

The Power of the Press

Chapter 1 - The Goblet of Fire

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx walked onto the stage and smiled at the audience. The audience, enmass, breathed a sigh of relief to note she was llama free.

“Hello and welcome to the beginning of a story multi-chaptered story arc. This is going to be a different type of story from our usual fare and we hope you enjoy it. As usual, we make no claim to any rights for Harry Potter or that person that did such an awful job on the last two books. She owns the rights and the blame.”

Alyx paused and waited expectantly, but nothing happened. Getting nervous at the sea of unfriendly faces calmly eating donuts meant for Bob, she started to hum, badly and off key.

The silence went on for another few minutes, then Bob walked onto the stage. He glared at the audience for eating his donuts and frowned at Alyx.

“Have you said the words?” he asked.

“Yes, but nothing happened!” she protested.

Bob scowled. “The story should have started then. Are you sure you plugged it in?”

Alyx looked at him in confusion.

Bob sighed and walked over to a wall outlet and plugged the story in. “Take away her Llama and look what happens,” he muttered. “And to think I bought her an Emu to replace the llama.”

The stage lights dimmed and Bob hurried to his seat. From the stage he could hear Alyx shrieking. She found her Emu!

The Power of the Press

Hogwarts Great Hall, October 1994...

Harry sat silently, watching the proceedings. He had been waiting for this moment since the start of term. Sirius and Remus had warned him about it and he hoped he was prepared. Sirius had come to him during the summer and had revealed some disturbing truths.

He saw the fourth piece of paper shoot out of the goblet and he hung his head. Sirius and Remus had been right after all. In a flash of flames, his hopes and dreams faded to a reality that he hadn't wanted to face.

It had all begun just two weeks into the summer holiday.

Harry leafed through the parchments for a second time and his hands trembled with the magnitude of what he had just learned. He looked up at Sirius with haunted eyes. “So, what do I do now, Sirius? You're still wanted by the Ministry and Remus can't take me. Even if he could, it's plain that the old man won't allow it.”

He had met Sirius and Remus in the park near Privet Drive and were now seated on a bench.

He held several items in his hands. The first was his parents will, which included a copy of the prophecy, and surprisingly, a transcript of a conversation between Dumbledore and Snape. In the transcript, Dumbledore instructed Snape to be even harder on Harry in the coming year.

Dumbledore then went on to explain about the tournament and how he hoped to arrange for Harry to participate in it, despite the Ministry's age requirements.

Sirius leaned in a little closer. “Harry, before I go any further, I need to know if you trust me.”

Harry nodded. Sirius was the closest thing he had to a father and Harry had already defied the Ministry in rescuing him from a dementor's kiss. At this point, Harry was desperate. The old man had played him for a fool and he had believed it.

“Yes, I trust you. But how did you get this transcript? How do you know it's real?” Harry asked. He had to make sure, he had to know.

“Ah, that was my doing,” Remus admitted. “I left the recording parchment in a book I borrowed from Albus. When I returned it, I forgot it was there. As you can see, it kept recording.”

Sirius grinned. He sat on the bench next to Harry and placed an arm around his shoulders. He had a strange gleam in his eyes. “I have a plan,” he said grandly.

Remus shook his head. “Brace yourself. The last time he had a plan, he paid a house elf to place a repeating mirror in the seventh year girls bathroom. I thought your father was going to kill him when James caught him ogling Lily.”

"Hey, I was more interested in Bethany," Sirius protested. "I can't help it if Lily was dressing in front of the mirror at the time."

Harry rolled his eyes and elbowed Sirius in the ribs. "Your plan?" he prompted.

Sirius leaned back, his expression smug. "You're going to love this, Harry. First, we're going to..."

Now back at Hogwarts, he found that everything he'd been warned about was coming true. He waited for the inevitable with a sinking heart.

Dumbledore plucked the floating piece of parchment out of the air and a hush fell over the Great Hall. Everyone knew something unusual was happening, but only a handful knew exactly what was going on. Dumbledore would have been shocked to know that his protégé was also in on the secret.

The Headmaster glanced down at the parchment fragment then looked up, his eyes seeking one particular person. A knot of anticipation formed in his belly. This was exactly what he had been hoping would happen. Everything was going according to plan!

"Harry Potter," he called.

A gasp ran through the crowd and Hermione pushed at Harry to stand up. He turned and shot her an angry look, but she was right, he couldn't sit here all day. She was his very best friend, but she could be awful pushy sometimes. He made a note to talk to her about it someday, but this wasn't the time. Today he would follow the plan no matter how much it hurt.

This was the moment he had been dreading and hoping would never come.

"Harry Potter," Dumbledore repeated, then he motioned towards the door that the other champions had vanished behind.

Ron scowled at Harry furiously and Hermione pushed him again.

He slowly rose to his feet, his expression filled with anger. He knew this moment had been coming. It was obvious since the end of last year that it was going to happen and he had spent the summer preparing for it.

"No," he said loudly from his place.

The Great Hall went deathly silent and Dumbledore stared at Harry in shock.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, no. I did not enter my name in this contest. I refuse to compete," Harry stated flatly, his eyes flashing with anger.

Ludo Bagman stepped up to stand next to Dumbledore. "But you must! The contest is a binding magical contract."

Harry glanced at him, then turned his attention back at Dumbledore. He dismissed Bagman as unimportant. "Well?"

Dumbledore looked at him, surprised. He couldn't believe or understand why Harry was being so defiant. The boy must compete, especially after he had gone to all the trouble of weakening the wards on Moody's home in the hopes of someone taking his place.

"I'm afraid there is no choice in the matter," he said, as if he regretted the fact.

"For you perhaps, Headmaster," Harry replied softly, then he pulled out his wand and looked at it for a moment. "But there is always a choice. If I refuse to perform, the binding magic will strip me of my powers."

He looked around the hall at the sea of faces staring at him. Some were curious, most looked at him as if they didn't believe him.

He nodded to himself and slowly walked toward the podium where Dumbledore stood. All eyes followed him. Dumbledore, in particular, seemed uncertain, Harry's defiance had thrown him for a loop. The boy was supposed to be a pliable subject.

"So, you're going to insist I participate in this farce of yours?" he asked loudly, the contempt obvious in his voice.

Another gasp ran through the crowd. Snape sneered at him and McGonagall frowned at such obvious disrespect. Hermione's face paled. Harry had hinted to her that things were going to be different this year, but it was only now becoming clear what he meant.

Dumbledore smiled at him in a grandfatherly fashion. "I'm afraid you have no choice, my boy."

Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling madly and he attempted to find out what the boy was thinking. His probe, however, was soundly repelled, bouncing off rock solid shields. His inability to read Harry unsettled him. The boy had always been an open book. *Who could have taught him to protect his mind?* he wondered.

Harry smirked. He had detected Dumbledore's attempted legilimency attack and rebuffed it easily enough. He knew he couldn't withstand a determined attack, but Dumbledore would need his wand for that and he couldn't do that in front of so many witnesses. Dumbledore's actions were the final piece needed to convince Harry that Sirius and Remus were right about the man. Deep down, a part of him had hoped that Dumbledore actually cared for him.

Harry nodded to himself and turned to face the hall, his anger increasing with every passing second. "Most of you people are too stupid to

understand what's happening, so I'll explain it to you," he said loudly. "This bastard," he said, pointing at Dumbledore, "is forcing me into a contest I didn't enter and don't want to compete in. He says I have no choice.

"Each year he sets up some sort of dilemma that endangers my life and the lives of others and each year I leap through his hoops like a good little boy. No longer."

Harry turned back to Dumbledore and glared at him. The Headmaster looked nervous, and Harry smiled coldly. "You're wrong about the contest. There is always a choice, even if it's not a good one. I am not your pawn, old man."

Harry held up his wand and, in a swift motion, he snapped it in two pieces.

A gasp ran through the hall.

"I will not compete. If it means the loss of my magic, then so mote it be!" he said in a ringing voice.

A strangled gasp came from the assembled audience. It was unthinkable to voluntarily give up your magic!

Harry's body glowed for a second. When it faded, he turned, smiled, and bowed to those in the hall before tossing the pieces of his wand over his shoulder and walking out. Behind him, the pieces of the wand burned to ash on the floor.

Dumbledore stood, dumbfounded. Then a blast from behind him threw him to the floor as the Goblet of Fire exploded. Everyone ducked for cover and many screamed.

Sirius was right! Harry thought in wonder. He was just outside the Great Hall and heading for the Entrance Hall when he heard the explosion. *Remus is going to be pissed. Sirius will never let him live this down.*

He walked from the Entrance Hall out into the deepening twilight of the Scottish autumn. He fished around in a pocket until he found the small rabbit's foot key chain Remus had given him.

"Marauder's Haven," he whispered.

Harry Potter vanished from the grounds of Hogwarts as the portkey activated.

Several chaotic minutes passed in the Great Hall as people got up and brushed off the dust. Dumbledore climbed to his feet in time to see a flock of owls flying into the hall. Two owls headed directly for him.

With trembling hands he opened the envelope from Gringotts. He sagged against the podium seeing it was a summons to appear before a Gringotts court of inquiry concerning the estate of Harry James Potter. The list of charges against him was long and surprisingly complete. By the time the Goblins were done, the house of Dumbledore would be penniless and indebted to the house of Potter for centuries.

"OH MY GOD!" shouted someone, brandishing a copy of the Daily Prophet.

Dumbledore looked up to see the hall dissolving into a panic. A number of students rushed to leave the hall, running for the Owlery. Several fights broke out and there were a number of people crying. Students were babbling wildly and showing each other copies of the Prophet. With a sinking heart, he unrolled the paper the second owl had delivered. There, in large print, ran the headline;

Potter's Prophecy Secret!

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

So claims a prophecy involving Harry Potter, age 14, and You-Know-Who. This boy, who saved us once, is all that stands between our world as we know it and total destruction. When consulted, experts on prophecy believe firmly that this prophecy proves that Harry didn't kill You-Know-Who back in 1981. No, they say that had that happened, the prophecy orb which is stored in the Hall of Prophecies would have turned black, which it hasn't. And that, says the experts, means that You-Know-Who will rise once more to face Harry Potter again.

According to Otis Stillwater, a renowned Ministry expert on prophecies, this means that You-Know-Who and Harry Potter are effectively equal in ability. The real difference lies in the fact that Harry Potter is a 14 year old boy, while He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is pushing seventy years of age and is a fully trained and merciless killer.

"Prophecies like this invoke what's called a magical singularity. That means that there is a fundamental connection between Harry Potter and You-Know-Who," said Stillwater. "The two are literally connected at the magical level. What that means is if You-Know-Who were to use a ritual to enhance his abilities, Potter's abilities would also receive the same enhancement. There is no way for the two to be unequal at the magic power level."

The Prophet has examined the level of course work that Mr. Potter has been receiving at Hogwarts and we think it is woefully inadequate, considering his dark future. When asked, Minister Fudge was quoted as saying that Albus Dumbledore was in charge of young Harry's education and it would not be right for him to step in and mess with that.

However, we have to question that attitude. Our checking has shown Mr. Potter is not adequately cared for at home. He was placed, by Albus Dumbledore, with muggle relatives and when we spoke with neighbors of those relatives, they accused the Dursleys of being far less than loving

towards their nephew. In fact, in his neighborhood, young Mr. Potter is considered a dangerous criminal who attends a school for the criminally insane. We attempted to speak directly to Mr. Vernon Dursley, but he refused to be interviewed. He was belligerent and rude to our reporter, who was forced to flee in fear of her life.

So why then is Harry Potter receiving only a normal magical education when he should be trained by the best our world has to offer? Why is Harry forced to live with people that despise his very existence? These are the questions this paper intends to find out the answers to. In the meantime, Minister Fudge, for the safety of our world, we urge that steps are taken to see Mr. Potter is properly cared for!

Dumbledore let the paper slip between his numb fingers. The cat was not only out of the bag, it peed on the floor and ripped up the curtains! And to make matters worse, all his plans had gone up in smoke with a sharp snap of a wand. Potter was gone and, even if found, he would be useless to everyone now.

He looked around, surprised by angry looks directed at him.

Harry's friends sat off to one side. Hermione and Ginny were both weeping, knowing that they had lost something very important. Ron looked stunned and unable to comprehend what had just happened. He shuddered at the looks the Weasley twins were giving him.

Dumbledore swept from the room, ignoring the looks and demands for explanations. There was only one place for him to go at a time like this; his office. It was his safe haven, his sanctuary and the one place he could consider what moves to make next.

Hogwarts (the Next Day)...

Dumbledore threw the paper down on his desk in disgust. He had holed up in his office, refusing to let anyone in. He needed time to consider his options. Harry was gone, powerless and of no use to anyone.

Somehow the Goblins had learned what he had done with the Potter Estate and were moving forward with a preliminary hearing. He had been caught by the goblins dipping into the Potter family vaults, removing money and priceless antiques. In a follow up letter they sent this morning, they provided a detailed list of items to be returned to the Potter Vaults immediately.

And if that wasn't enough, Gringotts was now performing a detailed audit of all thirty orphan accounts he had seized control of during his tenure as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. *The goblins are not going to be lenient with me when the truth came out, he thought sourly. Howdid they find out in the first place?*

Black and Lupin, he thought. Both of them went missing over the summer months. I wonder if they had anything to do with this fiasco. I wouldn't put it past Black, he mused.

He was safe for the moment, locked up in his impregnable office. The only way in was via the house elves who brought in food and, of course, the morning paper, which was currently the major source of his anger.

*Boy Who Lived Loses Magic!
Dark Lord Powerless!*

In a move that staggers the mind, Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, tried to force Harry Potter into participating in the famous Triwizard Tournament. This fabled and dangerous contest had been limited by the Ministry to those 17 years of age or older. Potter, age 14, somehowfound his name being ejected by the legendary Goblet of Fire.

Witnesses said that Potter asked the Headmaster if he was going to insist on his participation and they say the Headmaster claimed there was nothing he could do. The drawing of a name from the Goblet of Fire invokes a binding magical contract with a magical loss as the penalty.

Ministry lawexperts differ on that opinion. Omar Nifflerhopper, top Ministry legal expert on binding magical contracts, told the Prophet that Dumbledore and the other school heads could have declared the contest a drawand insisted on a newname drawing. "Why the Headmaster tried to force Potter to enter the contest is a mystery to me. I went over this particular option with the Headmaster over the summer when we decided to hold the tournament," quoted Nifflerhopper.

When pressed to join the other champions, Potter questioned Dumbledore closely and publicly. When he was told that there was no other choice, he said, "You're wrong." Then he snapped his wand in front of the assembled students of three schools, Ministry dignitaries and the press. He then refused to participate, and walked from the hall. A moment later, the Goblet of Fire exploded as the magical contract governing Harry Potter terminated. A valuable magical object was forever lost thanks to the rash decision made by a man who has obviously outlived his usefulness as Headmaster of Hogwarts.

And what of young Mr. Potter? The truth is that no one knows where he has gone. He seems to have vanished. However, he is less than a squib at this point, powerless and without a wand. In fact, according to Otis Stillwater, the Ministry expert on prophecies, "Mr. Potter's loss of magic is not only complete, but he's done the same thing to You-Know-Who. I checked early this morning and discovered the prophecy sphere was still active. However, with Potter's magic gone, it must be referring to a meeting between muggles. The prophecy no longer involves the Ministry or the wizarding world and I've ordered the destruction of the sphere.

"In a way, Mr. Potter's actions have saved us all. Even if the Dark Lord could come back at this point, it wouldn't matter. He would have no magic to speak of. He would be He-Who-Cannot-Cast," Stillwater said.

We at the Prophet are thankful to Mr. Potter for what he's done, but cannot help but wonder how he could be pushed into making such a dreadful decision. We call upon the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to investigate the conditions surrounding Harry Potter's life. It is the least the Ministry can do for a boy who has saved us all, at such a tragic cost to himself.

Related stories...

Lucius Malfoy arrested on Bribery Charges, Minister to answer before Wizengamot, page 2.

Anonymous Tipster topples Ministry Bigwigs, page 2.

Barty Crouch Jr. Found Dead at Hogwarts, page 3.

Dumbledore scanned the article again, agreeing with the Ministry experts. Potter lost his magic to the goblet, and the goblet, being enchanted, had exploded as a direct result of trying to absorb his magic. In four hundred years of the Triwizard tournament, a contestant had never refused to participate until yesterday.

Dumbledore stood and walked angrily away from his desk, thinking furiously. Potter was gone and his plans were in ruins! Potter had found the one way of taking out Voldemort that Dumbledore had never considered. In doing so, the boy had ruined everything!

He sighed and looked up at his Order of Merlin, proudly hung in a display case with ample room for another. But there would be no more Orders of Merlin for him. Harry Potter had seen to that.

A knock came at his door and he ignored it. He paced back and forth, trying to ignore the knocking that grew increasingly louder. How they had managed to get the stairs to raise was a mystery to him. After several minutes, he threw up his hands, walked to the door and yanked it open.

"WHAT!" he exclaimed furiously.

Amelia Bones looked at him with disdain. Behind her were several Aurors and Minerva McGonagall.

Surprised, he staggered backwards and they entered his office.

"Excellent! You're still alive," Amelia said dryly. "I had thought we might find your body up here when you didn't open the door."

Dumbledore frowned. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm afraid the Board of Governors would like you to step aside while this Tournament business is investigated. They have requested I step into the role of Headmistress and asked Professor Flitwick to assume the deputy position," Minerva said angrily. She blamed him solely for what happened to Harry. If she could have gotten away with it, she would have gladly scratched his eyes out.

"We're here to escort you to an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot, Albus," Amelia added. "We have questions that need answering, especially in light of facts that are being discovered. Gringotts provided us with a package of information this morning that was most enlightening." She held out her hand. "Your wand, please," she said coldly.

Dumbledore winced. There was no escaping his fate at this point. It was all over. He handed her his wand and the aurors moved in to place manacles on his wrists.

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton (2 days later)...

Peter was getting increasingly nervous. The master's plan had failed in a spectacular fashion and now the papers were printing that Potter and his master were without magic. That meant Voldemort could no longer provide the protection he craved. He needed to be associated with a powerful wizard who could protect him, not some squib thing, which aptly described Voldemort at the moment.

He placed the latest edition of the paper down on the floor and Nagini moved to read it for herself. Peter was terrified of the snake. There was a level of intelligence in the beast that bordered on human. His rat form gibbered in fear every time it approached him.

"Ssssooo, it issss true then," Nagini said sibilantly. The horcrux within the beast gave it the ability to speak in English.

"He is powerless now," Peter agreed.

"What will you do?" asked Nagini.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "Run, I guess. It's not like I can re-enter British society," he said miserably. Who would have thought he'd end up like this? He had been certain his master would succeed! That damn boy ruined everything!

"The massster is usssless now," murmured Nagini.

She turned to eye Wormtail speculatively for a moment. Peter, not realizing the danger, had his back turned to the large snake. Nagini struck, sinking her eight inch fangs into his neck.

Peter gasped and his bladder immediately emptied. His eyes rolled in their sockets as Nagini's powerful neurotoxins went to work, shutting down his nervous system. Satisfied that he was dying, Nagini released Peter and watched coldly as he fell to the floor, twitching violently and foaming at the mouth. He was dead, he just didn't know it yet.

Nagini slid from the room. The human rat would no longer pose a threat to her. It really was a shame Peter wasn't in rat form. At least then he would

have proved a tasty snack.

In a well appointed room upstairs sat a strange creature. It was a magical construct, a body barely capable of supporting Voldemort's soul and it was dreadfully weak. The creature was hard to describe, being vaguely humanoid and only about as large as an infant.

"Hello?" called Voldemort. "Where is everyone? I need Nagini! Wormtail, bring Nagini! I must feed!" he shouted weakly. Wormtail milked Nagini's venom, which helped power the potion that sustained the Dark Lord in his artificial body.

Nagini entered the room and slithered towards the chair upon which Voldemort sat.

"Nagini? Is that you, my pet? Where have you been? Where is that useless Wormtail? I must feed. I am getting weaker by the minute. Why hasn't anyone attended to me in the last two days?"

"Ussselesss creature," hissed Nagini. She reared up, her tongue flickering angrily. "You had dreamsss of glory, now turned to asssh. I warned you not to anger the child. Now he hasss defeated you."

"What? How dare you! Child? What has Potter done? No, stay back! I am your master and lord! I command you to obey me!"

"No. You are food," hissed Nagini. And then she struck.

No one heard the final howls of Lord Voldemort. Even if they had, the wizarding world no longer cared about a powerless muggle Dark Lord.

Outside of the Ministry of Magic (Three weeks after Harry's departure)...

Dumbledore stood tiredly in the atrium of the Ministry building, pondering fate. The few that passed him by refused to look at him. It was a far cry from his privileged position of just a month ago.

He had few possessions left to his name. His brother even had his pub seized and sold to help pay off the debt he had incurred to the Potter Estate, as well as the others he'd stolen from over the years.

Aberforth, his brother of 151 years, upon hearing the news, had died of a heart attack.

The last three weeks had been a personal kind of hell for Albus and he was exhausted. Disgraced and dismissed from every post he held, his Order of Merlin revoked, he had little more than the clothes on his back, a small bag of galleons and his bag of lemon drops.

He had used most of the last of his money to pay the fines for forcing a bondage bind on a phoenix. Once the bind was broken, the bird had disappeared, leaving him behind. He had hoped that, after all the time they'd spent together, the pheonix might have developed feelings for him. How wrong he'd been.

Dumbledore had narrowly escaped prison only because all of his actions were done under the auspices of his office as Chief Warlock. Sending him to jail for exercising his authority meant that any future Chief Warlock could suffer the same penalties. If there was one thing the Wizengamot would not do, it would be to take away privilege from their own positions.

This was probably his last visit to the Ministry. They had summoned him so he could sign some papers, closing out his eighty year tenure as the senior member of the Wizengamot. He was a pariah now. No one wanted to talk to him and few were willing to be seen associating with him.

In the final days he had tried to argue that Voldemort would return, but no one listened. They didn't care if he did or not. Even if he did come back, he would be a muggle and, therefore, not a problem to the Wizarding World. Even former accused Death Eaters like Walden McNair openly scoffed at the concept of a muggle Dark Lord. McNair was one of the few accused Death Eaters who not only survived the purge, but had come out better than he was.

He wasn't the only person caught by the facts revealed over the last three weeks. Severus Snape had been beaten by a crowd in Hogsmeade when the first accusations of his abusing students came to light. He was rescued by a squad of Aurors, who led him off to Azkaban, while prosecutors built their case against him.

Lucius Malfoy had been imprisoned and most of his fortune confiscated. Former Minister Fudge was now a permanent resident of the prison he help staff with dementors.

Dumbledore stepped into the lift and sighed. Several moments later, he exited the Ministry building and wondered what to do next. He still had a very small home that had once belonged to Aberforth and a small flock of enchanted goats. The home had escaped goblin detection because it was owned and listed as a muggle residence in northern Wales.

I suppose I could go home, he thought morosely. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a lemon drop and popped it into his mouth. A second later a muggle tripped and rammed into him accidentally. He swallowed reflexively and his eyes widened. The lemon drop was lodged in his throat!

Gasping, his hands flew up to his neck. He tried to suck in a breath, but all he got was a pitiful, insufficient amount of air. Far too little! One arm flailed around wildly. A muggle stopped to stare at him uncomprehendingly, then more gathered, wondering what was wrong with the strange looking man.

Someone screamed while his lips were turning blue and spots danced before his eyes. A young muggle man stepped up and pounded on his back a few times, then wrapped his arms around him, just below his rib cage and jerked upwards.

He coughed and the lemon drop soared out of his mouth and into the street. Panting, he bent over, clutching his knees.

“Mister? Mister, are you alright?” The voice sounded young and very concerned.

Albus looked up at his savior and blinked for a moment in shock before relaxing again. For a brief moment the man almost looked like James Potter. A closer inspection corrected that. The young man had black hair and glasses, but the resemblance ended there.

“I’m fine now, thanks to you,” he said slowly.

The young man grinned. “No worries, sir. But you might want to be more careful with your candies.”

He nodded absently and the young man, pleased that he had helped someone, stepped away to continue whatever muggle errand he had.

Bemused and still shaken by his close brush with death, he stepped off the curb.

There was a screech of brakes and someone screamed. Dumbledore had a brief impression of something very large and bright red, then he was flying and everything went black.

The driver of the double decker bus slammed on the brakes and bolted from his vehicle. A policeman near a corner shouted over his walkie talkie for backup and an ambulance. They would arrive too late.

Albus Dumbledore, defeater of Grindelwald and once darling of the Wizarding world, had been killed in a muggle accident. Hit by a bus, then crushed by a lorry, it was an ignominious way to die for someone who had lived for so long.

Waivunu, Fiji (1 Month after Harry left)...

“Evan?”

He lifted his head and looked at his godfather. “Paddy! I was wondering when you’d get back.”

He had been laying on the deck of their house reading his transfiguration textbook. Sirius walked over and sat on the edge of the lounge and gently lifted the bandage from his forehead. Harry waited anxiously for the verdict.

“The doctor was right. They were able to reduce the scar and now it’s barely noticeable.” Sirius glanced down at the book on his godson’s lap and frowned slightly. “Why are you reading that?”

Harry waved his hand and several birds appeared. It wasn’t really wandless magic he was performing. The Fijians had a limited supply of wood, so wands had been replaced by a wooden focus ring with a magical core. The ring provided the same focus as his wand, which he still had. The wand he destroyed in the Great Hall had been a fake.

“It’s still good to learn, Paddy, even if I never go back there. Did you mail my letter?” he asked eagerly.

He laughed. “Yes I mailed it. Now, why won’t you admit you like her?”

Harry blushed and looked down. “Alright, I do. But now we’re really far apart,” he said with a sigh. It was the biggest flaw in Sirius’ plan. He had left his friends behind. He missed Ron and Ginny of course. But her? Missing her actually hurt.

Sirius gripped Harry’s shoulder supportively. “If she feels as you do, I suspect it won’t matter, Harry.”

Harry scowled at him. “Evan, remember?”

Sirius nodded. They were both living under aliases. He was Evan Black, and Sirius was Patrick Orion. Remus, when he arrived, would assume the name of John Wolfe, which Sirius thought extremely amusing.

They had stopped over in Japan after leaving Britain. There, Harry had undergone muggle plastic surgery to reduce the size of the scar on his forehead. Sirius had also used the opportunity to relocate both the Black and Potter fortunes from Gringotts Britain to the Gringotts Japan. The goblins cared little about the Ministry proclamations about Sirius’ guilt and were happy to accommodate them. Sirius was pleased to learn from the Goblins that his name had been cleared by the British Ministry.

Despite being free, they had decided on using aliases to hide the fact that Harry would continue learning and practicing magic.

After Harry was well enough to be released from the hospital, they had moved on to Fiji and a very comfortable house right on the beach. Sirius had stocked the home with plenty of magical texts for his godson to study if he wished.

Harry was at first uncertain of Sirius’ plan, but he had been right. The binding magical contract from the Goblet of Fire had met the unmovable force of prophecy. The two had clashed spectacularly in the Great Hall, and the goblet had lost as it’s magic was overwhelmed by destiny itself.

For a brief instant, all magic within Harry’s body ceased to function, and then most of his natural magic came rushing back into him. What he didn’t get back were the blocks and tracking charms and other spells that had been cast upon him over the years. That magic failed to return to his body and had helped fuel the spectacular explosion of the Goblet of Fire.

Harry knew that someday he would have to face Voldemort. But he also knew they had bought him time, a lot of time, decades perhaps. Time he

could use to train and live as he should have from the beginning. Voldemort's had lost his key supporters in the Ministry, thanks to help from the goblins who had supplied the information needed to bring down Fudge, Malfoy and Dumbledore.

Harry and Sirius were just settling in and getting used to living together, although soon, two would become three when Remus joined them. In the meantime, Harry studied as though his life depended on it and he practiced his magic. Remus was scurrying around the continent trying to contact the tutors that James and Lily had set up for Harry in their will. He also managed to get his hands on a massive chunk of the Dumbledore family estate, including Albus' private journals.

