me. I discovered later that I should have figured that she was being too nice; along the edge of the scarf was a decorative

stitch that spelled out “Harry’s Girl” again and again. As if that weren’t bad enough, I’m told that it would light up and blink from time to time too.

In my childhood, a Muggle friend had invited me to Sunday School a few times before I started Hogwarts. Needless to say, the local Methodist Sunday School did not prepare me for services today at St. Simon’s. Like I said before, Harry tried to brief me on all the basic stuff: stand, sit, and kneel. He even showed me how to hold my fingers when I attempted to make the sign of the cross. They’re a tricky bunch at St. Simon’s though. The prayer book doesn’t tell you everything, like the fact that everyone drops to one knee during the creed, or that the sign of the cross made before the reading of the Gospel is way different from the sign of the cross that’s made throughout the rest of the service. Harry also neglected to tell me that there’s no cushion on the feet of the kneelers, and that if you don’t stop it with your foot, it sounds like a bomb going off when it hits the floor.

It was a successful outing, all in all, I did not fall off of the kneeler, I did not sneeze when I got a face full of incense, and I did not go forward to receive communion at the end of the service. Remus and Tonks went forward, and I began to get up, when Harry gave my arm a tug. He flipped open the prayer book and silently pointed to a line that said that communion was restricted to baptized, confirmed believers. I haven’t a clue whether or not I was ever baptized, but I think that I would have remembered being confirmed.

I learned that Harry can kneel very stilly for a long time.

He seemed both very focused and very much at peace during the service. The music was interesting – it was my first exposure to a pipe organ, and the choir chanting the psalms was awesome. I was able to sight read most of the music, and I discovered that not only can Harry carry a tune, but he has a decent singing voice. Towards the end of the service, Tonks’ phone grunted, and she excused herself to the parish hall to take care of that interruption, leaving the rest of us to cool our heels after the service. An older girl I recognized from Hogwarts made a bee-line to Harry with a familiar, hungry look on her face. Evidently Harry knows that that look means, because he made a show of grabbing my hand and introduced me to Daphne Greengrass as “Ginny Weasley, my girlfriend.”

Well, that was unexpected.

Tonks showed up shortly thereafter and as we exited the sanctuary, I received a vigorous handshake from the rector, who said “Ah, you must be Harry’s girl.” Tonks started sniggering. I didn’t know it at the time, but my scarf was blinking at the time. I said something inane like “yes sir, nice service today,” and walked out into the morning sunshine.

We’d skipped breakfast before the service, so the next stop was a little bistro not far from St. Simon’s. We split a large order of something called nachos, which was a bed of crisps made from corn tortillas smothered in refried beans, melted cheese, diced black olives, chopped tomatoes, jalapeno peppers and a few dollops of sour cream. That put a big dent in my appetite, and I was able to make it back to Grimmauld Place where we had soup and a salad with carrot cake for dessert. It was at Grimmauld Place that I finally looked in a mirror and saw the blinking decorations on the scarf. Part of me was thrilled, after all, Harry had introduced me as his girlfriend, but the rest of me was slightly annoyed.

I’d been pranked.

I volunteered to wash up with Harry and we had a chance to talk about the “girlfriend thing.” He apologized, after a fashion. Not for calling me his girlfriend, but for not talking to me about it first.

To say that I was shocked was an understatement.

“Who are you and what did you do with the real Harry Potter?” I asked. We both had a great laugh after that.

Then he held up his hand, waiting for me to place mine against it. I didn't need to be told that he wanted my shield down. For a moment, all I felt was the delicious warmth that I feel when I'm sensing him when we're apart, followed by an avalanche of other thoughts, emotions and phantom memories, including not a few from the night we'd spent in the orchard a week and a half ago, doing exactly what we were doing right now. It didn't last long and the overexposure caused us to break contact before we could pull up our shields. It's actually quite painful.

I explained about the headscarf trick, which he'd been oblivious to, and we agreed that something had to be done in reply.

We popped back to the Burrow by Floo and spent the rest of the day apart – Harry was off doing something with Ron and I was reading up on an assignment for tomorrow imposed by that comely taskmistress, the Wicked Witch of the East. I'd drop my shield down to zero from time to time just to check that he was still there. Dragon magic can be a nuisance at times, but it has its moments.

Just before dinner he found me alone in the parlour, pulled me up from my chair and wrapped his arms around me. I asked him, “What's this for?” to which he replied “Do I have to have a reason?” Evidently some part of him needed recharging.

No, he does *not* have to have a reason. I *don't* mind.

I don't mind one little bit.

After dinner, Ron trounced him soundly in two games of chess, followed by a draw when he played me. He cheated – he kept distracting me whenever it was my turn to play, looking me in the eye, talking to me, brushing up against my free hand, touching my foot with his own. He thought it was pretty funny.

He's going to pay for this, but the twins and Tonks will be dealt with first.

Tomorrow's going to come pretty early, so it's time to close out this entry.

GMW

~+~

12 August 1996

Waking early was not a particular sacrifice for Harry. Since moving to the Burrow for the balance of the summer, he'd been sleeping very well indeed. The only thing that made a sound when Harry entered the kitchen was the muted slap of his flip flops. The subsequent sound of the pipes groaning indicated that Mrs. Weasley (he'd not yet surrendered to her entreaties to call her 'Molly') was in the shower. He loaded the large speckled percolator with coffee and water, setting it on the stove to heat. Next he put on a tea kettle. Mrs. Weasley drank both tea and coffee, but preferred a cup of tea before she got to work on breakfast and the morning chores. Harry had worked out the outer limits of what he could do to be helpful without supplanting his surrogate mother, which turned out to be having coffee ready when she got to the kitchen and volunteering to clean up on mornings when he had the time.

The coffee pot began to burble on the burner. Harry turned the heat down by half and let the happy sound continue unmolested. He let down his shield enough to tell him that Ginny was

stirring. He smiled briefly at the sensation - he'd be hanged if he could ever express in words what that felt like, or what it meant to him. The next sounds were familiar, a sliding door to a closet banging open, then shut, the sound of the door to the upstairs loo opening and closing, more water running and then a simultaneous flush, slam and shuffle down the stairs.

Ginny looked up briefly as she entered the kitchen.

"You know, for a small girl, you make a lot of noise in the morning," he said cheerfully as she came up to him and engaged in the typical Ginny embrace: thumbs looped into his belt, head bent down, forehead resting on his chest. She inhaled deeply, shivered slightly and then broke away, reaching with one hand behind her on the counter for the mug that she knew would be there, grabbing the percolator with the other hand. Filling the mug with steaming hot coffee, she slumped into the nearest chair, cradled the mug with both hands, sipping lightly before she raised her head to meet his gaze.

"Shut it, you," she said with a snarl, followed by a wink.

Ginny didn't care for morning, and didn't care for running. Combining the two activities was not synergistic in the least. She finished the coffee, stretched and then bent over to lace up her trainers. She was eager to finish her run. "Getting it out of the way," was the highest praise she could give that activity. They carefully shut the door, trotting out over the grounds of the Burrow for the morning run. They had an established route which they'd carefully measured - the short route was three miles, the long route was just over five miles. They'd done the short route today; it was a day they'd both be taking lessons at Abelard's. As they came around the chicken coop, the point where they normally stopped jogging and started walking, Harry spoke up.

"Hermione wrote last night," he said.

"Did she now? How is the sweet girl?" Ginny puffed.

"Curious," he replied.

"She was born curious, what else is new?" she quipped.

"She wants to know how we're doing," he said, stripping off his light jacket.

"So tell her," she said.

"I wanted to talk to you before I did," he said quietly.

"Why?"

"What's between us is private," he said.

"Yeah, good luck with that, Harry. In two weeks we are returning to the Gryffindor Goldfish Bowl. I think that people are likely to notice," she said, looping back around the coop towards the orchard.

"Notice what?"

"Oh, little things, you know, like a red-haired lunatic pressing her forehead into the chest of the Boy Who Lived when he's standing in the common room, like the fact that it's hard for us to go six hours without touching each other, things like that," she said, slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow. Harry sighed. Normally a contented sound, today it sounded distressed. "I mean, what shall I say to would-be suitors who ply me with attention to see if there's any truth to the rumours about my kissing ability?"

"Dunno," he replied, not rising to the bait. "What about the immediate question?"

"Answering Hermione?"

"Yeah," he replied.

"What were you thinking of saying in your answer?" she asked.

"That you're brilliant to be with, that we seem to like each other?"

"That would do, I suppose, she should be used to getting monosyllabic answers from you by now: 'How are you, Harry?' she asks. 'Fine,' you answer. You really *can* disclose a little more of yourself to someone who's known you for going on six years, you know," she said, blowing a wisp of hair out of her face.

"Okay, smarty-britches, what's the answer of the modern witch?" he snarled, half in jest.

"That we're together; that we're happy," she said, searching for the right words.

"What about the kissing ability?" he said, raising one eyebrow rakishly.

"Fix things so I can kiss you unshielded without my head blowing up and I'll gladly show you," she replied as she grabbed his belt.

Harry wrapped his arms around her. "Promise?"

"Promise."

"Let's go eat breakfast, today's going to be a long day," he said.

"Yeah. You know, on second thought, your answer wasn't bad - simple, economical, to the point - I am a brilliant witch after all," she said smugly.

Harry smacked her backside and began to run towards the house. "Legend in your own mind! Last one to the house does the dishes!"

"Potter, you cheater! I'll get you for this!"

13 August 1996

Ron was sprawled in front of the empty fireplace, writing a letter. Ginny was reclining on the couch, reading one of the final chapters of *Combat Cures and Countercharms*. Harry was sitting on the floor, leaning against the middle of the couch, writing a reply to Anthony Goldstein, who had written a lengthy description of a Death Eater raid in the village down the road from his family's estate. From time to time Ginny would reach down and caress his shoulder or run her fingers absent-mindedly through his hair. He would often close his eyes when this happened, leaning back into the caress. It broke up the pace of his writing, but he was glad for the distraction. When he looked up again, Ron was watching him with a broad smile on his face.

"Eight more days, mate and she'll be here," Harry said.

Ron sighed in reply.

"It's not like you haven't seen her – you've been popping over to her house through the Floo so much that Mum's had to lay in a new supply of Floo Powder," Ginny said, snapping her book shut. "That reminds me, I need to write it on the shopping list for the twins." She stretched, laid her book down carefully and pulled a Muggle pen, clipboard and paper out of the secretary desk. She returned back to her spot on the couch and began to write. "What's a nice word for a hickey?" she asked.

Harry reached back for her first-aid textbook, thumbing through the middle. "Uh, subcutaneous suction bruise," he said, putting the book back down on the couch.

"What's a combat first-aid book doing discussing hickeys?" Ron asked, distracted from his letter.

"It's in the section on Succubi and Incubi – don't ask," Harry replied. "It's really gross – way more gross than Seamus showing off his trophy love-bites," he said with a sniff of disdain.

"Ever have one?" Ginny asked playfully.

"No, you offering?" he replied.

"Huh, not quite, Mr. Potter. I value my sanity. Besides, love goddesses don't stoop to such crude measures," she said in an affected manner.

"Oh, do tell?" he countered.

"Leaving a temporary mark on your beloved is crude; killing or perhaps maiming a few of your rivals will let the world know that your property rights should be respected," she said airily.

"Do you have a list?" he asked.

"Of course! Monica says that you have a list, why shouldn't I?"

“It’s not the same thing,” Harry said with a note of protest in his voice. “Besides, other than you, everyone on my list is taken now.”

“Oh, does that imply that I’m still on the market?” she replied.

“It depends, how many rivals do I have to maim to take you off the market?”

“I’ll tally up the list and leave it under your door in the morning,” she said.

“Thanks, I’ve been running out of things to worry about this month,” Harry said, deadpan.

“If I might interrupt,” Ron said pointedly. “Who are you writing to that you need a euphemism for hickey?”

“Luna Lovegood,” Ginny replied. “She’s trying to figure out whether Neville’s *subcutaneous suction bruises* are due to allergies or something else.”

Ron sniggered. “I’ll place my bets on something else, perhaps something blonde,” he said before letting out a solitary guffaw.

“Yeah, well, I’m trying to think of a polite way of saying that she needs to knock that off before school starts, or else Neville’s immature roommates will tease him mercilessly,” she said.

“Hey, we resemble that remark,” Harry said. “My own policy is ‘don’t ask’ – I’m more than willing to ignore that sort of thing if I can keep from hearing the gory details afterwards.”

“Oh, you’re no fun,” she replied.

“Yeah, but most of the time I don’t leave marks, either,” he quipped.

“It’s getting deep in here. Goodnight, Harry, goodnight, Ginny,” Ron said pleasantly. “Say ‘hi’ to Luna for me, will you?”

“Sure *Ronald*, g’night,” Ginny replied.

~+~

14 August 1996

Dear Hermione,

Well, you already know how no-longer-bald brother did on his O.W.L. results – I hope that he’s expressed his gratitude to you – he certainly didn’t get those results on his own. Harry and I opened our letters this evening after we came back from Abelard’s. Harry’s nursing a headache upstairs, so I’ve been asked to let you know how he did. Harry did well, naturally. He washed History, got a low pass in Astronomy and Divination, and nailed outstandings in Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms, Defence (duh!), Care of Magical Creatures and (tah-dah) Potions. Word

has it that Professor Snape appealed his grade to the Examination Authority, saying that based upon his classroom performance, Harry couldn't have done as well as he did on the exam. Yeah, right. The EA denied Professor Snape's appeal. Fancy that. Harry also wants me to let you know that without you, he couldn't have done nearly as well as he did on the O.W.L.s. Well done, Hermione. Based upon these results, I reckon that he'll be taking N.E.W.T. courses in the five areas that he nailed. Well, now that I've performed my dutiful girlfriend responsibilities, on to the real meat of this letter.

Being in a relationship with Harry is far more wonderful and far odder than the fantasy. The fantasy was having him breeze into my life for an hour or so at a stretch, say a few nice things about me and then bruise my lips with a smouldering kiss. The reality is going running with him in the morning, having him make me breakfast, and going for a walk after dinner – no kisses yet, smouldering or otherwise. There's a technical glitch there – we'll discuss it when you're here in a week. I'm working my broad backside to a nub this summer – three days of classes, three days to get my chores done, and then a day off on Sunday.

Speaking of which, Harry introduced me on Sunday to Daphne Greengrass as “my girlfriend, Ginny Weasley.” Under the best of circumstances I would not give a flying fig what Daphne thought, but in the context, it was a pretty good outcome. The brothers have been pretty cool about the whole thing, pretty much leaving us alone: no pranking, no beating up the beau for taking liberties with their baby sister (but then again, he hasn't been taking any liberties, so maybe that's not so odd) no teasing, etc. I should have had it this good for the first fifteen years of my life!

Well, I'm knackered. More later.

Love from,

Ginny

~+~

Are you quite done with your scribbling?

I beg your pardon, Ginny replied in a voice heard only in her mind.

That won't be necessary. Have you checked on the Servant of the Light recently?

He's upstairs.

I am well aware of his location. I was inquiring into your knowledge of his present condition. Might I suggest that you lower your shield and check on him yourself?

He's here – same as always.

Insufferable mammal! You must use what the Creator has given you! I will suggest that what you just felt is qualitatively different than what you have sensed in the past. How would you describe

the feeling within you when you drop your shield?

It's like a mouthful of warm butterscotch syrup, only I'm feeling it rather than tasting it.

Exactly so. Now, break down the components of that feeling: the warmth is the fact that he is alive; the flavour is his essence. Now, feel it again, and savour the feeling, look for different scents and flavours underneath the warmth and the sweetness.

It's the same, but in the background there's a note of vinegar, and a different, off smell, like bread mould – it's very faint.

I will take back a fraction of what I have thought about your powers of perception; it appears that you can be taught. The vinegar note is physical pain; the mould scent is emotional distress.

So I should get him a potion for his headache?

You have the power to take his pain completely.

Eating his pain?

Exactly.

And the distress?

I have no notion as to how to comfort a mammal. You will have to rely upon your intuition, guided by mammalian experience.

Thank you, Tk'lch.

We serve by guiding, young dragon.

~+~

Ginny checked the stairwell and the hallway before pushing open the door to Percy's old bedroom, Harry's temporary lair. He was lying on his back, dressed in the jeans and t-shirt he'd worn that day, arm over his eyes.

"You awake, Harry?" she asked, feeling slightly foolish in the question.

"Yeah – I'm awake. I thought if I lay down that my headache would go away. I was wrong. Ginny, my kit's in the loo, could you bring me the bottle marked 'Ibuprofen?'" he asked.

Ginny smiled in the darkness. "I can do better than that," she said, perching lightly on the bed, stroking her fingertips lightly across his forehead. She flinched briefly as the pain began to flow up her arm and into her magical centre. It was an unusual feeling, not physically painful, but she knew that it was a solemn thing that was happening. She felt a brief pang of guilt that she'd known that he was suffering from a headache and done nothing about it. *Live and learn*, she

thought.

Harry groaned appreciatively. “That was marvellous, thanks,” he said.

“Roll over,” she commanded.

“What?”

“Roll – Over,” she said, slowly and distinctly.

Harry grunted as he flipped slowly from his back to his front, spreading his arms up over his head. Ginny placed her palms on his back, flexing her hands until just her fingertips rested on his back. She began to wiggle her fingers up his back until one hand was kneading his shoulder and the other his neck.

“Blimey, that feels good,” he grunted into the pillow.

“It’s supposed to – now just relax,” she said, smiling broadly. “What are you brooding about?”

“I wasn’t brooding, I was worrying. There’s a difference,” he protested.

“Okay, I’ll rephrase it,” she said, pulling one hand back behind his back so that she could work under his exposed shoulder blade. “What were you worrying about?”

“Crimeny, that’s fantastic,” he mumbled. “I was worrying about you.”

She paused for a moment, her mind frozen for an instant while her hands poked and stroked around his shoulder blade. “What about me?” she asked quietly.

“Abelard wants us to spar,” he said, grunting as she moved one hand back above his head and pulled the other hand behind his back to work on muscles surrounding the other shoulder blade.

“I’ve been sparring with Jasmine all week,” she replied.

“He wants us to spar with each other,” Harry mumbled.

“I’m not made of glass,” she retorted.

“I’m very well aware of what you are made of, Miss Weasley. I don’t want to fight you, even for training. I guess what really bothers me is the notion that Abelard believes that you’re going to need to be as dangerous as I am becoming, which means that you’re going to get hurt,” he said, lifting his head briefly before surrendering once more to her ministrations.

Ginny pondered her response, shifting from sitting beside Harry to straddling him, resting her weight between his bum and his knees. She started with long, slow strokes, beginning at his waist, travelling parallel up his spine, across his shoulders and down his arms. He said nothing in reply, gasping contentedly when she placed her full weight into the stroke. “You’ve got to stop thinking

of me as a liability, Harry. I'm an asset. Two are better than one," she said, shifting her stroke into a criss-cross motion across his back.

"I'm well aware of your assets, a number of which are pressed up against me at the moment," he replied saucily.

Ginny smacked his bum. "Pig," she grunted. She returned to her ministrations, working on long strokes up the back. After a few cycles of this, she began kneading his neck, holding his head still with one hand while working the cords in his neck with her other hand. She wiped her forehead with the back of her sleeve. "Sweet Circe, it's hot in here," she muttered.

Harry muttered something in reply.

"What was that, Harry?"

"I said, it's not rocket science - either open a window or take off some clothes," he said gruffly.

"Thanks, I don't mind if I do," Ginny said impishly, stripping off her shirt, leaving only a thin camisole in place. "You too," she said, tugging his t-shirt off in a swift motion.

"That better be the last piece of clothing that gets removed, Ginny. Your mum is going to kill me if she catches you in here," Harry said grimly, wincing as Ginny dug into a sore muscle in the base of his back.

"Actually, Harry, I have it on good authority that Mum believes that you are a perfect gentleman, and that your virtue is at far greater risk than mine," she said with a snort. She rose up to her knees. "Roll over," she commanded.

"What, why?" he asked groggily.

"I want to see your face right now," she replied.

Harry groaned softly as he turned over. Ginny settled her weight back down on his thighs, brushing his hair away from his eyes as he propped himself up on one elbow.

Ginny paused to say something when Harry reached up to tuck a stray wisp of hair behind her ear. She could see his lips moving, but he was making no sound. His fingers trailed down her cheek and down her jaw, leaving a hot streak upon her skin as they moved. Harry seemed to be having trouble focusing his eyes, which he was blinking slowly.

"I - I've gotta go," he gasped, before he closed his eyes and Disapparated from the room.

~+~

Harry Apparated into the Weasley parlour, which was a good thing. His posture was all wrong for an easy landing, appearing horizontally a foot above the coffee table in front of the couch, which was currently occupied by Arthur Weasley. Harry dropped unceremoniously onto the table and

then onto the floor, cursing quietly as he fell. Arthur looked up from the evening edition of the Daily Prophet, wry grin upon his face.

"I take it you weren't planning on dropping in on me this evening, Harry," Arthur said pleasantly, nodding in Harry's direction where he sat on the parlour floor, *sans* shirt and glasses. Above them they heard Ginny shriek, slam the door to Harry's bedroom, stomp down the stairs and slam the door to her own bedroom shut, uttering a muffled curse that sounded like "black-haired pig." Harry's gaze drifted to the open magical map that sat on the couch next to Arthur Weasley.

Harry groaned softly.

"I understand, Harry," Arthur said sympathetically. "Molly said you were having a lie in with a bit of a headache. Ginny was leaving the parlour just as I came home."

"How much did you see on the map?" Harry asked.

"I saw my very beautiful daughter set Gossamer wards in the stairwells and enter your room, leaving your door open. She then cast an Aversion charm on the doorway to keep anyone from looking into the room. As the rule of the house is that the door may not be closed, she technically broke no rules," Arthur said with a snort. "I guess I'll have to revise those rules now that she's doing advanced Wandless magic. A decent amount of time after her arrival in your room, I see you Apparate into the parlour. I assume that you were trying to keep things from escalating out of control."

"Yeah," Harry said, nodding his head. "I don't think she liked that much," he said, hooking his thumb in the direction of the stairwell.

"Harry, I pride myself on my understanding of human nature in general and the workings of the Weasley women in particular. Some things you should let slide, and others you should deal with immediately. I will give you a pointer that whatever passed between you and Ginny just now, you should not let it slide; it will fester and poison your relationship," Arthur said with a penetrating gaze into Harry's eyes. "The house is locked up, I'm going to turn in now; Molly's already off to bed. I'm not expecting the Twins until the weekend, and frankly I'm not expecting Ron to be home tonight at all. By the power invested in me as head of this house, I'm granting a one time waiver of the closed door rule. Go on up and work it out, even if you have to close the door and silence the room," he said solemnly, then breaking into a slight grin.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied. "One-time good deal."

"I trust you, Harry. Good luck," Arthur said, extinguishing the light as he left the parlour.

~+~

"Go away, Harry," Ginny said from behind her locked and shielded door. He'd heard the lock click as he stepped onto the landing next to her door, and felt the shielding go up after that.

"Please open the door, Ginny," he pleaded.

"Go Away," she said in a louder voice.

Harry engaged his Farsight, glancing briefly at the layout of Ginny's bedroom, searching for an open spot for his Apparation. He popped into her room, passing through the shielding charm without harm.

"Get out!" she shouted, tossing a book at him. Harry could have deflected the book, but stood still, letting the spine of the book bounce against his chest.

"Uh!" he gasped involuntarily.

"I'm not going to fight you, Ginny, and I'm not going to leave," he said quietly, holding one hand behind his back.

"Here's your shirt," he said, extending it towards her as she looked around wildly for something else to throw. "Your dad saw everything on the map," he added quietly.

"What?!?" she shrieked.

Harry tossed her shirt onto her bed and then cast a silencing charm on the walls. "Your dad was watching the map that shows everything in the Burrow: the Gossamer wards, the Aversion charm, the open door, you sitting on my bed. He sent me up here to patch things up," he said quietly.

Ginny covered her mouth with her hand. "I am so busted," she gasped.

"I don't think so - he told me I had a one-time waiver of the 'no closed doors' rule if I tried to patch things up," Harry said with a wink.

Ginny ran her fingers through her hair, staring at the ceiling briefly, one hand on her hip.

"I don't think you understand why I left," Harry said haltingly.

"Oh, I understand all right," Ginny replied venomously. "I was being a stupid little tart, taking my clothes off in your room. I was about to tell you something very important, and - and you didn't want to hear it," she replied.

Harry shook his head. "I haven't the foggiest what you were going to say, you have to believe me when I say that. I left because, because I was about to do something that I thought I was g-going to regret," he stammered.

Ginny assumed a full Molly posture, both hands balled into fists, planted on either side of her waist. "I'm listening," she said harshly.

"Sit down," he said sharply.

"Don't use that tone of voice with me," she snapped.

Harry took a deep breath, running his fingers through his hair. "Okay, *please* sit down," he said in a softer, more pleasant tone.