Sirius helped Harry by reminding him to have fun. He bought Harry a surfboard and helped him start working out. The pair were often seen bouncing over the landscape in their land cruiser, seeming to forget that there were perfectly acceptable roads for such vehicles. Neither seemed to understand that four wheel drive didn't translate into tank.

Nadi International Airport, Fiji (December 20th)...

Hermione walked down the jetway to the terminal ahead of her parents. She was both excited and a little angry. The school was holding a Christmas ball this year and she had hoped that someone would ask her. Unfortunately, at the same time that they made that announcement, her parents sent her a letter detailing their plans for the holidays and she couldn't talk them out of it.

It had been an exhausting flight, with a change over at Sydney, and she was grumpy because her parents insisted she join them. It didn't help that the boy she had wanted to go to the ball with no longer attended Hogwarts. She desperately missed Harry and wished he'd write. He was her best friend. She didn't care that his magic was gone!

The year had started off dreadfully, with the loss of Harry. The revelations about his home life, as well as the other irregularities in his case, created a major scandal. Dumbledore retired in disgrace, barely escaping prosecution. Former Professor Snape had been placed in Sirius' old cell at Azkaban and was currently awaiting trial.

Fudge going to prison blew open a major criminal case when secret files were discovered in his office outlining corruption in the office of Minister going back more than fifty years. Even Sirius Black's files were found, along with eyewitness testimony that exonerated him.

Following the Ministry trials, the notice of Dumbledore's death was a minor blip on the back pages of the Prophet that most of the Wizarding world never noticed.

Hermione stopped and dropped her carry on bag. She stared for a moment, then tried to blink away the tears that filled her eyes. There, not ten feet away, stood Sirius, Remus and Harry Potter!

He looked wonderful! Healthy, and tanned, and maybe even a little taller! He smiled at her and his hands played nervously with a beautiful orchid.

"Harry!" she squealed, then bolted forward.

He opened his arms to receive her, and she threw herself into his embrace. He held her tightly to him and she wept, while Sirius and Remus greeted her parents. The adults smiled softly seeing Hermione's reaction to Harry's presence.

Finally Harry pulled away slightly and lifted up one hand. He placed the orchid behind her ear, then he conjured a tissue to wipe away her tears.

She gasped softly when she realized that he'd just used magic.

"Welcome to Fiji," he whispered. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too," she replied softly.

"Well, so much for keeping that a secret," murmured Remus when he saw Harry conjure the tissue.

"Are you kidding?" asked Sirius. He grinned and shook his head. "He can't keep secrets from her. He's like James that way. James couldn't hide anything from Lily. Every time he tried, she knew he was hiding something." He turned to the Grangers then and smiled. "Welcome to Fiji! I hope you like the tropics. I suspect you'll be visiting us often."

Hermione's mother smiled softly at the two teens who were still holding each other and whispering softly. "I think you're right, Mr. Black," she replied.

To be continued...

The Power of the Press

Chapter 2 - Year Four Continued

Standard Disclaimer:

“You killed our Emu!” Bob exclaimed.

“Of course I did, what is it with you and animals lately? Are you sure you're not hiding some strange fetish I don't want to know about?” Alyx retorted.

“No! But the Emu was our mascot! No what will we do for a mascot?” Bob whined.

Alyx sighed and shook her head. “Do we really need a mascot? I mean you've had penguins, llamas, Emus, Hippogriffs, Elephants, Killer Whales and a clown named Bobo in our disclaimers. Why not do something new and different?”

“How about we bring out Sean Connery wearing a codpiece in the shape of a fish to do the disclaimer?” Bob asked eagerly. “Or wait! We can get Britney Spears to do it. She's desperate for any kind of exposure!”

Bob's expression filled with disappointment.

“What is it? What's wrong?”

“If we get Britney she can't wear a codpiece in the shape of a fish!” he wailed.

Alyx groaned and banged her head against the wall a few times. Then she turned to the audience. “While he wrestles with this problem, I'll let you know that we don't own Harry Potter or anything associated with him.”

She turned back to Bob and blinked in shock. He had a life size replica of Darth Vader and he was trying to attach a stuffed fish to it.

She carefully walked over to him and took him by the shoulders. “Come on dear, I think you need a rest.”

“Oh, is it nap time already? I haven't finished watching the crab races.”

She shook her head sadly. She knew this day would come. Behind her she never noticed the dozens of crabs running in her direction.

Waivunu, Fiji...

Hermione rolled out of bed and stretched, then stopped and looked out the window in surprise. She was momentarily disoriented and needed a minute to get her bearings. She remembered arriving at Fiji with her parents and meeting Harry. Then the long ride across the island on an incredibly bumpy road. When they arrived at the house in the small village of Waivunu Bay, Sirius suggested the Grangers each take a small dose of sleeping draught and nap for a few hours. They accepted, as it would help with the jet lag they were suffering from.

Wait a minute! Harry? she thought. Grinning, she bolted from the room and ran down the hall, skidding to a stop once she reached what looked to be a spacious living room. Hearing something outside, she walked toward a large, open sliding glass door, then stepped out onto the porch. She squinted slightly in the bright sunlight and glanced around.

There, just off the porch, she found the source of the sound that had drawn her from the house. Harry stood, his expression slightly pinched in concentration. In front of him were half a dozen objects, all of which he seemed to be levitating. Sirius was off to one side, tossing ping pong balls at him.

When Sirius noticed her, he winked, then placed a finger to his lips. Hermione wasn't sure what he was doing, but understood that he wanted her to remain quiet.

Sirius walked up slowly behind Harry. “BOO!” he shouted.

Harry ignored him and raising the objects higher.

Sirius frowned, then turned and gestured to Hermione. She glanced between him, Harry and the objects, then shrugged.

Stepping off the porch, she walked up behind Harry, leaned around his shoulder and kissed him on the cheek.

The objects came crashing down as Harry spun to face her, blinking rapidly. “Hermione?”

Remus, who had been watching from the porch with Hermione's parents, applauded and whistled loudly. “Nice job, Evan!” he called.

Hermione laughed, then grabbed his hand and tugged. “Come on. You owe me some explanations,” she told him.

He nodded and waved to his godfather. “We'll be down by the water's edge, Sirius.”

“Alright, Harry.”

He rolled his eyes. "It's Evan," he muttered.

"Sure, Har...er, Evan," Sirius said, smiling. "Now go explain to Hermione before she has kittens."

Harry glanced at his friend and raised an eyebrow. She did look close to bursting. Laughing, he led her down to a bench well above the water line.

Hermione sat and looked around in wonder. It was summer in Fiji and the crystal blue waters beckoned to her invitingly.

"It's a far cry from Surrey or Hogwarts," Harry murmured, then leaned back on the bench and sighed. "So much has happened and so much needs to be explained."

He turned to look at her, noting the worry in her eyes.

"My life has never been a very good one, Hermione. Until a few months ago, you and Ron were the brightest spots in my life. The Dursleys hated me and everything about me. They barely fed me enough to survive and kept me locked up most of my life. Sirius had Azkaban, I had the Dursleys. I won't burden you with what happened there. Let's just say it wasn't a good place and Dumbledore knew that.

"A lot of my life hasn't been what I would have wished for. When Sirius and Remus visited me this summer, they told me they had spoken to the goblins, who told them about what Dumbledore had done. I read my parents will and it specifically said I was to be raised by a wizarding family in my family home and that under no circumstances was I to go to the Dursleys."

He paused and his hands trembled and he smiled apologetically at her. She reached across the distance between them and touched his hand gently.

He shook his head. "So much of my life has been a lie. My parents knew about the prophecy and made special arrangements to have me tutored, starting at age eight. I wasn't supposed to go to Hogwarts at all. They recognized that it would limit what kind of education I would have, and they didn't want that. They wanted me to have a broader view of our world and knew Britain couldn't provide that view."

He looked away, trying to hide the pain he felt. After reading his parents will, the magnitude of what he'd lost and could never regain had hit him hard.

Hermione squeezed his hand gently. "Harry, there's no shame in mourning what might have been. You're not responsible for Dumbledore's actions or the way the Dursleys treated you. But it looks like Sirius and Remus are doing everything they can to help make up for what you've lost through the years."

"I know," Harry said. He turned to face her, then shrugged a bit helplessly. "It's just that things could have been so different."

"They are different," she told him earnestly. "Look around you! This place is a far cry from Privet Drive or Hogwarts. Sirius and Remus would do anything to keep you safe and happy." When a tear slid down her cheek, she brushed it away irritably.

Harry looked at her, his eyes wide. "Don't cry, Hermione," he said, alarmed over her reaction.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and put her head on his shoulder. "Idiot," she mumbled. "I'm crying because I'm happy for you. You finally have the family you always wanted." She had always suspected that her friend held a terrible secret and when his home life was revealed in the papers she'd broken down and cried, cursing herself for missing the obvious clues. She had cried for him in the privacy of her own bed, with the curtains drawn and a silencing charm in place.

Now, however, with the help of his parents best friends, Harry had a chance of living the life his parents wanted him to have.

He wrapped his arms around her a bit awkwardly and thought about what she'd said. It was true that he'd been concentrating so much on what had been denied him that he hadn't quite realized everything he'd been given. Remus and Sirius were family. His parents wishes for him were being fulfilled, if later than they might have wanted.

"Thanks, Hermione," he said, leaning away so he could see her face. "I was so caught up in the past that I couldn't see what was right in front of me."

She released him and flashed him a bright smile. "I'm glad I was able to help. But I'm angry, too. Angry at not seeing the clues about your home life that you kept hinting at."

"You really weren't meant to see them," he told her softly. "They weren't clues so much as mistakes on my part. Sirius said I've become adept at hiding my feelings. He said he learned to do the same thing in prison, which is why he can see it in me."

She nodded. His explanation made sense. "Alright, now tell me how can you still perform magic?"

He grinned and considered making her wait, then decided against it. "It's simple, really. The Goblet is a binding contract made by wizards. The prophecy is an expression of destiny. Which do you think is going to win when they're in conflict?"

"So the prophecy and the binding contract clashed and the contract lost?"

Harry shrugged. "Sort of."

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

He looked across the bay. "Do you remember the glow that surrounded me for a second? In that instant, all of the magic in my body, including the

bindings placed on me and my abilities, were lost. I was, for just a moment, a muggle. It came back, of course. My core has been steadily expanding and refilling since then.

"Now days I spend as much time learning new magic as I spend learning to control my power and using my new focus. Three days after we arrived on Fiji, I accidentally levitated a lawn chair into orbit."

He looked at her sheepishly when she broke into a fit of giggles. He tried to glare at her, but he couldn't hold it. A second later he was laughing right along with her.

Gaining control over the need to laugh, she shook her head. "So, tell me about your new focus."

He held up a hand, showing off an ornate wooden ring. "Fiji's about forty percent forested land, but only a quarter of that is suitable for logging. As such, appropriate wood for wands is an issue and the native wizarding population doesn't want to add to the demand. Their solution was the use of focus rings, which use less wood, rather than wands. In some ways, the rings are very different and seem to make for a stronger focus."

"So your magic is stronger now?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes. Like the saying goes... '*and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal*' ... I have as much as he does."

She nibbled on her lower lip worriedly and looked unhappy. "He's not really gone?"

"Not yet, but we're working on it. And I'm preparing for when I finally face him," he said. He gestured and a ball of fire appeared in his hand for a moment, then vanished. It was a demonstration of magic far more complex and different than anything she could do.

She looked at his wooden ring rather wistfully.

He caught her look and made a snap decision. Holding up one hand, he closed his eyes. A few moments later a small box flew out the sliding glass door, over the porch and down the beach to his hand. He looked down at the brightly wrapped box and smiled. "I was going to give you this, as well as another gift, for Christmas," he told her quietly, then he thrust the small gift box into her hands.

Her expression changed to one of surprised pleasure. "Are you sure?" she asked.

He nodded. He knew he was jumping the gun, but it was important that she learn to use it while she was here.

She carefully unwrapped the box and glanced up at him when she saw the beautifully built focus ring. He blushed knowing what giving a ring to a girl normally meant. When she smiled shyly, he rushed to explain.

"I'm not trying to propose or anything, you understand," he stammered quickly. "That's a focus ring, like mine. It has no tracking charms like your wand, so you can use it at home without the Ministry knowing, as long as you don't attract muggle attention. Besides, it works differently from a wand, which requires a precise movement."

She looked at him curiously. "Why, Harry? Why do you want me to have this?"

He looked at his feet.

"Harry?" she prompted gently.

He ran a hand through his hair, flustered. "I like you a lot, Hermione and you'll be going back to that school without me around to keep you safe. Despite what they say, we both know Hogwarts isn't safe, especially with gits like Malfoy still running around. No one back in Britain will recognize the ring for what it is, and Sirius is going to charm them with a modified Fidelius charm. That will hide the ring entirely. You'll always have a way of protecting yourself."

She pulled the ring from the box and when she slid it onto her finger, she felt a small pinprick. "What was that?" she asked, frowning.

"The ring has a dual focus core," he explained. "The primary focus is sacred Tiki wood. When you put the ring on, a tiny bit of your blood was added as the secondary focus. With your blood as part of the core, only you can use the ring."

"A blood core," she said breathlessly. Blood cores were banned by the British Ministry, but they made for the most powerful foci known. It didn't make sense to her why the Ministry would ban them, but she wasn't about to throw the ring away. It was mated to her now, She would be the only one who could ever use it.

"Can I try it here?" she asked eagerly.

He nodded. "Sure. This stretch of beach has a notice-me-not charm on it. Besides, the Pacific Rim Ministry doesn't have underage magic laws. Try this. Place the box on the bench and levitate it. Don't bother moving your hand, just point a finger and think the incantation."

The box rocked gently a few times before she managed to get it to rise six inches off of the bench. She laughed and the box fell to the bench.

"Hermione..."

She tore her eyes away from the box and looked at him. "Hmmm?"

"You know you can't tell anyone about me, don't you?"

She frowned at him, wondering what he was talking about. She was about to ask when it dawned on her. “If people knew you still had your magic, they'd know Voldemort still had his. And since the prophecy is still valid, that means Voldemort will come back.”

“But as long people think I'm powerless, they'll believe Voldemort is, as well,” he countered.

She nodded. “If they knew about your powers, then his followers will flock to help him.”

“I wish I could be with you, but I can't. The best we will be able to do is arrange holidays together. Sirius and your parents are probably talking about that now,” he said with a touch of bitterness. The reality of the flight to Fiji was sinking home now that Hermione was here. He realized that she couldn't stay.

“It'll be fine, Harry. We can do this. At least now I can send you letters.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah. You can drive Lavender nuts by telling her you're writing the boy you met on an exotic tropical island.”

She looked at him oddly. “I suppose I could tell her I'm writing my boyfriend,” she said, watching his face carefully to note his reaction.

He smiled at the thought. “That's the second offer along those lines I've gotten in the last month,” he said softly. “Though I must say, this one is far more attractive than the last.”

“Oh? You've already catching the eye of the local witches?” she asked. There was a strange, twisting feeling in her belly that she couldn't quite identify. She didn't like the idea of other witches being interested in him. Was this jealousy?

“No, I've not met many local wizards or witches yet. When Sirius was cleared, a friend of his in the States offered to help smooth things over for him there. He had some work he needed to arrange for and she's employed with their Department of Magic.”

“And this older witch is interested?”

He grinned. “Well, I do like women a little older than myself, but she's way too old for me. She had a niece, you see. She wanted to send a photo and wondered if we'd consider a formal betrothal.”

Hermione bit her lip and looked down at her hands, trying to hide the sudden hurt she felt. Her best friend was engaged?

Harry didn't catch her expression. “I told Sirius that I am going to do what my father did. When the time comes, I'm going to marry someone I love. But I'm too young for something that serious. Besides, I... Well, let's just say I have a hunch my heart knows where to go when I'm old enough.”

She glanced up to see he was staring intently at her. “What are you trying to say, Harry?” For the first time since she'd met him, she was unsure of what he was saying, mostly because what he was saying went against her own self image. Part of her wanted to shout for joy and another part was terrified by what he was implying and denying the possibility.

“I like you, Hermione. I like you a lot. Someday I think we could have something really special.. We're young, maybe too young, but I had a lot of time to think when I was in the hospital.”

Her eyes flickered to the faint scar on his forehead. Sirius had explained about his operation on their trip from the airport. The scar was barely visible now and it seemed odd to see him without it, though he did look better.

“You're my best friend, Hermione. I can easily see what I feel for you turning into something more.”

She smiled shyly at him. His comments struck a chord within her. It wasn't as though he had professed his undying love for her or something, but the last few months had changed him. He was more mature and willing to express his hopes for his future; a future that might just include her. For herself, his comments bolstered her self confidence. She had never thought either of her friends would realize she was a girl. Obviously she'd been wrong, at least where Harry was concerned.

“I can see that, too,” she whispered. It was going to take some getting used to.

Harry's smile tugged at her heart. For the first time in a long while she saw that his smile was also reflected in his eyes.

“Come on, let me show you around,” he said as he stood up and offered her a hand.

Blushing, she reached up and took it.

Sirius watched the two teens walking down the beach holding hands and he shook his head and smiled. He then turned to his other guests, who were also watching the teens. “I've known two Potter men in my life besides Harry. Harry's father, James and James' father, Charles. James fell hard for Harry's mom from the moment he met her. He then spent the next six years mooning over her and trying to deny the inevitable. Charles told me he met his wife, Catherine, early on the Express. Unlike his son, Charles didn't try to fight the curse like James did.”

Daniel Granger turned to look at Sirius in alarm. “There's a curse?”

Remus laughed. “What my melodramatic friend is trying to tell you is that Potter men tend to do two things in their lives rather well. They find the girl they're going to marry very early on, and they usually pick the smartest girl in their class. We thought it might be something about red heads, but Harry's grandfather told us it wasn't. It was just a coincidence that James' mother and wife both had red hair.”

Emma Granger glanced at the teens, then looked at Remus. “So, you're saying that they're going to be a couple? Already?”

Dan scowled and started to stand. "She's too young yet!"

Sirius stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Relax, Dan. They aren't there yet and won't be for a while. I'm just saying that, if Harry is true to form, you're looking at the beginning of it right here."

"I'm rather surprised he took the step myself," Remus added softly.

Emma turned to look at him. "Oh? Why?" She was inwardly pleased for her daughter. Harry's influence had turned her from a sedate bookish little girl into a vivacious young woman.

The two wizards exchanged a glance and Sirius nodded his approval.

"Harry wasn't well treated when he was being raised by his relatives. Hermione knows a good deal of the story because it's been published in the WIZARDING PAPERS. No one but Harry know the entire story. He's still painfully shy at times and he has no self esteem. We don't think he was physically abused, or at least not regularly. His surgeon in Tokyo told us that he's suffered bouts of malnutrition and there are more than a few scars that he won't talk about.

"That the two of them are holding hands tells me that they're close and that Harry may have told her some things that he hasn't told Sirius and me." Remus watched the two teens on the beach for a moment, then turned back to Emma, his lips twitching. "I think he might even have told her he likes her."

"For Harry, that's a really big step," added Sirius. "I don't think you need worry about Hermione's virtue anytime soon. Harry's too much of a gentleman for that sort of behavior and he'd never do anything without her telling him it was alright."

Mollified, Dan sat back down. "So what do we do?"

Remus shrugged his shoulders. "It's up to them. All we can do is continue to bring them together during their free time. It's up to them to develop it further or see if they remain just friends."

"I have some ideas, if you're willing to listen," offered Sirius.

Emma nodded and motioned for him to continue.

"We'd be more than willing to play host to all three of you. We have ample space and can provide portkeys or other methods that can be used to move between here and your home in Oxford. Harry is planning on giving Hermione a focus ring..."

When Dan tensed, Sirius held up a hand in caution. "Relax. It's not what you think. Wood is in high demand on Fiji. As a result, they use wooden rings, rather than wands. The government here has no underage magic laws either, so she'd be able to practice her using both her wand and her ring. When she goes back to Britain, the ring will allow her to use magic, free from Ministry interference, as they don't track rings."

Emma frowned. "I'm uncomfortable with the idea of spending every holiday we have here. Our summer is your winter. Would you be willing to consider letting Harry take a holiday with us during the summer months?"

"Half and half, eh?" Sirius asked. "Mind you, Harry or I will pay for any expenses he incurs."

Emma nodded. There were several issues that she still wanted to address. It was obvious that Hermione felt something for Harry. Even if it were only friendship, she had so few real friends. And she'd be able to continue her studies during the summer months under Remus, who was her former Professor.

Both Emma and Sirius smiled, thinking that they had won the best part of the deal. Remus and Dan exchanged a knowing glance and looked towards the couple walking the beach.

"Well, that's one thing taken care of. The next is Voldemort," Sirius said softly.

"He's not really gone, then?" asked Emma worriedly.

Remus shook his head and explained the hoax they had managed to pull on wizarding Britain.

Dan watched the couple as they walked back toward the house. "So, he still has to fight this Dark Lord," he murmured, shaking his head unhappily.

"It's not as bad as it sounds, Dan," Sirius said. "First off, James and Lily provided for his training. We have a number of specialists lined up to help him in the coming years. We've also found out how Voldemort managed to survive his attempt to kill Harry when he was a toddler."

"What did he use?" asked Hermione. She and Harry were climbing the short steps onto the porch.

"Do you know what a horcrux is, Hermione?" asked Remus. He knew she probably didn't.

She shook her head and looked upset that there was something she didn't know.

Remus smiled. "Don't be upset. You wouldn't learn about them at Hogwarts, ever. It's a piece of dark magic so obscene and foul that all good folk would rather not know about it."

When she looked at Remus with bright, curious eyes, Sirius tried not to grin. Many called her the smartest witch of her age and he didn't doubt it.

Knowledge was like air to her.

"Basically," Remus continued, "a horcrux is a vessel in which you place a piece of your soul. It can be anything, really; a cup, even a fireplace poker. We found out about them when I read Dumbledore's journal. In fact, Harry's already destroyed one horcrux already; the diary."

Hermione shivered.

"That's not the worst part," Remus added. "In order to create a horcrux, you have to kill someone in cold blood. With each Horcrux you make, you become less human."

She gasped and took a step closer to her parents. Emma reached up and took her hand.

"We think he may have meant to use Harry to make one, but that effort failed, obviously," Sirius said. "Remus has the list that Dumbledore had kept and the spells needed to detect them. After the new year, he'll return to Britain and begin the search for them."

"Once you've destroyed them, he'll be mortal again?" Hermione asked. Her eyes were on Harry and everyone could see she was clearly scared for him.

Harry reached out and took her free hand in his. "I have no intention of going after him until I'm trained and have a chance," he told her. "He's a stain on my life, ruining everything I want. I can't let that continue."

She released her mother's hand and wiped at her wet eyes. "No, I know you can't."

The two stared at each other, oblivious to everyone around them. It was a bit embarrassing for the adults. They felt like they were witnessing something intimate.

Sirius coughed politely. "I do believe dinner's ready. When we're finished, we can change clothes, go to midnight services and get home before Santa shows up!"

Remus rolled his eyes. "There's no such thing as Santa," he said tiredly. It was an old argument between them and he never won it.

"How do you know?" asked Sirius, seriously.

Remus blinked. "Erm... Well..."

"HA! Gotcha! You can't prove he doesn't exist!"

Harry turned to Hermione's parents. "I'm so glad there are some adults around finally! I've felt like I should be parenting these two!"

Sirius pounced on Harry, grabbing him in a headlock and vigorously rubbing his knuckles into Harry's head. "Say uncle! Say uncle!"

Remus shook his head and walked into the living room.

Dan leaned over to Hermione. "See? Aren't you glad you weren't born a boy?"

"Dan!" Emma exclaimed.

He winced and quickly followed Remus into the house.

Aboard STS 66...

A loud alarm sounded in the cabin and the Commander floated over to a console. He frowned and activated his microphone.

"Houston, Atlantis, we show an object coming up from astern, distance 100 nautical miles and closing at 600 mph."

"Atlantis, Houston. We not showing anything on our scope here."

"Houston, Atlantis, activating rear cameras. Stand by for video feed."

"Roger."

There was a moment of silence as everyone examined the monitors in growing confusion.

"Houston, Commander McMonagle here. Have the Russians started skimping on their MIR program?"

"Atlantis, say again."

"Houston, we're being overtaken by a lawn chair," came the sardonic reply. "We can see it clearly in the telephoto view."

The speakers remained silent for a few minutes.

"Atlantis, our experts down here don't agree with your assessment. They don't think it's a Russia lawn chair. Perhaps it's Chinese."

Christmas on Fiji...

It had been an exhausting day for Hermione. Harry and Sirius had taken her and her parents out to witness the Christmas celebration, followed by a huge feast at their home.

Harry had given her a book on magic used by the islanders, as well as a training guide for using her focus ring. He also told her that one of the big hotels had a New Years ball and that they had reservations. She and her Mom would be going shopping for an appropriate dress up in Nadi in a few days. Harry wanted to make up for the fact that she had missed the Yule ball.

Hermione was a little upset over the fact that she hadn't been told about Harry or Sirius and Remus. Not expecting to see them, she hadn't gotten gifts for Christmas. Harry brushed her concerns off by telling her that just coming to Fiji with her parents made up for it.

Harry was sitting on the couch with Hermione, talking softly when Sirius interrupted them.

"Guys, I have one final little gift that will make life a lot easier for you both," he said, sitting across from them on the love seat. With that said, he pulled out two small packages and laid them on the coffee table.

Hermione sat forward and picked up one. She started to unwrap it, then paused and Sirius nodded for her to go ahead. She unwrapped the package to discover a book. It was light pink in color with a silver pentagram on it's cover. Harry had unwrapped a similar book, only his was light blue.

"They're charmed journals," Sirius said. "There are instructions on the inside covers of each book for some of what they can do. The really nifty feature about them is that what you write in one appears in the other. This way, you don't have to rely on owl post to talk to each other."

Hermione was practically bouncing with excitement. The distance between them had her concerned, but this would do a lot to limit that distance.

"The books have other abilities that you'll not be able to tap into until you're both older. But for now, the ability to write to each other is a big plus," Sirius added. "For some of the other features, read the instructions and don't worry about running out of space. They're charmed to be never ending."

With a wink, Sirius stood and walked out of the living room, leaving them alone.

Harry glanced down at his book in wonder. He'd never heard of anything like them before. Opening the cover, he scanned the instructions and discovered that he could make entries private, or visible to the mated book.

"You will use the book to write me, won't you, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"Of course! This is brilliant. They'll make things a lot easier for both of us."

"Easier?"

He shrugged. "Well, some things are easier to say in a letter, or in this case, a journal, than they are in person. At least at first. Had you not come here for Christmas, I had a letter ready to send to you."

She chewed on her lip for a moment. "Do you still have the letter?" she asked.

He nodded.

"May I have it?"

He smiled gently. "I tell you what. When we take you to the airport, I'll give it to you so you have something to read on the airplane."

She smiled and stood up. "Thanks! Good night, Harry." She bent down and kissed his cheek, then walked out of the room.

The remainder of the holiday was extremely pleasant for everyone, until it came time for Hermione and her parents to leave. Neither teen was able to say goodbye happily. It was a scene that moved the adults. Harry and Hermione would have been surprised to discover that both Hermione's parents, and Harry's guardians vowed to do whatever they could to help the pair stay in touch with each other.

Waivunu Fiji, January 15th 1995...

"You've been quiet the last few days, Harry; ever since I came back from the States," Sirius said, sitting down on a deck chair near him. Sirius had just returned from a week long trip to Britain and the United States.

Harry closed the book he'd been reading and looked at Sirius. "I can't help but wonder why things happened the way they did. I mean, my parents, all the other people who were affected by this. But I don't understand why. Don't get me wrong. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am for what you and Remus did. But sometimes I lay awake wondering why. What did the Potters do to deserve such a fate?"

Sirius glanced up at Remus, who stood in the doorway listening to Harry, before turning back to his godson.

Sometimes there's no real understanding, no real reasoning why things happen. No one will fully understand Dumbledore's actions. His journals hint at financial difficulties as his motivation for pillaging nearly thirty family accounts. He would have emptied yours as he did the others, but he couldn't, thanks to the way the accounts were set up.