She sat down on her bed.

He sat down on the guest bed across the room, already made up for Hermione. "I already told you that I'm rubbish with feelings and things like that. This isn't going to make any sense," he said, grabbing the pillow from the bed, wringing it with his hands. "Let me start over. Do you know why Dragons use Pyr'gs?" he asked.

"They are guarding our minds," she replied, looking at him quizzically.

"Wrong – that's just a side effect. Dragons use Pyr'gs to teach little dragons how to become big dragons - that's part of why we've been learning so much new magic this summer - the Pyr'g makes it easy to learn what's really difficult magic," he said.

"What's that got to do with us, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Ginny, I – I'm so sorry - I haven't got a clue how to be a proper boyfriend, and I certainly don't know anything about being in love," he said, oblivious to Ginny's widened eyes. "When you were touching me, it was stirring up all sorts of things inside of me. I wanted to drop my Occlumency shield to zero," Harry said, leaving a long silence. They both knew what that would have meant.

"And?" Ginny asked.

"I wanted to take you by force," he replied, blanching at her response. "No, not like that, I wanted to mark you," he blurted.

"Mark me?" she asked.

"Yes, just like in the dreams. You've been having them too, I suppose," he asked. Ginny nodded in reply. "I have very strong feelings for you, Ginny, and I haven't a clue about what I should do with them as a human, so my Pyr'g is trying to help me sort them out the way dragons do things," he said.

"What happens when boy dragons mark girl dragons, Harry, aside from all the blood?" Ginny asked.

"They're bonded - forever," he replied. "It's like being engaged, or betrothed. The mating comes afterwards, it's like the last formality," he said, sighing.

"And you want to be *bonded* - with me?" she asked.

Harry nodded, biting his lip.

"Gallop Gargoyles, I've really botched it up tonight," Ginny exclaimed.

"I don't have a headache any more - you didn't botch that up," Harry added helpfully.

"Do you know what I was going to say to you?" she asked.

"I haven't a clue," he answered.

"I was going to tell you - that - that I love you, Harry, and then you go and hare off out of the room," Ginny said, standing and beginning to pace. "It was then that it hit me that I was slightly underdressed for the occasion, and the only thing I could think was that you didn't like what you were seeing. I put up a good front, you know, but I'm really insecure about a lot of things, including how much I've got up top, or how little, depending upon which way you want to see it. Is the camisole half full or half empty?" she asked with a nervous grin.

Harry grinned as he fought a blush. "There's nothing wrong with your camisole, Ginny. You're a very pretty girl, and I'm sure that if I ran into you in the dark that I'd know that you were a girl," he said, raising one eyebrow.

"Is that the standard?" she asked.

"With me it is - I'm more of a leg man, personally, but believe me when I say that there's nothing wrong with your top, or your bottom. You have quite an effect on me," he said earnestly.

"Yeah, I understand that now," she said sheepishly.

"We're not very good at this, are we?" he asked.

"No, we're not," she agreed. "This is where a normal magical couple would spend the night snogging in front of the fireplace," she said cheerfully.

"Yeah, good luck with that," Harry replied. "This is when a good dragon couple start wrestling until one of them is properly marked," he said with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

"Don't even think about that, Harry. I don't have wings," she replied forcefully.

"Pity that," he said, "Mm'lau is always chiding me for that. Proper girls have wings and tails, you know."

"Yeah, well Mm'lau must agree with Mum, I'm not a proper girl then," she said, closing her eyes briefly. With the briefest of pops, she Apparated to his side, leaning into him. "I don't think I care much any more," she said, sighing as she rested her head against his shoulder.

They talked a bit more, about things of no great significance until Harry pushed up off the guest bed, standing on unsteady feet. "Tomorrow's coming no matter how bad we are at being a magical couple. Goodnight luv," he said with a yawn. Ginny grabbed his belt, pulling herself up from the bed. She tucked her head under his chin as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Harry, I love you so much," Ginny said; her voice muffled in his chest.

"There, that wasn't so hard to say, was it?" he replied with a smirk.

"Prat," she replied, slapping his stomach with the back of her hand.

Harry cancelled the silencing charm, the seal and the locking charm and then opened the door.
"Sleep well," he said.

"I'll try," she replied.

"Harry?"

"Yes, love?"

"I'm not running tomorrow."

"See you at breakfast then," he said, closing the door behind him.

Once the door was closed she put the silencing charm back in place, thrusting her clenched fists into the air. "Yes, yes, yes!" she exclaimed.

15 August 1996

Dear Diary,

The monthly visitor came last night. ;-{
I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised – it comes like clockwork. The cramping is terrible today. I tried the pain-eating trick this morning when I first woke up, but apparently it doesn't work on my own pain. I'm not going to ask Tk'lch about it, because I'm tired of his snotty attitude about mammals – I'm certain that whatever lady dragons go through, it just doesn't compare. How special. Why couldn't I get the lady Pyr'g and Harry get the attitudinally challenged gentleman dragon? I'm not waking Harry for this, either.

Things got a little out of hand last night – I don't know what I was thinking. Harry, sweet boy that he is, wanted to take me, but he ran away instead. He wants me – that much is clear. This blasted dragon magic is a right bloody pain some days. He didn't come right out and say "I love you" last night, but he did say that he was in love with me, and he called me "love" so I guess we are making definite progress. J

If the cramping weren't so bad, I'd be ecstatic this morning. Maybe Mum will cast a warming charm on my bloated little belly.

TTFN

GMW

15 August 1996

Dear Diary,

It's just before lunchtime – Harry's outside working with Bill - tuning the wards to recognize Harry's Apparation signature. Bill was surprised when Mum called this morning, asking to adjust the wards on the house – I don't know which surprised him more, the fact that I'm Apparating, or that Harry is now my boyfriend. I was moaning with Mum this morning, trying my best to choke down tea and toast, sitting sideways on the long bench at the breakfast table. Harry slides up behind me on the bench, wrapping his arms around me. I was surprised – Mum was astonished.

Harry asked where I hurt, and I placed his hand below my belly. It was amazing to feel the pain drain away – I'm afraid that I made some not very ladylike noises that Mum misinterpreted entirely as I was wiggling on the bench. Harry, dear lad, explained in rather terse terms that this was a medical trick that he'd learned from the dragons, and that it's not something he'd do for just anyone. He's so sweet.

It's odd, really. I'm still cramping, but I'm feeling no pain. He's a handy guy to have around at times. Harry and Ron were degnoming the garden after breakfast – I got rather light duty instead, which I didn't mind a bit. Mum says that my period was wretched because of the stress of this month. Yeah, it has been a stressful month – riding the roller coaster with Harry. I don't think I'd have it any other way, though.

GMW

21 August 1996

Dear Diary,

Well, I've survived another week – another round of lessons, another visit to St. Simon's (early service this week – no Tonks, no choir, no Daphne). I wore the scarf again, but I charmed off the decorative stitching. I don't need to tell the world that I'm Harry's girl just yet .

I've been scheming with Harry to prank Tonks and the twins – it's almost ready to put into place. Today, around lunchtime, we'll be Apparating to Grimmauld Place and to the twins' flat in Diagon Alley. Jasmine will be covering for us, so technically I suppose that we aren't violating the security rules. Harry will be delivering a very special package to Grimmauld Place, and I'll be rearranging a few things in the twins' flat. If all goes well, we will perpetrate a righteous prank that can't be traced back to us, until such time as we 'fess up to our deeds – if ever.

Hermione comes tonight after dinner. It will be good to have another girl under the roof – one who understands the ride I've been taking this summer.

I'll let you know if we keep our nerve and execute this plot – Harry's a fun co-conspirator. He has nerve, but he also tries really hard to not be mean in his pranks. It's good to have another friend - even if he's distracting.

More, later.

GMW

22 August 1996

Dear Diary,

It's great to have Hermione here, even if it means that I'm sharing a very small room. For reasons known only to Mum, she keeps a rather sharper eye on no-longer-bald-brother than she keeps on the short scarlet-haired scarlet woman. That being said, she's never without that blooming map. I suppose I should be grateful; without that map, I'm sure that Remus would insist that we spend the summer at Headquarters, as it's supposedly a far better place to defend than The Burrow.

Gred called this morning - apparently both of them have been afflicted with a combination of hexes - they can't say a word - everything comes out in song, and they can't stop dancing. Hee hee. Amazing what happens when you keep using Tenor Toothpaste and Tarantella Toilet Paper - the time delay was enough that they never did figure out what was causing it. Mum was able to neutralize both of the hexes (she should, she's been cleaning up after the twin terrors for years now) but unless they stop using those items, they'll be right back to the same old song and dance. Harry and I have a hard time looking at each other today without breaking into hysterical giggles over that prank.

We did the spell work at Abelard's, where we could use wands without running afoul of the MoM. Charlie tweaked the wards on the twins' flat so I could Apparate there without any difficulty. Harry, Jasmine and I Apparated into Diagon Alley, and while the black-haired duo stood watch, I Apparated into their flat, changing out their toothpaste and toilet paper. In addition to the stuff that's already in use, I also swapped out the supplies in the cupboard. I think of it as a gift that keeps on giving.

Next we Apparated to Grimmauld Place, where the girls stood watch while the black-haired knight left a booby-trapped gift on the kitchen table. Still no word yet from Grimmauld Place on the Lupine Locket - we're fairly sure that that prank came off without a hitch either. He left a gift wrapped box that said "for Tonks" on the label. A person-specific aversion charm was cast on the box, so that Moony wouldn't notice it on the table. Tonks, curious girl that she is, won't be able to resist opening it, especially after I did a credible job forging Moony's handwriting on the note. Inside the box is a nice locket on a leather choker - just the edgy style that would appeal to Tonks. The locket is charmed so that once she puts it on, she can't take it off. She'll do fine until Moony comes into the room, at which time she should be deprived of human speech and start acting like a female wolf in the presence of the Alpha Male. Harry explained that she'll probably be dancing on all fours in front of Moony, rolling over to show how submissive she is. It should be interesting. The only down side of this operation is that it could be entirely successful and we'd never hear about it - Moony is a very private person, and Tonks wouldn't mention it to us unless she had reason to suspect us.

Such is the price of great art. The planning was wonderful, the execution was sheer bliss, now comes the hard part: waiting for the fallout.

This coming year is going to Rock at Hogwarts.

What do you call a lady Marauder, anyways, a Maraudix?

GMW

P.S. Harry just left my room – he came and knocked me up just as I was closing this entry out – he had a whisper patch in his hand – evidently the tricky boy had an extra charm on Tonks’ locket that I didn’t know about – although we didn’t get a chance to see the prank, we did hear it, live, with Harry providing commentary. It was wicked good fun until Remus cancelled the doggie charm by nipping her on the neck. Thereafter we heard more conventional noises commonly associated with a human couple on very friendly terms – nothing too graphic, but you *could* tell that they were kissing. Harry blushed like a Weasley and cancelled the whisper patch charm, giving them a modicum of privacy. We then got a terrible case of the giggles, and he wished me a good night.

Oh yeah, this year is going to ROCK !

~+~

It was great to be back at The Burrow. Mrs. Weasley had always treated her like a brown-haired daughter; this trip was no different in that respect. She’d settled in the day before and by breakfast time Mrs. Weasley had doled out chores to Ron, Harry, Hermione and Ginny; chores that needed two boys or two girls to complete. Tricky witch, that Mrs. Weasley. Ginny and Hermione got caught up on the big changes in their respective lives fairly quickly. Thereafter, Hermione watched the interactions with renewed interest: smiles, glances, winks, small touches. It was all there, plain to see if one knew what to look for. The girls’ chores were finished before lunch, so she went looking for Ron, checking to see if he’d finished his summer assignments. Sixth year assignments came along with the O.W.L. results – readings and problems for all of the N.E.W.T.-level courses.

He wasn’t in his room, so she pulled out his planner (her gift from Christmas) and began to scribble notes into the calendar squares.

“A bit early for that, isn’t it Hermione?” Ron asked.

Hermione jumped. “Ron, you startled me,” she said, hand on her chest as she caught her breath.

“Well, you see, it’s my room, so normally I don’t worry about how I come or go. What’s with the planner?” he asked pleasantly.

“I just wanted to make sure that you’re going to finish your assignments before school starts,” she said, looking up into his pale blue eyes. *Focus Hermione, focus*, she thought to herself.

“Woman, it’s the holidays!” he whinged.

“Honestly, Ron, if you plan things out, you can get all of your work done on the nights that Harry and Ginny are home,” she protested.

“And why would I want to do that?” he asked.

“That would leave us time free for other things the nights they aren’t home,” she said sweetly.

“Other things?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, moistening her lower lip with the tip of her tongue. “Other things.”

“Right then,” he said earnestly. “Wouldn’t want to run out of time for other things, now would we?”

“It wouldn’t hurt if we started work on the D.A. lessons early either,” she said.

“Are you worried, Hermione?” he asked gently, circling her waist with one arm.

“I’m terrified, Ron,” she answered breathily as she leaned into him.

“Let me talk to Harry then,” he replied.

Hermione ran her palms across his chest and then pulled his head down for a quick kiss.

“That’s all?” he asked.

Hermione stamped her foot lightly. “One, I’m in your bedroom; two, your mother has a map that shows where we are and what we’re doing; and three, if we get started doing *that* right now, we’ll be late for lunch for sure. I’m not keen on the idea of getting caught by your mum the first full day I’m here. Your mum and my mum had words, you know, about my coming to visit now that things are *different* between us.”

“Oh, do tell, Miss Granger,” he said, running his hands around her waist until his palms were cupping her bum.

“Ron!” she said, pushing him away, “I’m serious!”

“I rather doubt that,” a familiar voice cracked behind them. Hermione gave a muffled squeak.

“Sirius was scrawny, had black hair shot with grey, and wouldn’t kiss a bloke like Ron on a dare,” Harry drawled. “You, on the other hand, have lots of padding, nicely arranged I might add, lovely chestnut hair, and a pronounced preference for young men. Nope, you’re not Sirius at all,” he finished with a grin.

“How long have you been here, mate?” Ron asked, swallowing nervously.

“Long enough,” Harry replied in a sing-song tone. “Lunch is ready, Your mum wants *you* to set the table,” he said, giving Hermione a wink.

Ron kicked off his trainers and headed towards the door. Looking at Hermione, he said, “We’ll finish this later.” Looking at Harry, he said, “Don’t do anything that I wouldn’t do.”

“Thanks, that gives me a lot of latitude, mate. Perhaps Hermione can give me some pointers on how to keep Weasleys happy,” he said, ducking as Ron sent a slow-motion backhanded punch his way.

Once Ron was safely downstairs, Hermione turned to Harry, wringing her hands lightly. “How are you doing, Harry?” she asked.

“Better than I deserve,” he replied.

“I’m surprised to hear you joking about Sirius,” she stated quietly.

“There’s not a day that goes by that I haven’t thought of him, Hermione,” he said sombrely. “He wanted me to keep living. He wanted me to be a Marauder like Dad, like that was possible. When things have been particularly difficult, I’ve pushed harder, thinking that it’s something I can do to honour his memory,” he said, breathing deeply as he struggled for control, biting his lip. “He wanted me to know that I’m surrounded by people who love me – that’s finally sinking in this summer – pity it’s taken me this long to figure that out,” he said with a sigh. He was silent for a moment. “Being in love helps, I suppose,” he said.

“Have you told her?”

“I think she knows,” he replied.

“She’s a girl, she needs to hear it, Harry,” she replied.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said lightly. “Let’s go get lunch.”

~+~

Fridays were a welcome relief – Abelard and Jasmine usually planned something rewarding for their respective students; dinner always had a wonderful pudding prepared by Mrs. Paprikash before she went home for the weekend; and rather than coming home at 9:30 or 10:00 at night, they were often home by 8:30. Rather than testing the outer limits of teen-aged endurance, Harry and Ginny had agreed to spend some quiet time with whoever was about at The Burrow, in this case Bill dropping by with some mending for Molly, and turn in early to allow their reserves, magical and otherwise, to replenish during the night. After an obligatory hug from Ginny, Harry changed into pyjamas and was soon fast asleep.

He awoke in the early morning – he’d taken his watch off and placed it on the bedside table when he’d retired, so he guessed from the silence in the house and the darkness outside that it was the deep of the night. He lowered his Occlumency shield, hoping to sense a glimpse of Ginny before he rolled over, only to find that Ginny was awake, in some distress and heading towards his door. He stood up and made a gathering motion with his hand, causing the door to open, leaving a somewhat startled Ginny, dressing gown thrown on carelessly on top of her oversized t-shirt, standing with her hand poised to knock on the now open door.

“Knock, knock,” she said sheepishly. “May I come in?”

“Ginny, what’s wrong?” he asked.

She rushed to him, placing her forehead on his chest.

“Hmmm?” he asked.

She mumbled something into his chest.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that,” he said.

Lifting her head slightly, she said, “I said, shut-up and hold me,” before placing her head back down.

He obligingly wrapped his arms around her, feeling her relax briefly in his embrace before she started shuddering again. She was crying silently.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

“No,” she replied with a sniffle.

Harry shifted slightly, dipping his knees to pick her up and carry her out of the room and down the stairs.

“*What* are you doing?” she hissed.

“Probably saving our lives,” he replied. “If your mum ever caught you in my bedroom, she’d kill you and then turn me into a dog or something.”

Ginny hiccupped softly. “Nope, not a dog, Mum never wanted a dog in the house. She’d stick to something simple and useful like a bat.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” he said, setting her down on a reclining chair in the parlour, twisting the chair to face the door to the kitchen. He pulled a quilt off of the couch and covered her up, tucking the quilt under her chin. “Stay here,” he said, adding as an afterthought, “please.”

Ginny grinned a crooked smile as she watched him bustle about in the kitchen. “What are you doing now?” she asked after a moment.

“Taking care of you,” he replied simply. In a short while he brought a tea tray in with a teapot, two matched cups and saucers and an odd cup and saucer that didn’t match the family china pattern. “Drink some of this,” he said, adding again, “please.”

Ginny sniffed at the cup, wrinkling her nose in distaste, and then took a cautious sip from the steaming cup. It wasn’t the usual blend of tea, but tasted as if it were some herbal concoction.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A frilly girly tea that Jasmine oohed and ahed over when we took a break during an exercise this summer. I brought some back, thinking that your mum might like it – it’s soothing,” he said.

“What’s in it?”

“Chamomile, Lemon Balm, Hibiscus and a bunch of herbs that Neville might recognize, but I’d never heard of before,” he said, taking a big gulp.

“What’s with the third cup?” she asked.

“In a few minutes it will be a Pensieve,” he replied, Summoning his wand from his room. He performed an intricate wand movement that ended up pointing to the North, South, East and West. “Underage Magic Sensor dampening charm,” he said tersely. “Now that I don’t need it, Abelard finally got around to teaching it,” he said with a grin. He set to work drawing patterns on the odd cup, ending his scribbles with three sharp taps on the rim with his wand. The cup glowed briefly before it flickered and became for all intents and purposes an odd, ugly teacup. Ginny reached over to the cup, surprised that it was heavier than it looked. Looking inside she saw a milky substance shot with strands of silver. “Abelard uses Pensieves the way other men use paperclips,” he said casually. “Dreams can be stored like any other memory, the practical benefit being that nightmares rarely recur if you capture the offending dream and pop it in the Pensieve,” he said, looking up to catch her eyes.

“Do you use one?” she asked.

“I’ve got three,” he answered with a grin. “Good dreams, bad dreams and stuff tainted by Tom Riddle,” he said, pulling a face. “Thus far, the cup for the good dreams has the most in it. I keep them all sealed with a blood seal,” he said.

“The saucer?” she asked.

“Exactly,” he replied. “Are you game to try it?”

“Sure,” she said, hoping that she sounded more confident than she felt.

“Close your eyes and think of your dream,” he said calmly. She complied, but a minute after her eyes were closed, her hand darted out to grab Harry’s hand. “You’ve got it?” he asked. She squeezed his hand in reply. He traced his wand to her temple, pulling a sickly grey thread from her head when he removed his wand. With a deft, practiced motion, he dropped the thread into the Pensieve where it sizzled briefly. “Feel better?” he asked. She opened her eyes and nodded. She took a deep breath, pulling him onto the arm of the chair.

“I want to talk about it now,” she said simply.

Harry nodded.

“We’re back in the Chamber of Secrets, only we’re as old as we are now, not what we were then. I’m lying on the ground – I’m so cold. I’m fading in and out. You and Tom are arguing – your voices are getting louder and louder. You’re arguing about - me. Tom says that he had me first, and that you can never have me completely,” she says, halting suddenly, biting her lip. “You leave the Chamber, leaving me with Tom, and it’s so cold,” she said, gripping his hand so hard that it hurt.

Harry waited for a long period. “That’s it?” he asked.

Ginny nodded.

“I came for you once when I barely knew you. I would never leave you with him now. You know that, don’t you?” he asked.

Ginny looked up, her eyes brimming with tears. She nodded.

“Tom never loved you,” he said quietly. She nodded again. “I do,” he said.

Ginny froze, analyzing or trying to analyse what he’d just said. “What did you just say?” she asked with a sniffle.

Harry swallowed hard.

“I love you, Ginny,” he said, smiling a crooked smile. He let go of her hand, holding his hand up, palm towards her. She reached out, Occlumency shield down, and touched her hand to his. A sound like a deep chime pealed softly as the warmth of his essence surrounded her. She saw shards of his own memories of the Chamber mixed with fragrant snippets of recent memories. The thoughts and emotions and sensations swirled until she could no longer distinguish between those that were hers and those that were his. She felt a dull popping sound as she pulled her hand, reluctantly, from his. “That’s the longest we’ve ever been able to hold that connection open,” he said.

“What was the bell?” she asked.

“I haven’t a clue. Mm’lau says it must be a Mammal thing, because Dragons have the sense to not try this before they are bonded,” he said. “We’re almost there,” he added.

“Almost where?”

“You can sense me when you drop your Occlumency shield?”

She nodded. “Uh-huh,” she said.

“It goes both ways – I can feel you too – it’s quite - pleasant. We wouldn’t be able to do that without a bit of a bond between us, or at least that’s what Mm’lau says. When the bond is complete we’ll be able to hold the connection open as long as we want,” he said.

Ginny muttered something.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that,” he said.

“I said, ‘better lay in a supply of lip balm, Mr. Potter,’”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said with a grin. “Let’s get you back to bed,” he said half heartedly.

“Sit with me on the couch for a while?” she said, batting her eyelashes in an exaggerated fashion.

“Yeah, for a while, then we’ll seal your Pensive and hit our respective beds – tomorrow promises to be a long day, and I don’t fancy falling asleep in the Muggle cinema,” he said.

“You have a point,” she conceded.

“I try to be useful,” he said.

“Then be useful now. Sit close to me and keep me warm,” she said, batting her eyelashes again.

“That’s what the quilt is for,” he replied.

“Hang the quilt!” she snapped.

“All right, all right,” he replied. “Maybe we can share the quilt.”

“Now you’re talking.”

~+~

In the late evening of the next day, Ginny was sprawled across her bed, writing in her diary with a Muggle pen, a casual gift from Harry. As she came to the end of a page she began to fiddle with the clicking button on the pen, cycling it several times as she thought of what she wanted to write next. She stopped when she heard a hand on the doorknob.

“I’m awake, Hermione, you don’t need to sneak in,” she called out to her favourite summer roommate.

“I wasn’t sneaking, I was trying to be considerate,” Hermione said as she dropped her purse on the desk.

Ginny looked up from her diary. “You missed a button,” she said impishly.

Hermione inspected the placket of her blouse with horror.

“Ha!” Ginny exclaimed. “Made you look!”

Hermione looked at her feet for a moment and then broke out into a hearty laugh, plopping down onto the guest bed. Her hair was already plaited and, knowing her friend, Ginny suspected she’d probably already brushed and flossed before coming into the bedroom.

“Before you regale me with sordid tales of how you have been slaking your carnal desires, might I remind you that this is my brother you’re talking about; at least I hope it was my brother that you’ve been with for the past half hour,” Ginny said, rolling up into a sitting position.

“Not much to tell, actually,” Hermione said primly.

“Yeah, right, that’s why you were worried that you’d missed a button,” Ginny retorted.

Hermione grinned and laughed. “Your brother,” she began, looking up at her closest female friend, “is a terrific kisser.”

“Ewwwwwwwwww,” Ginny said in mock disgust, clapping her hands on her ears, before switching to a more serious expression. “Of course he’s a great kisser, he’s a Weasley,” she said proudly. “Unfortunately, he’s also the only single Weasley under this roof seeing any action this summer.”

“You and Harry--” Hermione began.

“Are still experiencing technical difficulties,” Ginny interrupted, wrinkling her nose.

“But you were cuddled up together all through the movie,” Hermione protested.

“Yeah, that was wonderful, too, but we were both burning our Occlumency shields at full blast to keep from crawling out of our respective skins,” she said.

“What’s up with Tonks?” Hermione asked.

“What do you mean?” Ginny replied.

“The whole 'embarrass you two by rearranging Harry’s arm around you at the beginning of the movie' thing,” Hermione said, pantomiming the action from earlier in the evening.

“Oh, that! That was payback for the enchanted locket prank,” Ginny explained. “You know, the one she had on tonight?”

“Yeah, you wrote about that – pretty sophisticated charm work in that juvenile prank, I’d say,” Hermione observed.

“Show me a juvenile who can do magic like that, and I’ll show you a Weasley,” she replied proudly.

“Or a Potter,” Hermione countered.

“Or a Potter – remember, he comes by it honestly, too. Remember also that we don’t have *outlets* for all of our energy, so we have to do *something* on our dates.”

“Pranking Tonks was a date?” Hermione asked incredulously.

Ginny grinned with more than a bit of pride. “Yeah, and a thumping good one it was, too,” she replied.

“So what was tonight?” Hermione asked.

“Double date,” Ginny said, then smiled. “Triple date, if you count our chaperones.”

“What did you think of the movie?”

“It was brilliant – but then, I haven’t seen all that many Muggle films to compare it to. I did like Harry’s question about Sheriff Woody – ‘if you do the right thing for the wrong reason, are you still a hero?’ – not that he’s ever had to worry about that,” she added with palpable irony. “Harry doesn’t have to do something subtle like rescue his rival, he just has to kill his adversary before his adversary kills off everyone he loves – you know, something direct and simple like that.”

Hermione frowned and scooted back on the bed, leaning against the wall. “How are you holding up on that front?” she asked seriously.

Ginny sighed and rubbed her forehead with the heel of her hand. “I work real hard on not thinking about it,” she replied. “Some days I go for hours at a stretch without thinking about old Tom.” She looked up suddenly, with a ghost of a grin. “Speaking of sudden death, has Mum cornered you yet for the famous Weasley girls’ talk?”

“You mean the ‘why witches must wait’ talk?” Hermione said, looking away with a slight blush.

“Yeah, I call it the virginity pep-talk. I got it several times in several modes when Mum found out about Michael Corner,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes. “Well, has she cornered you yet?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“It was *mortifying*,” Hermione moaned. “She’s way better at that talk than my Mum was, and believe me, although Monica Granger gives a great talk on love, sex, marriage, self-respect and all that stuff, she’s a piker compared to your Mum.” She raised an eyebrow. “Have you had *your* refresher talk this summer?” she asked with a sly smile.

“Oddly enough, no,” Ginny said thoughtfully. “I’ve been getting mixed signals from Mum and Dad on that front. Mum, of course, is crazy about Harry and would start reserving the hall for the wedding reception if I gave her the slightest encouragement, but on the whole Mum and Dad keep saying, ‘we trust you two, make good decisions,’ which takes a lot of the fun out of it. You know about the map, of course,” she added.

“Of course,” Hermione replied.

“Once Harry started being frank with his feelings, Mum started watching us like a hawk,” Ginny explained. “She came right out and asked me why she hadn’t caught us kissing yet.” Ginny brought her hand up before her face, though she knew it was impossible to hide the famous Weasley blush. “*That* was mortifying,” she groaned. “Explaining our technical difficulties was even more mortifying, but I’ve always tried to be open with Mum.” She stretched and yawned, an

action mirrored by Crookshanks, who stretched in the windowsill before landing with a thump by the foot of Hermione's bed. "So, have you been a good girl today?" she asked Hermione.

"According to your brother, I'm absolutely corking," she replied with a smile. "Why?"

Ginny reached under her bed and pulled out a small basket, grabbing a wadded up jersey. She tossed it to Hermione, who caught it with ease.

"What's this?" Hermione asked.

"Pyjamas," Ginny replied.

"This is Ron's souvenir jersey from the World Cup," Hermione protested.

"Yeah, give it a whiff," Ginny said with a grin.

Hermione did, and her eyes went wide. "Ooooh, it smells like him," she said with a squeal.

"I figured you'd like that," Ginny said while Hermione shucked off her clothes, hanging them neatly on the back of the desk chair, and pulled the jersey over her head. "Looks good on you too," she added.

"Where's yours?" Hermione asked.

"What do you mean?" Ginny countered.

"Haven't you nicked something from Harry yet?"

"I don't fancy sleeping in his shirts – the old ones are too gross and the new ones aren't broken in yet. I did nick his pillowcase this morning though," she said with a broad grin, patting her own pillow. She'd looked up the charm to keep the scent on the fabric, which was why she nicked Ron's jersey in the first place.

Hermione laughed as she slipped under the covers. "Goodnight, Ginny," she said.

"Goodnight, girlfriend. I'll try to slip out quietly in the morning. Tomorrow's the early service at St. Martin's."

"Pray for my soul, I'll still be asleep," Hermione mumbled.

"Lucky girl," Ginny replied, as she rolled over and inhaled deeply. "Lucky me," she muttered before she fell asleep.

~+~

27 August 1996

Dear Diary,

I just finished a good cry.

I seem to be falling apart a lot this summer. Really high highs and morbidly low lows. Yesterday was the last day of tutoring at Abelard's. Although nothing was said about it, I suspect that we'll go back for more lessons during the school holidays this year. I take back everything I said about Jasmine – she's a very sweet girl, once you get past her somewhat violent persona. She's very pleased with the progress I've made this summer. She's not very liberal with her praise, so that meant a lot.

We had a delightful luncheon picnic today with Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna – oh yeah, Harry was there too. J

The weather was just right – not too hot, just a bit of cloud cover so the sun wasn't baking us, and a light breeze. We set up a table by the pond in the shade of the big oak tree. After we finished the sandwiches, salad and crisps, Harry passed out chocolate biscuits (that he made) and ginger biscuits (that I made) and said he had something he wanted to share with us. He told us the prophecy – the one made before he was born, along with the one Trelawney gave my second year. Hermione wanted to argue with him about it – saying that we shouldn't know more than what he shared at his birthday party. Harry's response was that everyone knew that he shared things with his friends, and he wanted us to have a secret to give up in the event that we're ever captured by Death Eaters. Now there's a morbid thought for you.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches -
born to those who have thrice defied him,

born as the seventh month dies

and the Dark Lord will mark him as equal,

but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not

and either must die at the hand of the other

for neither can live while the other survives

the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.

Just for grins I asked Harry if he knew what time he was born – he replied that it was a few minutes before midnight on the 31st of July. Then he dropped the second bomb on us and told us about being the Servant of the Light.

When Abelard was a young wizard, learning how to use his powers as a Seer, he spent a considerable amount of time with the Snow Dragons. A great deal of his Foresight work at that time concerned the rise of Voldemort. He'd had a number of visions about old Tom.

(Actually, it was young Tom then, but you know what I mean.) Abelard saw him being vanquished, but coming back again. His mentor was unable to answer Abelard's questions, so she asked *her* mentor, an old, old dragon known for the clarity of his Foresight. This dragon pondered the problem for a long time and then announced that a human would be born to be the Servant of the Light. The Servant of the Light would defeat the Man of Darkness, which is what the dragons call old Tom. Abelard quibbled that he had seen Voldemort vanquished, but then come back again. The dragon snorted, saying that when the Servant of the Light defeats the Man of Darkness, it would be complete and irrevocable.

Next Harry shared that the Snow Dragons identified him this summer as the Servant of the Light, giving a very abbreviated tale of his trip this summer, leaving out the salient detail that he and I each have a Dragon Pyr'g riding around inside our heads.

Neville seemed quite pleased by this – “So, you're going to defeat him – it's not just a matter of you having the power,” is what he said. Hermione put her finger on the problem, though. “Will you survive defeating him?” she asked. Harry said that Abelard had never asked the

question when he was studying with the dragons, and shortly after he left the first time, the old dragon passed away. Harry did a very credible impression of Abelard: “sometimes ‘I don’t know’ means I don’t know, Harry,” he said in Abelard’s wheezy voice.

Luna did her best to change the topic, and within a matter of minutes we were all carrying on again, six friends on a picnic.

It’s bloody unreal at times. There’s a war going on, but we’re having a picnic at the pond. I caught Harry later and asked him about the prophecies – specifically, did he believe that he was going to survive. He smiled at me, saying that he sure hoped that he survived. Then he ran his fingers through my hair, blinking like mad, fighting back tears. I let him walk away – I know him well enough now that I know there are times he doesn’t want me nearby. This was one of them.

I’ve been living in a bubble all summer, which has been nice, but this afternoon is the first time in a long time that it’s come home to me that we’re in a war, and I’m in love with the bloke at the centre of it all. Harry might die tomorrow or the year after next or ten years from now. Can I deal with this? Do I have a choice?

Harry’s back now.

I need a hug.

I’ll probably start blubbering again, but I don’t care.

If all I ever have is what I have now, it would be enough, but I want more.

Much more.

GMW

~+~

For perhaps the first time since Harry arrived, Ginny awoke before he did. She sat up in bed, stretched, yawned and lowered her Occlumency shield, letting the familiar warmth wash over her. Harry, *her* Harry. He was asleep - dreaming of her. She couldn’t make out much more than that, but the warmth began to increase. As she raised her shield a notch, she made a mental note to tease him about this sometime later today.

~+~

“Morning, Mum,” she said cheerily.

“Well, look who’s woken up on the sunny side of the bed today,” Molly said brightly. “What’s got you so happy?”

“Sweet dreams, Mum,” she said, opening the door to the cold pantry.

“Starring anyone in particular?” Molly asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Hard to say, Mum; it wasn’t my dream,” Ginny replied, grabbing a stack of plates from the cupboard as she began to set the table for breakfast. “How many am I setting the table for today?”

“Set it for six. Remus and Tonks may be by just before we leave for Diagon Alley – if they haven’t eaten anything, I’ll have a little something put aside for them,” Molly answered.

“Dad’s not at work already?” she asked.

“No,” Molly replied with a secretive smile. “He stayed home today.”

Hermione shuffled into the kitchen wearing fuzzy slippers and a plaid dressing gown. She yawned and began setting out silverware and napkins at the plates Ginny had just set down on the table. Ron sat down blearily at his customary place. Hermione silently set a steaming mug of coffee before him and then sat down next to him with her own mug of tea.

“Thanks, I knew that there was a reason I love to have you around,” he said after draining half of the mug.

“Don’t get used to it, I wasn’t put on this earth to be your waitress,” she replied, giving his leg a squeeze under the table.

The teenagers were almost done with breakfast when Harry slid into a seat next to Ginny, his hair still wet from the shower.

“Sweet dreams?” Ginny asked as she leaned into him.

“Uh, yeah,” Harry responded.

“Harry dear,” Molly said, “I managed to keep these wolves from devouring all of breakfast, but if you don’t eat up, I can’t guarantee that they won’t clean me out before you’re fed.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Weasley,” he said, pulling some toast from the rack and a covered dish with sausage and eggs from the buffet table behind him. Ginny got up to pour a fresh mug of coffee, setting it down in front of Harry. “Thanks, love,” he whispered to her.

“What was that, Harry?” Ron said in an overly loud voice.

“I thanked your sister for being so kind as to bring me some coffee,” Harry said, slurping some coffee before spearing a bit of sausage.

“I don’t think that’s exactly what I heard though,” Ron said with a mischievous grin.

“Ron!” Hermione said sharply as she poked him with her elbow, “behave.”

“I am behaving, I just wanted to make sure that I heard things correctly,” Ron answered, holding his ribs where he’d been poked.

Harry pushed another mouthful of eggs into his mouth, chewing silently, then swallowed and pointed his fork at Ron. “I love your sister, Ron,” he said simply, not noticing that Molly had stopped rummaging in the dry pantry. “I love your girlfriend, and for reasons known only to the Almighty, I love you too,” he said before returning his attention back to his plate.

There was a somewhat shocked silence from the teenagers at the table.

“Thanks, mate,” Ron said seriously.

“Life is short,” Harry said sombrely. “Some things have to be said when you have the chance.” He glanced up, and his tone lightened slightly. “Now, just to make sure that everything is clear – while I love you and Hermione, I’m not *in love* with either of you.” He took a large bite of toast.

“And the short, red-haired terror sitting next to you?” Ron asked.

“*Her* I’m in love with. Happy now?” he said, shoving the last of the toast into his mouth before pouring a glass of juice.

“I am,” Ginny remarked, rubbing her hand lightly across Harry’s shoulder. Molly Weasley resumed her activities in the dry pantry.

“Ron, could you and Hermione clean up?” Molly asked pleasantly. “I’ve got to make some Floo calls before we head on into the city.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Weasley,” Hermione said, moving to the sink to run some dishwasher.

Ginny continued rubbing Harry’s back. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“For what?” Harry asked, putting his fork and knife onto his plate.

“For not being as thick as my brother,” she said, smoothing out a bit of his hair that was sticking up as it dried.

“Sure,” he replied. “I think I’m up to the emotional depth of a coffee cup by now.”

“What’s that mean?” she asked, giving him a quizzical look.

“Ask Hermione,” he said with a smirk, pushing away from the table.

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Their transportation into Diagon Alley was by Portkey. Harry disliked Portkeys about as much as he disliked travelling by Floo, but on the whole, Portkeys didn’t leave him with soot in his hair. Remus met them at their destination, a private room in the Leaky Cauldron.

“Where to?” Harry asked Molly Weasley.

“Well, I think we all need to go to Gringotts, then we’ll split up and visit Madam Malkins, Flourish and Botts and then decide if we have time for any fun shopping before lunch,” she answered.

“Sounds like a plan,” he answered. “Who’s my designated minder?”

“Me,” Tonks answered, entering the room through a disguised door that Harry didn’t know existed

until it opened. She was dressed in tatty jeans and a short-sleeved cropped jersey emblazoned with the letters “M-B” across her chest. Her hair was in dewy spikes, some coloured gold, others coloured a deep black.

As they filed out of the room, Harry asked Tonks in a whisper, “What’s the ‘M-B’ stand for?”

“Moony’s Bitch,” she replied in a conspiratorial whisper. “The old fuddy-duddy asked me to take it off, so we agreed to compromise.”

“Nice choker,” Harry said, touching her locket lightly.

“Thanks, it’s one of my favourites,” she replied. “Moony got it for me?”

“Did he now?” Harry asked with a broad smile.

“That’s what the note said,” Tonks replied. “Why he had Jasmine pick it up in Capetown is a bit befuddling, but he always did get around on his days off,” she said with a knowing smirk.

“Imagine that,” Ginny said, linking her arm though Harry’s.

The walk to Gringott’s was pleasant – the streets were bustling, but not too crowded, as was often the case the week before classes started. Harry and Ginny saw a few fellow students, waving and smiling to them as they passed, but none of them stopped to talk.

Hermione went to the money exchange counter, pulling out a thick sheaf of bank notes from her purse. Ron pulled a smaller wad of notes from his back pocket.

“What’s that from?” Hermione asked.

“I’ve been working odd jobs all summer – a bloke needs to have a few Galleons if he expects to treat his girl on Hogsmeade weekends,” he replied proudly. “Your dad paid a bit for the day I spent doing plumbing with him, and then again for the day I moved your mum’s office, but most of this came from helping out with the Waldron family down the road from The Burrow. They’re Muggles, but they pay well for a hard day’s labour,” he said simply.

After waiting in line with Ginny, Harry finally was finally asked by the goblin at the desk for his key. Harry pulled two small brass keys from his pocket, along with a larger, iron key, all strung together on a brass-coloured chain.

“Are all of those keys for vaults, here?” she whispered.

“Yeah. The iron key is my family vault, the older brass key is Sirius’ vault, and the shinier key is my school vault – I never knew about the first two until I met with my solicitor this summer. Can you come with me to my vault?” he asked hesitantly.

“Uh, all right,” she replied, looking over her shoulder, first at Tonks, then at her mum. Molly and Tonks exchanged a look between themselves, Tonks finally nodding slightly.

The desk goblin snapped his fingers, calling a smartly dressed goblin from the corridor who led them to the cart. Harry picked Ginny up and placed her into the cart, amid some not so playful squeals of protest.

“I’m not helpless, you know, I can climb in all by myself,” she said.

“Yeah, but you’re wearing a skirt. I’m not too keen on you flashing your knickers to the entire lobby,” he said with a grunt as he squeezed into the cart beside her.

“Oh, you’d prefer a private showing?” she asked saucily.

“Let’s not go there today, Ginny,” he said, slipping his arm around her. “It’s going to be a long three years before you’re done with school.”

The goblin looked back at them with an odd expression, pointing his finger forward as the cart took off down the twisting rails into the bowels of Gringotts. After a long and dazzling ride, they stopped in front of Harry’s school vault. To Harry’s surprise, Ginny accepted help getting out of the cart without protest. As soon as they were out of the cart, the goblin pointed his finger forward and the cart disappeared down the track with a clatter.

“How does he know when to come back?” she asked.

“Dunno,” he replied. “I’ve never had to wait more than a minute, though.” Harry fit the brass key into the keyhole in the centre of the door and then placed his palm against the door. With a muffled click the door opened, revealing a room slightly larger than Percy’s bedroom filled with small stacks of ingots, a table piled high with large canvas bags marked with Gringotts’ logo and next to the door a bucket filled with shiny Galleons.

“Blimey, Harry, you’re filthy rich,” Ginny exclaimed, her eyes wide as she looked about the vault. “Why are you showing me all of this?” she asked.

Harry’s face flushed. “How much would a really nice gown cost for the All-Hallows Eve Ball?” he asked.

“Twenty Galleons, Thirty Galleons tops if I got all the trimmings,” she said wistfully.

Harry pulled an empty bag from his pocket. “How about fifty Galleons?” he asked as he began to scoop coins into the bag.

“No,” she said resolutely.

He looked up, startled. “What do you mean, ‘no?’” he asked.

“Weasleys don’t take charity,” she replied.

“It’s not charity, it’s a gift – it’s just fifty Galleons,” he sputtered.

“Just fifty? That’s more money than I’ve ever seen in Mum’s cashbox at home! You’ve already lavished me with gifts this summer,” she said, crossing her arms in front of her.

Harry continued to scoop Galleons into the bag, counting as he did so. “Take it,” he said when he’d finished counting. “One way or the other, it’s going to be yours anyway.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Harry had a hard time looking at her. “If things work out between us, it’ll all be yours,” he said haltingly.

“And if they don’t?” she asked, shifting her hands to her hips.

“If I don’t live that long, my will has three beneficiaries; you’re one of them.”

“That’s how you see it?” she asked with a quizzical expression.

“Pretty much,” he said. “If I live long enough, I’m going to ask you to marry me. If I don’t, well, I know where it’s all going, so that’s okay too.”

“You are so sweet, Harry,” Ginny said, her posture softening.

“So you’ll take it?” he implored.

“No.”

Harry took a deep breath and looked out of the vault into the yawning chasm beyond the narrow gauge railway that ran outside the door. He hefted the bag and stood in the doorway, reaching down into the bag for a Galleon. Adopting his best cricket stance, he threw the Galleon into the darkness. A short bit later they heard a distant clatter of metal against stone and then a *kerplunk* sound of something hitting unseen water. Ginny’s mouth was wide open; she was speechless. The next Galleon he threw sideways, like a skipping stone.

“You lunatic! What are you doing?” she shouted.

“What’s it look like I’m doing? I’m pitching this rubbish away,” he said, reaching into the bag for another Galleon.

“That’s good money!” she said vehemently.

“Not good enough for you, apparently,” he said with a lingering trace of bitterness.

“Harry, stop!” she pleaded.

“Why? What good does this rubbish do me? Will it bring my parents back? Will it bring Sirius back? Will it keep you safe in the coming war? Will it guarantee that there’ll be nine places set at the table come next Christmas? No, it can’t do that. I’d hoped that a little bit of it could make

you happy, but apparently it can't do that either, so it's worth nothing to me. It's worth nothing! *My treasure's not in this vault, Ginny!* ” he shouted, pitching another Galleon into the void.

“What do you mean?” she asked earnestly.

“My treasure wears shoes,” he said, looking down at her well scuffed trainers. “Size three by the looks of them,” he said drolly.

“You're daft,” she said softly.

“I thought we already established that,” he said, reaching down for another Galleon.

Her face set into determined lines. “Harry, so help me, if you throw another one of *my* Galleons into the void, I'm going to hex you something fierce!” she said.

He turned back to her and raised an eyebrow. “*Your* Galleons, eh?” he asked with an innocent expression.

Ginny nodded.

“*Accio* Ginny's Galleons,” he said, holding his hand out towards the chasm. With a zipping, whistling sound, the Galleons came whizzing back to him. He caught them left-handed and then dumped them into the bag. Pulling another bag from his pocket, he quickly filled it with a similar amount, before he turned to face Ginny. “Forgive me?”

“For what? I'm the one who was acting like a brat,” she replied. Moving in close to him she laid her forehead against his shoulder. “You don't need the forgiveness, Harry. You're a lunatic, but your heart is in the right place.”

Harry began to say something when they both felt, and then heard a muffled “Whump!” from the void below them. The lights dimmed and then went out. The cavern was silent except for the occasional drip of water in the distance. Whatever background noises or hums that had been the norm before vanished when the lights were extinguished. Ginny reached for her wand, only to have her hand stopped by Harry's strong grip. “Not now,” he whispered. “Put your Farsight on, send out your bats and spiders,” he said, sinking into a crouch by the vault door, leaning up against the doorframe.

“What are you doing?” she hissed softly, closing her eyes in the darkness to engage her own Farsight, which had the effect of bathing the cavern in an eerie false light. “Nothing on this level,” she reported, feeling slightly foolish as she spoke. Harry's ability to control his Farsight far outstripped her own nascent abilities.

Harry sat silently for a moment, grunting a few times as he made an unpleasant face. “We've got problems,” he announced. “We're seventeen stories down from street level here. There's a portal above us, looks like it's on the third floor down from street level. Whole bunch of Death Eaters just came down from there on a cart, down to the lowest level, three stories below us – they're

putting up right now the biggest portal I've ever seen there. Oh, by the way, there's a pair of Trolls and a half dozen Death Eaters running amok on the third level, north wing. Your mum, your brother and Hermione are on the third level, south wing. If they just stay put, they should be fine," he said in a detached fashion, digging into Ginny's bag for a Galleon. He dropped it on the floor, tracing patterns on it with the tip of his wand.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Harry held up his hand for silence, tapping the Galleon with his wand. Holding the coin between finger and thumb, he brought it up to his lips. "Tonks, this is Harry, when you touch your locket I should be able to hear you if I set things up properly," he said earnestly. Ginny could hear a small tinny noise coming from the Galleon.

"Bewitch me," came a faint version of Tonks' voice. "Tell me something only Harry knows," she said.

"I found your knickers on my chair the day that Moey won a Galleon from Jasmine," he answered with a smirk.

"Blimey, it really is you," Tonks answered. "Well, you can probably tell that things are going to hell in a hand basket here," she said in a clipped tone.

"They're about to get worse," Harry said. "You've got what looks like an even dozen Death Eaters up on your level. Another half dozen are busy three levels below you on the north wing – pair of trolls is with them, kicking the stuffing out of some vaults there. The Weasleys and Hermione are on that level in the south wing – if they just stay put they should be fine."

"Is Ginny with you?" Tonks asked.

"Yes, we're keeping tabs on what's going on below you," he said, giving Ginny a wink and taking her hand. His blood suddenly ran cold.

"Harry!" Ginny exclaimed, a note of concern in her voice.

"I felt it too," Harry said, closing his eyes in concentration. "Holy Smokes! About a thousand Dementors just came into Gringotts down on the 20th level, by the underground river. They're moving up this way," he said, opening his eyes as he put a grim expression on his face.

"How many Dementors can you hold off with that fancy Patronus of yours?" Tonks asked.

"I held off about a hundred two years ago – even with Ginny for backup, I don't think I can hold off a thousand," he said, shivering slightly as the temperature dropped. "They're moving from the 20th level to the 19th, but they're stopping there. I don't know why," he said, closing his eyes again. "Oh, crap," he moaned.

"Harry, this is Lupin," a familiar voice said from the Galleon.

“Hullo Uncle Moony,” he said faintly. “Now I know why they put up that big portal – they just pulled a Basilisk through it, now they’re pulling what looks like a Hydra through the portal,” he droned with his eyes still closed.

“Please repeat that,” Moony asked.

“Tommy’s boys put up another portal on level 20, where the river flows. Big nasty snake came through – it’s a Basilisk – I know, I’ve killed one before. Right after that one came through, another monster came through, big snake with lots of heads – if I paid any attention at all to *The Monster Book of Monsters*, I’d say it’s a Hydra,” he reported.

“Can you get away?” Moony asked.

“I don’t think so – the Dementors are about five minutes out, max. Once they start moving again, and even if I were invisible, they can find me. I can’t outrun them and I can’t hide from them. The main track goes right by my school vault,” he answered.

“Can you conjure a broom?” Moony pleaded.

“That would be nice right now, wouldn’t it?” he said with a wan smile. “Abelard said that subject was nicely covered in my sixth year curriculum, so he wasn’t going to duplicate it this summer. Some Seer, eh what?”