"In a way, we were lucky," Sirius said, continuing with his explanation. "Gringotts considered your family to be one of the founding depositors. For that reason, they felt they had an obligation to expose what was going on with your account."

Remus stepped out onto the porch and sat next to Sirius. "Sometimes, a man gets a taste for a certain way of living and he'll do anything to keep living in that manner," he offered. "Why he ignored the issue with Voldemort is a mystery to me. Perhaps he felt he could take care of Voldemort himself. Then the prophecy came along and took it out of his hands entirely."

Remus looked out across the bay. "I don't understand it myself. He knew Tom Riddle had the potential to do great evil. He even wrote down everything we now know about the Horcruxes, including how many Voldemort had and where he thought they were. I get the impression that Dumbledore had no intention of telling anyone about them. Not even you."

Harry shook his head in dismay. "He was setting me up to fail, wasn't he?"

"We think so," Sirius replied. "Remus thinks he was going to collect the horcruxes and keep them intact until you failed. Then he'd destroy them and kill Voldemort. But that's only a theory. There's nothing in Dumbledore's journals to back that up."

"So it boils down to human greed and what? A quest for fame and glory?" the teen asked.

Remus shrugged. "That's why Paddy said we'll never know. Does it really matter?"

Harry sighed and shook his head. "I suppose not. I just wanted to understand. He took my parents and my life from me. It would be nice to know why." He looked at his godfather. "You're looking better now that you've sobered up. Was destroying that locket really that bad?"

Sirius shuddered and his eyes seemed haunted. "I've had lot of nightmares about Azkaban, but my dreams about the locket's destruction make them seem like a walk in the park. Remus thinks destroying the locket disassociated Voldemort."

Remus nodded, pleased for once that Sirius hadn't mangle the word. It always surprised him that Sirius, could be serious when it was called for.

"Disassociated?" Harry asked, confused.

Remus leaned forward. "We know from the vision you had over the summer that Voldemort and his familiar, Nagini, are in close proximity to each other. Now we think, and mind you this is only a theory based on Dumbledore's journal explanations for horcruxes, that when the locket was destroyed, it was like dropping a stone in a pond, sending shock waves out to all of the soul fragments.

"For most of the fragments, it wouldn't mean much because they are anchored by the magic of the horcrux. But for the one that's currently free, the one that needs to be close to Nagini? That one will be torn from it's body."

Remus paused when Harry frowned.

"But if it's torn from Voldemort's body, what will happen? Won't he possess someone else?"

Sirius shook his head. "I had the same thought. Moody thinks otherwise."

"The free fragment is like a moth, Harry. If Nagini is anywhere nearby, within say a few hundred yards, or if there is another horcrux in the same range, he'll be pulled to them like a moth to a flame."

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead painfully. "So," he murmured, "Voldemort was thrown out of his body and sucked into Nagini, making her a double horcrux?"

"Yes, that's the theory," Remus replied. "From what we saw in the pensieve of your vision, Voldemort was using a magical construct and he needed Nagini's venom to keep him alive. As such, I doubt he'd allow Nagini to get too far away."

"The real beauty of this, if Remus is right, is that Voldemort really is powerless. If he's been sucked into the snake, he can't wield his magic. If he's been sucked into a different horcrux, he'll not only be powerless, but immobilized, as well."

Harry nodded thoughtfully.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Jan 20th 1995, Hogwarts...

Harry,

It's been only a few weeks since we were together and I miss you terribly.

Things have become difficult in Gryffindor without you. Ron and I are always fighting and almost never have a civil word to say to each other. Ginny and I have grown closer and I have told her about 'Evan'. She thinks it's all mysterious and wonderfully romantic to meet a boy on a tropical island.

Ginny is a tough girl to figure out. In a way, she's like a combination of Parvati and Padma all rolled into one. She can be extremely smart one

moment and all giggly over something in *Witch Weekly* the next.

From what I was told, Ron made a royal fool of himself at the Christmas ball. He went with Padma but wouldn't dance with her. And then, to make matters worse, he got into a major fight with Ginny over her going with Neville. Dean and Seamus had to pull Ron off Neville. The poor guy had to go to hospital to have his nose and a tooth fixed and Ron got a month's detention and a howler from his mum.

I don't think I told you, but our newpotions teacher is an ex-healer. Her name is Professor Milly Thistlewhistle. And no, I didn't make up that name. I swear! Is there some lawthat says Wizards must have oddball names? I mean, really. Ronald Bilius? Or Ginevra Molly? At least you got lucky with your name. It's nice and simple. Harry James... see? It just flows off the tongue.

Anyway, despite her odd name, she's a really good teacher. She answers questions! And if she sees you about to make a mistake, she stops you in time. I really like her.

Lavender and Parvati found out about 'Evan' from Ginny and have been wondering if I had a photo to showoff. Do you think I should cut something out of a magazine? I mean, they won't knowit's not a real photo, would they?

Answer back soon, Harry. I've got to go now. I still have a charms test to study for.

Miss you.

Hermione

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Jan 21th 1995, Waivunu, Fiji...

Hermione,

Wow, talk about strange names. I suppose it could be worse though. One of my private tutors is from the United States and he's part Native American! His parents hated him, I think, because they gave him two names, Julius Augustus Murphy and his Indian name, which I can't even pretend to spell. But it means 'He who soars with Eagles.' Cool, eh?

And speaking of names, what about Hermione? It's very uncommon, to say the least. It's a name I wouldn't mind saying for a long long time.

I'm sorry about you and Ron. I told Sirius about it and he had an interesting comment. He admitted that had it not been for James (my dad), Peter would probably never been part of their group. Remus says that in every group there's always someone who holds them together. I'm sad to discover that I was that someone for you two.

You must be terribly lonely nowand that makes me feel bad, like it's something I did to you. But I promise I'll make it up to you! HEY! Did you hear? Your mum agreed to allowme to visit with you over the Easter holiday. It's only a week, but it breaks up the time between our visits and makes it a little less uncomfortable.

Yes, I said uncomfortable. I miss you Hermione and it bothers me a lot. There! I said it. I told you writing would be a little easier. For one thing, it gives me a chance to think of what I want to say instead of just blurting stuff out. If I left it up to my mouth alone, you'd probably hate me and I'd choke to death on my toes.

You'd be proud of me, Hermione. I'm getting really good grades and my tutors all think I'll be taking the Pacific Rim NEWTS at least a half year, maybe even a full year early! My tutors knowabout you and are adjusting things so that when you're here, we'll do an accelerated schedule. It'll be tough, but we'll have weekends for fun and Sirius is insisting on at least one week off to relax.

Now, onto other news. Sirius has dropped the aliases for himself and Remus. He's been cleared and exonerated in Britain, so there's no need for them to pretend to be someone else. It made for some interesting conversations with our neighbors. I'm still Evan, and I'm not really happy about that. I can't wait until I'm just Harry again.

Speaking of that, Sirius returned to England for a fewdays to check on something. We found one of V's items! It turned up in Sirius' old London home. It was a locket that was once owned by Salazar Slytherin. Apparently, Sirius' brother, Regulus, was an ex-Death Eater who was killed for trying to leave V's service. He stole the H from wherever V had hidden it and was killed for it. The H was in the London home where Regulus left it.

After he had the locket, he went to visit his friend in the States. Yes, the same friend who tried to hook me up with her niece. She helped him by arranging for the H to be thrown into a muggle industrial blast furnace. He told me it was over 2300C!

Sirius doesn't frighten easily, but he said this scared him senseless. He said the locket sat on top of the molten metal for a minute and everyone was getting worried, then it turned black and started to scream. The American representative became physically ill. The screaming went on for several minutes, then the locket melted away, leaving nothing behind. Just writing about it makes me shiver, but that's one step closer to being able to come home for good.

I look at it as a puzzle. Each piece puts me one step closer to going back to being Harry Potter again.

Tell Lavender that you'll have a photo to showoff soon. I'm letting my hair growlonger and I'll soon have it in a pony tail. A simple glamour to make a fewchanges and you'll have a photo of Evan to showthe others. Only you'll knowthe truth.

It's nearly midnight here and I have to go. I get up at five in the morning to run on the beach before my tutors arrive.

Miss you too!

Harry

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Mar 10th 1995, Fiji...

Just once in my life I wish I could be a normal kid! ARGH!

Alright, now that I've got that out of my system, I'll have to explain it. One of my tutors, Eton - yes, that's the only name he'll give me when I ask and I don't even know if that's his first or last name - is teaching me Occlumency. Once I know that, he'll start on Legilimency.

What Remus taught me last summer was barely enough to keep out a surface scan. Eton is teaching me the whole damn thing. And that's why I'm stuck writing in this thing in private mode now. The book allows for public and private entries, and Eton says I need to write down my thoughts and especially my dreams. He insisted that I do this because he thought I was allowing certain 'things' to distract me. By 'things' he means Hermione. He stumbled onto that dream I've been having over and over where she's wearing that blue bathing suit of hers and she...

STOP IT!

Alright, I'm back. I had to bang my head against the wall for a while to get that image out of my mind. Yes, she's driving me to distraction and she's 10,000 miles away! I would like to say I love her but if I were honest I'd say I'm not sure what love even is. All I know is that I think about her often. I wonder what she's doing, is she doing her homework or sleeping? Is she laughing and happy? Does she miss me like I miss her?

If I had known now the price I'd pay for quitting the tournament, I'm not sure I would have gone through with it. The simple fact is, I'm doing alright, and I love being with Sirius and Remus. But if someone asked me if I were really happy, I'd have to think about my answer.

I didn't know being without my friend would be so uncomfortable.

There, Eton, I hope you're happy. I miss her and it's a distraction that won't go away. Live with it! Are you sure you're not related to Snape? He was a git, too!

Remus is back in England this week. He has a line on a possible location for one of the other Horcruxes; the cup of Hufflepuff, I think he said. Hopefully he'll succeed. Each one down brings me closer to my goal of getting Voldemort out of my life, my name returned and the day I can go home for good. I like Fiji, but I miss Britain.

Damn, tomorrow is PE day, or as I like to call it, "Torture Harry day". Last time I had to run up this hill with a pack on my back weighing twenty kilos. I wonder what I'll have to do tomorrow? Lift a car? Dig a hole and bury an airplane? I know I won't be able to get away with using a featherweight charm. Sirius could have told me the tutor for that class was a wizard. I hate Sirius! Well, not really. But he deserved that bowel loosening hex I hit him with! He's just a prat!

Quibbler Front Page Article, March 30th, 1995...

Harry Potter sighted!

The Quibbler has discovered that Harry Potter was spotted in lower Patagonia last week, attending the annual Puffskein roundup. Potter, age 14, was spotted riding a double crested Peruvian Llama and wearing a large sombrero emblazoned with his signature lightning bolt.

The Ministry would have you believe that Potter is no longer magical, but the people we've spoken to don't agree with that assessment. In fact, they tell us that Potter is hiding his powers until such time as he can announce to the world that he's really harnessing his energies so he can oppose the Ministry backed Heliotrope revolution.

The Ministry refused to confirm any part in the Heliotrope conspiracy, but they did announce that the prophecy sphere concerning the muggles Harry Potter and Tom Marvolo Riddle, formerly known as You-Know-Who, and former British Prime Minister Margret Thatcher, has been destroyed. Minister Scrimgeour claimed "Voldemort will never return!"

Fortunately for our readers, we've discovered that the Minister's comments were actually a coded anagram which we've decoded below.

Ed Velvet Newt Mirror Unroll

Ed Velvet is the lead cellist for the internationally acclaimed band, Prancing Wizzies. As to what "Newt Mirror Unroll" means, well it's obviously a reference to the final exams that students take in wizarding schools world wide and only confirms our long held belief that those exams were being illegally rigged by House Elves.

We at the Quibbler will leave no stone unturned to learn more about this terrible conspiracy. And that, dear readers, is a promise you can count on!

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), April 1st 1995, Hogwarts...

Sigh...

Easter break is coming up quickly and as much as I want to see Harry, the professors have really piled on the holiday work! I'll have to figure out a way of being with Harry and doing my homework.

Lavender and Parvati saw me writing to my parents about Evan and they started in on me again. To my surprise, Neville and Ginny both jumped on the two gossip mongers. I still can't believe Lavender! As if I'd really answer a question like 'what kind of bulge is he packing in those tight bathing suits?'

Honestly, has she no decency? I nearly died when she asked that question loudly in the common room.

Besides, how could I know anything about that? I mean, Harry never wears anything tight, and the few times we went swimming he wore a t-shirt in the water.

Oh, alright! The voice in my head is telling me I'm being foolish and dishonest with myself. Yes, I will admit I wouldn't mind finding out the answer to Lavender's question someday. At least, that's what some of my dreams of late seem to suggest. I can't imagine what others would think or say if anyone knew that I, Hermione 'Know-It-All' Granger was seriously crushing on her best friend. I mean, come on, he's growing up to be just... Wow!

Neville kissed Ginny yesterday, and she went from blushing to angry in less than ten minutes. Ron jumped on Neville and broke his nose again. McGonagall is really angry. She's sent him home early with a two week suspension, and he'll be serving detention every night until the end of the year.

It took me over an hour to calm Ginny down. After they took Ron to Madam Pomfrey to reconnect his limbs, she spent several hours crying. She thought that Neville wouldn't want nothing to do with her again. Surprisingly, the twins spoke to Neville and they promised him that they would keep Ron under control.

Oh, well, time to start packing. The train will be here tomorrow at eleven and it's going on noon.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Jun 10th 1995, Hogwarts...

Harry,

What do you mean it was only a minor injury? Wasn't it you who said you were in hospital for nearly a week? And that was a wizarding hospital, at that! I suppose I can wait until you arrive, but I think it was foolish of Sirius to give you that potion without checking to see if you would have an adverse reaction to it. The Animagus Revealus potion is dangerous and controlled for a reason, you know!

Sigh... There I go, nagging again, but I can't help it, Harry. I do worry about you. I'm not exactly sure what's going on between us, but I do worry about you.

In other news, after nearly a month of refusing to speak to me, the red headed git had the audacity to ask me if I'd like to come visit with him and his family for a few weeks during the summer. He went into an absolute fury when I said I would be with Evan this summer. He accused you of being after only one thing, then he said I would be a scarlet woman if I gave into your demands. Talk about over dramatic!

At that point Ginny hit him with her famous Bat Bogey hex, which sent him screaming from the common room. Unfortunately, the damage is done. You know how the rumor mill works around here. Now everyone thinks I'm dating the mysterious 'Evan' who lives in the Pacific. The stories are all quite outrageous and have us lounging around on topless beaches all day long. Really! As if!

And if that isn't bad enough, someone copied that photo of Evan you gave me and it's been duplicated all over the place. I have had several girls ask me for your address and more who practically growl at me as I pass by. Honestly, you looked really good with those contacts and the brown hair, but I like your green eyes and black hair better. I keep the photo on my night table, but I keep your real photo locked in my trunk. That's the image I think of when I think of you.

I took your advice about Neville and Ginny. You were right, Neville is shy and just lacks confidence, once he learns a spell, however, he remembers it perfectly. It's a far cry from the days when he used to forget the passwords to the common room! Bringing those two together and being friends with them isn't as good as having you here, but at least some of the loneliness is gone.

I know you're going to be here in only fifteen days, Harry, but it's still hard to wait.

I'm going to close this entry for now. But just so you know, I've written to Mr. Flourish of Flourish and Blotts about our journals. Sirius mentioned they had other properties and I'd like to find out what they are. Wouldn't you?

See you soon!

Hermione (I'm counting down the days!)

Daily Prophet Article, Jun 11th 1995...

Tournament Ends!

The famed Triwizard Tournament ended at Hogwarts last night with a wonderful fireworks display and the award ceremony of the Triwizard cup to Beauxbatons champion, Fleur Delacour. Ms. Delacour had been trailing going into the final task, but managed to pull off an unexpected upset when the Hogwarts and Durmstrang champions fought over the opportunity to escort Ms. Delacour past a muddy patch on the ground near the cup.

The tournament got off to a very rocky start when former Headmaster Dumbledore attempted to force Harry Potter to participate for reasons he was never able to adequately explain. Potter, age 14, refused and suffered the loss of his magic. His refusal stripped not only his magic, but also that of Lord You-Know-Who, thus preventing him from ever returning again to threaten our world.

Mr. Potter has been declared a hero for his selfless sacrifice. There were calls by the Wizengamot to award Potter an Order of Merlin, but those calls were dropped when the Ministry rightly pointed out that the Order cannot be award to a Muggle.

Headmistress McGonagall did call for a toast to be made in Potter's memory at last night's award ceremony. Many of those present were moved to tears at the loss of such a courageous spirit.

Sirius Black pushes Sentencing reform. See page 2

Bellatrix and Rodolphus LeStrange to be kissed! See Page 3.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Jun 12th 1995, Waivunu, Fiji...

Hermione,

I said it was no big deal. They know I'm not allergic to that potion, so they're trying to figure out why I had such an unusual reaction to it. Believe me, spending a week in hospital was no joy. Madam Pomfrey must train healers world wide because I swore my healers were just like her.

It's all old news at this point anyway. It happened last month, after all!

It's not nagging, really. Well, it is, but it's a good kind of nagging. Not too many people have cared about what happens to me in the past. I know Sirius and Remus do and I know you do. But it's not something I'm used to yet.

I'm glad that you, Ginny and Neville are growing closer, Hermione. I hate the fact that you've been alone all this year. And honestly, if I ever see Ron Weasley again, I'll be tempted to punch him in the nose!

You know, it's funny. I sit here, thousands of miles away, and I think about Ron and wonder why I was ever friends with him. Remus thinks I was so lonely and wanting a friend so bad that I accepted the first person to come along. And Ron stuck around because I let him make so many of the decisions. Funny thing is, he's probably right. You and Ron were my first real friends. I probably would have been friends with you from the start, but Ron tried to talk me out of it.

I hope you won't mind, but while I'm visiting with you I'll still need to keep up with my daily exercises. Master Kwang (or King Kong, as I prefer to call him) insists that I don't let myself go and I guess that makes sense. The man is huge! Not Hagrid huge, but huge for a normal person and I'd swear he'd swing from a tree if you offered him a banana. Honestly, Hermione, he has one eyebrow that runs from one eye to the other!

So, to appease Kong, I run ten kilometers every morning. If I can keep that up, then I can let the rest slide with King Kong's permission.

I pulled O's in most of my classes and Eton says I should master Occlumency by next year. He's teaching me some interesting protective techniques that aren't taught in western wizarding society. He was also more than a little annoyed by the influence you have over me. He's a stuffy git who's a lot like Snape, but at least he knows how to teach. The only problem I have is that he keeps harping on the influence you have on me. I swear, Hermione, one of these days I'm going to hex him good if he doesn't let up.

Yes, that's right, influence. He was probing my mind a couple months back and ran into some memories of you and knew from my emotional upsurge that I was missing you greatly. He made me sit down and start using the journal in private mode so I could try to figure out my feelings for you. I'll tell you now, don't look for any definitive answer except to say that my feelings are confusing. Sometimes I wish I could turn them off entirely, like that guy, Data, on the telly.

Honestly, I don't know if I could even say face to face half the stuff I say in these journal entries. And if I know you by now, you're biting a nail and wondering if I'm talking about my feelings changing. They have changed; they've gotten stronger and that is something I'm uncertain about.

Did you write Sirius? He went out and bought me a pair of swim trunks that look like you have be poured into. You know what I mean because you've been hinting about them for the last three entries. Well, I've got them now. Wearing them, however, is another matter. I do know he's charmed them to be fireproof, and no, you don't need to know how I know that.

Way back in March, Remus got a lead on another H. This one, believe it or not, was Hufflepuff's cup! He finally found it about two weeks back and we did the same thing with it as Sirius did the first. When Remus returned from the States after seeing the cup destroyed, he did something I've never seen him do. He got drunk, and he wept for my parents. Sirius and I had to put him into bed.

That's three down and three to go. Nagini will be the hard one. Slytherin's ring and Ravenclaw's brooch should be easy. Each one of these

brings us one step closer to when I can return home and not have to hide any more. Remus will be looking for the ring while I'm with you, then he'll come back with us to Fiji and Sirius will leave for a couple weeks.

He's been using his family seat on the Wizengamot to push through tougher laws for Death Eaters. We all breathed a sigh of relief when the LeStranges were kissed. I saw some of Sirius' memories of them in a Pensieve and they were true evil. Just looking at them made my skin crawl.

We're going to be seeing each other real soon and I'm counting down the days also. I know you'll yell at me for my language, but this time apart is hell.

I'll see you on the 25th, Hermione. Till then, take care of yourself.

Love,

Harry

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), June 13th, 1995 Oxford England...

LOVE? LOVE!

In his last journal entry, he wrote:

Love,
Harry

I've spent the day puzzling over this, trying to figure out what he meant by love.

He could be saying he loves me, as in 'I love treacle tart'. Or he could mean Love (yes with a capital L).

Alright, let's try to work this logically. Fact: Harry hasn't much experience with love, thanks to Dumbledore and those damnable Dursleys, so he obviously can't mean he loves me. But just the same he'd never say it or mean it the same way he'd say he loved treacle tart.

Am I making sense? I think I'm confusing myself!

He's given me some clear signals that he really likes me. Even someone as relationship obtuse as I am couldn't miss them. So, where does this 'love' fall into the picture? He couldn't love me like a sister, could he? No, that isn't possible either. He was quite plain in his meaning without coming out and saying it. Merciful Merlin, why won't he just say what he means?

I can't believe this! I've been home for nearly six hours now and I still haven't opened my text books to start my homework! No, Mr. I-will-confuse-the-girl Potter had to go and throw the 'L' word at me. Thank god I read that in our compartment when everyone was off changing out of their uniforms. I'm sure I may have squeaked out loud. Oh, alright, I know I did. Crookshanks spent the last twenty minutes of the trip giving me the evil eye for disturbing his nap.

I'm continuing this entry from the previous night. It's now two in the morning and I woke up from a dream that I thought I should write about. Harry's entry is still bothering me, why else would I have a dream about him like that?

I dreamed he was watching me with a strange look in his eye. I didn't understand his expression, and that's strange because I think I'm quite the expert at reading the many facial expressions of one Harry James Potter. He walked towards me and gently ran his hand against my cheek, then he leaned in and kissed me! I remember his expression. It was so clear, I thought it was real. I remember waking up and wishing I hadn't. I wanted the dream to continue! I want to know what happened next!

Anyway, I woke from a sound sleep and realized that figuring out what Harry meant wasn't nearly as important as figuring out what I would feel if he mean it in the real sense.

I laid in bed for nearly an hour thinking about that. I remember when I was younger I dreamed of a hero that would sweep me off my feet and carry me away to his castle. Childish, I know. Then I met Harry. He's moody at times, he's been hurt terribly in the past, but he strives to move beyond that. He's a hero, but his armor is tarnished and dented and his horse has a limp. The reality, however, is better than the dream.

Do I want him to love me? I think I do because I think I'm falling in love with him. It would be nice to know he feels for me as deeply as I feel for him. There, I've said it! I want Harry to love me because I think it would be so easy to love him back.

We're young, but I don't think we're too young to fall in love. If I've learned anything about this past year, it's that I've missed him as much as he's missed me. Do you hear me, Harry? I think we're connecting and I'm content with that for now. The future, however, looks to be wonderful, and I can't wait for it!

London, England, June 25th 1995...

Harry bit his lip and walked past the security guard, showing his stamp that proved he'd been cleared through customs. Behind him, a small cluster of airport security personnel were studying an X-Ray machine that had just gone up in smoke. He shook his head and smiled ruefully. While he was walking down the jetway he had recast his body shield. It was low powered, but would absorb a stunner or a medium power hex.

He always had the shield up these days. His Dark Arts teacher had drilled it into him, and while it hadn't become a habit yet, he was working on it.

What he hadn't counted on was the press of the crowd pushing him until he brushed the portable X-Ray machine they used to search for incoming contraband. Magic and technology don't mix and the machine fried on contact.

The terminal was packed. His flight was just one of many that had arrived nearly at the same time and there had to be three or four thousand people waiting for loved ones and friends to arrive. He blinked in the harsh light and looked around, wondering how he was going to find Hermione and her parents.

A brown blur streaked in from an oblique angle and he had only a split second to brace himself before he was engulfed in a warm hairy hug from Hermione. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair. He had dreamed of holding her like this.

They had seen each other only two months ago but seemed like forever.

"I've missed you so much," she whispered.

"Me too. You're a sight for sore eyes," he replied, then he looked up and smiled, seeing Dan and Emma not far away.

"Welcome home, Evan," Dan said softly. "How was your flight?"

Harry grinned. "Tiring, but I'll only have to do this one more time, and then we'll not need to do it again."

Neither adult missed the fact that the teens still held each other.

"Why, Evan?" she asked.

Harry and Hermione parted reluctantly and Harry grabbed the cart that held his luggage. "I'll explain when we get to the car. It's a little complicated and not something we should talk about in public."

Dan took the cart from Harry and Hermione latched onto his hand. He looked down at her hand and smiled at her.

"We're over this way, Evan," Dan said, then he started off with Harry and Hermione following. Emma followed the two teens with a satisfied smile. It was clear to her that they were on the cusp of forming a relationship. It hadn't happened yet, and still might take a while, but it was growing before her eyes.

Emma was thrilled for Hermione. Despite his rocky upbringing, Harry was unfailingly polite, and usually very soft spoken. He obviously cared about Hermione a lot. Emma felt privileged to be able to witness this. Had Hermione formed a relationship at school it would have been an accomplished fact before she got home. With Harry's insistence that her parents come along whenever possible, she had a front row seat on what Hermione and Harry were going through.

Once they were in the car, Harry rubbed his face tiredly. "In my trunk is a portable door. Remus will be arriving soon and he'll help me install it. It's much more convenient than a portkey, but they're very expensive. Portkeying between here and Fiji takes too long and is dizzying, as I found out at Easter. The doors are custom made in the far east. That's why you don't see them around very much. Sirius had to pull some strings to get them made for us.

"In order to keep customs records straight, I'll be flying home on the 30th of July. On the 31st, you, your parents and Remus will step through the door and come out in our living room in Fiji. I'll be there the next day. The door will be left at your home and we'll use that to go back and forth, rather than unbelievably long flights or sickening portkeys."

"But, Harry, you'll miss your own birthday!" protested Hermione.

Harry shrugged. "It's always been just another day for me. I never even knew when my birthday was until I entered primary school. I learned a lot about..."

He stopped and looked out the window. They were coming too close to subjects he didn't want to talk about. It was common knowledge that life with the Dursleys had been hard for him. Even with that, he didn't like talking about it.

Hermione reached out and gripped his hand, gently squeezing it for support.

"So, do you have any idea what you'd like to do while you're here, Harry?" asked Dan.

He looked forward again. "Yes, sir, I'm thinking that first I'll help Hermione finish off her homework. Once that's done, we'll have more free time. I have a set of exercises to teach her for her focus ring and I need to transfigure a stick to look like her wand. Beyond that, I was hoping that maybe we could visit London and take in some of the sights? I've lived in Britain all my life but except for trips to the store to carry packages and my trips to Diagon Alley and Hogwarts, I've never seen the country."

Dan and Emma exchanged a grin. "Shakespeare walking tour?" she asked excitedly.

"Absolutely!" he replied with a grin.

Harry tried to hide a yawn, but it was too much for him.

I think someone needs a dose and off to bed,” Emma said, watching him carefully.

He nodded. “I could use a bite first, then I've got a potion that should put me out until tomorrow.” He glanced at his watch, noting it was nearly five in the afternoon. “I've brought some gifts that I think you'll really like, but I think they'll wait until tomorrow when I'm more awake.”

“Well, then, how about some Chinese take away?” offered Dan.

“As long as it's not sushi,” Harry said with a shudder. “Sirius tricked me into trying the stuff after I was released from the hospital in Tokyo. Hideous stuff! Give me something that's cooked any day of the week.”

“I never thought you were a picky eater, Harry,” Hermione replied softly. She liked sushi!

“Generally, I'm not. But sushi reminds me too much of the Dursleys. Aunt Petunia used to give me raw chop meat instead of what she was cooking for dinner. It didn't happen often, but it was enough,” he replied quietly.