“Harry, listen to me,” Moony began. “Get moving, start going up. The Dementors are beginning to affect you – once you get to the spot where the floor branches out into east and west wings go into the east wing – there’s a sub-branch about half way down – you might be able to hide there before the Dementors start moving again.”

Harry stood up, pushing the bags of Galleons back into the vault with his foot, pulling the door shut with one hand and then breaking into a trot up the rail line, the other hand still clutching Ginny’s hand. He raced up the track until it hit a level spot, using the point-me charm to find the east wing, jogging down that branch of the cavern, looking for the sub-branch. The further he got away from the main passage, the warmer he felt, until he found the sub-branch, ducking into it.

“I’m sorry, Ginny, I was losing it back there – I’ve never been able to stand the Dementors for long,” he apologized.

“Shush, Harry,” she replied. “You’ve kept your head about you and kept the Aurors informed as to what they’re facing – you’ve probably saved some lives already. Let’s talk to Moony,” she said, breathing heavily.

“Tonks, Moony?” he whispered, breathing hard.

“What’s all the heavy breathing, Potter? This is a particularly bad time to be snogging your girl,” Tonks chided.

“Very funny, Tonks. We’re in the sub-branch. How are things on your end?” he asked.

“Reinforcements are coming – it’ll be a while before we can get to your level though. Any movements below?” she asked.

“The Basilisk is still down there on level 20, the Dementors are on level 19. I don’t know where the Hydra is. I’d hazard a guess that he’s following the river, but I can only guess whether it’s going upstream or downstream,” he said, closing his eyes again.

“Moony wants to know if you’re feeling any better,” she asked.

“Ginny’s here,” he said, pulling her close with one arm.

“I think he meant feeling better about the Dementors,” Tonks replied.

“Yeah, that too,” Harry said with a grin.

Ginny squeezed his hand again, a grim expression passing over her face.

“Listen, the Dementors are moving again – they’re on the 19th and 18th levels right now. The Basilisk is moving forward – man, can that thing move up the passage! I’m going to shut up for a bit until he passes by,” Harry said, pulling Ginny’s back against his front. If it weren’t for the panic of the moment, it would have been a pleasant way to spend time. He smiled in the darkness, moving his hands a bit before saying, “See, pitch dark and I can tell that you’re a girl.”

“I’m flattered, Harry, but I’m not sure that this is the time,” Ginny replied.

The charmed Galleon gave a slight “ping” before Tonks’ voice was heard again. “Harry, what’s your situation?”

“Bloody minders,” he hissed into Ginny’s ear. “We’re okay. The Basilisk took off for the upper levels like it was late for tea with the Queen. The Dementors are milling about a bit, but not moving forward. Oh, crap, they’re moving again,” he exclaimed with an involuntary shudder.

“Harry, hang on,” Moony said, his voice booming through the coin. “We’re going to try to get some Aurors to you.”

“Bollocks,” Harry spat. “They’ll never get past the Basilisk. We’ll take our chances hiding in the sub-branch,” he said, muting the coin with a tap of his finger. “Ginny, if they start coming down the sub-branch, I want you to run while I hold them off,” he whispered into her ear.

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” he asked, afraid that he already knew the answer.

“You’re *not* dying today, Harry Potter, and I’m *not* leaving you. We *both* hide or we *both* run. Two is better than one, remember? Besides, I’m fairly certain that I can’t outrun a Dementor,” she replied, leaning back so that she could whisper into his ear. Harry shuddered.

“Any regrets?” he asked with a chuckle.

“No, none,” she said after a brief pause. “You weren’t ready for me earlier, and I certainly wasn’t ready for you.”

“I meant what I said earlier,” he whispered, pushing her behind him. The Dementors were moving up the tunnel again. The sub-branch grew colder until frost began to form on the walls.

“About what?” she whispered.

“About asking you if I live long enough,” he replied, his heart contracting in a spasm as he saw a Dementor stop, looking up and down the corridor of the sub-branch. The creature turned back and rejoined the gliding masses moving in the main corridor.

“Good, I’ll start thinking about my answer then,” she quipped.

“Funny girl,” he hissed.

“Hey, just because you put all your cards on the table, it doesn’t mean that I have to do the same,” she said with a grin.

“I love you,” he whispered. She squeezed his hand in reply.

The gliding mass of Dementors stopped again. The cavern was silent, except for the crackling sound of water freezing in the walls. The steady drip-drip sound had ceased, no doubt frozen by the presence of the Dementors. A lone Dementor broke away from throng of dark creatures, its head moving from side to side as it began to glide down the sub-branch, looking for the entire world like a dog trying to capture a wayward scent. It stopped, hesitating until it was joined by nine more of its fellows. With a nod from the scout, they began to glide towards Harry and Ginny.

“Well,” Harry said resignedly, “so much for hiding. *Expecto Patronum!*” he intoned forcefully. With a sharp crack a dazzling silver stag appeared, walking and then cantering towards the small pack of Dementors. At the last moment, the stag put its head down before racing forward in a burst of speed. The Dementors scattered before the bright creature, except for the scout who had been impaled on the stag’s horns. The scout was now writhing on the ground at the feet of the stag. The gored Dementor melted into a puddle of dark liquid which evaporated in an instant. The Patronus looked back at Harry, nodded and similarly faded away.

“One down, nine hundred and ninety nine to go,” Ginny quipped as she pulled out her wand. She captured his hand with her free hand, noticing that his shield was down, almost to nil. She lowered her shield as well, feeling a familiar surge of warmth course through her centre as she dropped the shield. “I’m next,” she said fiercely, “*Expecto Patronum!*” she chanted.

With a thunder clap and a blinding flash of light, a silver coloured Welsh Green Dragon sprayed out of the end of Ginny’s wand. The Patronus was huge. It turned to look at them, nodded its silvery scaled head and then began to waddle down the corridor, sending out silvery jets of flame

as it walked. The Dementors scattered, retreating to the main corridor.

“See? Two is better than one,” she exclaimed as she held up their clasped hands.

“That must have been one very happy thought,” Harry smirked.

“Oh, it was, trust me, it was,” Ginny replied, smiling broadly.

The Galleon pinged again. “State your situation, please,” Tonks called.

“Oh, we’re just fooling around,” Harry replied. “Lovely holiday this is turning out to be. Seriously now, the Dementors have stopped moving – they’re massed at the junction in the corridor where the sub-branch begins. We had to light off a couple of Patronus charms to keep them at bay,” he reported.

“So they know that you’re there?” Moony asked.

“We zorched a couple of them, but yeah, they definitely know we’re here,” he said, not bothering to keep his voice low any more.

“What do you mean ‘zorched’ Harry?” Tonks asked.

“Sorry, Muggle term. My Patronus killed one of the Dementors, Ginny’s Patronus probably killed another nine or ten,” he reported.

“Killed?” Tonks asked incredulously.

“They fall down, turn into a puddle of something and then evaporate,” Harry said, not without a tint of accomplishment.

“I didn’t know that was possible,” Tonks muttered.

“Yeah, well, live and learn,” Harry said philosophically. “I’m going to leave the link open, but we’ve got to send a few more Dementors to their doom, they’re returning for more attention,” he said, squeezing Ginny’s hand. *What did I ever do to deserve her?* “*Expecto Patronum*,” he barked, slightly surprised to see three silver stags appearing in front of them. “You guys know what to do,” he said as the stags walked away towards the slowly advancing horde of Dementors. The stags waded into the clustered dark creatures, taking careful aim as they gored about a score of Dementors before they evaporated.

You are not going to be able to maintain this for very long, you know.

Mm’lau?

You have another dragon tucked away inside your little mammal skull?

No. Any advice would be cheerfully received about now.

Drop your Occlumency shield completely; I need to talk to my mate for a moment.

“Ginny?” he asked.

“I heard already,” she said, “I’m dropping the last bit of my shield right now.”

It was strange enough to have a voice in your head, Harry pondered, but when the voice is talking to a voice in someone else’s head, it’s really strange, he concluded. The Parseltongue was flying back and forth between Tk’lch and Mm’lau, a fierce, technical discussion with rapid strings of what seemed to be mathematical formulae and equations.

We are agreed, the Pyr’gs said in unison.

“Yes?” Harry said aloud.

You cannot run; this corridor is a dead-end. You cannot fight either, as the two of you will run out of magic before the Dementors run out of dark creatures. You must change the balance in your favour, Mm’lau said solemnly.

“Tell us what you need us to do,” Harry said. Ginny nodded.

Release your magic to us, just for a moment.

Ginny looked at Harry with concern. Harry pursed his lips and nodded slowly. Ginny shrugged. “Go ahead,” he said.

The male first, then the female , Tk’lch grunted.

Agreed, Mm’lau replied.

Harry closed his eyes and slowly sank to the ground. Ginny kept a death grip on his hand, willing herself not to panic as she felt the warmth within her begin to change and churn. She knelt beside him, dipping her head for a moment as she began to get light headed herself.

Harry’s skin grew cold and began to prickle to her touch. He transformed before her eyes, his clothes dissolving as his skin turned a dark hue of blue, iridescent scales covering his thick hide, bumps and ridges appearing along his arms, legs, head and tail. Once the transformation was complete, she found herself holding hands with a dark blue Snow Dragon, a dragon with sparkling green eyes. The dragon opened its mouth and spoke in a familiarly accented Parseltongue. “Your turn now,” he said simply, coiling his tail until the tip of his tail was touching her forehead, between her eyes.

She felt as though she was falling, pleasantly, like falling onto a soft, cushioned bed. When she opened her eyes again, she saw that she was similarly transformed into a glistening white dragon. Looking at her reflection in an icy patch on the wall, she saw a lovely white dragon with warm brown eyes the colour of cinnamon. She ran her head under the chin of the dark blue dragon. She felt him shiver in reply.

“Let’s go kill some dark creatures,” she said cheerfully.

“Harry? State your situation,” Tonks called from the now forgotten Galleon.

“I’m going hunting,” he replied in Parseltongue.

“Harry? Harry? Answer me!” Tonks called.

Harry slapped the coin with the tip of his tail, muting it before he went down the corridor, catching up with his glistening companion.

This was going to be fun.

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Ginny learned a lot of things that morning: When she was invisible, shrunk down to the size of a small cat, she could activate her Occlumency shield and flank past a battalion of Dementors without any of them noticing. Activating her true vision, she could, with a bit of straining, see where the Anti-Apparation wards began and ended. She learned that Apparating as a dragon was much easier than Apparating as a mammal; that the internal wards within Gringotts were such that one could not Apparate between levels without smacking into the wards, but with a bit of care, one could Apparate within a level. She discovered that Dementors tasted terrible, but Trolls, properly roasted, tasted like mutton; that being around Harry as a dragon was in some ways easier than being around Harry as a mammal, provided that she didn’t get too close. She found that her link to Harry as a dragon meant that she could communicate with him without talking, much. Following Harry’s lead, she learned that Death Eaters who surrendered were stripped naked and stuck to vault doors with 24-hour sticking charms (a Gred and Forge favourite), while Death Eaters who resisted were not given the chance to surrender. She discovered that Dementors pop before they melt, and that the popping noise encourages the surviving Dementors to stampede in the opposite direction.

They caught up to the Basilisk on the third level. Harry picked off the Death Eaters who had been acting as handlers for the gigantic snake, leaving Ginny with a clear shot at the beast. She could understand what it was saying perfectly, although the accent was rough and uncultured, but after a while, she didn’t care what it said; it was destined to die. The Basilisk was simple-minded; it asked for no quarter and gave none. When at last it shuddered in a final spasm, leaking slime and blood from its numerous wounds, she stopped, her blood lust, for the moment, sated. She looked up into the eyes of the dark blue dragon, smashing the ground with her tail. He roared his approval, joining his voice with hers. She ambled over to him, rubbing her dorsal spines across the underside of his neck. As she stood there blissfully, she realized that she was now purring with contentment. The dark blue dragon led her to a section of the chamber that had collapsed, indicating with a nod of his head that they were going to move a few stone pillars and then fuse the remaining shattered stones with a concentrated stream of dragon fire. When they had cleared a path to the blocked section of the chamber, the dark blue dragon carefully formed words in the mammal tongue.

“Come out,” he said in the mammal tongue, enunciating the words quietly and slowly, as if speaking to children.

Two dishevelled, frightened mammals came forward, brandishing glowing wooden sticks. The taller mammal shoved the smaller mammal behind him.

The dark blue dragon began to shake at the tip of his tail, the mirth working its way forward along his long back. Speaking in the mammal tongue again he said, “*Wingardium Leviosa*” to the taller mammal, floating him above the rubble.

“Harry?” the taller mammal squeaked. Understanding dawned on the smaller mammal. “Ginny?” she gasped, looking at the blood and dust and scales that covered her transfigured friend. The dragons nodded. It was difficult to form words in the mammal tongue; she wished that they spoke Parseltongue. The dark blue dragon released the charm, gently lowering the taller mammal to the ground.

“Where’s Mum?” she asked the mammal she now recognized as her brother.

“I think she’s upstairs,” he replied quickly before being interrupted by his girlfriend, who rattled off a long string of questions.

“Ssslowly, woman,” the dark blue dragon interrupted. “Your ssspeech is difficult to understand, and your mind is ssshielded from me,” he said, hissing his s-sounds with a sibilant lisp.

“It is?” she replied.

“Yessss,” he said. “Be mossst thankful. Your boyfriendss’s mind is rather easssy to read. Part of him wantsss to hug you like there iss no tomorrow, and the other part of him wantsss to find lunch,” he said, wagging from his tail again.

The dark blue dragon paused, closing his eyes for a moment. “Tonkssss and Lupin are looking for ussss. Let them know that we need to clean out the lower levelsss before we are ready to return to your kind,” he said, nodding at each of the mammals before twisting around to go towards the part of the tunnel that went deeper underground. With a stretch and a flicker of wings, the white dragon turned around and followed, disappearing into the darkness.

“Do you think that’s really them?” Ron asked Hermione.

“I’d stake my life on it,” she replied. “Let’s get upstairs, I’ve had enough adventure for one day,” she said, clasping his free hand with her own.

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Hermione had been left, over her strenuous objections, at the makeshift first-aid station in the Gringotts lobby. Molly had enlisted her assistance in conducting basic and not-so-basic healing charms on the Aurors, customers and goblins lined up in the Triage area. Lupin and Tonks commandeered a cart to return to the lower level vaults, calling Ron to join them at the last

minute. The lights and basic ventilation had returned on most of the levels, although levels three and seventeen through twenty were in ill repair; if Harry and Ginny were hunting by the river, they'd have to walk down the last three levels. Rather than the usual break-neck speed favoured by the goblins, Remus was driving the cart at a slower pace, trying to reconstruct from the damage what had occurred on each level. Thus far the worst level appeared to be Level Three, with dead Trolls, dead Goblins, blast marks indicating where Dementors had been incinerated, and lots of broken vaults and demolished stonework. They ran across their first live Death Eater, affixed to a vault door, screaming threats and obscenities as they passed.

"Nice trick, that," Tonks observed. "Pity it was the obese criminals that surrendered," she said with snuffle. "I haven't seen this much charred flesh since the ox roast at Uncle Croaker's wedding."

"Dora, please," Lupin said. "My stomach is queasy enough." He held his hand over his middle.

"Oh, so that's why you're driving like an old biddy today?" she replied.

"No, actually, Griphook warned me that the tracks were damaged in many places, and if I travelled at the customary velocity, I'd be scraped up from the kerb with the rest of the debris when they finally get around to cleaning up the lower levels," he retorted.

Ron was dumbstruck. He'd never seen this many dead bodies, this much rubble all in one place. Then they passed by the corpse of the Basilisk.

"Bloody hell, what happened here?" Ron gasped.

Tonks snorted. "Five will get you ten it was your sister," she said as they wheeled slowly past the shredded and scorched corpse.

"And just why are we going downstairs again?" Ron asked Lupin.

"Don't look at me, lad, she's in charge," Lupin said, pointing to Tonks.

"Bollocks," she spat. "Only on paper – I specialize in two legged criminals, not monstrous poisonous things that slither on the ground. That's his speciality," she said, pointing back to Lupin.

"We're making sure that the area is safe, for one, and secondarily we want to be on hand if Harry or Ginny need help transfiguring themselves back into their proper form," Lupin explained.

"I figure into this project how?" Ron asked.

"You recognize them in their current form, and they recognize you," he replied.

"Harry knows who you are," Ron exclaimed.

"Harry the human knows who I am, but I'm not so sure that Harry the blue dragon will recognize

me. When I'm a wolf, one human looks pretty much like another; I can only distinguish them when I'm close enough to smell them. Do you know whether Harry was practicing to be an Animagus?" Lupin asked.

"Not that I know of," Ron replied, scratching the short hair on the top of his scalp. "He had a book on theory, but he complained to Hermione that it didn't make any sense to him," Ron added.

"Hmm," Lupin said. "He's been experiencing an explosive growth in magic this summer – Ginny too," he began, only to be interrupted by Tonks as she placed her hand on his.

"Moony, I don't like what I'm hearing," she said, peering into the shadows as the cart descended into the lower levels.

Lupin slowed the cart to a crawl. Sounds came echoing up the tunnel: roaring, crashing, with an occasional muffled explosion. Lupin stopped the cart, gesturing that they should get out. No one needed to be told that their approach on foot should be as quiet as possible.

The tracks ended at the 20th level, the corridor emptying out into an enormous cavern, one capable of swallowing several Quidditch fields without much effort. A slow, turgid river ran through the cavern, with branches leading off perpendicular to the river in what Ron supposed to be east and west, but he was so turned around that he had to do a "point me" spell to make sure. Okay, so they pointed north and south. He was twenty stories below ground; he was entitled to a little confusion. Tonks and Lupin were standing on one side of the north branch, holding hands as they peered into the twilight, with Ron standing on the other. He felt *something* move in the twilight, but he couldn't hear anything, and the light, such as it was, wasn't much for seeing anything in detail. The river made a quiet mish-mash of sounds, which under normal circumstances would be quite pleasant, but Ron had the odd premonition that the burbling was masking something important.

There was a distant flash deep up in the south tunnel, followed by a churning, rasping, hissing noise that increased in volume. Something was coming down the tunnel at break-neck speed. That something was an enormous multi-headed snake, larger than the Basilisk. The Hydra was racing through the tunnel, as if something were pursuing it. Within a trice they all realized that there was something in pursuit, a roaring, snarling dragon, glistening white in the dim light that was available. The Hydra had just about reached the river when a dark blue dragon appeared in front of it. The dragon was standing still, so it had either Apparated to that spot, or been invisible and just dropped its cloaking spell. Either way, the Hydra was going too fast to stop, and ran smack into the blue dragon with a clang and a clatter of bodies. The blue dragon wrapped its terrible jaws around the body of the Hydra, below the point where all of the heads branched out. The multiple heads all began striking at the dragon's neck, many glancing off, but a few managing to pierce the thickly scaled hide. The dragon flinched when those heads managed to pierce its skin, but still clamped down like a dog on a particularly desirable bone.

The white dragon attacked the tail of the Hydra, sinking her jaws into the writhing snake's body. The blue dragon began to walk backwards, pulling the Hydra across the river while the white dragon dug in her heels, until the Hydra was taut between them. Nodding simultaneously, the

dragons disappeared and the Hydra exploded. The cavern was sprayed with bits of blood and bile and bone. Ron covered his eyes, not wanting to find out whether or not any of the debris was poisonous. One half of the Hydra's body was north of the river, the other half was south; the dragons had apparently Apparated in opposite directions, provoking a violent splinch that had severed the beast. The blue dragon roared, weakly at first, and then with a full throated bellow that shook the cavern. The roar was answered by a higher-pitched roar from the southern tunnel.

They'd done it; the dragons had defeated the Hydra. The blue dragon came into the main chamber, nodding slightly to the humans, then peering expectantly down the south tunnel. The white dragon came running at a fair clip, stopping when she came into the cavern. She bellowed once, followed by a rapid clip of what Ron assumed was Parseltongue, which was answered by the blue dragon. Their necks twined together as they stamped their feet. There was a stretch of silence, broken by a slow utterance from the blue dragon. The white dragon brushed her head under his chin and then turned away from the blue dragon, facing the humans at the mouth of the north tunnel. The blue dragon twisted suddenly, his tail sweeping the white dragon off of her feet. He pounced upon her with his front legs, slashing at her back with his glistening, dagger like teeth. The white dragon roared again, this time in surprise and pain as blood began to spurt here and there.

Ron felt a surge of fury rise up in his chest. Pointing his wand at the blue dragon he shouted out, "You filthy beast! I thought you loved her!" before shooting a blast into the blue dragon's eyes, not heeding or hearing the shouts coming from Tonks and Lupin. Slowly, like a tree falling after being severed from its roots, the blue dragon collapsed to the ground where he joined the white dragon, both of them lying still as death.

Ron was still heaving, trying to catch his breath when he finally heard what Lupin was saying to him.

"Lad, I hope for your sake that Harry wakes up before Ginny does," Lupin said. "Dora, could you see if we can get Minerva down here as soon as possible? This transfiguration may be a little tricky."

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Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com – write me, I write back.

Well, gentle readers, one more chapter to go.

Windscion won the "find the homage" contest – the proper reference being AtE, Chapter 29, Christmas at the Burrow for the quote "I'm still mad at you, you know." Many readers correctly spotted the reference to Archie, who preferred to wear robes without underwear, so as to afford his privates a healthy breeze. A-hem. When next we see our favourite Wizard couple, they will be recovering in more or less recognizable form as mere mammals.

Having provided more than one hundred pages of reading pleasure, I don't want to read any reviews complaining of cliff-hangers.

Thank you, thank you very much.

Elvis has now left the building.

The Letters of Summer

The End of August

The Letters of Summer

Chapter 21 – The End of August

He woke up in darkness with the sound of phoenix song in his ears. He could tell that he was in a bed, which was unexpected. Memories came rushing back: hunting Dementors in the dark, sticking a naked Death Eater to a vault door, watching that beautiful white dragon polish off the Basilisk. With a bit more effort he remembered going back down into the bowels of Gringotts, routing more Dementors, a quick tactical huddle with the white dragon in which he suggested a crazy plan for dispatching the Hydra that actually worked. He could still feel the spots on his neck where he'd been bitten by the Hydra - that had been regrettable, but unavoidable. The last memory was watching her return from the tunnel. With the memory came the feeling of fire raging within his centre. She was so beautiful. He was so proud of her. He'd told her as much before she turned her attention to the mammals. He knew then that this moment would not present itself again. With a quick turn he'd swept her off her feet, literally, with his powerful tail, pouncing upon her long enough to tear her back open with his glistening teeth. Her roar filled the cavern, but he knew she welcomed the marking; they'd been dancing around it for too long. Now that he was human again, he could more easily understand Ron's words.

Oh crap, I'm in for it now.

He tried to sit up, tried to open his eyes, but his body wouldn't or couldn't respond. He tried to lower his shield; desperate to feel the warmth of her essence, but the shield was stuck too. Finally he focused his mind on his magical centre, moving from darkness to a twilight grey.

Mm'lau?

I'm glad you are with us again.

How long have I been out?

A bit longer than a day – I am sorry that I cannot be more precise; the People do not measure time as mammals do.

Where am I?

At the perch of the wolf.

Wolf?

The one you call Uncle Moony.

Ah. What happened?

Well, you went to go visit your vault and started a row with your Krulach over those shiny metal disks.

I remember that much, Mm'lau.

Then the dark creatures came. I must say, you acquitted yourself well as a mammal.

Thank you.

I am even more proud of how you did as a dragon. You reflect honour upon the People.

I had an excellent teacher.

You are too kind. I have begun to suspect that for some reason known only to humour of the Creator, your soul was switched at birth, I believe that you were always meant to be a dragon.

Thanks, I think. What happened after we splinched the Hydra?

What you've been longing to do for most of the summer; you marked your Krulach. Then her brother attacked you. I must say, that took me by surprise. I was created to be Pyr'g to a mammal, so when you were a dragon, I could see and hear the outside world, but I had no active control. Once you were unconscious, however, I was able to control enough of your magic to protect you. The wolf and the shape-shifter Auror stood guard over you and your fallen mate.

My fallen mate?

You were stunned while bonding to your Krulach – when her brother attacked you, the spell traversed your bond. The brother fetched your senior Glossat, the quiet changeling who is constantly pressing her lips together.

Professor McGonagall.

Yes, that is what the others called her. She attempted to transform you back into your present form; I dissuaded her from attempting that, and then I changed you back, invoking the help of your Phoenix to mend your wounds. Together, we changed your Krulach.

Wounds?

You accumulated a few as a dragon; the toxin from the Hydra's bites interfered with your self-

healing powers as a dragon, so I reverted to the safeguards your tutor installed.

So why can't I open my eyes?

Because I have not yet relinquished control back to you – I desired to brief you fully before allowing you to go charging off hither and yon as you are wont to do.

Thank you, Mm'lau. Sometimes it's frightening that you know me so well.

I exist to serve, young dragon. I am returning control back to you now. Before you go, please be advised that many mammals wish to talk to you before you attend to your Krulach.

Where is she?

She is nearby, in the city. It is a place where your healers work upon the ill and the injured.

St. Mungo's

Yes, I heard that word used a few times. McGonagall said she is in a comma, which is ridiculous. She is in a healing sleep.

A comma?

A slumber from which one cannot be waked.

Oh, a coma . A comma is a punctuation mark.

Close enough. You are in your old room. Moey is outside your door. The man who first changed you into a dog is here as well.

Father Martin.

He is not your father.

Sorry, it's a mammal expression that would take too long to explain.

Your Krulach is almost ready to be woken – you will need to complete your bonding when she awakes.

How will I do that?

It will be obvious when the time appears – listen to your heart. If that fails, listen to the dragon whispering in your ear.

Thanks, Mm'lau.

I exist to serve.

He sat up, opened his eyes and then closed them again as he yawned, taking simple pleasure in having his body responding to his will. Notwithstanding the healing power of the Phoenix, he felt like he'd just finished playing a very long Quidditch match; he was sore, tired and uncomfortable. He lowered his Occlumency shield, hoping that she was within range. He wanted desperately to sense her presence. He sighed in relief when the warmth of her essence resonated within him. She was sleeping, but full of a strange, conflicted energy. It was bloody marvellous to feel her from a distance. His perception of her essence was stronger now – whether she was transmitting louder or he was just more attuned, he wasn't certain. The warmth took away some of the panic he had to see her; he knew that she was safe and in relative good health, which was all he could ask for the moment.

When he made it to the door he realized in a burst of sudden clarity that he needed to visit the loo, immediately. Opening the door, he saw Moey looking up at him over a take-out cup of coffee. He was walking stiffly and swiftly. She pointed the way to the loo, not knowing that he'd lived here long enough to know his way around in the dark.

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Moey was a good interrogator. She set a dictation quill up on a pad of paper on the table and never looked at it again, asking questions, teasing out answers, going back for follow-up questions. Within a short time she cancelled the quill and stuck the paper into a thin portfolio under her chair. “As always, it's a pleasure doing business with you Harry,” she said, shaking his hand in warm but businesslike fashion.

“Any notion what that was all about?” he asked.

“The attack on Gringotts? I have no idea what the politicals will call it, but it fits in nicely to the phoney attack earlier this summer that had my knickers in a twist. As sure as hell's a mantrap, they were trying to destabilize Gringotts – if John Q. Wizard thinks that Gringotts isn't safe, he'll pull his money out, put it in a mattress, or bury it in a bottle in his back yard – which would cripple the Magical economy, by the way. Thanks to you and your lady friend, tomorrow's headline will read ‘Ministry foils Death Eater attack at Gringotts Bank – bank security measures repel Dementors and other dark creatures’ which will not be all that far from the truth. Gringotts *has* used dragons for security in the past. Perhaps they'll hire Charlie to beef up their security?” she asked with a chipper expression on her tired face.

“You'd like that now, would you?” Harry asked.

“It will be a bit hard for him to fall for my feminine wiles if he's stuck in Romania,” she replied. “If he's here, I can keep an eye on him – Weasleys bear some careful watching, don't you know. Well, the good Father is patiently waiting for you in the kitchen, shall I call him up, or will you walk me down to the main floor?”

“I'll walk you out,” he replied. “If I don't keep moving, my muscles are going to freeze up and force me to take some well-deserved beauty rest.”

“I know how that is, youngster, just wait ten years, then you’ll know how good you have it now,” she replied, picking up her things and heading down the stairs.

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Harry pushed the kitchen door open, surprised to find the fire roaring with Remus Lupin and Father Martin engaged in a vigorous discussion.

“Harry! So good to see you again,” Father Martin said, jumping up from his chair by the fireplace to shake his hand. He was dressed in plain black pants and a black clerical shirt, unlike the usual grey habit he wore when he wasn’t dressed in his Sunday vestments. Noticing Harry’s glance, he said, “These are my hospital clothes – no one bothers a hard-working priest when he’s visiting his parishioners in the hospital – it doesn’t matter whether it’s a Muggle hospital or St. Mungo’s, this collar gets me in almost everywhere,” he said, fingering the white celluloid tab on his collar. “Your lady friend is resting well; I was there not more than half an hour ago. Her vitals are all strong, although they haven’t quite figured out how to close up the wound on her back – try as they might, it just won’t heal,” he said earnestly.

“Her parents are going to kill me,” Harry said nervously.

“I think not,” Lupin said. “Ron already tried that,” he said dryly, walking over to the buffet table to refill his glass from a crystal decanter. “I took the liberty of explaining to them what all occurred yesterday at Gringotts, including the marking.”

“The Weasleys know I’ve marked their daughter?” Harry asked incredulously.

“They took that explanation a bit more calmly than the notion of her boyfriend attacking her without provocation after they’d both been turned into dragons, that’s for sure. Arthur is fairly placid about it; Molly is ecstatic. She’s spent this month worrying that you two would have a spat and that you’d give your heart on the rebound to the first bimbo that would pay attention to you,” Lupin said.

“Tell me you’re kidding,” Harry replied.

“Those were her exact words, Harry,” Lupin replied.

“Only an idiot would give up on Ginny,” Harry observed.

“Well then, her fears were misplaced – you are many things, but an idiot is not one of them. Are you up to a visit to St. Mungo’s?”

“Do you have to ask? I’d like to see her tonight; right now would be soon enough.”

Father Martin stood up, grabbing a cloak from the cloak tree by the hearth. “I think that’s my cue to leave,” he said. “Harry, you’ve had a trying experience. I’m available if you wish to sort it all out,” he said, shaking Harry’s hand.

“Perhaps Saturday at 3:00?” Harry asked. He knew that confessions were heard at St. Simon’s from 3:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m.

“That would be fine,” Father Martin replied with a sombre nod of his head. “You know where to find me,” he said, taking a pinch of Floo powder from the urn on the mantelpiece. “The Friary,” he said, stepping into the fire. With a sudden burst of green flame, he was gone.

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Ron and Tonks were sitting outside of Ginny’s room when Harry arrived with Lupin. Tonks rose up from her chair, grabbing Lupin in a fierce embrace. When she released him, she whispered in a hoarse voice, “Take me home, old man, I’m knackered.”

Ron looked at his trainers, staying slouched in his chair, hands in his pockets. “Harry, mate, I’m sorry. I didn’t understand,” he said, simply, not looking up.

“It’s all right, Ron. Let’s go wake your sister up, ok?” Harry replied. From the corner of his eye he saw Laurel move in and occupy the seat that Tonks had just vacated. She opened a bag and pulled out some lurid coloured yarn with two oversized needles.

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The room was small, barely able to fit a bed, a small wardrobe and a nightstand. A door to the right of the nightstand probably opened to the loo, but Harry couldn’t tell for sure. The nightstand had a large vase with flowers that Harry recognized as coming from Mrs. Weasley’s garden, along with a box bearing the WWW logo of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes. Ginny was lying face down on the bed, wearing a hospital gown and pyjama bottoms. A bloodstained bandage was visible through the gap in the back of the hospital gown. Harry’s heart fell when he saw the bandage.

Blimey, it seemed like such a good idea at the time.

Harry placed his hand upon the small hand lying on the pillow. He felt a flicker of energy and heard a rumble from Tk’lch, answered by low growling noise from Mm’lau. Her eyes opened, she rolled over and sat up in bed, yanking her hand away as she looked around wildly. She spat out a string of Parseltongue, followed by “Oh, Harry.”

“Lk’shs shashimo,” Harry said earnestly, not realizing he was speaking in Parseltongue.

“Lk’shn shashin,” Ginny replied with a nod of understanding.

“Ek’tch g’bh,” Harry said.

“Ek’tch g’bh,” Ginny answered, pausing for a long time. Lifting her chin she said proudly, “Lk’shs shashimo.”

“Lk’shn shashin,” Harry answered, nodding in agreement.

“Harry, oh, Harry,” Ginny said, tentatively holding up her hand. Harry approached, slowly, deliberately, pressing his hand against hers. He then twined his fingers between hers. Their Occlumency shields were down completely. They heard the chime again, peeling from an unknown distance. They felt the energy flow across their bond, waxing and waning as it ebbed and flowed until equilibrium was found. Their senses were heightened, but the only thing they saw in the room was each other.

Harry pulled closer, wrapping his free arm around her in a gentle embrace, taking care to avoid the bandage. He heard the melody of phoenix song, quietly at first, and then a warbling duet. Ginny began to shudder as she wept into his shoulder.

“Would someone mind telling me what’s going on?” Ron asked plaintively. “Why are you crying, Ginny?”

“Because I’m so happy, Ron,” she replied, lifting her head briefly from Harry’s shoulder.

“Yeah, right,” Ron replied. “You’re mental, the lot of you,” he said, sticking his hands into his pockets as he leaned against the doorframe.

“Ron, make yourself useful and get some scissors from the nurse’s station, these bandages are driving me nuts,” Ginny said. Ron disappeared. Ginny pulled closer to Harry, sighing contentedly. She had not yet released his grip. “You’re stuck with me now, Potter,” she said quietly.

“I think I’ll learn to live with it,” he replied.

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When Ron returned, he regretted opening the door. It’s not like they were indecent or anything, or that they were doing anything that he hadn’t done with Hermione, but they were definitely - together.

Harry was sitting up on Ginny’s bed, leaning against the wall. Ginny was straddling him, tucking her head between his head and shoulder. Ron flushed suddenly and began to walk back out of the room.

“Oh Ron, grow up,” Ginny said as she lifted her head from Harry’s chest. “Better yet, snip this bandage off – it’s killing me.”

Ginny shrugged off the hospital gown, letting Harry hold it up as a screen between them. The only thing now covering her top was the thick layer of bandages.

“Uh, Ginny, if I snip the bandages, you’ll be starkers from the waist up,” Ron objected.

“The hospital gown goes off, and it can go back on again, dear brother, but if you don’t snip my bandages off in the privacy and comfort of my room, I’m going to wander down to the nurse’s station and have them cut it off, exposing my post-pubescent body to whomever is wandering the

halls at the moment. Now will you be a good brother and snip it off here, or do I have to do everything myself?" she asked, temper rising.

Ron snipped the bandage off with the wonky twisted scissors he'd nicked from the nurses' station, cutting along the side of her ribs in the back, hissing as he pulled the bandages away from the skin. Ginny was biting her lip.

"Blimey," Ron exclaimed. "It's all healed. You've got a doozy of a scar though. Crimeny, the scar's moving! It's like Charlie's tattoo – that's wicked! Harry, you've got to see this, uh, I mean, uh, Ginny, you need to get your top back on," he said, totally flustered.

"What does it look like?" Ginny asked.

"It's a white dragon," Ron replied, not knowing why this struck his sister and his best mate as funny as it did, but their laughter was infectious.

Ginny's wand, according to Ron, was safely tucked away at the Burrow. She had no clothes at St. Mungo's, as she wasn't wearing any when she arrived, unconscious, the day before. She began to pace, and then state in increasingly more agitated terms that she wanted to go home.

She was inspected by the Ward Matron, who was most impressed with her progress and her scar, but the Matron insisted that she must be examined by the attending Healer before she was discharged.

Ginny blew a wisp of hair from her face and stamped her foot. "I want to go home. I want to go home, now! Harry, take me home!" she said, hair falling into her face again, hands on hips.

Harry looked at Ron, who shrugged his shoulders in reply. Wrapping his arms around her, he closed his eyes and Disapparated, leaving a bewildered Ron to explain to the Matron why her patient was no longer on the floor, and yes, that was *the* Harry Potter. A half hour later, he'd signed a raft of paperwork, promised that Ginny would return tomorrow and be properly discharged, and went down to the first floor to return to the Burrow by Floo.

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Harry and Ginny arrived with the quietest of pops in the Kitchen at The Burrow. Arthur, Molly and Charlie were sitting at the table, sipping brandy, tea and pumpkin juice respectively. Within an instant the kitchen was ablaze with shouts, questions, back slaps and general jubilation. Ginny hugged her Dad, wincing when he squeezed the scar, whispering into his ear. She kissed Mum and then Charlie, heading towards the door. "I'm getting a bath, and then into proper pyjamas, and then I'm going to bed. If you know what's good for you, Potter, you'll wait up and say goodnight to me before I turn in," she commanded before making a dramatic exit.

"Is she always like this?" Harry asked.

Arthur laughed. "Only when she's really tired and then only with family," he said.

“Hey, Harry, did the two of you dispatch the Basilisk, or was that your doing?” Charlie asked.

“No, that was all Ginny’s doing – I just kept the Dementors and Death Eaters from interfering. It was something - personal,” Harry said, draining his glass of juice.

“I think I understand,” Charlie said with a nod as he pushed away from the table. “Mum, Dad, I’ll be by in the morning – I’m interviewing for a position at Gringotts. It seems that they’ve decided that having dragons around can be good for business. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you Harry?”

“Not a thing, Charlie” he replied with an innocent expression on his face. Charlie chuckled before Disapparating.

“Harry, thank you,” Arthur said sombrely.

“For what? For endangering your daughter again?” Harry asked bitterly.

“Now see here, young man, you’ll not talk to your father in that tone of voice,” Molly started, before covering her mouth with her hand. “Ooops,” she said, sheepishly.

“The correction was spot on, even if the relationship was a bit off,” Harry replied. “I’m sorry, *Dad*,” he said with a wink.

“Harry, what I meant so say, before I was so *rudely* interrupted,” he said, winking at Harry and Molly, “was that I wanted to thank you for protecting her, for loving her, for taking her seriously, for drawing her on to do great things. Ginny’s chosen you, and Molly and I can’t be more pleased,” Arthur said, surprised that he’d said as much as he had.

“Did Remus explain about the marking?” Harry asked, rubbing his face, already knowing the answer.

“In some general detail,” Molly replied.

“It wasn’t something I planned when I went to Gringotts,” Harry explained, feeling awkward talking about this without Ginny. “When I was a dragon, my feelings were different. Well, no, that’s not right either - the feelings were stronger and simpler than they are when I’m – I’m like this,” he explained, sitting down at the table, pouring a glass of pumpkin juice. “By the time we’d chased away the Dementors and killed the Hydra, I was so proud of her. The dragon part of me thought that this opportunity wasn’t going to come my way again, so I did it,” Harry said, feeling the blush rise up the back of his neck. “It made a lot more sense when I was a dragon,” he explained sheepishly.

Arthur and Molly nodded. Did they understand? Did he understand?

“I have a question for you, Mrs. Weasley.”

“Ask away, Harry dear,” she replied.

“Did you really think that I was going to have a spat with Ginny and go off and fall in love with some bimbo on the rebound?”

Arthur drew in his breath. Molly blanched. “Well, yes,” she replied, “it happened more than once with the older boys, and with her temper she’s not the easiest of girls to get along with under the best of circumstances – too much like her Mum, I guess.”

“She’s worth waiting for,” Harry replied. “Only a fool would walk away from Ginny.”

The Floo erupted in the living room, depositing Ron into the hallway. He pushed the door open gingerly.

“I don’t think they expected you to Disapparate from the secure ward, Harry. The wards were supposed to prevent people from Apparating and Disapparating on that ward,” Ron said, pouring himself a glass of juice. “Hi Mum, do we have anything to eat?” Ron asked, sticking his head into the cold pantry.

“That might explain the ripping sound as I Disapparated,” Harry said flatly. “I suppose I’ll catch hell for it tomorrow,” he sighed.

“I think not, Harry,” Arthur replied. “Officially, you and Ginny were never at Gringott’s yesterday, which means that you weren’t at St. Mungo’s either. Unofficially, on level two of the Ministry, we’re very glad that you were there,” he said sombrely. “Gringotts sent an emissary inquiring into how you should be rewarded.”

“I dunno,” Harry replied. “Have someone hire Professor Snape away so we can get an Advanced Potions professor who doesn’t have it in for me?”

Arthur and Molly laughed. “I’ll put in a word, Harry, but I suspect that they were thinking of something simpler, like a monetary reward,” Arthur said. “Well, I’m off to bed, are you coming, Molly?”

“Yes, dear,” she replied.

“You want some potato salad, Harry?” Ron asked, pulling his head out of the cold pantry.

~+~

Harry and Ron talked for a good while, about not much in particular before Ron yawned and announced that he was going up to bed. Harry followed him up the stairs, not surprised in the least when he stopped in front of the door to Ginny’s room. Ron knocked gently at the door. “We’re decent, Ron,” Ginny replied from within. Ron pushed the door open with a smile.

“Hermione, someone’s here for his goodnight kiss,” Ginny called out in a sing-song voice.

“I think I can accommodate that,” Hermione said, rising from the bed. She slipped on a scruffy pair of slippers and shuffled over to Harry, giving him a chaste peck on the cheek.

Harry smiled broadly, trying to hold back his laughter. “While I appreciate it, Hermione, I don’t think that’s what Ron had in mind,” he said.

“No? Well, let’s see if I can fix that,” Hermione said, pushing Ron against the doorframe and pulling his head down to give him a proper kiss. Turning sharply on her heel, she stepped out of her slippers and was back under the covers, pulling her book back from the nightstand. Ron smiled a goofy smile, clapping Harry on his back. “G’nite, mate. See you in the morning.”

Harry leaned up against the door.

“So,” he said.

Hermione put her book down, looking up at the two of them. “Should I leave now?” she asked.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a glance wordlessly.

“I don’t think so,” Ginny said. “We’re not about to do anything that we wouldn’t do in front of Mum and Dad,” she explained as she placed her thumbs inside his belt, pressing her forehead against his chest. Harry wrapped his arms around her.

“Mind the scar, it’s still tender,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered in reply.

“Don’t be,” she said, looking up. “I worked hard for that scar,” she said.

“Any regrets?” he asked.

“Same answer as last time,” she said with a crooked grin. “How about you?”

“I regret hurting you to the point of putting you in St. Mungo’s,” he replied.

“Harry, that’s my stupid brother’s fault. If you had not been interrupted, and we’d had a chance to say what we said today, I would have healed up by the time we finished talking. It was getting knocked out in the middle of things that hung me up,” Ginny explained.

“How do you know that?” Harry asked.

“Oh, a little dragon told me,” she said with a smile. “He’s a lot more respectful now that I’m officially the Krulach of the Servant of the Light,” she said.

“Yeah, I figured that would improve his attitude,” Harry said with a wry grin. “You have no idea how happy I was when I woke up and discovered that I could sense you from Grimmauld Place.”

“You have no idea how happy I was to have you wake me up at St. Mungo’s” she replied. “If it weren’t for you, I would have done something wretched to Ron. Something Hermione would no doubt later regret,” she said, rolling her eyes in her roommate’s direction.

“I’m still here, you know,” Hermione said, “and I’m still willing to go finish this chapter downstairs to give you some quality time together.”

“Nah,” Ginny replied. “We’d just start something we couldn’t stop,” she said with a wink to Harry. “Good night, Harry,” she said, giving him a squeeze.

“Good night, Krulach,” Harry said breathlessly before closing the door. They both listened to the sound of his footsteps fading away.

“Ginnnnnny! What’s wrong with you?” Hermione asked after she was certain that Harry was safely out of ear-shot.

“What do you mean?” she asked as she turned her bed down.

“That was the perfect opportunity for you to – you know - kiss him,” Hermione said, putting a bookmark into her book.

Ginny smiled, fluffing up her pillow. “I’m in no rush,” she said.

“Why ever not?” Hermione asked indignantly.

“First, because I *can* now, so now it’s a matter of choosing *when* . For the last month I couldn’t, no matter how much I wanted it. Second, I can touch him now without having my Occlumency shield in the way,” she said, smiling a wicked smile. “Trust me, that’s very, *very* rewarding. There are times that it’s *very good* to be part dragon,” she said cheerfully. “Goodnight, Hermione.”

“Goodnight dragon.”

~+~

His sleep that night was poor. Several times he found himself awake, reliving in his mind bits of the battle beneath Gringotts. He didn’t mind roasting the Dementors, or the eventual end of the Basilisk or the Hydra. The dead Death Eaters, however, weighed on his mind. Each time he found himself in this cycle of recrimination, he’d lower his Occlumency shield and reach out for Ginny’s essence, revelling in its warmth. She was there, she was safe, she was his; all was right. He woke again shortly after dawn, unable to return to sleep. Some small part of him considered the odds of being discovered sneaking into Ginny’s room before breakfast, but the rational part of his mind shot that down quickly. *They trust you; you pervert, besides, Hermione’s there.* Feeling slightly disgusted with himself, he changed into shorts and a sweatshirt, lacing up his trainers before walking quietly down the stairs to the kitchen. Perhaps a run would clear his brain.

Molly was in the kitchen, staring at a cookbook, cradling a cup of tea. “Good morning, Harry dear, off for a run?” she asked pleasantly.

Harry nodded. “Yup,” he said.

“Ginny joining you?”

“Nah, she still needs her sleep,” he replied.

“May I ask you a personal question, Harry? About Ginny, I mean,” she asked.

“Uh, sure,” Harry asked, trying to think if there was anything he should be feeling guilty about.

“Can you sense her?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah, I can,” Harry replied sheepishly.

“It was that way with Snik and Abelard,” she observed distantly.

Harry snorted. “Different relationship, but yeah, the bond is similar,” he said.

“Enjoy your run, dear,” she said sweetly, looking back at the book.

“I will, when it’s over,” he said, closing the screen door quietly.

~+~

30 August 1996

Dear Diary,

Well, today started out ok – I got to sleep in. It wasn’t even my birthday! The day, however, went downhill rapidly from there.

Harry was gone by the time I stumbled into the kitchen for breakfast, the last member of the house to make it there – pickings were slim, that’s for sure. Mum said he’d gone for a run and then taken the portal to Abelard’s. I don’t recall any mention of that, but I was out of commission for a day, so a lot could happen that I wouldn’t know of until it happened. When Mum told me about him being away, I dropped my shield and reached out for him. At first there was nothing, then I felt it, faint, but unmistakably Harry. I couldn’t tell where he was, or what he was doing, but feeling him was reward enough. After a hurried and sparse breakfast, Mum hauled me off to London to properly get examined and discharged from St. Mungo’s. Afterwards we were supposed to go pick up the things we had on our list on Wednesday before the list was overtaken by events. Simple trip, no? Nooooooooooooooooooooo.

The Healer who had examined me when I first was admitted was off duty, handing my case off to a short lady Healer from Ulster by the name of O’Neil. She looked a bit like Hermione, except that her hair was black as coal in tight ringlets, and she acted like she’d spent the last week drinking Turkish coffee non-stop. She talked way too fast. She read through my portfolio, clucking through the usual collection of Weasley childhood diseases and magical mishaps. Everything was cool until she read my admitting report from this week. First she left the room to place a hurried Floo call, then Mum was shunted off to a waiting room, and I went into an

examining room.

I thought at first that I'd just have to take my top off, she'd poke my scar and then I'd be outta there. But nooooooooooooooooooooo.

I was up on a table, naked from the waist down with my feet in stirrups. Healer O'Neil's wand was up my bottom, apparently trying to detect a Floo connection given the time she spent poking around in there. Sweet Circe, that hurt! I will give Tk'lch credit – he did offer to eat Healer O'Neil. I declined his noble offer of assistance.

Healer O'Neil began to ask me a series of really weird questions that all seemed to hinge on the notion that my boyfriend had beaten me up, *or* raped me, *or* beaten me up *after* raping me. In retrospect, I imagine that her mistake was sensible – the admitting report indicated that I entered the hospital naked and bleeding with a chunk out of my back the size of a dinner plate. Ron was jabbering about how my boyfriend had done this, and that he'd tried to kill him in return, all of which were dutifully enrolled in the admitting report. I was about to the point of trying my chances against St. Mungo's Anti-Apparation Wards when Moey stepped in with Tonks in tow. Tonks, blessed woman, took charge. She looked like she'd just stepped out of an adult beauty parlour, hair, nails done just so with clothing that wasn't ripped and didn't show off her navel, you know, the works. When she tries, she looks very grown up. She explained that I'd incurred my injuries in the Gringotts break-in, that my wound had been caused by a dragon and that I really did have a boyfriend, but he wasn't beating me up or raping me. That cooled Healer O'Neil down a bit, but she made up for it when Mum finally came into the examination room and she began asking Mum if I was sexually active, and did I need to be on any one of a variety of methods of contraception. Mum, bless her soul, saw by my bright magenta colouring that I was not ready to have this discussion with this particular audience, and convinced Healer O'Neil that *she* had those topics well under control. Tonks was able to get us out of there without Obliviating Healer O'Neil, or accepting a criminal referral from her for my grievous injuries at the hand (or teeth) of my beloved.

After that we went out for lunch and a bit of shopping. Needless to say, I didn't feel much like walking, and I wasn't in much of a mood to shop either.