“That's called a learned response,” Emma offered. “It wouldn't be easy, but you could overcome it. However, for tonight, we'll have Chinese take away and we'll make sure yours is cooked.”

Harry nodded and smiled sheepishly.

Two hours later, Hermione came back downstairs where her parents were sitting in the living room.

“Is he sleeping?” asked Emma.

“Out like a light. He took that dose and was asleep before his head hit the pillow,” she replied. “I'm not sure he even needed the potion, he was that tired.”

“I can't help thinking about all the things he's missed out on. Then I wonder how he managed to turn out the way he did,” mused Dan.

“He's not that bad,” Hermione said with a frown.

“No one is saying he is, dear,” replied Emma. “But even you have noticed how little self esteem he has at times. He's working on it, that much is obvious, but he still has a way to go.”

“He's a good lad. He'll get there. And did you see the muscles he's wearing now? I think that PE course of his is really helping,” Dan said

Hermione blushed to the tips of her ears. The changes in Harry hadn't been lost on her. He didn't have a body builder physique, thankfully. She'd never been interested in bulging muscles. Instead he was toned and tanned. When she'd met him at the airport, she'd hugged him and couldn't believe the changes. He was a little taller, which she expected, but he felt like iron. He'd always been a little thin, but he'd put on a bit of weight, and built up some muscle mass. He'd never be brawny, but he looked much better than he had before he left Hogwarts.

Being away from the Dursleys, surrounded by a family who obviously loved and cared for him, certainly agreed with him.

Emma chuckled. “Judging by that blush, I'd say that our daughter has noticed those muscles, too.”

Hermione stood. “I don't have to stay here and take this abuse. I'm going to go work on my homework,” she said with a sniff. Her blush deepened and she retreated to the sound of her parent's laughter.

Hermione's home, Oxford, England, Jun 26th 1995...

Harry reached to open the door when it was suddenly flung open and he was pulled inside with a surprised squeak.

Hermione glared at him. “Where have you been?” she asked, her eyes flashing and her hands on her hips.

“Out running? I told you about this. I get up at five and run every morning,” he replied mildly.

Her expression softened and she motioned for him to enter. “Mum and Dad are just getting up. If you want, you can use the bath in the garage for a shower. Otherwise, you'll have to wait until they're done with it. They're going to spend the next few days at work, catching up on paperwork, until I'm done with my assignments.”

“Right. I'll run up to my room and grab some clothes to change into after I shower.”

An hour later, Harry sat down to the kitchen table with a small package. The Granger's eyed him curiously.

“Good morning, Harry. Did you sleep well?” asked Emma.

“Yes, thank you. I know you and Mr. Granger are going to work today, but I brought a few magical gifts I thought you'd like to look at.”

He opened the package and pulled out what looked to be a pane of window glass. He passed it to Dan. “That's a natural aquarium window for your study. You hang it on the wall and it shows you a scene of a coral reef just off the coast of Fiji, along with fish and occasionally someone swimming by,” he explained. “The really nice thing about it is you don't have to feed the fish.”

Harry reached out and touched the window, then muttered something Dan couldn't quite catch. The glass flared to life.

"Astounding!" marveled Dan. "But won't I need to hide this?"

"No. It's charmed so only wizards, or people who know about magic can see it. Muggles will only see a still image, like a photograph."

He reached into the box and pulled out two smaller boxes, handing one to Hermione and one to Emma.

Each opened a box to find a finely wrought gold chain with several polished seashells attached to it. Harry looked briefly uncomfortable and unsure of himself. Maybe these gifts were too personal?

Hermione could feel the magic in the chain and she looked at Harry curiously.

"The old lady that sold me the chains said they were for women only and you'd understand what they do after a month or so. When I tried to get her to explain, she refused. I bought them because they were pretty and I knew they wouldn't hurt you. Sirius managed to get an explanation, but the old lady said I was too young to know."

Hermione frowned, reluctant to put the chain on.

"The old woman said they have their own magic, so even a muggle can use them," Harry offered.

Emma's eyes lit up she loved all things magic and suspected what this might be related to. She undid the clasp and handed it to Dan, then she lifted her hair from her neck. Dan closed the clasp and she shivered for a moment. Then, with a sigh, she leaned over and whispered something to Hermione.

"Really?" Hermione asked.

Emma nodded.

"That's useful," she said as she passed the chain to Harry. Lifting her hair, she smiled at him. "Will you put it on, please?"

He fumbled with the clasp but finally managed to open the little lock and put it on. He resisted the temptation to kiss her neck. Hermione fluffed out the back of her hair and then turned to smile at him.

"Do you know what it does, Mrs. Granger?" asked Harry.

Emma looked at Harry for a moment, then smiled. "I do, but I think it's best that you don't know for now. You bought them because they're pretty and I thank you for that. It was a very thoughtful gift."

Harry wanted to protest, but settled for a frown instead. He was beginning to feel like the old woman had swindled him somehow.

Dan leaned over and winked. "Harry, if there's one lesson to learn, it's that women aren't meant to be understood all the time. They have this little secret club, you see. If a man gets too close to it, they kill him."

"Dan!" Emma said warningly.

"Dad!" shouted Hermione, her face flushed.

Harry tried not to laugh. "I guess it doesn't matter. I didn't buy them for the magic, after all. I knew they were charmed and Sirius said it was safe. I was just curious, that's all. If Mrs. Granger and Hermione say they're alright, I'll go along with it."

He turned back to his package, pulled out three books and gave them to Hermione. "One of these is a new book about using your focus ring. The other two cover advanced transfiguration theory and ancient runes, which we'll be taking next month back in Waivunu."

"Do you use your wand at all any more?" asked Emma.

He nodded. "Sirius and Remus insisted on it. I can do things so much better with my ring, but they want me to continue using the wand. This way, no one will know about the ring. Speaking of that," he said, turning to Hermione, "have you been keeping up your practices?"

Hermione gestured and the tea pot floated across the room and refilled her cup. She looked at Harry and grinned broadly when he laughed.

He was pleased to see she had kept up with her ring work. It was sufficiently different that it could almost be classified as a different type of magic than wand work.

Dan looked at his watch. "We're going to be late if we don't get a move on," he said to Emma.

They both stood and headed for the door. "We'll be home by five. I'll call later to see what we're doing for dinner," Emma called over her shoulder. A few minutes later the two teens were alone with the breakfast dishes.

Harry stood and looked at the table. "I'll clean up here. Why don't you bring your homework down and work at the table? I'll sit with you and either help or work on my own studies."

She nodded and rushed upstairs for her things.

Harry turned back to the table and raised a hand. All of the dirty dishes lifted off the table and floated into the kitchen. With a twirl of his fingers they washed themselves, one by one, and landed in the drying rack.

"You're handy to have around, Mr. Potter," she said from the doorway. Her arms were loaded with books and parchment.

He grinned. "If that impresses you, you should taste my soufflé."

"You can cook? I never would have realized after seeing you in potions class," she teased.

He frowned. "I do much better in that subject now. I guess it's because I don't have an overgrown bat hovering over me. Do you need any help with your homework?"

She looked at him, arching an eyebrow.

"Er, right!" he said, feeling a bit foolish. "I'll just be over here working on my meditation exercises."

He sat down and closed his eyes. Eton had originally taught him the technique, but several of his tutors had wanted him to continue using it to reach out to his core. The process of touching his core helped strengthen his connection to his magic. Remus and his defense tutor wanted to see if he'd be able to hold a continuous shield by touching his core and attaching it directly to the shield.

"Harry? Harry!"

He opened his eyes and looked up at Hermione. She was leaning over him, looking worried. "Sorry about that. Did you say something?"

She straightened up and looked at him in exasperation. "I've been trying to wake you for twenty minutes. You've been sitting there silently for hours, but every so often you'd... Well, you'd glow and levitate off the chair!"

He chuckled, then stood up and stretched. "Relax, Hermione. Meditation is one of the things I'm going to try to teach you this month. Using it, you can touch your core and strengthen your connection to your magic. Are you done with your homework already?"

She shook her head. "I've completed several essays, but it's nearly four and my parents will be home soon."

"Why don't you give them a call and tell them we'll cook dinner for them tonight? I'll run up to my room and grab my wallet, then we can walk to the store to get what we need."

"Are you sure you can cook?" she asked with some suspicion.

He grinned. "Why do I get the impression that you have problems with cooking?" he asked.

"I'm not answering that," she muttered darkly, as she turned away and picked up the phone.

They ate outside around a picnic table in the Granger's backyard. Harry had cooked a chicken breast over rice dish and had included a number of tropical fruits. The meal was sweet, with a small bite of tartness and well received by the adult Grangers and Hermione.

Dan was surprised to find Harry turning down the offer of a Guinness stout. When pressed, he replied that his tutors had told him that he should avoid mind altering drinks and drugs. Eton's take was a simple, "I teach you to defend your mind and you weaken it with drink?"

Sirius had been extremely disappointed by Eton's attitude, and even more so by the fact that Harry agreed to abide by it. Remus, on the other hand, applauded the decision. Remus rarely drank, it was too easy for the raging wolf to break free when he was drunk.

"So, three of the horcruxes have been destroyed, Harry?" asked Emma.

He nodded and gestured, placing a privacy charm in place. "Yes. The diary, Slytherin's locket and Hufflepuff's cup. There's still a ring out there that was once owned by Slytherin and a brooch owned by Ravenclaw. The last one is the difficult one; Nagini."

"Why is that the hard one?" asked Emma. "And what about Voldemort? Isn't he still around?"

Harry leaned forward. "The snake itself isn't the horcrux, but there is something inside it that contains the horcrux. From what I've been able to figure out, the horcrux should be pouring out enough dark magic to change Nagini. She's a very large snake, and most likely she's poisonous. Adding the horcrux to that will enhance her darker features. If she's like other snakes I've talked with, she's also very intelligent."

He took a drink from his glass, then tilted his head in thought. "So, we have a horcrux that moves and can inflict dangerous, perhaps lethal, bites. Remus showed me pictures of several snakes since I had the vision of Nagini and Voldemort last year. He hoped to identify it. The closest we could find was a Black Mamba, which is the second largest poisonous snake in Africa and one of the deadliest snakes in the world.

"Remus thinks Nagini might have started out as a Black Mamba, but that the Horcrux has twisted her beyond that."

Emma shivered. "Do you have any idea where Nagini is now?"

He shook his head. "No, but we're planning to search for her once the other horcruxes have been destroyed. I should be able to get a handle on her fairly quickly, if I can get the snakes to cooperate."

At their confused looks, he was forced to explain. "I can talk to snakes. It's called Parseltongue. British Wizarding society considers it an evil talent."

"That'll be handy," murmured Dan.

"Nagini's a magical creature, but she won't have the ability to cast spells, even if Voldemort's consciousness bled through to her. She'd have to go find another parseltongue, or another snake that does have some abilities to help her," Hermione mused.

Harry turned to stare at her. "Hermione! That's brilliant!"

She blinked at him. "What?"

"She'll go to the one snake she knows has powers and should be willing to help her. The problem is, she doesn't know it's dead!"

"The Basilisk?"

Harry nodded. "What happened in the chamber never became public knowledge. And I think it might be safe to say that Lucius Malfoy never had the chance to tell Voldemort that he willingly gave one of his precious Horcruxes to an eleven year old girl. It may be nothing, but I think it's worth looking into."

"And what about Voldemort, Harry?" asked Emma again.

He twirled his glass around on the table for a moment, then looked up at her. "We're not sure, but Remus thinks that with the destruction of a Horcrux, something interesting will happen. Voldemort's spirit could become disembodied, but with the close proximity of Nagini and her horcrux, he thinks Voldemort's spirit will be absorbed into that horcrux. So, killing Nagini means killing both a horcrux and the excess spirit."

"Of course," murmured Hermione, turning to Harry. "The pull of the horcrux on the spirit fragment would be irresistible." Her eyes widened. "But that would make Nagini..."

"A double horcrux," Harry said, completing her thought.

Everyone fell silent for a few minutes to consider the implications and the atmosphere grew uncomfortably heavy.

"How goes the homework?" asked Dan, trying to change the subject.

"I got about a third of it done, while Harry slept most of the day," she said dryly.

"I wasn't sleeping," Harry protested. "I was meditating."

"Alright, call it what you want," teased Hermione. "I'm just glad you didn't snore."

Looking offended, he bent down to finish his dessert, ignoring the laughter of the three Grangers. He knew when he was out numbered.

Later that evening, Dan and Emma held a private conversation in their bedroom.

"So, what does the necklace do?" Dan asked. He had been dying of curiosity all day.

"Are you sure you want to know?"

He nodded.

"Well, our guest brought them because they are pretty. What he didn't know is they were apparently designed for a specific purpose. I put mine on this morning and my cramps faded away to nothing in seconds. You know that aspirin only takes the edge off. This made them disappear."

Dan suddenly looked squeamish. "Oh."

She glanced at him, amused. "Yes, 'oh'. I think Harry would be embarrassed to know what they do. But you know both Hermione and I have bad cramps every month. This solves the problem and, like he said, it's pretty."

"I think he'd die if he knew. Does Hermione know?"

Emma nodded. "She's actually looking forward to experiencing the necklace for herself. But she's of two minds about it. Like Harry, she's embarrassed, but she's also thrilled. It's the first piece of real jewelry anyone besides us has given her. Add to that the fact that it came from a boy she likes very much."

"She does, doesn't she?" asked Dan unhappily.

Emma looked at him sharply. "What are you upset about?"

"She's still my little girl!" he replied mulishly.

"She always will be, Dan. But she's growing up. When Sirius and Remus talked about Harry's father and grandfather, I thought they were pulling our legs. Now, I'm not so sure."

"You think they are getting too attached?" Dan asked worriedly.

Emma sat on the edge of the bed and thought about his question for a while. "Yes... and no. What I see them doing is starting a relationship in slow

motion," she said softly, then looked at him. "What I mean is that they're going to take things very slowly. Hermione has a good head on her shoulders, and so does Harry. I think this summer we'll see a lot of hand holding and some hugs and kisses from them, and that's about it.

"They'll probably move ahead a bit more next summer, but I don't think you have anything to worry about until we're closer to graduation. Harry's focusing on his education, and making sure Hermione is kept safe. He wouldn't do anything she doesn't want him to do."

"You could tell all that just from today?" he asked incredulously.

She grinned smugly. "I know my daughter and I think I know Harry well enough by now. All I ask is you give him a chance to prove himself to you."

He nodded uncertainly. "I can do that, Em. I'm not trying to be unreasonable."

"I know. Now turn off the lights and come to bed. We have to get up early again tomorrow."

Hermione's home, Oxford, England, July 3rd 1995...

Over the course of the next week Harry and Hermione held mostly to the same routine of study. The only difference was, in the afternoon, they moved into the backyard. He swam in the pool, while she continued to work on her essays.

Now, nearly a week after Harry arrived, she rolled up her last parchment and smiled to herself. Harry had helped when and where he could. He made sure she had something to drink and basically left her to the job. It was quite a change from working in the common room, or even working with Neville and Ginny, where there was always some sort of conversation going on.

They had plenty to talk about, it was just that Harry gave her the solitude she craved to really concentrate on her homework. He seemed to know what she needed and didn't feel as if he had to fill the long silences with pointless conversation.

She placed the last roll in her school bag and used her focus ring to send the entire bag back into the house. With a pleased sigh, she leaned back on her chair and watched Harry swim laps in the pool. She frowned, seeing he was wearing a shirt again.

Standing, she walked over to the edge of the pool, sat down and dangled her legs in the cool water. He looked up and smiled at her. He let himself drift for a moment, then reached for the pool edge and pulled himself out of the water to sit beside her.

"All done?"

She nodded. "It went faster than usual."

"Would you like to learn a new exercise for your ring, then?"

She took a deep breath and almost changed her mind, sure the question she wanted to ask wouldn't be something he'd want to talk about. "I know we talked about this using the journals, but I'd like to know why you always wear a shirt when you're swimming. You have tanned arms and legs, and your face and neck. Why is that?"

Harry's expression altered and he looked down. "I have places on my back that don't tan. It would look weird."

When she remained silent, he glanced up at her. Seeing the confusion in her eyes, he sighed, peeled off his shirt and turned away from her. On his back were nearly thirty marble sized scars of irregular shape.

"What happened?" she whispered. Her hand reached out and touched one and he shivered under her touch.

"Dudley," he replied. "It was the only time I ever saw Aunt Petunia really mad at him. He was having a tantrum and he threw a pot of boiling water at me. I ducked, but I was still splashed with it. My plastic surgeon said he could fix some of them, but that there were too many and even a skin graft wouldn't help much because the scars are so old.

"Sirius and Remus know about the scars, but I haven't told them what caused it. I don't like talking about that time," he said, reaching for his shirt so he could put it on.

"Don't," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "They're part of you Harry. You don't need to feel ashamed about them. Believe me when I say it doesn't change a thing about how I feel about you."

He blushed and looked at his feet dangling in the water. "Thank you," he replied softly.

She picked up his shirt, wrung it out and spread it out to dry. Her parents were cosmopolitan enough that her only body modesty came from her own self image and not from others. "Now you were going to show me a new focus ring exercise?"

He grinned at her and held out his hand. A globule of water detached itself from the pool and lifted up to hover over his hand. "This is part exercise and part game. Watch carefully."

The hovering blob of water suddenly seemed to solidify. "It's not really solid. There's a paper thin layer of ice containing the water. Now, the purpose of this, to start, is to make the ball of water hover higher and higher without touching it. If you get really good, you can start playing a form of catch with it. But there's a penalty. If the ball touches you, anywhere, it will shatter and hit you with ice cold water."

Hermione watched him carefully as he lifted the ball twenty feet above his head, then let it free fall. Just when she thought it would hit him and

shatter, a puff of wind caught it and hurled it upwards.

He played with the ball for a moment longer, then he let it fall back into the pool and turned to her. "This is where things start to get different from wand use. Hold your hand out, palm up and concentrate on what you want the magic to do. There's no movement, no incantation. Command the magic and let the ring be your focus."

Hermione nodded and held her hand out. A moment later a stream of water hit her, soaking her thoroughly. She glared at Harry, who rolled over on his side, laughing.

"Well?" she asked archly.

He regained control and turned back to her, then averted his eyes. "Hermione, go change into something you don't mind getting wet!" he exclaimed in a strangled voice.

She glanced down at the white t-shirt that was now molded to her frame like a second skin and blushed brightly. It was obvious that she found the water cold. She bounced to her feet and ran back into the house. Ten minutes later, she came back out wearing her bathing suit and muttering to herself.

"I'm sorry," he told her.

She looked at him strangely. "For what?"

"For looking at you when you were like that."

She grinned. "Well, at least you know I'm a girl now."

He grunted and muttered something she couldn't hear.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"No, you said something. What was it?"

He looked up at her and knew from her expression that she wasn't about to let it drop. He sighed and knew he had backed himself into a proverbial corner. "I said that I was well aware that you were a girl."

She grinned smugly at him. "So, is this what your tutor complained about when he said I was a distraction?"

He thought for a moment, then stood and motioned her over to the table. "I think we should talk," he said softly.

She tensed, wondering what had just happened. Why had he become so serious? She moved to sit at the picnic table and watched him as he joined her there. Her stomach was churning with worry. Reluctantly she took a seat across the table from him.

"I've been told I have a tendency to rush into some things without considering the circumstances and I guess that's true. I'm going to say something and it's going to have an impact on us, Hermione. This last year with Sirius and Remus has been an eye opener for me. But even more of an eye opener was this last year without you in my life."

He looked at her intently. "Believe me when I say I'm well aware that you're a girl. I think you're beautiful and I often wonder what it would be like to kiss you."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he waved her to silence.

"I would like to know what it would be like. But, to be truthful, I'm scared. I'm afraid that if I make that kind of move, I'll risk losing the best friendship I've ever known. Part of me wants more and another part isn't willing to gamble what I have now."

She stared at him for several minutes. He had said things she had always hoped he would say, and then explained why he didn't act on them. It was confusing and annoying, especially since she knew he'd do nothing without any clear signal from her.

Finally, he ran a hand through his hair and let out an explosive breath. "I knew I would mess this up," he muttered in an anguished tone.

She blinked and shook her head vigorously. "No! You haven't messed anything up, Harry," she replied quickly, then she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. "I was surprised to hear you voicing the same worries I had. And no one has ever called me beautiful before," she ended in a whisper.

"Well, they should have," he blurted, then looked away quickly.

She looked down at her hands, studying them carefully and trying to control the blush she felt creeping up her face. "So, where does that leave us?" she asked, still staring at her hands.

"Would you like to be my girlfriend?" he asked, then closed his eyes and nearly groaned. Oh, God! Did I just blurt that out? Merlin, did that sound as lame as I think? he asked himself. I'm dead. She's going to kill me. Or hate me. How could I be so stupid? My life is over. Just kill me and bury the body Hermione!

She looked up to see him turning red. Despite his obvious discomfort, however, his gaze captured hers.

"I think I'd like that," she replied, then she did something she rarely did. She giggled as a sudden thought came to mind.

"What?"

"I just had this vision of Parvati and Lavender going ape when they hear that Evan is my boyfriend."

She laughed again and he smiled. He knew from her journal entries that Lavender and Parvati were dying to find out more information about Evan.

As her laughter died away, he mustered his courage, leaned across the table and kissed her, quickly. It caught her by surprise and she stared at him in shock.

He leaned back and sat down again. "We're going to have to try that again when we have more time. Now, do you want to know why you got soaked when you tried to summon the water?"

She nodded, unable to fathom if she was nodding in response to his comment about kissing again, or about the spell. Finally she held up a hand and shook her head, trying to clear it.

"You kissed me!" she exclaimed finally.

"I did. Weren't you listening when I said I wanted to kiss you?"

"I did, but..."

"But you didn't really believe it?" He sighed and shook his head when she reluctantly nodded. "What a pair we make. I was convinced I wasn't good enough for someone like you and you're convinced I shouldn't be interested in you."

She smiled wanly and reached across the table, taking his hand in hers. "It will take us both a while to get used to it. In the meantime, why don't you tell me what I did wrong?"

"Alright, but don't be surprised if I kiss you again sometime."

"I'm counting on it."

He grinned, then pointed at the pool. With a simple gesture, he had a frozen orb of water in his hand. "Your first mistake was that you tried to use your ring like a wand. In an emergency it can fill in for that particular job, but it highlights the limitations of wands and formalized spells."

He turned back to her, still floating the ball of ice water. "When you attempted to summon the water, you used the Accio spell in your mind, didn't you?"

She nodded.

He leaned back on the bench. "The accio is a wand spell, Hermione. Think outside the wand. Sure, you can do the summoning spell with the ring, but it's not exactly what you wanted to do."

He gestured and the orb of water vanished. Next, he conjured a sheet of parchment and laid it flat on the table. "Use your ring to fold the parchment in half."

She frowned. "I don't know a spell for that."

"I know. You don't need one. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Concentrate on what you want your magic to do, then let the ring tap into your magic to make it happen. I know you can do this. You've told me you've been doing the exercises to touch your core."

"Your desire can power your magic without the need for a formal incantation and wand movement. That's what I'm trying to teach you."

She stared at the parchment for a long while. It quivered a few times, then suddenly rolled itself up.

He grinned and unrolled the parchment. "Not quite what I had in mind, but that was good. Let's try it again. This time, make it into a roll instead of folding it. That first time was an accident, but let's see if you can repeat it. Command the magic."

Three minutes later the parchment was neatly rolled again and she let out an explosive breath of relief. "This is hard," she said in complaint.

"It isn't, really. What's hard is forgetting what you've learned. That's why you have so much trouble."

She looked at him, confused. "I don't understand."

"You like the structure of wand magic because you like order. Order is comforting to you. But ring magic is unstructured. There's no spell, no movement, no incantation. You envision what you want your magic to do and the ring helps focus your magic to make it happen. Maybe I made a mistake by telling you a ring could perform as a wand. You took that to mean it works the same way. when it doesn't."

He unrolled the parchment and laid it flat again. "Now, try it again."

She grimaced, but in less than a minute the paper was rolled up. "That time it came easier."

He grinned. "I think that, until you have it down pat, you should practice by doing things which you don't know corresponding wand spells."

Quibbler Headline Article, July 15th, 1995...

Harry Potter Prevents Ward Decay!

Despite his muggle nature, our reluctant hero has once again made his presence felt when he suggested to the International Association of Professional Warders that adding fluoride to their warding ceremonies would help prevent ward decay.

As you recall, Ward Decay was the principle cause of the Muggle stock market crash back in 1929. The Ministry denies this possibility, but they also deny any involvement in the coming Heliotrope revolution or the rise of Voldemort.

Potter, age 14, swooped down on the IAPW meeting in his patented bat suit and announced his findings. He then swooped away before the stunned audience could muster any form of reply. It was only after the incident that Melon Frumpberger, IAPW president and poster child, denied vehemently that it had happened.

Obviously, Frumpberger is lying. We have it from multiple eyewitnesses that Potter appeared to be an expert at swooping. How would so many eye witnesses know this unless it really happened?

This publication can't help but wonder what other mischief Potter will get into. Will he prevent the mass migration of Nargles through Naples? Or will he endanger our world by proving Stubby Boardman is not really Sirius Black using polyjuice?

We strongly suggest that the Ministry find Mr. Potter and stop him before he contacts brain eating aliens from planet Six!

Daily Prophet Article, July 15th 1995...

Wizengamot Narrowly Defeats Harry Potter Day Proclamation.

In a narrow vote, the movement to declare Harry Potter's birthday a national holiday was once again overturned. The Ministry was firmly against the idea, stating that the Wizarding world does not honor muggles by naming holidays after them.

What came as a complete surprise, however, was the fact that Sirius Black, Harry Potter's godfather, came out openly opposing the proposal. Mr. Black is quoted as saying, "Harry does not want the wizarding world to name any holiday after him. He left our world, discouraged and unhappy with the way he was treated. Naming a holiday after him would be a grave disservice to a boy who made the ultimate sacrifice for us."

Walden McNair, Ministry department head and Wizengamot member, led the effort to create the new holiday. "Of course, we're disappointed, and by no means have we seen the last of this effort. However, for now, we abide by the wishes of the Wizengamot. Perhaps we'll try again next year," he said.

In other business, the Wizengamot voted 78 to 22 to declare it illegal to sell medicinal potions to muggles who are not already aware of the Wizarding world. The Wizengamot also approved a proposal by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to create a special unit capable of handling undercover operations in the muggle world.

Hogwarts, office of the Headmistress...

Minerva McGonagall finished the last of the official letters she needed to write to the Governors explaining the past year and the results of the Triwizard Tournament. The board had not been pleased with the outcome and accusations had flown fast and furious against Miss Delacour.

Some claimed she had used her Veela abilities unfairly to confound the other two champions. However, in examining the magical traces recorded during the final minutes of the competition, it was discovered that she hadn't used any magic at all. Krum and Diggory had fallen for a much older and more potent magic than Veela magic. They had fallen for a pretty girl and started fighting over her.

Madame Maxime was understandably upset by the accusations as was the Triwizard Champion, Miss Delacour. Instead of waiting for the facts, several board members made public statements that had resulted in Minerva being forced to write letters of apology on behalf of Hogwarts and the board of Governors.

"Excuse me, Professor?"

Minerva looked up, surprised, but relaxed when she saw the house elf standing in the room, holding a box. A Hogwarts elf would be the only creature capable of entering her office without her approval.

"Yes, Tinky? What can I do for you?"

"Professor, this box contains things left over from Master Albus. Some of them are magical and are still working."

Minerva frowned. She had ordered the elves to clean out the man's possessions when she assumed his position. She sighed. With Dumbledore dead, she might as well try to figure out what to do with his possessions.

"Put the box on the floor, Tinky, and we'll go through it. I certainly don't want you rooting through anything that might contain dark magic. Merlin knows

I wouldn't put it past that man," she replied.

The little elf placed the box on the floor next to McGonagall, who leaned down and opened the box. The first item, a foe detector, she placed on the desk. She also found the Puter Outer and several charmed snow globes. Gryffindor's sword was in the box, as was what looked to be an early copy of the Marauder's map. Near the bottom she found a small saucer shaped silver object that spun and emitted puffs of green smoke.