I did pig out at lunch, though.

We picked up next year's books and some fresh camisoles, as my scar rides right about where my bra strap sits on my back, so I'll be going without for a week or so while the scar is toughening up. I wonder if Harry will notice?

We're back home now, and I don't feel like doing much of much. I'm waiting for Harry to get home so I can give him an earful. It's not like it's his fault or anything, but I want him to know – why I'm not entirely sure. I'm really tired, notwithstanding having slept in this morning. Maybe things will look better with a nap.

GMW

Ginny woke from her nap, sitting up to watch the dust motes dance in the late afternoon sunlight. She yawned, stretched and stood up long enough to straighten her covers. Dropping her shield, she reached out to find Harry. *Nope, still not at the Burrow .*

Tk'lch?

Yes, Mistress Weasley.

<giggle> Ginny will do just fine.

Yes, Mistress Ginny.

Why am I so tired?

It is because of the changes .

The changes?

A dragon, after she is marked, goes through a period of changes. The more you sleep, the quicker the changes take place.

Am I going to grow again?

I think not. These are primarily internal changes – they may affect your magic a bit. You should know by now that size means nothing to dragons.

Yeah, I guess so. Is Harry changing?

Yes, he experiences similar changes, although he finds that he is unable to sleep, and what sleep does come is light indeed. The male often stands guard over his sleeping mate during this time, unless they are situated as you are now, amongst your family.

I don't want to go back to school.

Why not?

I don't want to share Harry. I've had him to myself for almost a month.

You should speak to him about that.

Tk'lch?

Yes, Mistress Ginny?

Thanks.

I exist to serve, Mistress .

Ginny slid down the stairs, quiet as a shadow. The clock in the kitchen showed that Dad, Bill, Charlie, Fred and George were all “At work” while Mum was “In the Kitchen – working on the ledger” and Ron was “Canoodling in the Orchard. She already knew where Harry was, or more accurately, where he wasn’t; and Hermione, she presumed, was in the Orchard, at least she better be there if Ron was indeed “canoodling.”

“Hi, Mum,” Ginny said, washing her hands at the kitchen sink.

“Hello, Little One, did the nap help?” she asked cheerfully.

“Not really. Tk’lch says that the fatigue is part of being marked – something about my magic being rearranged for a day or two,” she said with a sigh.

“What’s on your mind, Ginny?” Molly said, putting down the family finance ledger, twiddling a quill in her fingers.

“Today’s pelvic exam. Is that what my first time is going to be like?” she asked quietly.

Molly set the quill down, gathering her thoughts. “Yes and no,” she replied, looking up at the clock. “If your *husband* is patient and slow, your first time will be a lot more pleasant, but it will still entail a certain amount of discomfort. It gets better with practice,” she said with a sly smile.

Husband, yeah, got it, Mum, subtle like a Bludger. “You know it’s going to be Harry,” Ginny said.

Molly pursed her lips, trying to choose her words wisely. “We know it will be Harry. Your father and I would prefer that you finish school first,” she said cautiously.

Ginny smiled and laughed. “Mum, I’m fifteen! I’m not in a hurry. I haven’t even kissed him yet,” she exclaimed.

“Yet you know he’s going to be the one?” Molly asked.

While you live there shall be no other. “Yeah, I do,” she answered.

“Where’s Harry?” Molly asked cautiously.

“Still at Abelard’s, I suppose. I can sense him, just barely, but he’s too far away for anything useful. Before he marked me, I could only sense him if he were within a quarter mile or so. My range is way longer than that now. I guess that’s part of the changes that Tk’lch was mentioning,” Ginny said.

“What’s it like?” Molly asked.

“What’s what like?” Ginny countered.

“Sensing him.”

“It’s like having a warm dollop of butterscotch sauce dissolving on my tongue. If he’s worried, or hurt, or sick, the flavour changes,” she explained.

“That could come in handy,” Molly said, picking up her quill and ledger again. “Ginny, I don’t want to start a fight, but I wanted to ask you some questions about expenditures this month,” Molly began.

“Sure, Mum,” Ginny said, confident that *she* hadn’t spent a Knut this month.

“When you went shopping this month, with your brothers and Harry, did Harry pay for the groceries?” Molly asked.

Ginny closed her eyes, fingers pressed to her temple. “Yeah, he did. He’d pull some money out of the cash box, put it in an envelope, and then he’s pay for whatever we bought out of what was in the envelope – when we got back home, he’d empty out the envelope into the cash box,” Ginny said, opening her eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“We’re over,” Molly said. “We should have a little over 20 Galleons in the cashbox, but instead we have 110 Galleons and a few odd Sickles and Knuts. The only way I can explain it is if Harry was paying for groceries this month out of his own pocket,” Molly said, pondering the notion.

“He’d do that in a heartbeat, Mum, it has Harry written all over it. When we went to Gringotts, we had a *terrible* row over money. He wanted to pay for my gown for the All Hallow’s Eve Ball,” Ginny said, proceeding to give a fair rendition of their exchange in the vault. “Harry doesn’t really care about money – he sees it as a way of making people happy, but it doesn’t particularly make him happy,” Ginny explained.

“Should I bring this up to him?” Molly asked.

“Only if you want to start a blazing row – I take that back. You could let him know that you know that he’s been buying groceries. That would be okay, I think. But if you tried to pay him back, you’d probably have a row on your hands,” she cautioned. “I’m not particularly in the mood to scrap with him right now,” she said with a smile.

“Is that all those post-marking hormones coursing through your body right now talking?” Molly said, raising an eyebrow.

“Something like that, Mum. Say, what’s for dinner?” Ginny said after her stomach rumbled quietly.

“Pizza – Remus and Tonks will be bringing a case of fresh Butterbeer. What does Harry like on his pizza?” Molly asked.

Ginny closed her eyes again, trying to remember if she’d ever seen him eat pizza. “Pretty much everything except for those little, hairy, salty fish,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“Got it, no anchovies,” Molly said, folding the ledger closed. She moved away from the table and

opened the dry pantry. “Ginny, be a dear and fetch the raisins from the cellar, please?”

“The large tin or the small tin?” Ginny asked.

“The small tin, otherwise I won’t stop,” Molly said with a laugh.

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Jasmine paused outside of the door to Abelard’s parlour before knocking softly. She knew that Abelard knew that she was there, but convention must be observed, especially when he was discussing business.

“Excuse me, Master,” she said before entering the room. She nodded at the thin, old woman having tea with Abelard. “The Portal does not come when it is called,” she explained.

Abelard smiled and nodded. “Advise Mrs. Paprikash that we may have two guests for lunch,” he replied.

“Do I need to prepare an adequate welcome?” she asked.

“I think not,” he replied, which she chose to interpret loosely.

Jasmine passed through the kitchen, advised her mother as to the number of guests for lunch, and then withdrew into the garden. Out of an abundance of caution, she activated the mantrap ward behind her. Her battle wand flicked into her hand. She found some shade underneath one of the trees near the wall and waited. She didn’t have to wait long. She felt the energy of the Portal before she saw the shimmering doorframe appear; it was crackling as its energy interfered with the mantrap. The door was its normal hue, which was a good sign, but she didn’t trust the mechanisms in the portal and took careful aim at the space where the door would open. Although the door opened, no one walked through.

She whistled for Rosie, who came bounding out into the garden, hesitating slightly as she passed through the mantrap, sniffing the ground until she abruptly sat upright, her tail flailing the well groomed grass. The hair on the top of Rosie’s head was moving, scratched by invisible fingers. “Hullo, girl,” an unseen voice said.

“Show yourself, Potter,” she snarled, crouching in the battle stance she’d perfected when she was a small girl. She heard the muffled pair of pops of Disapparation and Apparation, and then the voice spoke behind her.

“Have you missed me?”

“Show yourself!” she cried before she too Disapparated and Apparated, springing sideways about ten feet; she was taking pains to avoid the mantrap. She swung her wand in an arc, turning the air a brilliant shade of blue. A man-shaped hole appeared in the wash of blue. She unleashed a very special bolt of energy into the hole. The intruder fell with a thud. Minutes later, she deposited him, still invisible, onto the thickly padded carpet of the parlour, hands and feet bound together

behind his back. Standing up, she smoothed her tunic, giving the old woman a nod. “Your student, Madame,” she said.

Abelard smiled, doing his best to suppress a guffaw. “For just a few more days, he’s my student as well. Harry, you are among friends, please show yourself,” he said, nodding with satisfaction as Harry winked into sight. “Jasmine, please help my student out of his bonds and then bring suitable refreshment. I’m sure that you will wish to join us,” he said.

Jasmine touched the bonds with her wand, melting the bands first at the feet and then at the wrists, pulling him up off the floor. In a graceful move she pecked his cheek and whispered quickly into his ear, “Of course I missed you,” before darting silently out of the room.

Minerva McGonagall cleared her throat. “This is a pleasant surprise, Mr. Potter. I did not expect to see you until next week. Has your summer been good?” she asked, sipping from her tea cup.

“Uh, smashing, actually,” he replied. “It’s good to see you, too, Professor,” he said before turning to Abelard. “Did you send the Portal, sir?”

Abelard inhaled and then held his breath for a moment. “No, you called the Portal,” he answered.

“I did no such thing,” Harry protested.

“Did you want to see me?” Abelard asked.

“Of course,” Harry replied, “I was moping after breakfast and walked out into the Weasley’s herb garden. The Portal appeared in front of me. I thought you’d sent it.”

“Well, the Portal is attuned to your magic, and interpreted your desire to see me as a command to appear wherever you were to bring you here,” Abelard explained. “I intend to allow that to occur in the future. It may be a useful resource to call on in uncertain times. Why did you come through the Portal in invisible form, Harry?” Abelard asked.

“I wasn’t sure whether or not you had sent it,” he answered.

“Commendable vigilance,” Professor McGonagall said. “Were you wearing your father’s cloak just now?” she asked.

“No,” he said with a small smile, “I’ve learned a few things this summer that make that unnecessary,” he replied, winking out of sight and then returning again.

“Most impressive, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said, “I’ve read the reports, and I’ve walked through the lower levels of Gringotts to see first-hand what you and Miss Weasley did when you were transfigured. I’d like to run some tests if I might,” she said, stopping to pick up a biscuit from the tray that Jasmine brought into the room.

In response to her questions, Harry recounted in condensed form what he’d done two days before, answering a string of very nuanced questions posed by the head of his house. After what seemed

like an hour or so of questioning, she dug a blue half-sphere from her handbag, tossing it lightly to him. The half-sphere was heavy and cold, feeling like it was made of marble.

“What is it?” he asked.

“A very special touchstone,” she replied. “Think of a sunrise while holding it in your wand hand,” she instructed. Harry closed his eyes, squeezing the stone. When he looked up, the flat portion of the stone held a replica of the sunrise he’d imagined, a vista from the hill overlooking the lake where he’d first met with Abelard. He raised his eyebrows at the detail in the picture and then handed the sphere back to Professor McGonagall.

“Hmm, well, that question’s been answered, I’m afraid. By the picture on the touchstone, nothing’s there; I regret to say that you are not a true Animagus,” she sighed. “It is no shame to not have the gift. It would have been useful to have a bonded pair of dragons fighting on our side, but all in all, I’d rather have you as you are,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Dragons can be so unpredictable,” she said, “not to mention messy.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, “tell me about it.”

After another round of questions, Harry and Jasmine took an opportune time to excuse themselves while Professor McGonagall and Abelard continued to chat, ducking into the kitchen to pick up cups, serviettes, flatware and plates. After the table was set, Harry asked Jasmine the question that had been burning in his mind.

“What did I do wrong?” he asked.

Jasmine leaned up against the doorframe, playing idly with the end of her plait. “Frankly, Harry, you came in stupid – you’ve got to assume that your adversary will learn your capabilities and come up with countermeasures. I’ve been thinking since that time with the wooden swords as to how I’ll fight an invisible adversary,” she said, piercing him with her gaze.

“Point well taken,” Harry conceded. “I was taken by surprise,” he sighed.

“Better to learn that with your friends than with your enemies,” Jasmine said sagely.

“That’s what Mm’lau says too,” Harry said with a smirk.

“You should listen to the women in your life. Speaking of whom, how’s my student? She made her old teacher proud at Gringotts, I’ll have you know.”

“She’s a bit subdued – the aftermath from Gringotts has her under the weather – Mm’lau says she’ll be fine by Monday,” he said.

“And how are the two of you?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Fine,” Harry replied, blushing lightly, “better than fine, actually. We’re uh - bonded now. I suppose that it will take us a while to figure out what that means,” he said.

“Only the rest of your life,” she said, smacking him lightly on the arm as she went back to the parlour.

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Lunch was a quiet affair, soup, bread and cheese with a simple pudding for dessert. The old woman raved so much about the soup and bread that she had Mum blushing, which was novel, as she rarely blushed about anything. Jasmine tried to catch Abelard’s eye, but she wasn’t having any success. Since indirect wasn’t working, she decided to ratchet it up a notch.

“Sir, there’s a ledger we need to discuss after lunch in your parlour,” she said blandly.

“Indeed?” Abelard replied. “Will it wait until our guests depart?” he asked, staring a hole through her.

“Now or later,” she replied glibly. “It will take but a minute,” she said.

“If you will excuse us, then,” Abelard said, pushing away from the table.

Jasmine followed him to the parlour, turning the fountain on and sealing the room. “Harry is troubled,” she said, crossing her arms as she sat on the edge of a stuffed chair. “He wants to talk to you, something that he doesn’t want to discuss in front of me or his professor.”

“Indeed,” Abelard replied, stroking his short beard. “How do you know this?”

“I caught a glimpse of it as I untied him – his shield was completely down then. I suspect that he is troubled about what he did when he was attacked in Gringotts,” she said, remembering her own discomfort after the first assignment that led to the use of lethal force.

Abelard pulled a sour face, inhaled deeply and then exhaled through his nose. “It seems that I was remiss in not addressing that in his training this summer,” he said.

“That wasn’t the assignment, sir, you were engaged as an Occlumency tutor, remember?” she chided gently.

“While I may be feeble, there is nothing wrong with my memory,” Abelard protested. He stood up. Their impromptu meeting was over; he would take action of some sort; he always did. “Call the Portal, would you please?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, walking out of the Parlour, cancelling the sealing charm and turning off the fountain without a thought. “Feeble my arse,” she said quietly.

“Nothing wrong with my hearing, either,” Abelard called out.

“Yes, sir,” she replied with a broad grin.

Abelard was direct. He announced that the Portal was waiting to take Professor McGonagall back

to London, and then asked Harry if he'd care for a walk before he returned to the Burrow. Harry didn't have to be asked twice. Handshakes and pleasantries were exchanged before Professor McGonagall slipped through the Portal. Jasmine made sure the door was secure and then vanished the device, taking care to disappear into the house, leaving the men of her life, old and young, in the garden.

"I fancy a walk in the woods, Harry. Let's walk and talk," Abelard said, walking purposefully towards the Garden gate.

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Jasmine was right – she was right about most things. The lad was carrying a heavy burden over the lives he'd cut short in the lower levels of Gringotts. The fact that many of them were criminals and murderers themselves was beside the point. They talked about it at great length, Abelard sharing his own experiences from the First War.

"Has this helped, Harry?" Abelard asked at the end of their walk.

"Yeah, immensely," he replied.

"Keep your appointment with Father Martin, I've found his perspective to be most useful," Abelard admonished.

"Thanks, I will," Harry replied. "Uh, Abelard, can I use your telephone to call London?"

"Certainly, lad – Jasmine will set things up for you in my study," he said, sitting down with a sigh in a chair in the shade of his garden.

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After finishing a satellite telephone call to his solicitor, Harry returned to the garden. Abelard was still sitting in the shade, sipping from a tall frosted glass.

"Think clearly about where you want to go, then visualize the Portal taking you there," Abelard explained.

Harry nodded, closing his eyes, visualizing the herb garden at the Burrow. Next he placed the portal in that scene. Unbidden, Ginny appeared in this picture, smiling, wearing a yellow sundress. He smiled in return as he looked up. The Portal materialized in Abelard's garden.

"Can I write you during the year?" he asked Abelard, suddenly not wanting to leave.

"Certainly, lad; we'll work something out to put another door on your Passbox, but until then, write to me in care of Father Martin, he always knows how to reach me," Abelard said with a chuckle.

Jasmine reached out to squeeze his hand and then pulled him into a quick hug. "You'll tell her,

won't you?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied.

"Be safe, Harry," she said, not wanting to let go of his hand. "Do them before they do you; remember that I want to dance with you at your wedding," she said, giving him a wink as she squeezed his hand again.

He opened the Portal. Not surprisingly, there was a girl in a yellow sundress waiting for him on the other side.

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Smiling broadly, he raced through the Portal and picked Ginny up, spinning her around.

"Miss me, did you?" she asked mischievously.

"Yeah," he gasped, setting her down. "That dress, I've seen it before," he began.

"It's Hermione's," she interrupted. "She fills it out a lot better," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Not better," he said firmly. "Different, but not better; remember, I chose you," he said, pulling her towards him, running his palms up her back, "besides, you bounce better in this dress,"

"Careful there, mister, you're playing with fire," Ginny whispered breathily into his ear.

"Yeah, I am," he replied, "but your Mum is watching us from the kitchen window," he replied in a not too quiet whisper.

"Well," Ginny said, "that certainly puts ice in my knickers," she said, pulling away from him, placing one palm on his chest. "You didn't tell me that you were going to Abelard's," she said, somewhat accusingly.

"I didn't know I was going either – the Portal appeared and I went through it – I thought that Abelard had called me – it turns out *I'd* called the Portal. I wanted to talk to Abelard, I just didn't know it when I woke up this morning. So, how was your day, Miss Weasley?" he asked, holding out his arm while nodding with his head towards the orchard.

"It was the pits," she said, beginning the gruesome tale of her tribulations at St. Mungo's. Harry listened attentively, giving appropriate feedback when she came up for air.

"I - am - so - sorry," he said slowly.

"Haaary," she exclaimed, "we've been over this before – you did nothing wrong, it was my idiot brother that bollixed things up for me, for us," she said. "I'm just sore in places where I didn't know I could hurt," she whinged before she wiggled her eyebrows. "Mum says that it's good practice for marriage."

“Ah yes, lie back and think of England,” Harry said in a dowager’s voice.

“You’re terrible,” she said, bumping him with her hip.

“Try me,” he said, turning to face her.

“Harry, no,” she said, placing her fingertips on his chin. “Not here,” she whispered. “Ron and Hermione were out here after lunch – the clock in the kitchen said that he was ‘canoodling in the orchard,’” she explained.

“You’re having me on, right?” Harry said, raising one eyebrow.

“I wish,” she said, slipping her hand back into the crook of his arm, steering them back to the house. “Part of me doesn’t want to go back to Hogwarts, because I’ll never have time to see you again – this month I’ve pretty much had as much of you as I can stand. The other part of me wants to go back so I can get out from being spied upon all the time, and maybe find some privacy with someone I’m kinda fond of,” she said, leaning into him as she walked.

“Might I know this someone?” he asked playfully.

“Might,” she replied, suppressing a grin.

“Lip balm?” he asked.

“No thanks, I never touch the stuff,” she replied. “Hermione did buy me a complete range of flavoured and coloured lip glosses though. There’s a nice one that matches *Starry Night*, red gloss with sparkles. When you smack your lips,” she said, making a soft popping sound, “you give off these wicked sparks,” she said with a grin.

“Do they hurt?” he asked.

“She didn’t mention that,” she said.

Harry’s eyes opened wide. “She’s tested them?”

“Harry, weren’t you *listening* to me earlier? She was snogging my brother in the orchard. Knowing her she probably brought out a notebook and wrote down her observations after each application of lip gloss,” she said, waving her free hand theatrically.

“That’s waaaaaaaaay too much information, Ginny,” Harry said.

“Tuh, it’s not like you haven’t thought of it,” she huffed.

“Honestly, I don’t think that kissing Ron has *ever* entered my mind, even in my worst nightmares,” he said with a flat expression on his face. “It’s been a long time since I’ve thought of kissing Hermione, either, although that wouldn’t quite be a nightmare - unless Ron caught me,” he said, flinching when she dug her knuckle into his ribs. “Okay, I *have* thought of it,” he said,

slipping away from her, catching her hand as he made some distance. “But now that I know that we’ll show up on the clock, it kinda puts ice in my knickers too,” he conceded.

They walked in silence for a while.

“This has been quite a month,” he said.

“That it has, Mr. Potter,” she murmured.

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When they returned to the Burrow, the family had already begun to arrive; Bill was rolling out pizza dough on the kitchen table, Charlie and Ron were clearing the dining table and Fred and George arrived with dual pops in the kitchen after Harry and Ginny had washed their hands. Fleur arrived twenty minutes later as the first pizza came out of the oven, followed by a series of pops that announced Remus, Tonks and Arthur Weasley.

“Hey,” Charlie shouted out. “About time the bloke with the Butterbeer arrived,” he said, diving for the wooden case that Remus had just placed on the kitchen table.

Dinner was the usual Weasley pandemonium, several conversations raging at once, with questions being cross-threaded, seemingly at random. Harry was engaged in a polite conversation with George. He suggested that the twins consider erecting a kiosk or push-cart for selling the wares of Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes in Hogsmeade during the Hogsmeade weekends when he became aware of a sudden pleasant weight on his shoulder. “Cute, Harry, really cute,” George said, nodding at his sister who had fallen asleep on Harry before returning to his stream of consciousness ponderings of whether or not the twins could turn a profit operating a remote branch in Hogsmeade only on the designated weekends. “It’s a brilliant idea, Harry, my only regret is that I didn’t think of it,” he concluded. “You’ll forgive me in advance if I tell Fred that this was all my idea, won’t you?” he asked.

“What, me believe that you had an original idea?” Fred asked, turning from his conversation with Bill and Fleur to join Harry and Charlie. “You *do* make a nice pillow, Harry,” Fred said before turning back to rejoin Bill and Fleur.

Harry shifted around a bit, putting his arm around Ginny, who snuggled into him with a murmur. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Harry dear, she’s still tiring easily these days. Could you put her to bed?” Molly asked.

Harry looked up with a shocked expression on his face. “Uh, sure, Mrs. Weasley,” he said, hoping that his voice wouldn’t crack.

“Good,” she replied. “If you’re not back in an hour, I’ll send out a search party,” she said with a smile.

“Right,” Harry said, propping Ginny up with one hand as he stood up from the couch. He

pondered briefly how he could best carry her without resorting to the *Mobilcorpus* charm, figuring that she was light enough that he could probably just tote her up the stairs. A few voices rang out “Goodnight, Ginny,” as he carried her up the stairs, but they were met with some shushes before the random Weasley cacophony resumed in his wake.

He pushed the door to her room open with his toe, flicking the lights on, softly, with a wave of his hand. He leaned forward to turn the covers back before setting her down softly on her bed. After he removed her shoes, she smiled slightly as she nuzzled her pillow. He considered whether or not she would be more comfortable in pyjamas, but concluded that he just didn’t feel lucky enough to chance that manoeuvre tonight, settling for tucking her into bed instead. He began to leave when she murmured “don’ go,” her face screwed up in an unpleasant expression, “stay wif’ me,” she murmured. Harry went to the end of the bed, sitting carefully on the floor, leaning up against the bed. He could hear her sigh comfortably, feeling her magic withdraw. He pondered that for a while, concluding that she wouldn’t need a perimeter guard if he was there.

There was something incredibly right about sitting there, standing watch over her as she slept. As he leaned against the foot of the bed, he wasn’t truly awake, but he wasn’t asleep, either; his mind was mulling over the events of the last month, good things and not so good. Bat Pyr’gs were fluttering through the house and around the grounds of The Burrow; spiders were likewise occupied. Soon, he detected a change in Ginny’s breathing as she dropped into a sound sleep. This change brought him back to the here and now of regular consciousness. Squeezing his eyes open, he glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes had passed. He reckoned that he shouldn’t be in too much trouble. He pushed up from the floor, lingering a while before he planted a kiss on the top of her head.

“Is that the best you can do, Potter?” George called from the hallway.

“Lips, you know, those red things below her nose? That’s the customary spot, I’ve heard.” Fred volunteered.

Harry sighed. He’d felt the threads snapping earlier in the stairwell, but figured that he had the door open and wasn’t doing anything untoward, so he was safe. He hadn’t figured on the Twins, who were now joined by Bill. The twins were in their teasing mode, but Bill had an expression of disgust mixed with fury.

“Mister Potter, we’d like to have a word with you if we may,” George began.

“About our sister,” Fred continued.

“Sure, guys,” Harry replied. “C’mon up to my room.”

He trudged up the stairs, wondering if he were truly in trouble, or whether Molly’s teasing ban had somehow expired without his knowledge.

As they walked up the stairs, he extended his magic over the Weasley men, using his Legilimency to gently probe their surface thoughts. The twins were lightly rankled about something, while Bill

was livid; about what he couldn't tell without probing deeper. When they got into the room, he took care to position himself where he could see Bill's hands, which were dangerous whether he was holding a wand or not. Harry sat on top of Percy's old desk, the twins sat on the bed and Bill leaned against the door.

"What can I do for you guys?" he asked pleasantly.

"It's about Ginny," Bill said.

Harry nodded. "You going to tell me what's going on, or do I have to play twenty questions?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"Actually, I was hoping that you'd tell us what's going on, Potter," Bill said.

"Sorry, I haven't a clue where you're going," Harry said, hoping that the vague feeling in his gut was wrong.

"Are you shagging my sister?" Bill blurted.

"That's not what we discussed earlier, Bill," Fred cautioned.

"Bill, what's got into you?" George asked.

"I'll tell you what's got into me," Bill snapped. "Charlie's not the only one who studied dragons. Dragons mark their partners. When Ginny was at St. Mungo's today, she was examined for sexual assault," Bill said, glaring at Harry as he spat out the words.

"Yeah, she told me about the ordeal," Harry replied.

"Well, are you?" Bill demanded.

"Why would that be any business of yours?" Harry asked.

"Because I'm her brother, I'm supposed to protect her," Bill hissed.

"She doesn't need protecting, Bill, she's a very capable witch," Harry replied.

Bill began to say something when the door opened behind him.

Ginny was squinting in the light of the room, wrinkling her nose.

"Is there a problem in here?" she asked pleasantly, looking around the room.

"No problem, Ginger-Snap," Bill replied casually. "Why don't you go back to bed, you look really tired."

"Harry, I woke up because I could feel your anger. What's going on? Why are you angry with

Bill?" Ginny asked.

Harry exhaled through his nose, taking a while to answer. "Bill wants to know if we're shagging," he said, flinching as he watched her expression.

"WHAT? Why would that be any business of yours?" she fumed, glaring at Bill.

"Now Ginny, settle down," Bill said quickly.

"I think it's time for me to leave," George said.

"Me too," Fred said, flinching when Ginny turned towards him suddenly.

"Don't you tell me to settle down, Bill Weasley, and don't think that you're slipping away from this disaster, Gred and Forge," Ginny growled.

"I'm just concerned about you, Ginger-snap," Bill said.

"I got enough crap at St. Mungo's this morning to last me for the rest of the week, Bill. I love Harry, Harry loves me. Mum trusts him enough to ask him to tuck me in; he's always been a perfect gentleman with me. Just what the hell is *your* problem, Bill?" Ginny asked, hands on hips.

"I know you love him. You've loved him forever. I just don't want him to take advantage of you," Bill said, looking carefully at his shoes.

"Bill," Ginny said quietly. "Look at me." Ginny held her hand up fingers curled. She closed her eyes, concentrating on something. A bead of light appeared above her palm that grew until it was the size of a snitch. It was incredibly bright, giving off tonnes of heat. "Do you know what this is?" she asked her brother.

"I don't know what it's called, but I've seen it before," he said, holding his hands to shield his eyes.

"It's the Lesser Wrath, Bill," Ginny said, closing her hand on the ball of light until it disappeared. "I'm not an infant. Anything that happens with Harry will happen because I *want* it to, not because I'm a love struck little girl in awe of the Boy-who-lived. Got that notion straight?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," Bill mumbled.

Ginny slowly walked up to Bill, hooking her thumbs into his belt, resting her forehead against his chest. "'Tsallright. Bill, I love you, but life kept on happening after you went to school – I grew up," she said, speaking into his chest. "Harry is part of my life now, an enormous part of it – please don't try to come between us, okay?" she asked.

"I think I understand now," Bill said, wrapping his arms around her. Ginny began to wobble a bit. "Do you need me to put you back to bed?" he asked.

“Nah, that’s his job,” she said, hooking her thumb in Harry’s direction.

“Well then,” he said. “I’ll leave him to it, all right?”

“G’night, all,” George said, Disapparating with a pop. Fred disappeared after him.

“G’night, Ginger-snap,” Bill said, giving her one last squeeze before releasing her. “G’night, Harry. I’m sorry. I was out of line,” he said, nodding in Harry’s direction as he backed out the open door.

“It’s all right, Bill – you did it because you care,” Harry said, coming up behind Ginny, wrapping his arms around her.

“Hey, you,” she said softly after her brothers had left. “Can I sleep here tonight?” she said cheerfully.

“No,” he replied with a laugh. “One brush with death is enough,” he said.

“I thought as much, but it never hurts to ask,” she said with a grin. “I’m knackered, Mister Potter. Put me back to bed,” she commanded.

“Your wish is my command,” he replied.

She didn’t need to be carried, but Harry kept a hand on the small of her back to make sure he could steady her if necessary while walking down the steps.

“I was worried, you know,” Ginny said.

“Afraid that Bill would beat me up?” he asked. “He was thinking about it.”

“Yeah, I know. No, I was worried about what you might do to him,” she said, turning to look into his eyes.

“I was going to play nice,” he said.

“Why didn’t you just say that nothing is going on?” she asked.

“Well, first off, that’s not entirely true,” he said, feeling his ears heat up. “Second, whatever happens between us is private. If I was inclined to talk to anyone it would be your parents, Uncle Moony, or maybe Ron.”

“Hermione?” she asked.

“Of course, but I wouldn’t tell her everything.”

She placed her hand on his cheek. “You are so sweet,” she said.

“I try,” he murmured.

Ginny pushed open her door, lighting the room wandlessly. She opened her wardrobe, pulling a nightgown off of a hanger. Turning her back to Harry, she looked over her shoulder and asked, “Can you unrip me?”

“What?”

“My dress,” she explained. “It has a ripper in back – I can’t reach the pull.”

“The word my dear is zipper,” he said with a smile.

“Whatever,” she replied, pulling her hair up with one hand. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

“You really want me to unzip you?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah, Harry, I want to sleep in my nightgown. It’s just a zipper. I’m not asking you to ravish me on the spot, notwithstanding Bill’s keen insight into your wanton ways,” she exclaimed as Harry gingerly tugged on the zipper pull. “Although, come to think of it, that would be a nice way to end the evening,” she whispered before giving him a dazzling smile.

Harry was boggled by the notion. The zipper had exposed an expanse of pale flesh along with the scar. “It’s lovely,” he exclaimed softly. “When did it turn blue?”

“After we got home, it’s part of the change. When it reaches a deeper shade, say maybe indigo, I’ll know it’s done.”

“Crimeny, it does move,” he said in surprise.

“Yeah – I’ve been seeing how far I can get it away from the original location. Thus far I’ve sweet-talked it to my shoulder. I’d like to have it on my front, between my, uh, breasts,” Ginny said with a giggle.

“Why there?” he asked.

“Well, I figured if boys were going to keep looking at my chest, I should at least have something interesting on location,” she said with a wink.

“You’re terrible,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Please tell me that I haven’t done that,” he begged.

“Not recently, although I have noticed that when I’m playing with my hair you suddenly lose the power of speech and your eyes are riveted about eight inches below my chin,” she said with a smile.

“Busted,” he said.

“Yeah, it was one of the early signs that I wasn’t invisible any more. Turn around,” she commanded.

The dragon had begun to move again, captivating Harry’s attention. Ginny spoke up, “Turn around, or leave the room. I’m getting dressed,” she said in a slightly annoyed tone.

“Uh, right,” he replied, turning around and holding his hands over his eyes for good measure. The sounds behind him were maddening.

“I’m decent now,” she said, interrupting herself with a tremendous yawn. “Doing the Lesser Wrath really takes it out of me,” she explained.

“Did Jasmine teach that to you?” he asked.

“No, she can’t do it. She explained the theory behind it and then we went to Abelard for a demonstration – I haven’t the foggiest where you were at the time,” she said.

“Probably doing something really important like helping Mrs. Paprikash put lunch on,” he explained.

“You’re so good at that,” she said, smiling sweetly. “See you at breakfast?”

“Uh, I dunno – I’ve got to talk to Uncle Moony – I’ve got to go into London for some errands on Saturday,” he explained, amazed at her sudden change of expression. “Don’t pout; I’ll be back before dinner. It’s my last chance to wrap some things up before we go back to school,” he explained.

“I’m sleeping in,” she replied. “If you leave before I wake up, I’m going to hurt you,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Got it, Ginny needs her hug before her selfish beau goes off on errands,” he summarized.

Ginny yawned again, prompting a yawn in reply from Harry. She gave him a quick squeeze and then doused the lights.

“Goodnight, love,” she said softly.

“Goodnight, Ginny,” he replied.

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Harry found Moony and Tonks in the parlour. Tonks greeted him with an expansive wave. “We’ve been looking for you – we were considering sending out that search party,” she said with a musical laugh.

“I’ve already been found by one red headed search party,” he replied grumpily.

“Changing the subject – come the winter Holidays, what are your plans?” Moony asked.

“Well, Dumbledore says that I have to go to the Dursley’s for a weekend to make up for the suffering I’ve missed this August. Other than that, I’m open. Why, what do you have in mind?” he asked.

“Set aside Boxing Day,” Tonks said with a broad smile.

“Why?” Harry asked.

Tonks extended her hand, showing off a ring on her left hand. “Someone you love is getting married,” she said.

“I thought Bill and Fleur were getting hitched in the spring,” Harry said innocently.

Tonks threw a pillow at Harry. “Not them, you juvenile prat! Me!” she said, nodding her head at Moony. “And him!”

Harry stood stock still, letting the news sink in. “Wow,” he said. “Congratulations,” he said, shaking Uncle Moony’s hand and kissing Tonks on the cheek. “That’s amazing, that’s brilliant – that’s cool. Where’s it going to be?” he asked.

“St. Simon’s” Moony replied.

“But the reception is at the Ministry of Magic’s formal ballroom,” Tonks said proudly. “I wanted it at the Leaky Cauldron, but Mum about blew a gasket on that one,” she explained.

“So, who all knows?” Harry asked.

“Him, me, my Mum and Dad, Fr. Martin, the booking clerk at the Ministry, and now you,” Tonks said with a grin. “Oi! Hey, Weasleys! Lupin’s gonna make me an honest woman!”

“Dora!” Moony whinged.

“Gotcha,” she said, landing a peck on his cheek.

Hermione came bursting from the kitchen. “Did I hear what I thought I just heard?”

“I don’t know,” Tonks said seriously. “Are you given to hearing things?”

Hermione grabbed Tonks hand, staring at the ring, now glistening in the lamplight in the parlour. “Oh my goodness,” she exclaimed. “How wonderful,” she said, embracing Moony and then Tonks in turn.

“Uncle Moony?” Harry asked “can I have a word with you?”

Breakfast was a fairly bleary event for Harry. He hadn't had a sound night's sleep since the events at Gringotts. Mm'lau said he'd be back to normal in a day or so, but still, this endless wakefulness was getting old. Studying the Weasley family clock he noted that Mister Weasley was "at work" (which was odd for a Saturday), Fred and George were "at the beach," Charlie was "you don't want to know" while Percy was still listed as "in exile" and Bill was "at the Grocers." Mrs. Weasley was humming a tune as she worked in the kitchen, a few words of the lyrics leaking out during the chorus. She would look up at the clock, apparently checking on Ron's status, which remained "asleep – in bed."

Harry extended his Farsight, watching with some amusement as a more bushy-haired than usual Hermione crept into Ron's room, attired in dressing gown and fuzzy slippers. Her first few attempts at waking Ron were without effect, so she finally resorted to taking his pillow from underneath his head and smacking him soundly. He had a pretty good hunch at what was likely to happen next, so he diverted his attention elsewhere. Moments later they were both sitting at the table with him, Ron at his side, Hermione across the table from them.

"You look terrible, Harry," Hermione said, sipping some tea.

"Thanks, I needed to hear that," Harry quipped. "I should be sleeping normally within a day or so. On the whole, I'm better than I was last summer," he said.

"That's not saying a whole lot, mate," Ron said before shoving a forkful of sausage into his mouth.

Harry smirked. "Ready for Quidditch?" he asked.

Ron pointed to his bulging cheek and held up one finger. Two swallows and a gulp of coffee later he said, "I've drawn up a rough playbook for the first game and some practice schedules, but other than that, no, I'm totally unprepared," he said, looking pathetically at Hermione.

"I said I'd help you once I got the Prefect schedules tacked down," she snapped.

"Thanks," Ron replied, tucking back into his eggs.

Harry felt a touch on his ankle that became a feathery light circular stroking on the top of his foot. Looking up, he saw that Hermione was buttering her toast, the picture of innocence.

"Uh, Hermione?" he asked.

"Harry," she answered.

"Wrong foot," he said cryptically.

"Really? I'll have to be more careful," she said, spreading marmalade on the now nicely buttered toast. The stroking stopped. The dainty foot under the table moved to the right and resumed its

actions.

Molly smirked and began to run water in the sink.

“Do you need help with the dishes, Mrs. Weasley?” Harry asked.

“No, Harry, dear. I would appreciate it if you’d wake Ginny before breakfast is totally cold, or consumed,” she said, glaring at her youngest son.

“I think I can do that,” he said, heading towards the stairs.

Once he was safely out of earshot, Ron said, “watch the clock, a sickle says that he kisses her awake.”

“Ron, I’ll do no such thing, Harry and Ginny are entitled to a little privacy, even here,” Hermione answered tartly before draining her tea. “On second thought, a sickle says they don’t.”

“You’re on,” he said, reaching for the coffeepot.

~+~

Life at the Weasley household had certain rhythms throughout the year. Now, when the last batch of children was home, that rhythm seemed to be wake up, cook, clean, cook, clean, cook, clean, kiss Arthur good night and after an all too brief sleep, begin the process anew. Molly was enjoying a good cup of tea before the next round of cooking began, this time for dinner. She hadn’t had the chance to talk to Harry about the cash box surplus. Given everything else going on in his life, she concluded that she should let this one slide, making a note to someday congratulate Lily on whatever she’d managed to instil in him during her all too brief tenure as his Mum.

She heard the fireplace ignite with an unfamiliar voice calling “Incoming mail for Molly,” followed by a pair of clinks and the sound of the fireplace extinguishing.

That’s odd; I thought our Floo was blocked for Floo Mail.

Wand drawn she moved towards the fireplace, wondering just what new mishap was waiting to spill into her already chaotic life. Hermione picked up on her unease.

“Is there a problem, Mrs. Weasley?” she asked, looking up from her novel.

“I think not, Hermione, but if a Yeti takes off with me for the Orchard, do let Arthur know what I had planned for dinner,” she said more nonchalantly than she truly felt. Sitting on the hearth were two large glass cookie jars, one with an attached note that said “For Molly” the other with an identical note that said “For Albus.”

Tracing a complex pattern in the air, Molly’s wand gave off an off-colour light that leapt from the tip of the wand to the two glass jars. They both glowed for a moment, showing a sickly orange hue on the surface of the glass and then that light failed, leaving two very ordinary glass jars on

her hearth. Beyond the obligatory unbreakable charm on the glass, there was nothing magical about the packages; they were as safe as anything at the Burrow ever was safe. She hoisted them under her arms and took them back to the kitchen table for further investigation.

In the proper light of the kitchen she could appreciate the details of the jars which were sealed with glass stoppers like apothecary jars, but had a multicoloured ribbons tied into bows around their necks, as if they were Christmas presents. An envelope was tied to each ribbon, one displaying her own name, the other that of Albus Dumbledore. The handwriting looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. She carefully untied the ribbon on her own jar and opened the envelope.

Dear Molly,

Abelard is off again to the Pacific Rim for a series of client meetings, which means that I've lots to do and no time to do it. He asked that I send you these jars, one for you and one for Harry's headmaster. Mum told me that you were most fond of the dried fruit mixture in your jar. In case your memory needs jogging, it's a combination of Red Flame raisins, Golden Muscat raisins and dried cherries. I enjoy using this combination to spice various baked goods and desserts, but Mum distinctly recollects that you would eat this mixture straight out of the bin. Enjoy. Also enclosed is a new knob for Harry's Passbox and two letters that Abelard dictated to me before he went into his study. The knob is to be installed on the top of Harry's Passbox; once it is properly sealed, it will make the necessary modifications to the box. The letters are essentially duplicates as far as their substance. Among the various ailments besieging Abelard, his arthritis bothers him the most. The medicines that are effective for treating his joints also dulls his Vision. He prefers to suffer and complain rather than treat the symptoms and force his retirement. As he believes that letters must be handwritten, you will find them handwritten, in my hand. In addition to factotum and bodyguard, I am now Abelard's amenuis. As this is not quite business correspondence, I've taken the liberty to add my own comments in parenthesis from time to time. I only do this because you are almost family.

Fondest regards,

Jasmine Kadakia, JGS

My Dearest Molly,

My life of late has been rather dreary. This spring I'd begun to consider retirement again, winding up my worldly affairs and living with the Greyfriars as an Oblate, but by summer, Dumbledore and duty called once again. I found, however, that rather than being an odious task, I've had the pleasure to have a student under my roof once again. That pleasure was compounded when I was able to see you again, and then compounded beyond measure when your daughter came to be a student at my house, albeit for a short duration. As you know, I've never known the blessings of marriage and family, but I could not be more proud of Harry or Ginny if they were my own offspring.

When I proposed to engage the Snow Dragons to secure a means of protection for Harry, I did not

foresee that your or yours would be crossing my path again this late in life. Any sort of divination is foolishness when the magic of the Snow Dragons is introduced into the equation, so I don't feel all that bad at being caught by surprise. I have not attempted to foresee the future for either Harry or Ginny, given the fact that each now a powerful bit of dragon magic about them and both have ties to the Man of Darkness, any attempt to have a reliable vision, much less a decent interpretation of it, would be unlikely to succeed.

That being said, I can tell you a bit of what to expect with Harry and Ginny given my knowledge of them as people and my knowledge of the way of the Snow Dragons. Ordinarily, I would be reluctant to discuss affairs of the heart, especially the hearts of others, but I believe that it is important that the adults who are responsible for Harry and Ginny while they are still in their minority know as much as possible of the context of their lives. They are truly bonded now – what exactly that will entail remains to be seen, but it is more than infatuation at work. Harry *is* infatuated with Ginny, however, which is a good thing at this point. Among the Snow Dragons there is an odd, at least from a human perspective, distinction between intimacy and sexuality, which will flavour Harry and Ginny's relationship. The Snow Dragons are most loving and affectionate. Bonded pairs will spend a great deal of time grooming one another throughout the day as part of their normal routine, but mating behaviour is undertaken only when necessary to replenish the numbers of the clan and sept. While Harry and Ginny have the normal complement of drives and desires common to our kind, I do not believe that their bond will drive them to premature intimacy. In fact, I believe that the opposite will be true. As they grow to understand and appreciate their bond, they will live in the security that they have found their life mate. Much of this is educated guesswork on my part, but thus far, my predictions as to the peculiar effects of this magic have been correct.

Now for the odd news: involuntary separation, say longer than a week in duration, will be most injurious to them now that they are bonded. Prolonged separation will make them both physically ill. This will not be an issue in the short term while they are both at school, but you, Arthur, Remus and Albus should make plans to accommodate this new facet of Harry and Ginny's life by the time the next summer holiday occurs. Likewise, the year that Ginny will be in school after Harry finishes will present unique problems and opportunities. Among the Snow Dragons the usual remedy for this malady is mating. The sickness that comes from separating bonded pairs is resolved by their physical coupling. (You can't believe how embarrassed he was to dictate that to me. -- JK) I predict an early marriage if the situation with Harry's adversary can be resolved.

Now, on to more mundane topics: at the beginning of the summer I placed Harry under the mildest of apprentice pledges, which invoked a peculiar magic that accelerated his learning. I have assessed his proficiency in a number of areas as of the end of the summer. In Charms and Defence, he is performing well in excess of the N.E.W.T. level. I expect that he will have a banner year in those subjects in the coming year, provided that he is not too bored in class to apply himself. His performance in Potions is adequate for N.E.W.T. level study. He has some difficulty with Transfiguration concepts beyond the O.W.L. level. In light of his unexpected transfiguration into Dragon form at Gringotts, Minerva McGonagall tested his aptitude for Animagus transfiguration. To my surprise, Harry tested negative in this area. As you well know, Ginny tested positive in this area before the summer began and will be taking private tutoring from Ms.

McGonagall this fall to supplement her other coursework. Given her aptitude in that area of study, I suggest that you look for a good litter box before she returns for the Christmas Holiday, as her Animagus form is that of a Red Tabby cat.

Harry and Ginny both show aptitude in Farsight and Foresight; Harry is amazingly adept at the former and spotty at the latter. The power is there, but the control is lacking. With Ginny, it is the reverse: her ability at Farsight is rudimentary, limited in distance and the amount of time she can perform that particular magical task; her aptitude with Foresight is nothing short of phenomenal. My major regret at this point is that I'm not 50 years old, rather than a multiple of that number. Ginny performed admirably under Jasmine's tutelage (I'll say she did, she was an amazingly fast learner and quite motivated - JK), learning Apparation, a broad variety of wandless magic and basic fundamentals of armed and unarmed combat (she is particularly skilful with a knife, a most ladylike skill - JK). In the very likely event that I am not alive by the time Ginny finishes school, (ignore this last point, Abelard always believes that he is at death's door - JK) I am making arrangements for a proper education for her, should she desire to learn how to harness the gifts that are so strong within her.

Occlumency and Legilimency are difficult subjects to assess (I am not proud of the ways that I tested Harry's Occlumency - JK) but both Harry and Ginny have mastered the fundamentals of Occlumency beyond the point where I can be of any assistance, and will grow in their abilities in Legilimency as they have opportunity to practice and apply that skill. They will find, however, that developing these gifts has its drawbacks. The Legilimency employed by the Snow Dragons is somewhat different than that normally employed by magical mankind. They will be uncomfortable in situations where they must be in the presence of a large number of human magical minds. (Harry mentioned to me that he's already experienced this at his birthday party - he ran his Occlumency shield for most of the evening - JK) Normal classes will be unobjectionable, but double classes and large assemblies, say the normal mealtime in the Great Hall, will put both of them on edge as they progress. Their Head of House should give some consideration to allowing them to take some of their meals in private.

It was a delight to see you again after all these years, Molly. I know your Christmas break will be full, but schedule permitting, I would be honoured to have you and your extended family visit me at my villa on New Year's day. If this is acceptable to you and yours, send word through Remus; he always knows how to get to me, or through Harry, once his Passbox is activated to include an Abelard door.

Very truly yours,

Abelard

Well, Molly thought to herself, putting the letter down in her lap. *Abelard has certainly not lost his knack for saying things that I never expected*. She pulled the lid off of her jar and grabbed a handful of the dried fruit, a broad smile breaking across her face as she chewed thoughtfully on the mixture. *Ah, bliss*. She tucked the letter into her apron pocket, holding the Passbox knob and screw in her hand. She'd run the knob upstairs and begin working on dinner.

To her surprise, she heard music coming from Percy's room. Pushing the door open gingerly, she saw Harry's clothes and belongings stacked in piles across every horizontal surface in the room as Ginny moved about the room, singing to the pop tune coming from Harry's Muggle music box.

"What are you doing, Ginny?" Molly asked.

"What, Mum?" Ginny replied; a bit startled at first.

"Turn down the music, young lady! Thank you. Now, what are you doing?" she asked, suddenly annoyed.

"Packing Harry's things," Ginny replied innocently.

Molly sputtered. "These are his things, his *private* things, does he know that you're doing this?" she asked.

"No," Ginny replied. "What's the problem, Mum? If I don't do this, Harry will have to be up all night packing, as he's probably going to church tomorrow before the Hogwarts Express takes off at Noon. If he's up all night packing, I'm not going to have any time with him. Besides, secrets take on a whole different meaning when you can read someone's mind, Mum," Ginny explained. She was a bit surprised when her mother enveloped her in a hug.

"What was that about?" Ginny asked when her Mum released her.

Molly took a deep breath and then sighed. "I'd always hoped that Harry would see in you what I see in you. Then I came to understand how truly wretched his life has been, and I thought that he would never love anyone. After that I came to understand his destiny; *that's* when he finally expressed an interest in my daughter," she said wistfully.

"Is this kinda like 'be careful what you wish for, you might just get it'?" Ginny asked.

"Something like that, I'm sure," Molly replied. She pulled the letter from her pocket. "A report card from your summer tutor," she said. Casting an experienced eye at the stacks of belongings, she pulled out her wand, tapping the piles and pointing at the open trunk. The clothing rolled itself into tight rolls and flew into the trunk, packing themselves in neat, orderly rows.

"Oh, Mum," Ginny said, looking up from the letter, "show me that charm, please," she asked.

"You won't be able to use it before you're of age, Missy," Molly replied.

"Unless I do it wandlessly," Ginny replied with a grin.

Molly attempted to maintain her stern face, but broke into a fit of giggles. "Unless you do it wandlessly, of course," she said, launching into an impromptu lecture on the theory and technique of the packing charm. After that she stood silently while Ginny finished the letter.

"Is that accurate?" Molly asked.