"Well, hello. And what are you?" she asked the object. She placed it on the desk and stared at it. "I've always wondered what you were for."

"It's a tracker, Professor," Tinky said softly. She wasn't used to the new Headmistress yet. Before the changeover, she had been Dumbledore's personal elf.

"A tracker?" Minerva said, looking at her.

"Yes, ma'am. Professor Dumbledore said it tracks his most important student and tells him how he is doing."

Minerva sucked in a breath. "Tinky, do you know the name of that student?"

The little elf trembled in fear, but nodded.

Minerva frowned. She hadn't meant to frighten the creature. "I'm sorry, Tinky. I'm not angry at you. But would you please tell me the name of the student?"

"Harry Potter, Professor."

Minerva sat back on her chair, thinking hard. The device was clearly still operating, but it should have ceased tracking Harry when he lost his magic. She opened the lid on the device and saw a small crystal vial of blood contained within.

It's tracking on his blood? Shouldn't that have stopped when he lost his magic? I don't understand this. she thought. Maybe I could ask Ollivander. He knows about such devices.

She waved her wand and all of the magical objects, except for the tracker, returned to the box. She leaned forward and rubbed her forehead.

Harry's leaving was only one of several odd things that happened last year. she mused. What about Miss Granger? The girl returned from holiday practically ecstatic. Before the break, she had been depressed and her grades had started to slip. But that all changed when she came back. Why?

She considered the rumors that had been circulating near the end of the year about Miss Granger having met a boy on a tropical island. She had dismissed them at the time because she knew the girl wasn't likely to fall that hard for someone she had just met. But what if it was someone she knew very well? Someone she had thought she had lost? That might account for her change in attitude.

She pulled a piece of blank parchment out to write a note to Ollivander. She had a suspicion now and she'd probably know better after she talked with the wand maker.

Hermione's home, Oxford England, Jun 16th 1995...

"Sirius! Remus!" Harry shouted from the pool. He swam to the edge and lifted himself out so he could greet his guardians.

Hermione, floating on an air-mattress, waved and went back to practicing her ring exercises. It had taken her a while, but she had finally made the connection between desire to perform magic and commanding it. Right now she was summoning her orb of semi-frozen water.

"Hey, Cub!" Remus said, flashing him a quick grin before waving to Hermione.

"Harry," Sirius said, then he glanced over at Hermione and grinned slyly. "So, you're checking out Hermione in her bikini, eh?"

Harry blushed and stopped dead in his tracks. What Sirius said was true, but he wasn't about to admit it! He was sure Hermione knew, but neither of them spoke about it.

A second later Sirius was soaking wet and shivering from the now broken ball of semi-frozen water. "I don't mind Harry ogling me. But you're too old, Sirius Black," Hermione said with a sniff of mock disdain. Using her ring, she propelled the air mattress to the shallow end of the pool and climbed out of the pool.

"Old? Me?" Sirius said, aghast.

"Yes, old," agreed Emma from the door of the house. "Now, if you're interested, I happen to know a very nice woman who would probably enjoy knowing you. She's a muggle, a doctor, and probably just up your alley, considering how much she enjoys immature pranks and potty humor."

"Oh, Merlin," muttered Remus. "A female version of Sirius? I'd never survive it!"

Sirius, on the other hand, looked intrigued. "A doctor? Really? Maybe I should meet her!"

The two older men walked to the picnic table and their expressions tightened, becoming more serious.

"Harry, can we talk?" asked Remus.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked back at him inquisitively. He shrugged, then joined the two men at the table.

Remus leaned forward and looked at him intently. When he saw Hermione watching them, he waved her over to join them.

“You know I've been hunting for the horcruxes,” Remus said as Hermione sat down.

The two teens nodded and Harry reached for Hermione's hand. Something about Remus' attitude seemed off and he was afraid he was about to get some bad news.

Sirius, spotting the two holding hands, raised an eyebrow and grinned, but said nothing.

“A few days ago I searched the ancestral home of the Gaunt family. Gaunt was the maiden name of Voldemort's mother. The Gaunts are all dead, so the building is falling into ruin, but I did discover a few interesting and disturbing things.

“First off, I found Slytherin's Ring. It was heavily warded, hidden under the floor of the sitting room. However, Voldemort never considered that someone might try breaking in from the basement, which was unprotected.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a large gold ring with a green stone and placed it on the table.

Harry looked at the ring with revulsion. When Hermione tried to reach for it, and he snatched her hand away. “Don't,” he said, shuddering in revulsion. “It's vile. I can feel it from here.” He tore his eyes from the ring and looked at Remus. “Why haven't you destroyed it?”

“There are some spells on the ring that weren't put there by Voldemort,” Sirius said. “We think we'll have to break those enchantments before we can destroy the ring. I'll be taking it to the States the day after tomorrow. My friend at the Department of Magic has offered the services of their curse breakers. They don't know what we're destroying, but they recognize that we're searching out dark artifacts and destroying them. They agree the items need to be destroyed and are willing to help.”

Remus' expression turned grim. “Harry, we found something else at the Gaunt home. We found Wormtail.”

Harry's expression lit up and he looked eager. “Great! When is his trial?”

Remus shook his head. “No, you don't understand. Peter was dead. From the looks of things, he was bitten by a snake, most likely Nagini. From the state of the body, we think he's been dead for at least eight months.”

“That would put it right around the start of the Triwizard tournament,” Hermione said softly.

“Yes, that was our thought,” Remus agreed. “We found a newspaper spread out on the floor with the article that announced you and Voldemort had both lost your magic.”

“There were signs all over the place that a snake had spent the winter there,” offered Sirius.

Harry nodded and he bowed his head. The news wasn't completely unexpected, but he'd always hoped that someday he'd be the one to give Wormtail the justice he deserved.

“Harry?” Remus said softly.

He looked up, his eyes troubled. “I'm sorry. I know he was once your friend, but I always hoped I'd be there when he paid for his crimes.”

“He's paying for his crimes,” Sirius said, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. “He hurt all of us; you most of all. But never think he isn't paying the price for his actions.”

Hermione leaned against him, trying to offer what comfort she could. He took a deep shuddering breath and fought off the welter of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. When he opened his eyes, they were bright, clear and determined.

“Hermione and I have a theory about what Nagini might do,” he said.

The two older men looked interested and Hermione outlined their ideas about Nagini.

“Very good,” Remus approved, impressed by both of them.

Emma watched from the kitchen window for a moment longer. She knew she would find out later what had happened. What ever it was had a profound effect on Harry. She made note of the fact that he'd accepted comfort from Hermione without question or embarrassment.

The teens had announced to Dan and Emma that they were now officially dating. So far, that meant two trips to the movies, one night when Harry treated the whole family to dinner and dancing, and lots of walks around the neighborhood. They hugged more often and held hands a lot, and even occasionally shared a chaste kiss.

It made Emma want to pull her hair out! She had tried to talk to Hermione, hoping to find out if they were more romantic in private, but her daughter wasn't talking. Emma had come to understand that their fear that their friendship could be ruined had put the entire relationship into slow motion. The pair were exercising a remarkable amount of self control for their age and she was proud of them.

Emma chuckled watching them now. Hermione wasn't entirely above the whole hormone issue. Her choice of bathing suit proved that. Emma had bought her a skimpy blue bikini. She and Hermione had fought over it before Harry arrived, but she still wore it despite the fact that she owned more

modest swim suits. She and Dan had taken Hermione several times to Nice, in Southern France, for holiday and she hadn't had a problem until she hit her teen years and became self conscious about her appearance. Now, for the first time, she was starting to gain confidence in herself, thanks to Harry's reactions.

Harry, for his part, nearly swallowed his tongue when he first saw her in her bikini. Emma wasn't sure if the boy would faint, or bolt from the backyard. It took all of her willpower to keep from laughing. Hermione was practically preening from Harry's reaction. And Harry... well, CPR might have been needed had he not snapped out of his shock.

Dan, on the whole, was relieved by Harry's attitude. In fact, Harry often looked to Dan as a guide for how he should behave towards Hermione. He felt much better about the fact that his daughter was dating now that he saw them together.

Emma looked out the window again and smiled. All four were laughing now. Coming to a decision, she reached for the phone, wondering if Cindy could get off work for a small BBQ.

Back at the picnic table, the course of the conversation had altered radically.

"And so I told them that unless they were planning on holding a parade and putting up a statue of you, I couldn't possibly support such a measure," Sirius said haughtily.

Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands.

Hermione looked at him worriedly, then turned to Sirius. "Please, tell me you're joking! You didn't really say that, did you?" she asked.

Sirius nodded. He was actually quite proud of how he had outmaneuvered Walden McNair. He didn't trust the man at all. He was rumored to be a Death Eater, but that had never been proven. His attitudes were definitely leaning towards Malfoy and his crowd, except that the arrogant pure blood was now in prison and useless to those who'd once tried to curry his favor.

Hermione gestured with her hand and a Daily Prophet appeared in it. "I know I saw it here the other day," she muttered. "Ah! Here it is among the letters to the editor. It's from the chairwoman of the International Harry Potter Foundation."

Harry looked up and stared at her, thunderstruck. "I have a foundation?"

"He has a foundation?" asked Remus in astonishment.

"I didn't know you had a foundation," Sirius said, staring at his godson in admiration.

"Oh, Merlin's bloody balls!" groaned Harry, then he buried his face in his hands again.

"Language, Harry," chided Hermione, then she began to read.

"The recent proposed legislation which failed to ratify in the Wizengamot doesn't go far enough in the opinion of the IHPF. We have spoken with the sponsor of original bill and plan to work on bringing a new bill before the Wizengamot when it reopens for session in September.

"We understand one of the major shortfalls of the original bill was a lack of proper recognition for Harry Potter. Declaring a day in his memory is just not enough. Our improved version of the bill will result in a boon for businesses, as well as providing a draw to the Wizarding public. The parade and candle light vigil are sure to be quite popular."

She paused, hearing a strangling sound coming from Harry, who was glaring at Sirius.

The older man wisely decided to beat a hasty retreat. Unfortunately for him, he strayed too close to the pool.

Harry launched himself over the table and leaped, crashing into Sirius and taking him, and himself, into the pool.

Hermione stared, while Remus doubled over with laughter. Sirius stood up, and held Harry under the water.

"Ha! Now who has who?" he gloated. He lifted Harry out of the water by his hair.

"Do you say uncle?" he asked.

Harry sputtered and jabbered something at him. Sirius turned to Remus. "I told you we shouldn't let him learn Arabic. Now he curses at us and we have no idea what he's saying!" He dunked Harry again.

Harry waved a hand and a fin broke the surface of the pool. A large dark shape swam around them and Sirius' eyes bulged. With a shriek, he apparated out of the pool. Harry fell back, laughing and sputtered.

Sirius reappeared next to the picnic table. Harry stood and picked up the inflatable shark he had charmed to act like a real one. Sirius bared his teeth and growled at him.

Hermione, watching Sirius, shook her head. "You know, that's much more effective when you're in your other form," she informed him.

Before he could reply, the door to the house opened and Emma stepped out. She was followed by a tall brunette carrying a platter of chicken. Dan was behind them and made a beeline for the grill.

"Sirius, Remus, Evan? I'd like you to meet my friend, Cindy," Emma said, trying to ignore Hermione's smirk. Smiling, she took the platter from Cindy

and walked over to the grill.

Cindy eyed Sirius, who was standing next to the table, dripping wet and wearing a somewhat dumbstruck expression.

Harry quickly canceled the spell on the inflatable shark and climbed out of the pool.

Sirius, finally remembering he was wet and rather bedraggled, shook himself. "Er... I think I'll just pop inside and get into something dry."

"I have some of your clothes in my trunk, Sirius," Harry offered. He had a towel around his neck and was busy rubbing his hair dry. He didn't really have any of Sirius' clothes, but he gave Sirius the excuse he needed to get inside where he could perform a drying charm and a quick transfiguration on his clothing.

Remus snorted and tried not to laugh as Sirius beat a hasty retreat. Harry picked up a t-shirt and walked over to Cindy. "I'm Evan, a friend of Hermione's," he said, offering his hand.

"Cindy Adams," she replied. Her eyes took in Harry, noting the scars that spotted his body, including the tell tale signs of plastic surgery on his forehead. She held her tongue. After all, it really wasn't her business.

Remus leaned across the table. "Remus Lupin, one of Evan's guardians."

"Sirius should be down in a few minutes. He went for an involuntary swim," Harry said, then his eyes widened for a brief moment. He had spotted the Daily Prophet on the table in front of Hermione. "Emma must be a prophet. She mentioned you earlier and now you're here," he said lamely, hoping Hermione would catch on.

Hermione looked up at the mention of the word prophet, then paled. She couldn't use her wand. She gestured with her hand and the paper vanished, while Cindy's attention was on Harry.

Fortunately for all, Sirius returned at that point, exiting the house loudly and further distracting the new arrival.

Relaxing, Harry sat down next to Hermione. He leaned against her, watching and enjoying a warm summer evening and, more importantly, Sirius making a fool of himself in front of a woman.

Harry's home, Waivunu Fiji, Aug 1st 1995...

Sirius pulled the land cruiser into the garage and shut off the motor. He turned around in his seat to see why it had gotten so quiet in the back of the car. Emma sat next to one window, and she held up a finger, motioning him to be silent.

Harry leaned against Hermione, who had slipped one arm around his shoulders. He was sound asleep, his head resting on her shoulder.

"Well, that explains the lack of conversation on the way back," Sirius said softly.

"He's exhausted," Emma said softly. "Open the door on his side and we'll wake him up and get him in bed."

Sirius grinned. "Are you sure? Hermione looks quite comfortable at the moment."

Hermione blushed and then she did something incredibly mature for her age. She stuck her tongue out at him, causing him to laugh quietly.

Sirius exited the car and walked around to Harry's side, where he opened the door and levitated him out. Hermione flexed her shoulder in relief. She had enjoyed cuddling with Harry, but her shoulder and arm had fallen asleep. She climbed out after Harry and used her ring to open the doors for Sirius.

Emma walked behind them, smiling at the strange sight they made.

Remus and Dan stood in alarm. They'd been waiting for them to get home for the past hour. Emma motioned them to be quiet. She sat down on the couch, then she tugged on Dan's shirt, making him sit as well.

"There's nothing wrong, Harry fell asleep on the way home, that's all," she explained.

Relieved, Remus sat down and blew out a breath. "Good. I was worried," he said, glancing towards Harry's room. "I think Harry's one of those people who simply cannot sleep on a plane."

"Well, he won't need to take the plane anymore, so that shouldn't be a problem," Dan offered. They had installed the door back in Oxford and the houses were now connected. All someone needed to do was step across the threshold and they were transported thousands of miles in an instant.

"No, it's still something he'll need to know in case he has to travel muggle style in the future," Sirius said as he entered the room "If he has to make this trip by plane again, it might not be a bad idea to schedule a layover someplace like New Delhi."

He flicked his wand and drinks appeared for each of them. He stretched, then sat down near Remus.

"So, he's asleep? And where's Hermione?" Dan asked him.

"She'll be along. She wanted to put a charm on Harry to warn her if he wakes."

"So, Sirius," Emma began. "Cindy tells me you two are becoming an item."

Sirius made a face. "Yeah, maybe." He met her eyes. "You know, I was always a bit jealous of what James and Lily had. Now, for the first time, I find myself experiencing that and I'm not sure what to do about it."

Remus stared at him in surprise. "You've fallen in love already?" he exclaimed.

Sirius shook his head. "No. Yes. Maybe.

"Well, as long as you're sure," Remus quipped.

"Blast I don't know!" Sirius exclaimed, glaring at his best friend. "I can definitely see the potential for it, though. I never thought it would happen to me, especially after Azkaban, but Cindy is different."

"So what's the problem?" asked Emma. She was ecstatic to discover that her little foray into match making seemed to work this time.

"She's a muggle!" Sirius said. A frown wrinkled his brow. "No, I don't mean it in a bad way. It's just that I have to tell her about our world. And then there's the whole lifespan thing."

"Lifespan thing?" asked Dan.

"You know that we live longer than muggles, right?" asked Remus.

Hermione walked in and sat down next to her mother and Dan and Emma nodded to Remus.

"It works like this, our lifespans are tied to our magic. Sirius is fairly powerful, so he should live to be about a hundred and forty, maybe one fifty. Harry, despite his age, is even more powerful. It's very possible that he could live to two hundred, or more.

"When a weaker magic user marries a stronger one, the stronger partner's magic extends the weaker partner's life span to approximate his or hers. For example, Hermione could normally expect to live about a hundred and fifty years or so. Should she stay with Harry and marry him, her life span would increase accordingly."

Hermione chewed her lip and looked down at her feet. She was way too young to be thinking seriously of marriage, but she had considered it already. What she and Harry had could easily go that way.

Sirius grinned at her discomfort.

"Now, in the case of Sirius and Cindy, Sirius' magic would try to extend her lifespan to match his, but because she has no magic of her own, so it will only partially succeed. In the end, it will mean a reduction in Sirius' life span as his magic increases hers."

"What my learned and wordy friend is trying to say is that a permanent relationship with Cindy would extend her life by nearly forty years, while cutting mine by the same. That doesn't really bother me as much as having to explain that to her, along with the fact that there is no divorce from a magical marriage," Sirius said.

Emma frowned. "So, explaining this to her is what bothers you? Or are you just worried about her reaction?"

"A little of both," Sirius said. "I've never had to explain our world to a muggle before. And that's another problem. She's a doctor, a trained, very intelligent specialist in muggle science. There are some diseases that muggles get that Wizards never have to worry about. That works in reverse, of course. Our world has its share of diseases that seem to ignore muggles. If she had a cold, she'd reach for aspirin or something and I'd be offering her a pepper up potion.

"Those potions would be available for her own personal use, and for any family, but she would not be allowed to use them legally on her patients. Think how she'd feel knowing that there's a cure for a dying patient and she's prevented from using it?"

"What will you do?" Hermione asked quietly.

Sirius shrugged. "I'll keep seeing Cindy for now. If things continue the way they are, however, I'll have to explain our world to her soon. Perhaps I'll invite her here for Christmas."

"Oh, that will go over well," Remus remarked, trying hard not to laugh. "What will you do? Stun her and push her through the door in Oxford?"

Sirius grinned. "You know..."

"No," Emma said firmly. "Before that happens, you'll invite her to our house and we'll help you explain it to her."

Sirius blushed and looked both surprised and relieved. "You'd do that?"

"In a heartbeat," Dan answered for his wife. "I'm going to say something here that will embarrass my daughter, but it needs to be said. I didn't like the idea that Harry was interested in her. She's my baby girl, but I cannot deny the fact that Harry has done more to bring her out than even knowing she was a witch. Emma and I know he's saved her life on more than one occasion, and he's continuing to work to see that she's protected.

"That focus ring business is a prime example. But more than anything else, I've watched them together this past month in Oxford and they fit together like Emma and I fit together. We owe Harry and you and we'll do what we can to help where we can. Even if that means helping you break

the news to Cindy about magic.”

“Daddy,” Hermione murmured, her eyes glistening brightly.

He turned to look at her. “It’s true, princess. When you thought you’d lost Harry last year you were depressed. Your letters home were flat, almost emotionless. It was as though someone had sucked all the joy out of your life. Your Mum and I were terrified. You were retreating back into the shell you used to hide behind before you met Harry. Why do you think we took an extra vacation to come visit with Harry? We hoped that bringing him back into your life would bring you back to us. I don’t think you’ll ever know how much we missed you!”

“It’s true,” Emma agreed. “When Remus approached us and delivered Harry’s letter, we were overjoyed to know that he wasn’t gone forever. You two might not be ready to tell each other how you feel, but anyone who knows you both can see that there’s love there.” She turned to face Sirius. “And that’s why we’re willing to help you. Like Harry, you deserve something good in your life. Cindy’s always been a bit of a cynic where men are concerned, but I know she’s very interested. You intrigue her.”

“Well, she’s interesting and a lot of fun to be around,” Sirius replied.

“You would say that, especially after she got you with the dribble cup,” Remus said with a laugh.

Sirius ignored the barb. “I’ll take you up on the offer, if things continue the way they’re going,” he told the Grangers. Leaning back, he was relieved to know he’d have help in breaking the news to Cindy. He could only hope that she didn’t panic or think them all insane.

“So, what have you got planned for this week?” asked Remus.

Grateful for the topic change, Sirius went on to describe a relaxing week that included a day of deep sea fishing for the men, while the women went shopping in Nadi, one of the largest cities on the island. Sirius would leave Fiji with Hermione’s parents after a week. His role in the Wizengamot and the wizarding world was expanding. Remus would stay behind to supervise the two teens and their tutors for the remaining three weeks.

Hermione was looking forward to the extra classes and privately grateful that she wouldn’t have to participate in Harry’s physical training. That particular tutor had been asked to prepare a gentler regime for her that she could continue, even while going to Hogwarts.

She leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes. It was good to be back in Fiji.

TBC.

Author’s Notes:

Well, we’re back and we are actually doing author’s notes for this story.

First thing we want to do is offer our tanks to Keith and Dorothy for giving this file an extra pair of eyes. We appreciate it no matter what Alyx says. I’d send them a box of donuts, but if I had a box, I’d save them for myself. HA!

Hopefully this chapter will clarify a few points from the prologue. Yeah I didn’t call it a prologue, but hey, you people don’t pay me enough to do something fancy like a prologue.

We had a few nasty reviews, to those people we bare our behinds and remind you for the millionth time, if you don’t like it, don’t read it. No one is forcing you and your not paying for it. So your opinion means as much as the donuts I’m allowed to eat (which is none).

This is going to be largely a personality driven story. Unlike our other stories, there won’t be a lot of magic and or action. It’s a romance wrapped around a horcrux hunt with some magic thrown in because it’s Harry Potter.

We’ve always wanted to write a story where Sirius survived, and this is it. It’s also a salute to canon by tossing most of it out the window. You will find elements from books four, five and six in this story. But pieces only.

For those that are tired of bad Dumbledore, well I can’t see that going away in this story. But I will say, Dumbledore is gone, I wanted him gone and out of the picture so I could concentrate on more important issues.

One word of caution. Pay CLOSE attention to section headings in this story. They will identify a lot about each section. If you ignore them, do so at your own peril because we’ll publicly chastise you if you complain about something we clearly marked in a section heading. (Points to Alyx who has the BBQ pits already fired up)

Ken, you were right, he was an innocent bystander. What does the military call it? Collateral Damage?

Hang onto your hat Meg and buckle into that llama saddle. This is going to be a different ride.

Hands Treck a compass that doesn’t work. Now you’ll be even more lost.

You’re right Taxzombie, Alyx made me send all our llamas to Meg. It wasn’t easy stuffing them into those little fedex envelopes believe me!

All those that were convinced the first chapter could have stood by itself, you’re right. In fact I first handed it to Alyx as a stand alone one shot and she passed it back saying it was too short. So there you have it. How a 6.6K word story is now pushing more than 50k words and will probably top out around 80k to 100K. Blame Alyx, I blame her for everything.

For all the Weasley bashers out there, sorry, but Ron bashing isn't really going to happen here. Ron will be a git for a few chapters, and then wise up. Sadly however the golden trio is permanent dissolved.

Feris, this will teach you to not assume all the questions have been answered. Besides, you know us, if we close out one line of contention, we usually open another.

The Power of the Press

Chapter 3 - Year Five

Standard Disclaimer:

“Is it time yet?” asked Alyx eagerly. She stood holding a bloody cleaver and bloody bits dripped from the bloody blade in bloody splatters.

“Bloody Hell!” shrieked Bob and he back pedaled from her.

She arched an eyebrow. “You know that you're on an exercise bike and back pedaling won't get you anywhere?”

Bob blanched and fainted dead away, his eyes fixated on the dripping cleaver.

She heaved a great sigh and fought to suppress her laugh. Bob had fainted into the kitty litter box. Both Pagan and Smudge looked at him in annoyance, they so hated when Dad played in their sand boxes!

Alyx turned to the audience.

“I'm afraid we'll have to go with a improvised disclaimer for this chapter. I know that Bob had a wonderful disclaimer planned. He had several rock bands lined up, Leonard Nimoy as the guest speaker, a fireworks show and debate featuring Jesus, Moses, Buddha and Mohammad on the topic of 'Donuts, divine food or not?’”

She shook her head and admired the audacity of her husband to arrange such a fabulous disclaimer, only to faint at the last minute. “I'm afraid I'll just have to say we don't own Harry Potter at all. It all belongs to JK Rowling even if she doesn't know what to do with them.”

Alyx beamed a broad smile at the audience and realized they weren't applauding her words. It was eerie.

It was silent.

You could hear crickets chirping.

Realizing her danger she knew she better do something quick. So she started tap dancing.

Slowly the audience started to applaud, although they could have been afraid of that cleaver as much as Bob was.

From his position on the floor Bob smirked in his fake faint. He hadn't been able to get the fireworks arranged in time, so he forced Alyx into giving the disclaimer. It was annoying really, the things he had to do to make her participate more!

Alyx was really quite shy.

The Power of the Press Chapter 3

Aslton, England, August 5th 1995...

Tom dozed fitfully and dreamed strange dreams of rats and strange lights and sounds. Occasionally he'd gather his strength and rouse himself enough to attempt to impose his will on the creature he now inhabited, but most of his power was locked up, stolen away by the horcrux.

The horcruxes!

If he had a mouth he would have growled at his stupidity. He had felt the destruction of one of his soul containers and, for the first time in his existence, had felt true fear. He had tried to convince himself that the first one had been a fluke, but when he felt the destruction of the second horcrux, he'd nearly given the blasted snake a stroke. His safety net was vanishing and he was unable to stop it!

He was trapped, bound to a horcrux contained within the body of the snake. Until he could free himself again, Lord Voldemort had ceased to exist. He didn't understand it. Something had gone very wrong and his familiar had attacked him. Now he was stuck in the belly of this miserable beast and he had very little control over it. He had come to realize that his attempt to hide his immortality had, in fact, been a mistake. Now none of his minions knew where to look for him, and because he was bound, stuck in this Merlin forsaken creature, he was helpless.

When he could gather his strength, he'd shout commands into the abyss that the snake called a mind. Occasionally it would listen to him, but not often. It hadn't helped that he had railed and cursed at the snake for eating him so many months ago. Now the snake was proving to be a most uncooperative host, as it used the power of the horcruxes to prevent him from taking over.

It had taken him months to get the snake moving towards the one creature that would be able to aid him. And once it was moving, it found itself at a distinct disadvantage. A fifteen foot long snake is difficult to hide, especially when it tried to sneak aboard muggle vehicles.

He never would have dreamed of admitting it before, but now that the reality of the situation had finally been hammered home, he would admit, in the silence of his mind, that it was a mistake to make the horcruxes. There had been other methods of achieving immortality, but the horcrux held a

unique appeal for him. It was only now, after the fact, that he recognized the inherent flaws in the scheme.

"GO NORTH! GO NORTH!" he thundered to the Snake's mind. Only in going north and finding the basilisk would he get the help he needed so badly.

"Go north, go north," whispered the annoying voice in the back of Nagini's mind. She pushed the voice away and concentrated on her prey. The small girl had fallen asleep in her backyard and the female adult had left her alone.

She routinely ignored the voice. It demanded and commanded, but it held no power or authority over her. She had followed the advice of the voice once, and had been taken far south. So far south that she was south of her starting point in the manor house.

It had taken months to make it back to this point and she was still making up for lost time.

She paused and tasted the air. The adult was returning! With a hissed curse, she slithered back further in the brush and hoped that dinner wouldn't be taken away from her again, otherwise she'd be forced to eat dog again and she really hated dog. The fur always made her itch.

Hogwarts, Office of the Headmistress, August 6th 1995...

Minerva glanced up at the shelf and froze. The tracking device had stopped spinning! She hadn't looked at it in over two weeks. Normally it spun slowly, emitting puffs of green smoke. Now it was still.

She scowled and remembered her conversation with Ollivander.

"What do you think. Oscar?" she asked.