“Pretty much. I don’t know about the getting sick part, but as to the rest of it, yeah, it’s accurate,” Ginny said, leaning up against the bookshelf, her fingers playing idly with the music box handle.

Molly placed the knob carefully on top of Harry’s Passbox. “Remind me to tell Harry he’s getting a new door on his box,” Molly said. “Up for some quality time with your Mum?” she asked.

“Would that quality time happen to involve making dinner and discussing what Abelard thinks about my as-of-yet-theoretical love life?” Ginny replied.

“Might,” Molly said with a wink.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Ginny said, turning off the music box.

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Dinner was lasagne, green beans and yeast rolls with some sort of crisp for pudding. Ginny was dividing the dough for the rolls into small balls and then dipping it in the wash (raw egg and water) before carefully placing the gooey balls into the greased pan. When Molly usually made this recipe (which she could turn out in her sleep) it made six pans of rolls. Tonight they were making just two pans. Ginny paused as she put another roll in the pan, closing her eyes briefly, a beatific smile passing across her face. “He’s coming home now, Mum,” she said before she returned to dividing the dough.

Molly closed the oven door, breaking into a smile as she rubbed her hands on her apron. The lasagne was done, the crisp was cooking, and everything was as it should be for an early dinner. Arthur was in the shed, trying to figure out the mystery of the inner works of a Muggle baby monitor that he’d acquired after work. Ron was down the road at the Waldron’s farm, performing his last afternoon of labour for the Muggle family. Hermione, oddly enough, was not reading, or knitting, or studying or engaged in any of her normal pursuits, but instead was visiting Luna Lovegood in the village, a task she approached with some trepidation, given the odd nature of their quasi-friendship.

Harry Apparated into the kitchen with the quietest of pops, carrying the leather bag that he’d used last on his birthday. “Hi, Mrs. Weasley. Hey, Ginny,” he said, taking a great sniff of the cooking smells filling the kitchen. “Lasagne? Smells great,” he said while awkwardly holding his bag with one hand, stepping forward and wrapping the other around Ginny’s waist.

“Harry dear,” Molly said pleasantly, “the ceiling would not collapse if I saw you give my daughter a kiss.”

“No?” he asked.

“No,” Ginny replied vehemently, “it wouldn’t.” This sparked a startled look from her mum.

Harry turned to face Ginny. He held up his hand which was soon met by Ginny’s smaller hand. The two teenagers closed their eyes simultaneously as their bond flared into action across this

connection. Ginny shuddered momentarily and then opened her eyes, a wan smile coming to her lips. Harry bent down and placed the most gentle of kisses on her cheek before he broke the connection and wordlessly left the kitchen. Ginny rolled her eyes.

“Bad aim?” Molly asked.

“More like a failure of nerve,” she replied.

“I can finish up the rolls, Ginny. I think you’re done here,” Molly said.

“Thanks, Mum,” Ginny replied, wiping the flour off of her hands before taking her own apron off. She walked with dignity out of the kitchen before scrambling up the stairs at full speed. When she got to Harry’s room (in her mind it would never be Percy’s room again) she found him sitting on the bed, looking at his now stripped and packed room.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You got packed,” she replied.

“I can see that,” he said.

“Did I do the wrong thing, Harry?” Ginny asked, suddenly unsure whether or not this was a good idea.

“No, it’s just that, well, other than Tonks, I’ve never had anyone do something like that for me before,” he said, an odd twitching about his mouth. “So, anyway, how’s your scar?” he said, pulling himself straight.

“Isn’t that what other people are supposed to ask you?” she parried.

“Yeah, kinda nice to be able to ask someone else that question,” he said, catching her eyes with his own.

“It’s the colour of a new pair of jeans, dark blue, like the dragon who marked me,” she said in a low, almost sultry voice.

“Well done.”

“Yeah, it means that I’ll probably not nod off to sleep after dinner tonight,” she said, her voice back in its normal register as she gingerly sat down on the bed beside him.

“Which means, in turn, that I might actually be able to get some sleep tonight. I’ve almost got to the point that I’m willing to read *Hogwarts, a History*,” he said with a smirk.

“Oh no, not that,” she said dramatically. “So how did it go?”

“I showed you, back in the kitchen,” he said.

“Harry, that was just images and snippets of emotion. I want you to *tell* me,” she said.

“First stop was the solicitor’s office – I got into a row with Uncle Moony. I wanted to change my will. After a long song and dance, he agreed with me, which was convenient. He’s my guardian and he had to approve the changes in my will, as I can’t sign it myself, because I’m underage. He ended up changing his own will on the spot, which drug things out a bit longer than I expected. Then on to Gringotts to pick up some money bags from my vault. It seems that some ditzy girl left her money in my vault this week and never came back to retrieve it. Then off to Diagon Alley to do some last minute shopping, including a purchase for said girl, then a quick bite to eat, then off to spend a couple of hours chatting with Fr. Martin, then home again,” he said without stopping to pause or take a breath.

“I’ve never seen you do that before,” she said.

“Do what?”

“Talk for a paragraph without taking a breath – I thought only Hermione and I did that,” she said. “You never gave me a chance to interrupt.”

“How rude of me, I’m sorry,” he said semi-seriously.

“What was the row about?” she asked.

“I wanted to change my will,” he answered, as if that were the end of the story.

“Do I have to drag it all out of you one question at a time, dear boy?” she asked.

Harry sighed. “I’m not used to this openness thing, Ginny. It’s hard.” He ran his fingers through his hair before continuing. “I changed my will, so if I die before you do, you inherit everything – it’s the only way that I can provide for you financially, as Wizarding law doesn’t recognize marking as conferring any change in legal status. Don’t look at me like that, I’m not planning on dying anytime soon, but I’ve got to prepare for all eventualities. Moony didn’t understand at first, and by the time we finished our row, he’d talked himself into doing the same thing to make sure that whatever he inherited from Sirius went to Tonks, rather than reverting to the Black Trust. You heard about their engagement?”

Ginny nodded. “All the best things happen when I’ve been asleep recently,” she whinged.

“Yeah, right. Regular drama festival we put on while sweet Ginny is napping,” he said. “Ow! You don’t have to hit me!” he said, rubbing his arm.

“You deserved it,” she said. “Go on.”

“I got Hermione a Dyson’s bag – I’m not sure whether to give it to her now or make her wait until Christmas. Then, on a whim, I picked up a jersey for you from a speciality shop. I hope it’s the right size. I’m rubbish at guessing sizes for anyone other than myself,” he said, running his fingers through his hair. Opening his own Dyson’s bag he pulled out a bulging money bag and

placed it carefully onto her lap. “Here’s Ginny’s Galleons,” he said softly.

“Where’s Ginny’s present?” she asked.

“Oh, we’d like a present now, would we?”

“Give me my present, Harry,” she said, clenching her teeth a bit to look fierce. Harry ran his fingers over the back of her hand, deflating the faux anger. “I don’t know whether or not I should hate it that you can do that to me, you know.”

Harry pulled a brightly coloured bag from the satchel, plopping it on top of the money bag. “Impressive wrapping job, eh?”

“You’re a bloke, I expect that,” she said, pulling a petite rugby style jersey from the bag. It was dark green in colour, with an outline of a blue dragon stitched on the back. Turning the jersey over, he tapped it with his finger, causing letters to appear on the front. “What’s G-O-T-B-W-L spell?” she asked. Her nose wrinkled as she tried various combinations.

“As an acronym, it would be pronounced Gotbool, the w serving as an ōō sounding vowel,” he said.

“What’s it stand for?” she asked, her eyes bright.

“Girl-of-the-boy-who-lived,” he said with a small smile.

“Oh, Harry, I love it,” she said, moving onto his lap to hug him.

“If I’d known you’d like it this much, I would have bought a variety of colours,” he said with a broad smile.

“It’s not the shirt, silly, it’s knowing that you were thinking of me, of *us*, thinking of *us* having a future,” she said.

“I told you already, I’m not ashamed of you,”

“So why wouldn’t you kiss me in front of Mum?”

“I dunno,” he replied truthfully. “I guess in part it’s because you’ve wanted things to be private, and I just didn’t want an audience for the first time we, uh, you know, kiss. The rest of it is digging my heels in when someone’s mum is needling me. I didn’t care for it when Monica was doing it any more than now when your mum is doing it.”

“That’s fair,” she replied.

“I did pick up some lip balm while I was out. I hear the weather in Scotland is supposed to be murder on the lips this year,” he said with a deadpan expression.

“One wouldn’t want to have chapped lips now,” Ginny said in a friendly tone.

“Oh no, never,” he replied.

“So how did it go with Fr. Martin?” she asked, moving off of his lap to the other side of the bed so she could watch his face as he talked.

“It went well. I made my first confession, which was a milestone, I guess,” he said.

“Did you have to go into a little closet and talk through a screen?” she asked seriously.

“Nah, I’m not much for cupboards,” he said seriously. “We talked in his office. He was trying to argue with me about whether or not killing the Death Eaters was a sin or not,” he said, his eyes flickering to the ground.

“It wasn’t - they needed killing,” Ginny said vehemently.

“Yeah, we discussed that too,” he said somberly. “He finally agreed with me that it was a serious thing. We prayed together. I don’t know why, but I feel a lot better now. I guess it worked,” he said. “He wants me to get confirmed.”

“Remus wants to go to church; Fr. Martin wants you to get confirmed. What do *you* want, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“I want to get confirmed too,” he said.

“Why? Help me understand, because I’m without a clue here,” she said.

“I was baptized as an infant, based on my parents’ faith. Being confirmed means that it’s my faith now too, not just a decision made by a couple of lovely dead people sixteen years ago,” he explained.

“Then you could take communion, I suppose,” she observed.

“Yeah, there’s that aspect too,” he sighed. “Uncle Moony says that there are ways to go to church at Hogwarts, but he’s trying to figure out how it will work nowadays.”

“Let me know what you find out, okay?”

“Sure.”

They both sat a little straighter when they felt the gossamer ward snap.

“Are you two decent?” they heard Ron call up the stairwell.

“Pretty decent, why? Another bet with Hermione?” Harry called back.

Ron harrumphed, but didn't respond to the bait. "It's dinner time, wash up and come to the table," he called up the stairs.

"Thanks, Ron," Ginny called.

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Dinner was typical of Weasley events; casual and chaotic. Arthur peppered Harry and Hermione with questions about baby monitors. Hermione regaled them with stories from her visit with Luna, while Ron pretty much said nothing while shovelling in lasagne and rolls. Harry and Ginny watched the banter at the table, joining in from time to time. Halfway through dinner Harry captured Ginny's free hand from across the table; he spent the remainder of dinner eating with his left hand. Arthur exchanged a knowing glance with Molly before their meal was interrupted by a Floo call from the Twins, who had to ask Molly how to remove a particularly steadfast stain caused by one of their more obscure potion ingredients. Pudding was served after she returned to the table.

"Wonderful meal, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said sincerely. "Can I help wash up?"

"No, Harry dear," Molly replied. "I think that it's Ron's turn to wash up with Hermione," she replied.

"I could sell tickets to that," Harry said under his breath to Ginny as they walked into the parlour.

"What?" she asked innocently.

"Ron and Hermione in a bath tub, washing up," he replied.

"Oh, you!" she squealed, smacking him with a couch pillow. "You are such a *boy* sometimes."

"Harry dear," Molly called, interrupting his rebuttal to Ginny.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley?" Harry answered.

"Abelard sent a package that he wants delivered to Dumbledore. I was wondering if you could take it to Hogwarts in your satchel," she asked.

"Sure thing," he replied.

"He also sent me a letter with a knob for your Passbox. Perhaps Ginny could help you seal it tonight," she called over her shoulder after she deposited the glass jar of cookies in front of Harry.

"Sure, Mum," she replied sweetly.

"Do you get the feeling that you're being sent to my room?" he asked once they made it up the stairs.

“Yeah, funny thing is that when I was growing up, that was the standard punishment – ‘Ginny, go to your room, and no reading’” she said in a fair replica of Molly’s angriest voice, arms akimbo, hands on hips. “I don’t think this is punishment, though. If it was, I’d have to figure out what I did so I could do it again. ‘Ginny, go to Harry’s room and don’t come back until morning,’” she said, which set them both off on a laughing jag.

The Passbox was empty except for the Weasley door, which was lit. Harry opened the door, extracting the letter from Abelard. Using his knife as a screwdriver, he affixed the knob to the top of the box, the only flat surface other than the bottom of the box that didn’t already have a door. Nothing happened.

“I guess we have to seal it,” Harry said.

“You read the letter and I’ll get a pin from my room,” Ginny said.

“What, aren’t you carrying a knife?” Harry asked.

Ginny smiled sweetly. “Of course I’m carrying a knife, but we don’t need *that* much blood,” she said before she ducked out the door.

Harry opened the folded letter, hearing Abelard’s precise, albeit wheezy diction in the cadences of the letter. When he looked up, he saw Ginny watching him from the doorway, pin in one hand, wand in the other.

“You never told me,” he said.

“Told you what?” she asked.

“That you’re an Animagus,” he replied.

“I’m not an Animagus, not yet at least,” she said quietly. “Last term, just before Holiday, Professor McGonagall tested a few of the, uh, better students in her fourth year Transfiguration class. The ones who tested positive were invited to take special tutoring from her starting next term. I suppose I should have told you, but it never worked its way into the conversations we’ve had this summer. Sometime this fall, though, you’re going to have to pick up a litter box,” she said, suppressing a smile.

“What?” he asked.

“Harry Potter’s going to need a litter box for the adorable stray cat he’s going to befriend in Hogsmeade that’s going to start sleeping on his bed at night,” she said in the tone one uses for explaining things to not particularly bright children.

“Oh,” he said, understanding appearing in his face. “Oh my.”

“Do the Hopkirk Suppression charm while you’re entertaining those naughty fantasies,” she commanded. “I said ‘sleeping’ as in cat-nap, not ‘nights of wild debauchery.’”

“Right,” he said, weaving the complicated charm that protected them from the sensors of the Underage Magic Office. When that was completed, Ginny began to trace a pattern of runes on the knob on the top of Harry’s Passbox. The knob flared with a blue-white light for an instant and then returned to its usual colour. Ginny then looked over Harry’s hands, deciding upon the ring finger of his left hand. With a brief murmur she cleansed his hand with the Aseptico charm and then pricked the pad of his finger, squeezing the tip until a bright red drop of blood appeared.

“You know what to do,” she said, nodding at the box.

Harry nodded, turning his hand over carefully to wipe the drop of blood off onto the knob. The knob absorbed the blood and then began to pulse with a soft blue light. A spot of light appeared on the box, cutting a line. The light lingered for a moment while hinges appeared on the line, then the spot of light cut three more lines, duplicating the doors on the other facets of the box. The knob continued to pulse until the box disappeared with a flash of light and then reappeared again.

“What was that?” Harry asked.

“Hermione says that’s what happens when the box clones itself,” Ginny answered.

“Clowns?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, that’s what she said,” Ginny replied.

“I think she said ‘clones’ not ‘clowns’,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“Whatever – the box makes a copy of itself wherever the companion to the knob is located – presumably somewhere at Abelard’s villa,” she said.

“Hey,” Harry said, looking out the window. “Seeing as I don’t have to spend the evening packing, care for a walk? Once the sun goes down, we should be able to see the stars nicely.”

Ginny grinned. “Sweet, simple, silly boy. Why do you think I packed up all your belongings? How about a fly in the orchard until dark and then go for a walk? I left your jacket and broom in the wardrobe.”

Not for the first time this summer, Harry felt slightly outmanoeuvred, but as it was the last day of the holiday, he didn’t mind. “It’s a deal,” he said, pulling his jacket and broom from the wardrobe.

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The flying was brilliant. Over the past few weeks, Ginny had learned how to harness the power and agility of her new broom. They flew until dark, playing tag; follow the leader and taking turns doing Chaser/Keeper drills. Ginny was able to score three of four attempts when Harry was playing Keeper. Harry was certain that Ron could do a better job, but Ron was in the kitchen, with Hermione, making cinnamon buns for tomorrow’s breakfast. After the sun went down, they flew for a while in the dark. Harry spent a bit of time showing Ginny the finer points of using Farsight

for night flying, which she mastered on the second go-through.

“It’s time for that walk,” Ginny said, balancing her broom on her shoulder while catching Harry’s hand. There was a magic in feeling his warmth loom near, feeling his fingers twined through hers. They weren’t in any particular hurry. The spot by the river was indeed brilliant for stargazing. Harry found a perch on a large rock, leaning back to watch the stars. Ginny sat between his legs, leaning against his chest. She lowered her shield to naught, finding with some surprise that Harry’s shield was already completely down.

You’re troubled, she thought.

Yeah, he replied, answering her thought with his own. *There’s a part of the prophecy that I never understood until now: ‘neither can live while the other survives.’*

How’s that? She thought back, trying to still her own thoughts and feelings.

He’s out there, somewhere. I’ve got to stop him; I’ve got to kill him. Until I do that, my life is on hold. I’m alive, but I’m not living to the fullest. I didn’t understand that in June, but now I do, he thought.

“So what changed?” she asked aloud.

“Having something to live for, I guess,” he replied.

“And that would be?” she asked.

“Uh, Quidditch, definitely Quidditch. Ow! That hurt!” he exclaimed, rubbing his ribs.

“Serves you right,” she said, grinning a Cheshire grin. “What do you say we go in and check on the lovebirds in the kitchen? The cinnamon buns may be done by now and if we look pathetic enough, they might give us one or two.”

“Sounds like a plan. Walk or fly?” he asked.

“Walk, I’m in no hurry.”

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The buns were cooling on a rack when they returned to The Burrow. After much wheedling and begging, Hermione relented and they each had a warm bun with the beverage of their choice: Hermione and Harry had theirs with milk, Ron and Ginny drank pumpkin juice. Ron challenged Harry to what he called the final chess match of the month. Harry accepted.

“Not to sound disloyal or anything, but I’m going to bed,” Ginny announced. “Some things are inevitable.” She caught Harry’s hand as she rose to leave the kitchen, thinking across their bond, *Love you, make sure I’m up for church, ok?*

Harry squeezed her hand, nodding his head. Ron set up the chessboard and they played fervently for the first two games. Harry lost the first game and won the second. Ron set up the chessboard for the third round, pausing before he placed the last pawn on the board.

“Harry, you’re going to face him soon, you know. It might be this year, maybe next year at the latest,” Ron said. They both knew who he meant when Ron said ‘him.’

“Yeah, I think of that from time to time,” Harry replied drolly.

“I know that you’d die for Ginny,” Ron said sombrely.

“Yeah, I would, in a heartbeat,” Harry said.

“I don’t want you to do that,” Ron said. “If she lives and you don’t, I don’t know that I could stand that. Do him before he does you and get out with all your friends.”

“What if I can’t do both?” he asked.

“Then do him and let your friends clean up behind you,” Ron said as if he were planning his class schedule. “You know we’re not going to let you go alone,” he said.

“Yeah, I know. I’m not wild about that, but short of putting you all in the hospital, I don’t think there’s much point in trying to keep you all out of it,” Harry said, fiddling with his pawn. “Is there any point to this third game? You’re just going to smash me again.”

“It’s good for your humility,” Ron said.

“Yeah, right,” Harry said, tipping his king over as Ron put his last pawn in place.

The king took off his crown, waving it to Harry. “Thank you good sir, I didn’t fancy another bruising battle with that beast,” he said, pointing to the other side of the board.

Harry grinned. “Goodnight, Ron.”

“G’night, Harry – see you in the morning.

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Harry and Ginny left early in the morning for the first service at St. Simons with Tonks and Lupin. Upon their return, the Burrow was relatively quiet. Ron was in the kitchen, drinking coffee, eating a cinnamon bun.

“Hermione Flooed home with her stuff. After Mum finishes fussing at you about eating breakfast, we’re going to Floo to the safe house and then take a taxi or something to King’s Cross,” Ron said after washing down his bite of bun with a swig of coffee.

They ate a hurried second breakfast and then lugged their trunks to the fireplace. Molly appeared

and after a round of crushing hugs, she unzipped Harry's Dyson bag and stuffed a picnic hamper into the larger-on-the-inside-than-the-outside bag. "There, now I know that Ron won't starve on the ride up to school," she said with a wink.

Tonks went into the Floo first, followed by Ron, Ginny, Harry and last of all, Remus Lupin. "I'll be back at dinnertime, Molly," he called as his heels disappeared into the flames.

The taxi at the safe house was actually a large passenger van with tinted windows. "I wanted the limousine," Tonks said, changing herself for a moment into a matronly figure with pearls and furs, "but this was all that they had left in the Ministry motorpool," she said with a smile, transforming herself back into her customary jeans and t-shirt, complete with frosted spiked hair.

The ride to King's Cross was uneventful and silent, a rarity for travel with the Weasleys, but as Fred and George were not part of the entourage, it was not all that surprising. Harry spotted a number of Aurors in the crowd on the Muggle side of the platform, and even more Aurors on the magical side after they'd crossed the barrier. He found a compartment in the train and claimed it, with Ginny, for Ron and Hermione who went off to "set up" for the prefect's meeting.

"Do you really think that they have anything to prepare?" Ginny asked?

"Nah, lip gloss research maybe," Harry said, not bothering to suppress the snigger that came with that thought. Ginny snuggled into him on the bench, and shortly after the train began moving, was asleep, using his lap as a pillow.

Daphne Greengrass opened the door to their compartment, sticking her head in.

"Have either of you seen Malfoy?" she asked. "The prefect's meeting is about to start and I can't find him anywhere."

Harry coughed. "Uh, you might find him stuck to the outside of the train, next to the baggage car," he said, stifling a grin.

"Your handiwork?" she asked.

Harry nodded at the sleeping form beside him. "No, hers," he replied.

"Urgh, I'm not going to have to clean those bogey things off of him, am I?" she asked.

"Not this time, but you will find that he doesn't have eyebrows any more," he said.

"What happened?" Daphne asked pleasantly.

"He got singed," Harry said, not willing to elaborate that the fireworks were from Tk'lch who apparently had had enough of Draco after he had insulted Ginny and tried to trip her as they passed in the narrow aisle outside their compartment.

Daphne closed the door carefully.

Harry opened the Dyson's bag with one hand, extracting an advanced Defence book that Tonks had given him on the ride to King's Cross. Some of the stuff in the first chapter looked very promising for the upcoming Defence Association syllabus, which he'd thought about a lot, but had never reduced to writing. He soon was lost in his reading, absentmindedly stroking Ginny's hair from time to time as she stirred. He looked up when the door opened again. It was Cho.

"So it's true," she said, stepping halfway into the compartment.

"What's true?" he asked.

"That the position of Harry's girlfriend has been filled," Cho answered.

Harry smiled. "Yeah, looks like it," he answered.

"I still want to talk to you," she said. "Breakfast, tomorrow?"

"I'll be there," Harry said.

"Harry?" Cho asked.

"Yeah?"

"Great choice. Take care of her," Cho said, ducking back into the hallway and closing the door before he could reply.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll do my best."

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Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com - write to me, I write back.

Author's Note: For those lacking an English-Parseltongue/Parseltongue-English dictionary, the following notes are provided (pronunciations are approximated) :

"Lk'shs shashimo" (lock-sheesh sha-she-mo) is a formal declaration that translates into – "you are mine, I have chosen you."

The formal reply is "Lk'shn shashin," (lock-shane sha-sheen) which translates as "I am yours, you have chosen me."

"Ek'tch g'bh," (ech-tock goo-buy) is an imperative statement, "While you live, there shall be no other."

It's not a bonding ritual per se, but the words reflect and shape the reality within. The marking and the words together set off a very power series of changes within the magical makeup of the

dragons.

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Well, it's been a long, and at times, wild ride. Thanks to Imogen who believed in me and my story when it got selected at the late, lamented Gryffindor Tower, and to Aibhinn, who suffered through being my Beta, collaborator and firewoman extraordinaire, putting out fires that I ignited from time to time and place to place. Thanks to Mmusings and Felina, for duties official and unofficial, to Mr. Intel, Full Pensieve and AMulder, for the criticism, attention and feedback on all the iterations.

I will not be writing a year 6 story. It's taken me nearly two years to write a summer story, topping out in excess of 200,000 words. I may write other stories, some of which will touch down in Harry's 6th year, but for now, the story is done and I'm going to pay attention to things that I've more or less ignored during this time. <update - the sequel to this story, Stories from Sixth Year, is currently archived exclusively at PhoenixSong.net>

Please be advised that I've never asked for reviews, and I don't intend to answer any more reviews left without a contact e-mail – life is short, and this is merely a hobby for me, not a cause. I've joked that I can talk endlessly about Ginny's breasts, but heavens forbid that I show my characters going to church or praying or thinking about God. Apparently there's more truth to that gibe than I thought.

I hope you've enjoyed my little story. It's been a pleasure to write. And now, in closing, a verse from Larry Norman's "Song for a Circle of Friends"

...and if this song does not make sense to you,

I hope His Spirit slips on through,

He loves you.