"It's hard to say, Minerva. Clearly this device is operating on magic contained within the blood crystal. I'd say it's monitoring a person. You know, this reminds me of something I saw around the turn of the century. Parents would use a little blood from their babies and it would tell them if the children were alright."

Minerva nodded slowly. "So there's no dark magic involved?"

Ollivander shook his head. "Oh, no, although I do understand your concern. Albus had even fooled me. I often wonder where he went wrong and why. He didn't start out doing those things."

Minerva shrugged. "I can't really say, Oscar. To my shame, I will admit he had me fooled, and he cost us Harry Potter."

Ollivander's eyebrows rose and he nodded slowly. "He had us all fooled, my dear. Now, getting back to your strange device. Do you know whose blood this is?"

When Minerva shook her head, his expression fell slightly. "Pity. It would be interesting to know who he was interested in," he replied.

Minerva had the distinct impression that he knew exactly who it was tracking and that he knew she knew.

"You do understand the range will be limited by the magic of the student?" he asked pointedly.

Her eyes narrowed. "Yes, I understand perfectly," she replied primly.

He handed the tracker back to her. "Then I suggest you place this somewhere unobtrusive. It's implications are... disturbing."

She nodded and thanked him for his help, then she turned and left his shop. He knew who it was tracking and what that meant for their world. Fortunately, he was reliable and would keep the secret.

She walked over and examined the device. Her original observation was wrong. It was spinning, but very, very slowly, as if it weren't being powered adequately. She scowled. Mr. Potter was obviously at an extreme distance from the tracker, but it was still monitoring him.

Wherever he is, I hope he's happy, she thought. Damn Dumbledore! Lily and James are probably spinning in their graves right now, having their son forced to flee the country! If only I hadn't trusted Albus. I could have helped him.

Black and Lupin are involved somehow. I know that. I wouldn't put it past them to be working to continue the myth that he's a muggle, I just wish I knew why they were doing it.

She turned and sat back at her desk. She had just come back from a visit to the Grangers and had been surprised to find they were on vacation, again. She had wanted to talk to Hermione. The girl had been assigned as a fifth year prefect along with Mr. Longbottom.

She found it interesting to note that according to her neighbors, the Grangers had gone to the Pacific again for a vacation, although no one was exactly sure where they had gone. She also noted that the Granger's house now sported several professional grade wards that Hermione could not have cast without alerting the Ministry. An adult witch or wizard had placed these wards and they were very good at what they did.

Could Hermione be in on whatever Black and Lupin are up to? she thought, then she pulled out a sheet of parchment. Perhaps it was time to see if she still could bring some pressure to bear on Mr. Black. She had once been the only teacher he was afraid of. Maybe she could get some answers that way.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Sept 2nd, 1995 Hogwarts...

Dear Harry,

Well, I'm back at Hogwarts and the girls in the dorm are going absolutely nuts over my tan and your photos! It's hard getting back into the swing of things at school after spending the last three weeks exploring transfiguration and ancient runes. The structure of the classroom is a stark contrast to your tutors. I liked the atmosphere of informal discussion they created once the topic was chosen, and the fact that they let us go in any direction that struck our fancy.

I never thought I would say this, but I can see how an unstructured approach like that can help. Yes, you heard me, a little disorder didn't kill me and I've learned quite a lot using that approach.

We've had a few changes here at school. The Ministry has installed a representative here to "insure that the level of teaching is up to acceptable standards." Those are the words of Madam Delores Umbridge, who is the Minister's personal envoy here at Hogwarts. Rumor has it she's also one of the driving forces behind the movement to limit and restrict the non-human species.

She's a short, squat woman with horrible fashion sense, even by my standards. There are some other, uglier rumors floating around about her, but I'm going to withhold judgment for now.

Malfoy seems much altered. He didn't visit us on the train this year and rumor has it that his mother is selling off the remaining parts of the Malfoy estate to continue living in the manor.

Ron is being horrid! I had hoped he'd mellow a little over the summer, but he jumped on me earlier about you. I finally ended up telling him if he didn't shut up I'd give him detention. Not that I really would, that would be a misuse of my prefect authority, but he really is angry at me for having a boyfriend he doesn't know. And at this point I'm angry at him for being so narrow minded.

According to Ginny, he was horrible all through August when he learned I really wasn't coming to visit over the summer. I don't know why he wouldn't take no for an answer, but I told him that I was going to visit you during the summer. I told him that before school let out last year!

Forgetting about Ron, I'm really looking forward to this year, but a part of me is crying inside. I miss you so badly, Harry. It's nearly four long months before I'll see you again and that seems like forever now.

Something you said in the last week has been bothering me. You said, "I find it easier sometimes to write out what I want to say than to say it directly to you."

What can you possibly say in these journals that would be so difficult to say to me directly?

I miss you and wish you were here so I could hug you again.

Hermione

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Sept 3rd 1995, Waivunu, Fiji...

Dear Hermione,

I wish you were here so I could hug you, as well. I could really use one right about now. Spending the entire summer with you only makes your absence that much more pronounced. I keep expecting you to knock on my door and poke your head in asking if I want to take a walk on the beach.

King Kong felt I had been slacking off while you were here, so this morning he woke me up for a nice 15km run with a backpack full of rocks. Thirty four kilos of them! I hate that man... no, he's not a man, he's a monster. Do you think he's related to Snape or maybe this Umbridge you wrote about?

Remus told me at dinner tonight that he and Sirius thought I should go for Lasik surgery. After talking about it, I agreed. Tomorrow we're taking a portkey to a clinic in Japan for the basic examination. If all goes well, in less than a week I might be able to put away my glasses forever.

I think I've figured out part of Ron's problem. Are you ready for this? I think he likes you, but he's unwilling to grow up past the part where boys are supposed to pick on the girls they like. I love the Weasleys, but I think Mrs. Weasley doesn't want her kids to grow up and Ron happened to get a double dose of that.

I talked to Sirius and Remus about that and both of them seemed to think that part of the problem was that both you and I had matured while Ron hadn't. That makes sense, sort of, but then what's Sirius' excuse? I mean he's old enough to be my father and some days he acts more like a teenager than I do.

Remus pulled me aside shortly after we came to Fiji and told me he thinks part of Sirius' attitude is because of his stay in prison. He doesn't want to acknowledge that time, so he is trying to recapture some of what he lost. If that is the real reason, then I'd never dream of denying him that. Growing up with the Dursleys has made me keenly aware of what it's like to miss so much of one's life.

As for myself, well, I don't consider myself mature. But I guess if I had to attribute anything to why I act the way I do, there would be two reasons.

The first, of course, would be the fact that there is this prophecy that says I have to kill Voldemort. There is something maturing about the fact that a dark lord is out to kill you.

The second reason could be summed in two words. Hermione Granger. Yes, you, so stop shaking your head. Part of the reason I act the way I do is because I ask myself what would Hermione do? How would she act? I'm still a kid and I still mess around, but I want to grow up to be someone you can be proud of. I want to grow up to be someone you'd want to be with.

I'll pause and wait for you to shake your head in denial, but it's the truth. And speaking of that...

I knew I'd get myself in trouble with that comment and I know if I try to squirm out of telling you, you'll bug me until I give in. It's not your fault, really. I made a comment that, in thinking back, I suppose I should have known would get me in trouble.

What can I say in these journals that will get me in trouble?

How about you looked so fantastic and pretty in that bikini, it took all my willpower and plenty of cold showers to keep my hands to myself? If your father knew some of the ideas that have crossed my mind since seeing you in that outfit, or remembering how you felt in my arms when we went dancing, he'd take his bird gun out and chase me away.

I know we agreed to go slow and I still agree with that idea. Your friendship is too important to me to want to rush things. But this is probably even more important to me than the training that King Kong puts me through. And there were ideas that would have ended up with me getting my face slapped. I'm sure of that.

I'm sorry if this embarrasses you, but it's how I feel and you did ask.

Well now you know. And I will confess, I would never tell you this face to face, at least not yet. Now I will skillfully turn the contents of this entry to something more mundane and lull you into not hating me for those comments by distracting you.

This Umbridge sounds like a nasty character. Sirius says the woman may not be a marked Death Eater, but she certainly seems to sympathize with their cause. She is one of the key people behind the anti-werewolf laws. She's already complained to Sirius about the fact that Remus is basically working for him. But Sirius told her to take a hike.

He also thinks that Scrimgeour is out to bring Hogwarts under Ministry control. Remus wants you to remember to keep your focus ring shield up. Neither of them are saying much about the situation at Hogwarts, except to say that things are getting tense in Britain. Scrimgeour seems to be trying to pull more power and authority under his control. The Wizengamot is starting to get annoyed, but they aren't ready to do anything about it yet.

That's all from here for now. Christmas is so far away right now, but we'll see each other soon enough, we just have to wait for now.

Oh! I forgot to mention. Thanks to my continuing to study during the summer months I have been told that I will be able to take the Pacific Rim NEWTS one full year early and I'll be able to take them as myself! The Pac Rim Ministry has agreed to allow it, and keep the results confidential until we're ready to go public. Had I taken them as Evan, I'd have to retake them as Harry. I don't want to do that!

After that, Remus, Sirius and I will return to Britain to find Nagini. I'll be in my Evan disguise, but once Nagini is gone, look out world because Harry Potter is back! I promise I will be there for your graduation.

All my love,
Harry

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Sept 3rd, 1995 Hogwarts...

Someone pinch me!

Mum was right after all! During the summer she bought me this embarrassingly skimpy bikini, and while Harry's reaction implied he liked it, he never admitted to me that. Until he wrote yesterday, that is. He admitted he needed to take cold showers? Alright, I'm not stupid. I know *why* he had to take them, I just never thought anyone would say that about plain old me, let alone Harry.

He's Harry Potter! He's rich! He's growing more handsome with every day and he's famous. He could have any girl he wants.

I was always sure he'd be with someone like Ginny, or Hannah Abbot, girls that are incredibly beautiful, more attractive. But he thinks I'm pretty! And this summer he introduced me to that Japanese family who had magical children our age. Suzuki is stunning, but Harry wasn't interested in her except as a friend. Eat your heart out Suzuki! He's mine!

I can't believe Mum and I almost fought over that bathing suit. Now I'm glad she talked me into wearing it! I'll have to write her and apologize.

Harry's last entry has had me walking on a cloud all day. I know he's so far away, but he said exactly what I needed to hear. It may be months before we see each other again, but I promise I'm going to kiss that boy breathless for this.

He isn't the only one to have those thoughts, especially after I saw him in that tight swim suit instead of the baggy things he likes to wear. I'm glad Sirius hid his other suits and hexed his clothes so he couldn't transfigure a new suit.

Merlin, listen to me! I'm channeling Parvati and Lavender. Alright, maybe not that bad, but close enough.

True confession time. Harry, you weren't the only one needing cold showers this past summer. Maybe someday I'll tell you that too, but not today.

Harry without glasses is going to be very difficult. One thing was abundantly clear when we were swimming in our pool. His gaze is riveting when he's not wearing his glasses. His eyes are mesmerizing with the glasses and without them I could look at them forever. And now he's going to have surgery to get rid of them? I'm in so much trouble.

Arithmancy is first thing tomorrow, I'll have to cut this short for now.

Hermione's home, Oxford, England, Sept 20th, 1995...

Emma opened the door and immediately smiled.

"Cindy! Come in. This is an unexpected surprise!" she said.

The tall brunette entered the room and smiled wanly at Emma.

"I'm glad you're home, I wasn't sure if you would be and I should have called, but... Well, I need to talk to someone who knows Sirius," she said in a breathy rush.

Emma's smile slipped a little and she motioned Cindy to follow her into the kitchen. "How about a cup of tea and we'll talk?"

Cindy nodded absently. "Do you know what Sirius does?"

"He used to be in law enforcement," answered Emma slowly. She was unsure of how much Sirius had told her. "Right now he's involved in the government, but I'm not exactly sure what he's doing. I know he's independently wealthy and he spends most of his time overseeing Harry's education."

Cindy shook her head. "It can't be much of an education then. I was talking to him about some new prints I had ordered for my office. You know I'm interested in astronomy, so I ordered some large prints from the Hubble space telescope. Sirius looked at me and smiled, nodding his head, but I could tell he didn't have a clue what I was talking about.

"Later he looked at me and said, 'Outer space? I thought that was stuff they only did in moving pictures!'"

Cindy looked at Emma. "Honestly, Em, I think it's time you come clean about that man. Something is off about him and it doesn't make sense. Little common things surprise him. I've never seen him with a mobile phone, or even operate a telly. And the only place I've met him is either near my house or here. Does he even have a home?"

Emma grinned at her. "You're falling in love with him!" she accused her friend gleefully.

Cindy groaned. "I thought I was, but he's hiding something from me. After Anthony... Well, you know how I feel about dishonesty."

Emma leaned back in her chair and nodded, her expression thoughtful. "I do know. I don't suppose you'd be willing to take my word that... No, even if you were willing, it still wouldn't be right."

She paused and looked like she was making a decision, then she stood and held out a hand to Cindy. "Come on, love. I think it's time you two had a real heart to heart talk."

Cindy stood and looked confused. "Isn't he traveling this week? Do you have his phone number?"

Emma smiled mysteriously. "I have something better, and yes he is traveling, in a way. Now, no questions, just come with me," she said in her best doctor voice.

Cindy knew that tone, she used it often enough herself to follow Emma. She knew Emma wouldn't hurt her, and her friend would do what she could to help. She followed Emma, wondering exactly what her friend had in mind.

Emma led her through the door into the attached car park. Next to the half bath in the car park was an extra door that she hadn't noticed before. The door would be ordinary, except that there were literally hundreds of strange symbols painted on it in a bright silver paint. She shook her head and denied the possibility that the door seemed to glow with a light of its own.

Emma pushed the door open and pulled Cindy into the blackness. There was a moment of disorientation that passed so quickly she wasn't sure if she had really experienced it. It took her a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. A large window showed a beach with surf lapping gently against the shore.

She gasped and stood still, Oxford was no where near the ocean! Emma released her hand. "Lights," she called, igniting the gaslights in the large living room. Harry had worked with Hermione to change all of the lights and appliances in the home to be voice activated by anyone.

"Where are we?" whispered Cindy. She stared at the obviously non-electrical lights in shock.

Emma walked over to her and hugged her. "We're getting you answers, Cindy. And in the process, we're going to solve a problem that Sirius posed to me a little over a month ago. I'll be right back."

Emma left the room and Cindy sank down into a very comfortable chair. She looked out the window again, gazing upwards and suddenly leaned forward in consternation. There, above her, was a sight she had seen in some of her hobby magazines, but one she had never experienced. The southern cross.

“Bloody hell!”

She turned to see a boy standing in the doorway, looking shocked. He wore only his pajama bottoms. A light dusting of dark hair covered his chest.

“What are you doing here?”

“Who are you?” she countered.

He frowned and blinked. He wasn't in his glamor! But maybe the low lighting would let him pull it off anyway. “I'm Evan, of course.”

She blinked at him in surprise, he didn't look like Evan, well maybe a little. “Aren't you supposed to be on an island in the Pacific...”

She trailed off and looked back out the window to the sky that didn't tell her exactly where she was, only that she wasn't in England anymore. She paled and her hands trembled slightly.

A moment later, Sirius entered the room. He looked like he had been rudely awakened. Emma followed, looking rather pleased with herself. He stopped and stared at Cindy who was sitting, pale faced in one of the arm chairs. She gripped the arms of her chair tightly as if to hide their shaking.

“Oh, Merlin!” he muttered, then he walked over to her.

She turned to him. “Where are we? I know this isn't England. We walked through this door at Emma's and...”

He knelt by her side and she trailed off, watching him warily.

“We need to talk, Cin. I've been meaning to have this talk with you for a while now,” he said softly.

Harry moved to stand next to Emma. “This oughta be good,” he said with a grin.

“Harry, hush. You're not helping matters.” Sirius said.

“I thought his name was Evan?” protested Cindy.

Harry blanched and looked at Sirius in concern.

“Come on Harry, let's go put a pot of tea on,” Emma said, tugging on his arm.

Harry followed her into the kitchen.

Sirius stood and moved to a chair opposite of Cindy. “I bet you're really confused now. But if you can hold your questions to the end, I'll try to fill in the blanks.

“First, you're right. You're not in England, you're now in Fiji. You stepped through a portal that we installed in Dan and Emma's house. And that was Evan, but his real name is Harry. He's my godson, not my cousin.

“Cin... you're a scientist, a doctor. You've spent a third of your life learning how to heal people using the best medicines you know of. But there's a part of life that has been hidden from you and the rest of the world. There are things in this world that your science would deny, but they exist despite that denial.”

She looked at him and arched an eyebrow.

He leaned back in his chair and used his focus ring to conjure two cups of tea. Unlike Harry, Sirius had been unable to use his ring unless he treated it like a funny shaped wand. He didn't really care, it gave him an extra edge if needed, and he could still use it even if he were stuck mimicking the wand movements with his fingers.

Cindy gasped and accepted the cup he offered with shaking hands. She closely examined the cup, trying to see if she could figure out the trick.

“There is another side to life, a side that stays hidden because it's been hurt every time it's tried to make itself known. There's magic in the world Cin. Not the fake stuff like what we saw at that nightclub. I'm talking about real magic. There's a whole magical world out there that lives right next to your neat world and rarely interacts with you.”

“And what? You're a magician then?” she asked in a shaky voice.

Sirius grinned. “I'm a wizard. So is Harry, and Remus. Hermione is a witch. Dan, Emma and you are what we call Muggles. That means people who have no magic of their own.”

“And you used to be in law enforcement?”

He blinked at her and started to laugh. It was a mocking, bitter, laugh and she flinched at the sound.

When he finished laughing, he looked at her intently. "I was, and then I wasn't. When I was going to school I was friends with two special people. I watched them fall in love and marry. And I watched them have a baby boy. Nothing up until that point in my life seemed as important as when James placed little Harry into my arms asked me to be his godfather. He was so tiny and helpless and at the same time I could tell he was special.

"A little over a year later, my two friends were murdered by an evil wizard. When the wizard turned on Harry, something happened. No one knows exactly what happened, but Harry survived after banishing the evil wizard. Once I was sure Harry was in what I thought was safe hands, I went after the person who betrayed James and Lily to the evil wizard.

"P-Peter was our friend, one of our little group. Any one of us would have given our life for him, and still he betrayed James and Lily. I cornered him in London. He killed thirteen muggles and cut off his finger..." he paused and took a shuddering breath. "I was blamed for the incident and sent to prison for twelve years..."

Sirius looked down. Like Harry, he had incidents in his past that he couldn't talk about.

Cindy sucked in her breath and watched him. She could see the emotional turmoil his explanation had caused and was unsure of the cause. *Prison couldn't be that bad, could it?* she wondered.

A hand reached out and rested on Sirius' shoulder. Harry stood behind him. "Sirius was sent to prison without a hearing or trial. Wizarding prison is as close to hell on earth as you can get without dying, Cindy," he said quietly. "The only thing that kept him from going insane was the fact that he knew he was innocent. Ultimately, he escaped from prison and was later exonerated of all charges. Sirius wanted to tell you about himself. He asked Emma and Dan for their help last month because he thought that he could easily become involved with you on a more permanent basis.

"Our world is hidden from yours because we have been persecuted and burned at the stake for being different. There is a lot Sirius can tell you --- if you want to know more. But no one can know about our world except for those involved, either by being a wizard or witch, or somehow related to one like Dan and Emma.

"We're here because I'm hiding from the British Wizarding world," Harry continued softly. "The dark lord wasn't killed, only banished. Someday I will have to face him again and, hopefully, kill him this time around. In the meantime, Sirius and Remus --- it's like I have two dads. They rescued me and are helping me. They gave me something precious that's been missing from my life."

Sirius wiped at his eyes and tried to pretend Harry's words didn't move him, but he was fooling no one.

Cindy looked at Emma. "Magic is real?" she asked. Emma was the most practical and pragmatic person she knew. She found it difficult to believe that Emma would believe in something like this.

Emma nodded. "I know what you're feeling. When we found out about Hermione, we were stunned. After that, we never saw magic again for several years, until this past year that is."

"Hermione is extremely talented and a very powerful witch," Harry added with a touch of pride.

"Can...can I see some magic?" Cindy asked hesitantly. The concept was new to her, but one of the things that bothered her about science was the absolute belief that it could explain everything. She had seen enough in her day to know that sometimes the answers you looked for couldn't be measured and quantified.

Sirius nodded and his body flowed and shifted. A moment later Padfoot sat on the chair giving her a doggy grin. He hopped down and walked over to her. He nuzzled her hand and licked it. She smiled and tried to suppress a giggle, then she turned to look at Harry.

He shrugged and held up one hand. His hand suddenly burst in an aura of light and a ball of blue fire appeared, hovering over his palm. He grinned at Emma. "Hermione's favorite spell," he murmured. "She's an expert at the bluebell flames."

Emma smiled and nodded knowingly back at him, then Harry extinguished the flame. "I'm going to head back to bed. I suspect you two will be up most of the night and I have a 15km run in the morning."

Padfoot walked over to Harry and nudged him with his head. He looked down at the dog and grinned. "Behave yourself, Siri, or I'll tell Cindy about the time Remus slipped you beer while you were Padfoot and you ended up trying to hump that motorcycle of yours."

Padfoot whined and ducked his head and Emma laughed. Cindy looked startled, then she started to laugh also.

Harry waved and turned and went back to his bedroom. Sirius watched for a moment longer, then his body flowed back into his human form.

"I'm going to return home," Emma said. "Cindy, no matter what the time, use the door to return. If you need to talk, I'm here for you."

Cindy nodded absently and stood from her chair. She walked over to the window and looked out over the darkened bay.

"Cin? I wanted to tell you, I just didn't know how," Sirius said softly from behind her. His voice carried an obvious plea that tugged at her heart. Were the circumstances reversed, she was sure she'd have difficulty sharing that information also.

She nodded. "I know, Siri, but it's still a lot to take in. We come from different worlds entirely. I know nothing of your world and you know little to nothing of mine." She turned to look at him. "Is there a way to bridge the gap?"

He moved very close to her and looked into her eyes. "Honestly? I don't know. But I want there to be. I don't think I'd like the idea of you not being in my world. Harry and I told you about some of the dirtier aspects of our world, but there is so much good and pure that I'd like to show you. Magic can

be wonderful.”

She cupped his cheek with her hand. “And that is probably all that is needed to bridge the gap, a desire to share with someone.”

He leaned down and kissed her. They had kissed before, but not like this. On all their dates they had shared little intimate moments in public, but this was the first time they were truly alone. She surprised him by deepening the kiss and leaning against him. His arms wrapped around her, holding her tightly to him.

When they finally needed air and broke apart, Cindy's gaze smoldered as she looked into his eyes. “You'll tell me all?”

He nodded. “Everything you want to know, and more.”

She nodded and smiled slightly. “Which way to your room?”

He stared at her in shock for a moment. When she grinned at him, he began to chuckle. “This way,” he replied, taking her hand in his and leading her towards the back of the house and his bedroom. He had not imagined it would happen like this, but he wasn't about to question his good fortune. He loved her and wanted her to be a part of his world.

Hogwarts, Sept 22th, 1995...

“Miss Granger, if I might have a word with you?”

Hermione slowed and turned around. “Headmistress?”

Minerva approached the girl and she looked around pointedly, noting the number of students in the hall. “Walk with me, Miss Granger. I know you have a free period this hour.”

Hermione hesitated for a moment, then nodded and fell into step with her.

The pair walked in silence for a few minutes while the corridors emptied out. When they were finally alone Minerva began to talk.

“When I was head of Gryffindor house, every year I would have to inspect the tower at least once a month looking for contraband material. Mostly, I'd find Fire whiskey in some boy's trunk, or a proscribed love potion in a girls dorm.

“Last year, when I ascended to the role of headmistress, no one was available to perform such an inspection of Gryffindor. As such, I decided to do that myself this year since Professor Lawton said she'd be too busy.”

Hermione nodded uncertainly. She was sure she didn't have any contraband items.

“Tell me, Miss Granger, are you aware of the nature of the journal you possess?”

“Yes, Headmistress, I'm aware of what it does,” she replied. She had researched the journals and knew there was no dark magic associated with them. She hadn't found out much, but basic testing told her it was mostly light magic charms.

Minerva nodded silently. “Do you know that, traditionally, such journals were reserved for husbands and wives who were going to be separate for long intervals? As such, while there is no dangerous magic attached to them, they do tend to make the writer be more truthful than they ordinarily would?”

“I was aware of that, Headmistress, although the person on the other end might not be. I have refrained from asking any questions which might lead to embarrassing situations. The journals were a gift from a close friend who wanted to ensure that I and my pen pal would be able to easily remain in contact.”

A dark thought occurred to her and she felt a surge of panic. “Are you telling me that you intend to confiscate the book?” Hermione asked suddenly.

Minerva smiled slightly and shook her head. “No. I was young once, too, after all. Perhaps if I had a book like that, my young man would not have gotten away.”

Hermione blinked in shock and nodded numbly. That was a revelation!

They walked for a while longer in silence.

“Do you love him, Hermione?”

She looked down at the floor as she walked, her face flaming. “Yes, Ma'am, I think I do.”

Minerva nodded to herself. “And does he love you?”

Hermione paused. “He hasn't said so in words yet, but I think he knew how he felt even before I did.”

“Ah, yes. The so-called Potter curse, or blessing, depending on who you talk to,” Minerva murmured in agreement.

Hermione stopped short. “Headmistress, I never said...”

Come now, Miss Granger. Do you take me for a complete fool?” Minerva countered gently. “After Mr. Potter left last year you were in a terrible state and your grades were slipping. You even went home, skipping the first Yule Ball this school has had in fifty years. When you returned, you were back to your happy self and your grades rose once more. Rumors had you falling in love with some boy you met on an island, but I doubt you'd give your heart so easily, unless it was to someone you already knew intimately.”

Hermione blushed and she looked alarmed.

“I didn't mean intimately in that manner, Miss Granger,” Minerva said somewhat frostily. “I meant you knew the person very well. Perhaps he was someone that had been taken away from you? And now he's back and, I'd guess, mostly unaffected by the little drama that played out in our Great Hall last year.”

Hermione looked down, refusing to meet her gaze and Minerva sighed. The loyalty the Potters invoked astounded her! It had always been this way. It was no wonder the Potter line was the only surviving branch of Gryffindor's remaining even if they were a cadet branch.

They continued walking for a bit, until Minerva stopped in front of the entrance to her office.

“Of all the things I regret in my life, Miss Granger, what happened to Harry Potter was one of the biggest. I had a role to play in his life and I could have had more, but I wanted to maintain my position as head of house and his professor. As such, there were certain lines I could not cross and maintain those roles.

“I wish he were still in school here and someday I hope I'll be able to apologize to him in person. But if you are able to bring any measure of happiness to him and he to you, then seize that happiness. It can be a very fleeting thing. Rest assured your secret, and his, is safe with me.”

Hermione nodded silently. McGonagall was basically saying she knew Harry was still around somewhere and still magical.

Minerva turned to give the password to the gargoyle, then she paused and turned to Hermione again.

“One final thing, Miss Granger. Have you had any training in Occlumency?”

“Only the basics, Headmistress. I am able to enter the trance and work on my shields but I cannot yet maintain a steady shield full time.”

Minerva nodded, then she leaned a little closer. “Contact your friend and arrange a time when you can both enter the trance. Before you do, place a drop of your blood in the center of the pentagram on the cover and make sure you enter the trance while holding the book.”

Minerva pulled away and smiled thinly. “That will be all, Miss Granger.”

Hermione nodded and thanked her before hurrying away. She had given her a lot to think about.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Sept 22nd, 1995 Hogwarts...

Harry!
Professor McGonagall knows about you! I'm sure of it! She stopped me in the hall today and we spoke for a while. She knew about these books and what they do and somehow she knew you still have your magic! What are we going to do?

I nearly died of fright. For a moment I thought she was going to confiscate my journal. She gave me a little more background information on them, and asked me some rather frank questions.

I think she really regrets what happened to you, Harry. Promise me that when you come to see me graduate, you'll speak with her. I know she's always seemed distant and cold, but I think she's really sort of lonely. There is so much about her that I admire, and some that scares me. She's in her seventies and from what I've learned, never married.

Maybe she never met her Harry Potter, or maybe she did and made a wrong decision and let him go. How does that old saying go? There but for the grace of god go I? I can see myself falling into her lifestyle and probably would have if I hadn't met you.

I know this is a short message, but talk to Sirius. We need to know what to do about it.

Love,
Hermione

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Sept 23rd, 1995 Waivunu, Fiji...

Hermione,
I'll speak to Sirius, if he ever comes out of the bedroom. In case you haven't heard, your Mum showed up here a few days ago. She dragged Cindy Adams here! Sirius and I spoke to her for a bit with your Mum helping and we introduced her to the idea of magic.

That was three days ago and THEY HAVEN'T COME OUT OF THE BEDROOM YET!!!

I've had to applied the silencing charm twice a day for the last three days. I swear when Paddy comes out of that room I'm taking him to the Vet to be fixed! I mean really, I'm fifteen bloody years old and I don't need to be hearing that sort of thing. I have enough problems with my own mind

mucking about with me. I don't need Siri and Cindy going at it like industrial bunnies.

McGonagall strikes me as one who will keep the secret, but if I can't get Sirius to listen I'll send a message to Remus. He's back in England, trying to track down Ravenclaw's brooch.

What kind of things did she tell you about our journals? And what questions did she ask?

I learned a really scary dueling tactic today. Something called Snap Conjuring. My instructor was so pleased about the fact that I've been able to tie my shield to my core and keep it going all the time, he started me on something new. Basically, the idea is in the middle of a duel to conjure a twenty kilo rock in a second or less, over the head of your opponent.

So far it's taking me ten seconds to conjure something that big.

Classes are proceeding. Eton thinks I'll be done with Occlumency and have it mastered to the practitioner level by Christmas or sooner. After that, he'll start on legilimency and leave me to continue occlumency on my own.

I know this is your OWL year, so I'll understand if you don't reply right away. I'm in the same boat here, the only real difference between my OWLs and yours are that the Pacific Rim OWLs are more practical oriented than the British tests.

I'll talk to Sirius as soon as he comes out and let you know what he says. In the meantime, stay well Hermione. I miss you a lot.

Love,
Harry

The Three Broomsticks, Hogsmeade, Sept 30th, 1995...

"Mr. Lupon?" asked a voice.

Remus looked up from the notebook he was examining. "It's L U P I N, and do I know you?" he asked warily. The young woman had shockingly pink hair, and the red caped uniform of the Auror Corps. As a werewolf, he had learned to be instinctively wary of Ministry aurors.

"May I?" she asked, pointing to a seat.

"Please," he replied, pointing to the chair.

She slid into chair and looked apologetically at him. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I've been told that you might be able to help me. You see, I'm trying to track down Sirius Black."

Remus frowned. "What would an auror be doing looking for Sirius? He's not in any trouble, is he?"

"Auror? Oh, the uniform!" exclaimed the woman. "I'm sorry, I'm off duty. My name is Tonks. Well, that's my last name. I'm not going to tell you my first name, otherwise I'd have to kill you, then go find and kill my parents for giving me that name. Actually, I'm trying to find Sirius Black for my mother. They're cousins, you see. My Mum was disowned by the Black family, until Sirius assumed the head role last year, then he reinstated her and acknowledged me.

"My mum wants to thank him, but the only place we know to contact him is the Wizengamot office and he's not answering mail sent there." She blinked at him, then waited expectantly.

He sighed and closed the notebook, then folded the map he had open under the book. "I will inform him that his cousins are looking to speak with him, Ms. Tonks. I should warn you that it may still be some weeks until I see him, as he is out of the country at the moment. And I hope you'll forgive my being suspicious, but Sirius is wary of the Auror Corps, despite having once been a member of that organization."

Tonks reached over and swiped a chip from his plate and ate it. "Can't say I blame him, what with him being put in prison for something he didn't do without even having a trial? Mum just wants to thank him, and I think she also wants to whack him on the head for the trust fund he opened for her. If it's as big as the one he opened for me, it's a considerable sum of money.

"For my part, when I graduated during the summer, it came in mighty handy. I was able to buy that dragon hide armor for the job. Without the trust, I'd be stuck with the standard issue leather," she said happily.

"So you don't want to whack him on the head also?" Remus asked in obvious amusement.

"Merlin, no! But I would like to meet him again. I have very vague memories of him from when I was little. My dad has a small family, all muggles, so Sirius is the only magical relative I know about that I would want to talk to," she replied.

He nodded at that. As far as he knew, other than Andromeda Tonks, Sirius' other relatives were less than reputable. The only other exception were the Weasleys and Potters and they were a very distant relation.

"I will contact Sirius and pass the word along, Ms. Tonks. What I can't do is force him to contact you."

She nodded and handed him a card with floo addresses on it. "Here, that's for Mum and me." When he took the card, she stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Lupin. I appreciate your time."

She smiled once again and her hair turned a buttery yellow, then she turned and walked away.

Bemused, he turned back to the notebook he was reading. He spread the map out and made some notations on a piece of parchment. Ravenclaw's brooch was the last piece of the puzzle and he had tracked it down to a collector in Lancaster. That lead, however, was over a hundred years old. Finding out where it went from there was turning out to be a proverbial needle in a haystack.

"Well, here's a surprise. One of my former students, sitting in a public pub and up to their eyebrows in studying? What could Remus Lupin find so fascinating?"

He sighed and rolled up the parchment. "Minerva," he said. "What a pleasant surprise! Won't you join me?"

He knew he ran the risk of running into her in Hogsmeade, but he had to come here to follow up on a lead for the brooch.

Minerva sat down and looked at him with a stern gaze. He gazed back, not the least intimidated by her look. Having once been a fellow professor, he had lost most of his wariness of her during Harry's third year.

"Congratulations on your promotion, Minerva. Can I order you something? Some tea, perhaps?" he offered, knowing it would annoy her.

She leaned back and frowned at him. "I don't know what you and Black are up to, but I can't say I like it."

Remus scowled and picked up his wand. With a deft flick, he put them in a privacy bubble.

"I'm afraid that I haven't any idea of what you're talking about Minerva," he replied mildly. "And if I did, I suspect this would hardly be the place to discuss it."

Noting her frown, he leaned forward. "Really Minerva. If you would take a moment to think on it, you'd understand why things are happening the way they are."

Her eyes widened. "So the prophecy is still valid?"

"Valid enough. The shame of it is, this is all so futile. Dumbledore knew before Harry was born what Voldemort had done, and he did nothing to prevent it. James and Lily died senseless deaths," Remus said with a touch of anger.

Minerva nodded to herself. She had surmised as much. "Well, tell Mr. Black I'm rather put out with his avoiding me."

Remus smiled. "You would be surprised at how many people are telling me that today."

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Oct 1st 1995, Hogwarts...

One month down, one and a half to go before I can see Harry again.

I am beginning to understand what Professor McGonagall meant in regard to these journals. I had to explain to Harry that these journals would make us be more open and honest with each other. I had no choice, really. He asked me a couple questions in his last entry and I felt like I had to answer them.

I knew I really didn't have to answer them. I knew I wasn't being forced, but he wanted to know what I replied to Professor McGonagall when she asked if I loved him. Now I know how embarrassed he felt when he told me what he would be afraid to say directly to my face.

His reply was swift and unexpected. He said we needed to be a little more careful what we ask each other, but on the whole, he thought it was good thing. He didn't seem surprised when I said I love him and he said he was sure he loved me as well. Then he said he didn't have much experience with it but he knew he wanted to be with me! Then he did something he's never done before, he admitted he was scared by what he felt for me. All of his life he's had so few who really cared about him and now that's changed and it frightens him.

For myself, I am very happy to know he feels the same way, but I would really like to hear it in his own voice.

It doesn't help that the girls of the dorm are circulating a book called 'How to keep and please your Wizard.' Like I don't have enough of those thoughts running through my head when I'm not studying?

We've agreed to limit the questions we ask each other for now. But in a way, we're becoming more open to each other. Harry spoke to Sirius, who admitted he was aware that the books would encourage us to be honest and open. Harry told me that he thought Sirius was trying to help, in his own prankster sort of way.

I was surprised that Harry wasn't mad at Sirius, but I think in this case he isn't because the books helped us express things that neither of us would have said to each other.

I can't be angry with Sirius either. He rescued Harry from Dumbledore and whatever he was planning. And he has gone out of his way to help Harry and I stay in contact. It would have been so easy to lose each other when he left last year.

Remus told me privately that it was Sirius who convinced Harry to write that first letter to my parents, inviting us to visit with them.

I haven't told him about Professor McGonagall's suggestion yet, but I did tell him I knew more about the journals and wanted to wait a bit before we

tried them. He didn't have a problem with that. I just hope I'm worthy of the trust he's showing in me.

Harry told me that Sirius is aware of McGonagall's knowledge and I hate to say this, but they are watching her closely. Sirius isn't planning on doing anything unless it looks like the Headmistress is trying to cause problems.

Harry says that Remus sent Sirius a note concerning a meeting he had with McGonagall and that she may come and visit with all of us sometime next summer.

I had another run in with Lavender today. She is annoyed because of the photos I keep of Evan on my night table. She wanted to know what I could possibly do to keep such a hot boyfriend.

I just smiled and said I had the right sort of magic. Lavender's eyes nearly popped out of her head and she walked away muttering to herself. I can't help thinking that this might have been a quick victory, but that the war isn't over.

The Ministry representative had Lee Jordan in detention for the third time this week. The Weasley twins finally came to me, asking what they could do to help him. Apparently, she's using some sort of cursed quill that's carving his lines into the back of his hand.

Fortunately, I had a fresh jar of essence of Murtlap that they could use.

I've a charms test tomorrow, so I better end this now.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Oct 20th 1995, Waivunu, Fiji...

It's official. I'm done with Occlumency and have finally started on Legilimency. According to Eton, there are two distinct types and he intends to teach me both. Directed Legilimency requires a wand or focus ring to send a strong probe against a mind. Then there is the passive form, in which the practitioner can skim surface thoughts from unprotected minds.

Eton thinks Dumbledore's eye twinkling was probably passive Legilimency. Apparently, every practitioner of the art has a "tell" which indicates what they're doing. Thinking back on it, I believe I've run across two such people, Dumbledore and Snape. Dumbledore twinkled, Snape glared.

Sirius and Cindy still aren't using silencing charms. I finally got annoyed and recorded them using a recording charm, then played it back during breakfast. Needless to say, Sirius didn't find it nearly as funny as Remus and I. In fact, I never knew Sirius could run that fast. He wouldn't have caught me either, except he summoned a wave that knocked me to my knees.

I'm still trying to figure out how to get rid of this white hair and these damn blue spots.

Damn you flea bitten dog. I'll get you yet!

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Oct 31st 1995, Waivunu, Fiji...

Dear Hermione,

This is going to be a different kind of entry, only because of the day. It's Halloween here and I've been afraid of this day since I learned the truth about the death of my parents. Since I reentered the Wizarding world, something bad has always happened on Halloween.

It's hard to categorize Halloween in my mind. To the rest of the Wizarding world, it's a holiday. To wizards in Britain, it's not only a holiday, it's also the day I vanquished Voldemort. To me, it's a depressing reminder of a horrible day when my life changed forever.

I find myself wondering about my parents. Sirius and Remus can tell me what kind of people they were, but those memories are blurred by time and their own impressions. What kind of woman would my Mum be if she were alive today? Would she be like Molly Weasley or more like your Mum, or somewhere in-between? Or would she be like my Aunt Petunia? (Shuddering and praying that isn't the case.)

I hate this day. Even with Sirius, Cindy and Remus here, I feel alone. It's not helping that both Sirius and Remus feel their loss even more keenly than I do. They knew my parents. To them, they were living people with hopes and dreams and laughter. They have each other and Cindy to ease things for them. To me, my parents are silent photos and stories, or the rare dementor induced nightmare.

The one person who could help with how I feel isn't here and I won't see her for another month and a half. You've filled a hole in my life, Hermione, and I don't know how to thank you, or deal with it when you're not here. For you and I, Halloween marks a special day. The one good Halloween (if you can call fighting a mountain troll a good day) was where our friendship finally began.

I'm sorry, Hermione. I hate unloading on you like this, but after diner tonight I went into my room and thought about the holiday. Suddenly I felt so alone, there was this huge aching hurt in my chest and I just didn't know who to talk to. I almost took the door to your house, then I would have apparated the rest of the way.

I'm sure that by tomorrow I'll be able to laugh this off and greatly regret sending this entry to you. I wish there was a spell to fix how I feel, but there isn't.

I know this entry is a disappointment to you and I'm sorry for that. I'll do better next time. For now, I think I'll end this and go to sleep. That will get this day over even quicker.

Love,

Daily Prophet Article, October 31st, 1995...

Ministry Marks End of Reign of Terror.

In a solemn ceremony, Rufus Scrimgeour gave a short speech in the Ministry atrium, then called for three minutes of silence in respect for all those who died in the war against You-Know-Who.

It has been exactly one year ago today that Harry Potter sacrificed his magic. In doing so, he uncovered the despicable acts of Albus Dumbledore and forever removed the possibility of the Dark Lord from returning to life.

Invoking a magical singularity, Potter, then age 14, refused to partake in a binding magical contract. His refusal set in motion the loss of magic for himself and the dark lord, wherever he was hiding. It also brought to life the near criminal acts perpetrated by Albus Dumbledore on Harry Potter and twenty nine other orphans.

Investigations following Potter's refusal to enter the Triwizard tournament resulted in the fall of the Fudge administration, which lead to the arrest of twenty members of the Wizengamot, as well as other prominent members of wizarding society.

Mr. Potter dropped out of sight after he left Hogwarts and efforts to locate him have failed. It is rumored that Sirius Black is aware of his whereabouts, but Mr. Black is unwilling to tell what he knows. He asks that Harry be given the privacy he craves.

Minister Scrimgeour said that Mr. Potter's sacrifice was of the highest order of bravery and had he not turned himself into a muggle, he would surely be up for an Order of Merlin, forth class.

Full Coverage of Minister Scrimgeour's remarks. Page 2.

Harry Potter, a savior lost. Page 3.

You-Know-Who, muggle dark lord? Is that possible? Page 4.

Quibbler Headline Article, Oct 31st 1995...

Harry Potter Saves Mother Cat and Kittens from Burning Building!

As part of our ongoing investigation to locate Harry Potter we learned recently that he was spotted in San Francisco, USA. Apparently, a muggle high-rise was on fire and hundreds of people were trapped. Potter, age 15, appeared, hanging upside from a helicopter, which is no relation to the dreaded heliopaths the Ministry is training. The helicopter hovered over the building and Potter swung back and forth on his rope until he was able to swing into an open window.

From there, he collected the family of cats, which also aren't related to heliopaths, then he leaped from the window in his patented bat suit. He handed the mother cat and the four frightfully fried felines to the firemen. When asked why he didn't save the family of four who lived in the same apartment, he replied, "What's a family of people living in a place like that? Obviously they weren't real people and my duty was clear. I had to save the feisty felines from a fiery furnace."

And with that, our fantastic hero twirled his cape and swooped away, confirming his expertise in swooping.

We at the Quibbler will continue to bring you the exploits of Harry Potter and his swooping bat costume as we learn about them.

Correction: *Due to the Publisher's daughter playing with a time turner, the answers to next week's crossword puzzle was accidentally published last week. We apologize for the inconvenience. In order to correct the mistake, we intend to rerun last weeks crossword next week with answers for a puzzle from yesterday.*

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Nov 1st 1995, Hogwarts...

Dear Harry,

Your last entry came as a complete surprise and it brought me to tears. I could feel your pain and I wanted nothing more than to be able to hold you and tell you it would be alright. As much as I want to do that, I can't, not until the holidays. But I promise you I will be doing that. You and I need some serious private time together.

Just when I think I have you completely figured out you surprise me and show another side that I didn't know existed. I always thought you were so sure of yourself, so confident.

What you need to understand is that we all doubt ourselves, Harry, and there is no shame in doing so. That you were willing to share your feelings like that made me feel privileged.

I think your parents would be very proud of you. I know I am. I told you this once before, but you're a great wizard. And you've been working to that end since last October.

We won't always be apart, Harry. I just hope that there will come a day when we're together and you'll still feel able to talk to me like you did in your last entry. Yes, it hurt to know you were hurting and I wasn't able to be there to help. But it also made me feel good that you trusted me enough to tell me that. Before last year, you always hid your feelings. I will do my best to be worthy of that trust, I promise you that.

We'll be together soon and we'll have some time then.

In the meantime, school continues unabated, but some things are changing. That Ministry woman, Umbridge, fired Trelawney and she tried to fire Hagrid. Lee Jordan was hurt in one of her detentions and several of us are trying to convince him to go to McGonagall about it.

She's been issuing edicts that everyone has been ignoring and I won't even go into the pranks that have been played on her. Slytherin house is falling into her tripe about pure blood superiority lock stock and barrel. Not much of a surprise there, really.

In other news, Ron and Malfoy tangled in the Great Hall and for once it was mostly Ron's fault. He needs to learn to control his temper. His spell missed, thank Merlin, but it punched a three inch hole in the wall! McGonagall was livid. Malfoy's spell was bad enough, but it wasn't potentially lethal, like Ron's was.

The Weasley's were here trying to decide what was to be done. Ron's been warned. One more infraction like that one and he will be expelled. Since then, he's been really subdued and not speaking much. I'd feel sorry for him, but this time he really blew it. Sure, Malfoy said some rude things about Ginny, but he shouldn't have used that spell.

And speaking of Weasleys, Ginny is in danger developing a bit of a reputation. I'm not normally one to spread rumors, but I saw her coming out of a broom closet with Neville and her blouse was buttoned wrong. I'm not saying that she was doing anything wrong because I honestly don't know. But I need to talk to her about being more discreet.

How is your legilimency going? And what's this about apparating? Have you been taught how? I can't wait for us to learn, but that won't come until next year.

I mentioned your Snap Conjuring to our DADA teacher. He's an old Auror named Archibald Bunca, from Germany. His reaction surprised me greatly. He told me that the European Ministries frown on that technique in dueling because there is no counter, except to dodge. He told me to warn you to be wary of the technique, as some governments will prosecute you for using it.

Lavender is causing me some problems of late. For some reason she seemed to be extremely irritated over the idea that 'Evan' could be my boyfriend. So far it's just an annoyance, but she's beginning to get on my nerves with her innuendos.

My Mum tells me that Cindy has told her she's thinking of requesting a sabbatical from work. Mum is so smug. First us, now Sirius and Cindy. Honestly, I don't know how she can take any credit for us being together. I think that was our doing, and if I'm honest with myself, mostly your doing, Harry. I've seen you do many things and followed you into crazy situations, but this is one decision you made that I approve of wholeheartedly.

Anyway, Cindy is hoping to get some time off so she can spend more time with Sirius. I'm very jealous of her! On the other hand, the Christmas holiday is coming up and we'll be together then.

OOPS! Ginny's here and wants to talk. I'll get back to you later.

Love,
Hermione.

Waivunu, Fiji (Dec 15th 1995)...

Remus looked up and smiled, seeing Sirius and Cindy walk into the large kitchen area. He had tea and breakfast waiting for them. Back in England, Sirius relied on a house elf named Dobby to cook and clean his old family home, but here in Fiji, they did without his help. Sirius had to explain patiently to the little elf that the Pacific Rim Ministry considered house elf bondage to be slavery and would arrest anyone who had an elf.

That Dobby was a paid elf who wanted to bond with Harry was another issue. The simple fact was, they didn't want to risk arrest, even if they would eventually be cleared once Dobby explained his position with them.

“Good morning,” Remus said, pouring two more cups of tea.

Cindy smiled dreamily and moved toward the tea on autopilot. Sirius had explained to her about Moony's condition and she had taken several blood samples to see if she could isolate the Lycanthropy pathogen. She had been looking at wizarding medicine and wondering if there were ways of adapting parts of it to muggle medicine without violating the law. It helped that she greatly enjoyed biochemistry in college and had learned how to isolate out the biologically active compounds from natural compounds.

“G'morning,” she mumbled, then she sipped her tea and sighed in contentment.

Sirius mumbled something that didn't even sound close to a greeting and Remus snorted in amusement.

“Where's Harry?” asked Cindy. Normally Harry would be back from his morning run and having breakfast with them by now.

Remus frowned. "I'm not sure. I got up and put breakfast on before going through the owl post. Oh, that reminds me. We got a message from Samatha in the States, Sirius. She says that they've broken the protections on the ring and are waiting for either you or I to come witness it's destruction."

Sirius grunted, letting Moony know he'd heard.

Cindy shivered. "Evil things. I feel uncomfortable just thinking about them."

The group fell silent as they ate.

It was Cindy who broke the silence sometime later. "I'm starting to get a little worried about Harry. He's been working himself extremely hard and has seemed...I don't know, not himself, for the last few days."

Remus paused with a fork halfway to his mouth and scowled for a moment. "Yes, I thought that myself lately. But then, growing up is never easy."

Sirius shook his head. "He may be growing up, but he's growing up for the wrong reasons, Moony. He's still only a kid. He never flies his broom anymore, or uses that surfboard."

"Something has happened. He's been very serious and driven since last month," Sirius concluded. He was worried about Harry, but every time he asked, the young man's reply was always the same; he was fine and there was nothing to worry about.

"I think we need to make him..." Remus trailed off into silence.

Harry stood in the doorway shivering, his pajamas soaked in sweat and sticking to him. Cindy immediately went to his side. She felt his forehead, then his pulse.

"Don't feel good," he mumbled. There were dark circles under his eyes and his body shook with chills almost continuously.

"Sirius, get my medical kit," Cindy snapped. "Remus, help me get him back into bed."

Harry staggered and Remus jumped to his feet, catching him. He turned and lifted him easily in his arms, then walked down the corridor to his bedroom. Entering the room, he paused, seeing the condition of the bed. "Cindy, hold him upright. I need to change out his bedding; it's soaked clear through."

He stood Harry up and Cindy held him. Remus pulled out his wand and vanished the soggy bedding, then he conjured new sheets and blankets, which flew to the bed. He added a charm on the bedding to absorb Harry's sweat without soaking the mattress.

Remus took Harry and placed him in the bed, then he vanished his pajamas and replaced them with fresh ones.

"You have career possibilities as a nurse's aid, Remus," Cindy said softly.

Sirius rushed in and handed Cindy her medical kit. She pulled out her stethoscope and an electronic thermometer.

"No magic while I use this," she cautioned. She had learned that as long as the electronics didn't come in contact with an active magical field they'd work fine.

She placed the device against his ear and waited. A few seconds later it beeped and she examined the reading with a frown. "That can't be right. He's burning up, but he's registering as normal."

The two men exchanged a glance. "I'll call for the village healer," Sirius said, then turned and bolted from the room.

Remus conjured a cool damp cloth and laid it over Harry's forehead.

"Remus? What's wrong?" Cindy asked, confused.

"It's a magical illness, Cindy. We normally don't get many muggle diseases, but one of the signatures of a magical illness is a high fever that doesn't register on muggle instruments. Sirius is going to floo the village healer. She'll make the determination if he needs to go to hospital or if he can be treated here."

Harry groaned on the bed and a faint aura appeared around his body then faded away again.

At a loss, Cindy sat at the chair next to Harry's desk and watched in silence. She was a trained doctor, a specialist in internal medicine, and here was a situation where she was of no help at all.

Sirius returned a few minutes later, followed by a middle aged woman. "Cindy, this is Madam Salote, the Waivunu healer," Sirius explained

"You a mundane doctor?" asked the woman.

Cindy nodded. "Yes. I'm an internist, actually. But none of my instruments can help him," she said, gesturing to Harry.

Madam Salote nodded and sniffed loudly, then she ran a hand about four inches over Harry, muttering under her breath.

An image formed over Harry. It was brightly colored in sections and pulsed. There was a ticking sound in time with the pulsations.

Cindy moved in for a closer view and Madam Salote glanced up at her. She pointed to one section of the image with several hovering shapes colored bright pink. "These represent his physical condition. Heart, lungs, liver and so on. It's all good. Now this," she said pointing to another section. "This is his energy levels, which are very low. He's exhausted and has managed to contract a bad case of island fever because of it."

She straightened and reached into a pouch. "He'll be sick for at least a week. Except for going to the bathroom, he must rest. I'll leave you something for the pain and fever. When the fever breaks, he'll be weak physically and magically, but he should be able to move around. No magic for at least ten days! He needs to rest. I'll be back to look in on him tomorrow."

She pulled out several bottles of potions and handed them to Cindy. "Blue is for pain. Four drops, four times a day. The green bottle is for fever, three drops morning and night. Pain potion will make him sleep most of the time. Call me if he gets worse."

Cindy nodded numbly, staring at the little bottles in her hands. The scientist in her screamed about the unsealed, unsanitary conditions of the bottles, but this was a magical illness.

Madam Salote nodded to Sirius and Remus and breezed from the room. She'd been the healer who had sent Harry to the big hospital in Wellington, New Zealand when he'd had that potions accident. She suspected that something wasn't quite right here among these foreign wizards, but the boy seemed healthy and happy. Most of the small community of wizards and witches in Waivunu suspected the same thing when Sirius dropped his alias in favor of his real name. Sirius Black was a known name, even in the Pacific Rim.

"Why did she give me the potions? She knows I'm a muggle," protested Cindy.

Remus snickered and she caught something that sounded suspiciously like, "Village life".

Cindy looked at Sirius, her eyes narrowing. "What does he mean?"

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. "It's no secret we care about each other, Cin. Most of the Fiji wizard families are matriarchal in nature. She figured that you were assuming the role of Harry's mum. They already consider me his father."

She leaned back against the headboard of the bed and eyed him carefully. She didn't mind helping Harry. After all, she was a doctor and taking care of sick people was what she did. But what about Sirius? In the month she'd been shuttling between England and Fiji, she'd gotten more involved and more serious about their relationship. She had been badly burned once by Anthony and had sworn off men after that. But Sirius was different, wasn't he?

"We're going to talk about this later," she declared, then she stood and looked down at Harry. "I'm not sure if someone should be here with him all the time..."

"Let me, Cindy," Remus said, then he waved his wand. Like Sirius, he had a focus ring, but he was too used to his wand. Some habits were hard to break.

"That's a simple charm to warn us if he's in trouble. Someone should probably check him every few hours, but the charm will warn us if there are any problems," Remus said.

She nodded and placed the potion bottles out of Harry's reach on the dresser.

Waivunu, Fiji (Dec 20th 1995)...

"He's going to be alright, isn't he?" asked Hermione anxiously. Her hands twisted in her lap and she looked at Cindy worriedly.

She'd arrived in Fiji early. The Grangers were supposed to arrive on the 23rd, but when Hermione heard Harry was ill she had wanted to leave immediately. Dan and Emma had let her go once they had gotten a promise from her that she'd return on the 22nd for the annual family Christmas party.

"He'll be fine, Hermione," Cindy reassured. "He worked himself to a point where he got sick, but he's recovering. The fever broke two days ago. He's still partially bed ridden and he's not allowed to do any magic for five more days, but he's well and getting better."

"Hermione," Sirius said softly. "Do you know what brought this on? Last month he started working like a demon, running and studying nearly every minute of the day."

"Halloween," she whispered in reply.

"Halloween?" Cindy asked in confusion.

Sirius and Remus shared an anguished look.

"We forgot," Remus said, wiping his face tiredly. Suddenly both marauders knew that they had overlooked something very important.

"I don't understand," Cindy complained.

"It was Halloween. In the wizarding world, it's a major holiday, almost as important as the winter solstice or Christmas. But it's also the night that his parents were killed."

"Harry wrote me in the journal that night. He was depressed and unhappy. He hates Halloween. He hates the fact that Britain celebrates the first fall

of Voldemort and what was the worst day of his life," Hermione said softly, then she shivered. It was hard to even imagine having a nation celebrate the death of your parents.

"They celebrate that?" Cindy exclaimed.

Sirius nodded unhappily. "They do. They even have school plays about him banishing the dark lord. His parents are painted as some kind of martyrs."

"We forgot about it entirely," Remus said bitterly. "You and I got tipsy and we hung out with Cindy, but I remember Harry excusing himself early."

"He said he felt especially alone that night," Hermione added, then she stood. "I'm going in to talk with him."

The adults nodded and watched her leave the room before turning to look at each other. "We really blew it, Paddy," Remus said.

"We'll make it up to him, Moony. Now that we know, we'll make sure he's not alone on Halloween."

"I think the best medicine for what ails him just entered his room," murmured Cindy.

Sirius grinned at that. Cindy might not be a witch, but she was intelligent and very good at reading people.

Harry woke to the sensation of someone running their hand through his hair. He could feel someone lying in the bed next to him and he smelled the sweet scent of lilac and apple blossoms.

"Hermione?" he whispered sleepily.

She smiled and looked inordinately pleased that he could tell it was her. "How did you know?"

"Your shampoo, you're the only person I know whose hair smells of lilac and apple blossoms."

She nodded and her expression turned serious. "You frightened me, you know. I work hard, but never to the point of getting sick."

He grinned at her.

"What?" she asked, annoyed at his reaction.

"Time Turner."

She blinked and realized he had her there. She was about to reply when he pulled her into a tight hug.

"I missed you so much," he said softly against her ear.

Tears sprang to her eyes and she tightened her grip on him. "It will be alright, Harry. Things will get better."

He slowly released her and moved back enough to stare into her eyes. For the first time she noticed he wasn't wearing his glasses. His eyes were bright and clear and filled with a green that seemed to go on forever. It was mesmerizing!

He reached up and cupped her cheek. "The last month has been really bad. That's why I haven't written much. I didn't want to keep dumping on you, and it seemed that no matter what I did, I was in a hole I couldn't climb out of."

"Harry, you can always talk to me, you know that."

He nodded and his own eyes moistened with tears. "I know."

She hugged him again and kiss his forehead. "Let's get you out of bed. I talked to Sirius and Remus about why you felt the way you did. They understand now."

He winced at that, but nodded. As much as he didn't want to talk about Halloween, he really couldn't be mad at her. She was scared for him and that was something he was still getting used to.

She rolled off the bed and picked up his robe from the back of a chair. He sat up and swung his legs off the bed, then stood unsteadily. She reached out, steadying him, and he smiled weakly at her. Then she handed him his robe and watched him carefully as he put it on.

She followed him as he walked unsteadily towards the living room. As soon as he appeared, Sirius and Remus jumped to their feet and rushed to help him. He held up a hand, stopping them both.

"I'm sorry. I guess I should have said something, but I didn't want to trouble you with my problems."

Sirius scowled and Hermione muttered darkly about the Dursleys and waiting until she was of age and could use magic outside of Hogwarts.

"Harry, I know Remus and I aren't very good role models, but we want to help you. What James and Lily were thinking to make me your godfather is still a mystery. Remus would have been a better choice."

"Sirius, stop that," Remus said softly.

Yeah, stop it, Siri. Besides, Remus can only warm the bottom of the bed once a month. You can do it any old day," Harry said.

Sirius grinned and helped Harry over to sit on the couch. A moment later, Hermione joined him.

"You're looking better," Cindy said.

Harry nodded. "Maybe, but I still tire easily."

Remus chuckled. "That's because your core is still refilling after you shook off the fever. Your core was low to start, which made you vulnerable to the fever, and then it almost emptied fighting it. As it stands, Madam Salote is amazed that the fever broke early and your core is refilling so quickly."

Sirius leaned toward Harry and scowled at him. "From now on, you're going to go at a more reasonable pace. And I want to see you getting at least eight hours sleep a night. Master Kwang has done a good job of getting you into shape. Now I think I'll ask him to design a simple maintenance plan to stay that way. There's no need to build you up into some muscle bound hulk."

Harry glared at Sirius, but his godfather refused to back down. Finally he looked away. "Fine," he muttered, looking away.

Hermione shook her head and he turned to look at her inquisitively.

"I never thought I'd see the day that Sirius Black would be downright parental," she said dryly.

Sirius suddenly looked mortified and both Remus and Cindy broke up laughing.

"Sirius? A parent?" exclaimed Remus. "Merlin help the child!"

"Hey! I think he'd make a good father," protested Cindy.

Harry turned to her. "Is there something you'd like to share with us?" he asked with a wide grin.

She blushed and looked down. "Um, no, not really. I'm just saying."

Sirius glared at Harry. "Only your illness is stopping me from making you say uncle!"

"Thank Merlin for island fever then," Harry replied.

Hermione grinned.

Sirius glared at him for a moment longer, then his expression softened somewhat. "Hermione told us that you felt especially alone on Halloween."

He nodded warily, wondering what Sirius had up his sleeve.

Sirius turned to Hermione. "How's your occlumency?"

She gasped. "McGonagall asked me that same question. She said to enter the trance and put a drop of blood in the center of the pentagram on the front covers of the journals."

"McGonagall told you that?" exclaimed Remus.

Hermione nodded. "She didn't say what would happen. She just said to arrange a time when we both could do it at the same time."

"And did you try it?" pressed Sirius.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I didn't tell Harry about it because I wasn't sure what it would do."

Sirius shook his head in dismay. "Hermione, I love you to pieces and I suspect someday you'll be my goddaughter-in-law, but you need to be willing to experiment occasionally. I think this whole Halloween incident might have been avoided if you had followed McGonagall's advice."

Hermione stared at Sirius in shock.

"What will happen?" she asked.

Sirius opened his mouth, but Remus laid a hand on his shoulder and shook his head. Sirius nodded to him in agreement, then he turned back to Hermione. "Just try it, Hermione. Did you bring your journal with you?"

She nodded. She never went anywhere without her journal. It had become a part of her, like her favorite book, Hogwarts: A History.

Remus smirked at the young woman. "Just remember that it only lasts for an hour and you can only do it every two days. But I think Sirius is right. It will help you both."

She glanced over to Harry, who shrugged. "Even hearing your voice would have helped," he said softly. "I'm willing to try it, if they think it will help. I was in a dark place and I don't want to go back there again."

"Alright. Let's wait until after Christmas, though. You're still tired from being sick."

He nodded and leaned against her shoulder. Remus launched into a conversation about the protections that had been placed on the ring and the great antiquity of them. The Americans recognized there was an exceedingly dark curse on the object and it had to be destroyed, but they also lamented the fact that the object obviously had some historical significance.

Somewhere in the middle of that conversation, Hermione felt Harry slip into sleep. Without giving it a second thought, she used her ring to lay him out on the couch with his head resting in her lap. She gently combed his hair with her fingers.

The adults exchanged grins, but said nothing.

Hermione's home, Oxford, England, Dec 21st , 1995...

"Anyone home?"

Emma looked up to see the garage door open and Cindy walk in to the house.

"Cindy! Come in. I didn't expect to see you today. Is everything alright?"

As she spoke, she turned and placed a kettle on the stove for tea, then motioned for Cindy to take a seat at the table.

"Yes, yes, everything is fine. Harry is recovering nicely, although he's still sleeping a lot. The village healer dropped off several nutrient potions to help him recover the bulk he lost while ill. And Hermione is hovering nicely."

Emma smiled at that. "And Harry isn't complaining? Dan complains if I hover too much when he's feeling ill."

She shook her head. "No. I think he actually enjoys the attention. Remus explained his upbringing to me and it does make sense. He had no one to care for him while he was growing up at his aunt and uncle's house. So if Hermione coddles him a little, he's not going to turn it away. Besides, she's in seventh heaven. She even managed to convince him to read that book she's so fond of."

Emma smiled knowingly. "That boy knows exactly what buttons she likes pushed."

Cindy blinked. "I think you give him too much credit. He's a smart lad, but he lets her do most of the steering, at least for now. I've had the opportunity to really watch him now and he's one of the strangest people I've ever met. He's incredibly driven, so much so that he drove himself into illness, and at the same time he has little self esteem and is very uncomfortable in situations involving other people.

"I actually worry that he'll be cast adrift once this Voldemort is finally gone. I've been trying to steer him into thinking about career opportunities, but he doesn't have any long term goals."

Emma frowned. "What do you suggest?"

Cindy sipped at her tea. "Let's enlist Hermione. She's the one person he almost always listens to. Maybe if she started talking along those lines, he'll get the hint."

"I don't know. Isn't that rather pushy? I mean, she's only going on seventeen. Wouldn't that seem like she's herding him towards a marriage?" asked Emma worriedly.

"It might, if Harry were normal, but I don't think he'll feel that way," Cindy replied. "Besides, he needs to think about what life can be like after Voldemort is out of the picture."

Emma nodded, mulling over the idea. She could see Cindy's point well enough. However, she didn't want to talk about her daughter's love life. That seemed to be developing all by itself with no help from her. "So, how are things with you and Sirius?" she asked innocently.

Cindy blushed. "In some ways he's more of a kid than Harry, but I guess that's to be expected. And just when I'm about to despair, thinking he'll never grow up, he does something so totally adult. Yesterday he laid down the law to Harry and they had a contest of wills over it. Harry lost, this time," she said, then she sighed. "Although, to be honest, if Harry weren't recovering from his fever, I think they might have wrestled over it."

Her expression brightened and she smiled at Emma. "Actually, it's rather refreshing. Sirius makes me stop and laugh. Before, it was rush to see patients, rush to get lab results, or rush for this conference or that one. He makes me stop and look around with wonder. He's put magic into my world and I rather like that."

Emma hid her smug grin by taking a sip of tea. She never really expected Cindy to take to Sirius as well as she did. Cindy had been hurt by a man she'd nearly married five years ago. She'd sworn off men and relationships after that.

Cindy stood. "I'm off to do some last minute shopping for the holiday, then I'll head back to the beach house. Can I pick you up anything while I'm in London?"

Emma shook her head. Their shopping was long over and Hermione had made it infinitely easier when she shrank everything down and put it into a single bag. "No, we're set. Although I'm going to go pop over to the beach house in a bit to remind Hermione that we have the family Christmas party to go to."

Cindy nodded and headed for the door with a wave.

Emma waited until the door was closed, then she started laughing. "Girl, you have it bad," she muttered.

Author's Notes:

We interrupt these author's notes to bring you a public service announcement!!!

INTRODUCING THE FAN FICTION EXCUSE NOTE!

Instructions:
Please print below the dotted line.
Circle all appropriate fields.
Do not bend, fold, spindle or mutilate.

Dear Boss/Teacher/Parent/Spouse/Child,
Please excuse _____ from doing their work/homework/cleaning their room/talking to you/Taking care of you and feeding you. They were engaged in the more important duty of reading the latest chapter from the non-award winning tag team wrestling duo of Bob and Alyx.

If you are under the impression that performing one of the following (please circle appropriately) activities is more important, you are clearly mistaken. Hence the reason for this note.

- Writing that report to prevent world war.
- Writing that report to keep the company liquid.
- Curing cancer.
- Landing men on the moon.
- Doing their homework.
- Cleaning their room.
- Taking out the trash and walking the dog.
- Making love.
- Apologizing to your spouse for pushing her/him away from the computer.
- Changing that three day old smelly diaper.
- Taking the gun away from the toddler.
- Feeding the baby.
- Taking that at home pregnancy test.
- Cooking dinner for the family.
- Talking to the family.
- Admitting they have a family.

It is important that you understand where you stand in the grand scheme of things in the life of your loved one. You are a distraction when a new chapter is published, and entertainment when there is nothing better to do. Life would be so much easier if you would hide in your Office/Classroom/Bedroom except for such times when the note bearer actually desires your presence.

Your cooperation will be enforced.
Bob & Alyx (Will wrestle for donuts)

The Power of the Press

Chapter 4 - Year Five Continued

Standard Disclaimer:

Generic Reader #6 sat happily reading the latest chapter. Upon completion GR#6 hit the review button and proudly filled in the box.

“Great Cahpter, rite more!”

Out of nowhere a whip descended and lashed across GR#6’s back causing him to scream in pain. Alyx strode out onto the stage wearing a leather bustier, leather boots with six inch stiletto heels and a studded miniskirt. “That isn’t a review,” she snarled.

Bob watched the scene unfold and he swallowed nervously when Alyx wheeled out the rack and a cart full of gardening tools. Generic Reader #6 screamed in fear and soiled himself.

“While Alyx proceeds to educate our happy volunteer,” Bob said, trying not to wince at a particularly loud scream, “I’ll explain that we do not own anything associated with Harry Potter. Harry Potter and the Potterverse belong to someone else, some British broad, but not that queen.”

Alyx laughed maniacally and she started up an electric torch. “Proper spelling! Properly punctuation! Proper commentary! And stop offering to pet my llama! I don’t own any llamas any more!”

Bob backed away from Alyx when she brought out the battery jumper cables, or as she called them, nipple clamps. Generic Reader #6 howled in agony and promised to do better in the future.

“Ummm.. let’s get started shall we? I suspect Alyx will be a while.”

The Power of the Press

Chapter 4

Waivunu, Fiji, Jan 2 nd , 1996...

The days that followed the Grangers’ arrival for the Christmas holiday were filled with activity. Gifts were exchanged, though Harry felt that Hermione's presence was the best gift he could have received. Among the gifts he'd bought were two wizarding cameras, one for Remus and one for Hermione, and they carried them everywhere.

Emma had shocked Harry by embracing him tenderly when she first arrived. He was still weak and tired easily, but the potions were quickly rebuilding his strength.

As it was summer in Fiji, Harry and Hermione spent most of their time on the beach. One of the adults was always nearby, and Hermione kept a careful eye on Harry, making sure he didn't overexert himself.

On the eighth day of the Granger's visit, Hermione saw Harry use magic for the first time since her arrival. With his illness, he'd been instructed to go slow with his magic. They were both reading, enjoying the warm breeze off the ocean, when Harry suddenly closed his book and sent it back to the house with a quick flick of his hand.

“Should you be doing that?” Hermione asked with an arched eyebrow.

He stood and moved away from his chair, then he flexed his muscles. “I’m better, Hermione, really. Madam Salote gave me the go-ahead on using magic four days ago. She says my core is the largest she’s ever seen and it’s still increasing.”

She resisted the urge to grab her camera and take his picture. He wore a tight surfer’s suit that left little to the imagination.

Harry smiled and turned to look out over the bay. The sun was beginning to set and the sky was streaked with vibrant reds and yellows.

Hermione closed her book and followed Harry's example, sending it back to the house. The task complete, she stood and moved to stand at his side.

“It’s amazing,” he murmured.

She looked at him curiously. “What is?”

“The sunset. I’ve never really taken the time to watch one. I never knew they could be so beautiful.”

He turned to her and meeting his eyes, she sucked in a breath. His eyes had somehow gotten darker, almost a forest green instead of their usual emerald green. He leaned closer, sliding his arms around her and she leaned against him. They had hugged before, but not like this. Her breath quickened and he tilted his head before lowering his lips to hers.

She tightened her grip on him, sliding her hands up his bare back into his hair. He lightly ran his tongue against her lips and she opened her mouth.

He bent her backwards, cradling her in his arms, and her thoughts seemed to stop. She could feel their magic entwined.

It was an intoxicating experience for both of them.

Needing to breathe properly, Harry broke the kiss and straightened, pulling her up with him. "That sunset is the second most beautiful thing on this beach," he whispered to her. They had kissed before, on the cheek and chaste kisses on the lips, but never, anything like this. Hermione's heart raced; this was the kind of kiss she had read about and hoped one day to experience for herself. It curled her toes and left her wanting more.

"If you kiss like that as a beginner, Mr. Potter, you may just end up killing me," she murmured.

It took him a moment to realize she was complimenting him. When he did, he couldn't help but grin. "I never could have done that with anyone else. If I was any good, it was because I was inspired by you."

She blushed and he took her hand as they slowly walked up to the house.

On the deck, five adults watched the young couple approaching with varying expressions. Sirius looked proud and Emma was all but crowing over the silly smile on Hermione's face.

Remus was chortling. He had gotten several good photographs of that first bona fide kiss.

Dan looked torn. He wasn't sure if he should be happy for his daughter or if he should beat Harry to a pulp. One close look at Hermione's expression convinced him that being happy for her would be the best thing.

Cindy watched the pair with interest. She had known Emma since college and had known Hermione all her life. She approved of Harry, although she thought he still had lingering issues from the Dursleys and Dumbledore to deal with.

The two teens paused when they spotted the adults watching them intently, most grinning.

"We shouldn't have done that in front of them," Hermione mumbled, her face flaming in embarrassment.

"No," Harry declared firmly. "I refuse to hide my feelings for you any longer. They'll get used to it."

She shot him a grateful look, then she lifted her chin and walked past the snickering adults, refusing to rise to the bait.

Later that evening Hermione sat on her bed, wearing only a cut-off t-shirt and an old pair of Harry's boxers for pajamas. They had opted to wait until tonight to try out the advice Sirius and McGonagall had given them concerning the journals.

She pricked her finger and squeezed a drop of blood into the center of the pentagram on the cover. The silvery emblem flashed into life and glowed softly. Clasping the book in both hands, she entered her standard Occlumency trance.

The universe spun wildly about its axis. There was a distinct sulfurous odor and a whistling sound before all movement seemed to stop. She blinked and looked around in confusion.

She was in a large circle of light. She could see hundreds of other circles in the distance and an intense blackness that seemed to suck all the light into it. She walked over to the edge of the circle and made to touch the edge.

"Hermione! No!"

She whirled and spotted Harry only a few feet away. He was holding one hand as if he had somehow injured it.

"Why not?"

"It's cold enough to burn you," he replied as he held out a hand to show her. One finger looked blistered.

She winced and tried to cast a healing spell on his finger, but nothing happened.

He grimaced. "Yeah, magic doesn't seem to work here." He looked out past the circle of light. "Wherever 'here' is," he muttered.

She looked around. Some of the circles of light in the distance seemed to have figures in them, moving about.

"Do you have any idea what's going on?" she asked. This was magic unlike any she'd ever seen, but Harry had more experience than she did with strange magic.

"I do, but I think you might think I'm nuts."

She rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't do that!" she protested. "Now, tell me what you're thinking."

"Think about what McGonagall told you about the journals. She said they were once very common for married couples who were separated for months at a time. Writing to you is great," he said, as he reached out and touched her cheek. His voice dropped an octave and she shivered at his touch. "But we saw that writing alone can't help when the distances are too great.

He paused and waved in the direction of the islands of light in the distance. "What if each mated pair had the ability to draw us into a place? Call it bookspace, if you want. Those islands of light are the bookspace for other journals. Each pair has their own private area in which owners of the journals can interact, almost as if they're together."

He stepped closer and touched her cheek again. His touch was warm and inviting along her skin. "I think that this place is almost as good as being together. I can touch you, hold you. I could even love you here."

She frowned at the last comment and the thrill it caused to run through her. She took a half step back. "It's an interesting hypothesis, Harry, but I don't think I'm ready for that last step yet."

He nodded. "Neither am I, but think of the possibilities. If I could only have held you on Halloween, I might never have gotten sick."

She nodded absently and looked around again. She could see figures moving in the distance, in their own little island of light. "We can do this once every two days and it lasts for an hour," she murmured to herself with a bit of smile.

She turned back to Harry and noticed he was staring at her. She glanced down and suppressed a groan. While her mind was whirling with the potential of bookspace, her body had firmly latched onto other possibilities. Her lack of appropriate attire was only part of the problem. Harry wore even less than she did, dressed only in a pair of boxers.

She felt her nipples tighten and knew her shirt was a less than adequate shield to hide her body's reaction. When she noticed Harry's boxers were showing the effects of more than a casual interest, she shook her head and resisted the urge to lick her lips. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Potter," she said playfully. "The question is, does what happens in here, happen out there?"

Harry leered at her playfully. "I could give you a hickey here and you could see if it comes out with you." Seeing her expression, he decided to offer another option. "How about this. The next time we're here, we wear more clothing. I could wear my socks and take them off. If I'm not wearing them when we leave bookspace, we'll know."

She nodded and chewed on her lower lip, trying to ignore the fact that her traitorous body was more interested in a hickey than Harry's socks. "Good idea," she said in a strangled voice. "I'll try to come up with a schedule where we can meet at least once a week, although twice would be better."

Harry nodded in agreement as he looked off at the distant circles. "I wonder what the others are talking about? Are they complaining about how painful being apart is?"

"Painful?"

He turned to her, his expression thoughtful. "Yes. It's like there's a hole in my soul and it aches. Leaving you and Hogwarts behind was the hardest thing I've ever done. Had I known how it would affect me, I probably would have asked Sirius to come up with a different idea."

"You really haven't made many new friends, have you?"

He shook his head. "There are eight wizard families in Waivunu and only three have kids our age. You met that one Japanese couple last year, remember? She's a Muggle marine biologist and he's a wizard. Suzuki is nice, but she wants to be more than friends. She reminds me of Lavender or Parvati. When you talk to her, you get the impression that the lights aren't on upstairs. Her brother, Abe, is all right, but he's more interested in chasing Madam Salote's daughter than he is in being a friend.

"I'm afraid there aren't a lot of opportunities for close friends here. And making friends with Muggles works only until you're forced to do magic," he said, his expression souring. "I really hate having to Oblivate people."

She nodded knowingly. She had been forced into just that scenario at the family Christmas party. An aunt saw her conjure a drink and she had to cast an *Oblivate*. Her parents were not happy, but agreed it had been necessary. She still couldn't believe how careless she'd been, but her mind was in Fiji, not on her surroundings.

He reached out and took her hand in his. "This makes being here much easier. If what we do in here doesn't affect the real world, we can spend plenty of time talking or holding each other."

She smiled softly. "Just remember, this is our OWL year so we won't be able to do this as often as we like. Next year will be different, I hope."

"Don't remind me! I have to make up for missing a year of Runes. I'm glad I dropped Divination, but coming in late isn't easy," he said darkly. He liked Runes but he had missed a year of it at Hogwarts, which meant he had to do two years worth of work in one.

She nodded, understanding the work he'd have to put in to make up for the lost year. She'd hate to be coming into any subject after missing a year.

"Hermione, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, but I don't promise I'll answer. A girl is entitled to a few mysteries about herself," she replied archly.

He grinned. "Are those my boxers you're wearing?"

For the second time in less than an hour, her body fought with her mind over control of her reactions as embarrassment warred with the fact that she had purloined the boxers from his laundry.

"Ummm, yes," she replied meekly.

He flushed. "Erm... right. Just checking," he replied rather lamely. He looked away from her and began to whistle nervously.

Hermione coughed, then asked him a question about his studies, hoping to change the subject. It worked, and they continued speaking quietly about school. The conversation ended when they were interrupted by a pulling sensation. They had time to glance at each other before being pulled out of bookspace and back to their beds.

Harry glanced around his room and smiled to himself. The journals would certainly help ease the distance between them.

Waivunu, Fiji Jan 5 th , 1996...

Harry walked into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of tea. Sirius and Remus sat at the table talking about the latest lead on the Ravenclaw Brooch, while Cindy read from one of her medical journals. The Grangers had returned to England the day before.

He sat at the table and stirred his tea absently for a moment. "Sirius?" he asked.

"Eh? What? Good morning, Harry." Sirius said.

He turned back to Remus and the parchment he was perusing, when something Harry said caught his attention.

"What did you say?" he asked, wondering if his ears were tricking him.

"I said, what does it mean when a girl knicks your boxers for her pajamas?" Harry said softly. His face was flaming, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Remus choked on his tea and nearly fell off his chair.

"Were you wearing them when she took them?" Sirius asked, grinning.

"Sirius!" exclaimed Cindy.

"Padfoot!" yelled Remus.

"No!" shouted Harry. He tilted his head for a moment in thought. "Should I have been?"

"Harry!" exclaimed Cindy.

"Harry!" yelled Remus.

"Yes," answered Sirius. Then, noting the looks from the others, he muttered, "Well it's more fun that way."

Harry looked around in bewilderment. "Maybe I shouldn't have brought this up."

"No, I think you were right to bring it up, I'm just not so sure these two reprobates are qualified to talk to you about it. Would you like me to ask Dan to come over to discuss it with you?" replied Cindy calmly.

Harry looked at her in horror. "Oh, I can see that going over well. 'Hi, Mr. Granger, so you're going to tell me how to score with Hermione?'"

Remus and Sirius howled in laughter.

Harry shot them a disgusted look. "I'm doomed," he muttered, then he stood and walked from the kitchen.

Cindy stared at his retreating back in amazement. How did the conversation move from Hermione sleeping in his boxers to them having sex? She turned to the other two supposed adults and waited for them to calm down.

Remus wiped the tears from his eyes. "I better go talk to him. We really weren't laughing at him."

"Wait, Moony," Cindy said, then she turned and looked at Sirius, who was still chuckling to himself. "It's not funny, Siri. He has a real question that needs to be addressed. Has anyone given him the talk, or shall we wait for the day Hermione announces she's pregnant?"

Both men blanched and she held up her hands to prevent their protests. "Look, I don't think it's gone anywhere near that point yet. But someone needs to make sure he knows what he's doing," she said; then she made a sour face. "And obviously that can't be Dan."

Remus and Sirius stared at her for a moment, then glanced to each other. "Best two out of three?" asked Sirius hopefully.

Remus sighed. "I'll do it, Sirius." He was not about to let Sirius drag him into another game of Rock, Paper, Scissors!

"No, you'd be too serious. You'd only end up scaring him!" Sirius protested.

Remus blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected Sirius to say that. "Do you want to do it?"

Sirius nodded reluctantly. "I am his godfather and guardian. I suppose it's my job," he replied firmly.

Remus nodded slowly. "All right, I'll let you have at it then."

"Remus!" protested Cindy.

Sirius turned on her. “Cin, do you have any complaints about my technique?”

She blushed and shook her head. “No, not really, except for that one time you got drunk and spent three hours as Padfoot chasing your tail.”

“I’m never going to live that down,” Sirius muttered darkly.

“Hey! How come I never heard that one? That’s almost as good as the time he tried to hump that poodle in Hogsmeade,” quipped Remus.

Sirius stood, looking highly affronted. “Saturday. Harry and I will talk on Saturday. I expect you both to find something else to occupy your time, elsewhere,” he said, then he walked from the room.

Cindy looked worried. “Do you think we hurt his feelings?”

“Not really. If I know Sirius, right now he’s plotting revenge.”

“Oh,” Cindy replied worriedly. Magical pranks were devilishly difficult for her to avoid.

Waivunu, Fiji Jan 7 th , 1996...

It was late afternoon and Harry looked up to see Sirius enter his room. He closed his text book on advanced dueling strategies and looked at him expectantly.

“Could you join me in the living room? I think it’s time we had a talk,” Sirius said.

Suddenly worried, he nodded and followed Sirius out of his room. In the living room he found that Sirius had a bottle of fire whiskey and two glasses waiting for them. He looked at the glasses, his eyes narrowing, then he glanced around. Next to Sirius’ chair was an empty bottle of firewhiskey. If it was the one he knew they had, it had been about a third full.

“Have you been drinking, Sirius?”

“I might have had a drink or two. Sometimes you need a little fortification when you’re about to start this kind of conversation,” the man replied airily.

Harry wondered where Remus and Cindy had gotten to. And why had they left him alone with a tipsy Sirius?

“What’s going on?”

Sirius sat and reached for the bottle. He poured two stiff drinks and handed one to Harry.

“Sirius, I don’t...”

“Just humor me and drink, all right?”

Harry sighed and accepted the glass. “Fine, but if I get in trouble for this, it’s your fault,” he muttered.

Sirius shot him an innocent grin. “Your question the other day led us to think that perhaps one of us should talk to you about women...”

Harry gulped and shook his head. This wasn’t happening. “No. No, you don’t. It’s not necessary Sirius, really. They taught us all that in school,” he said weakly.

Sirius peered at him intently. “They taught you what?”

Harry flushed and mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“Well, you know, how to make babies.”

“So you know the basics then?”

He nodded and looked away.

“There is a difference between watching a Quidditch match and being one of the players. Now the question I put to you is, are you a spectator or a player?”

Harry looked confused. “Ummm, I want to be a player? Merlin, I miss Quidditch.”

Sirius waved his comment away. “We’ll see if we can get a pickup game going later. Right now, focus. I’m going to tell you how to be a player.”

“But I know how to play Quidditch.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Focus! We’re talking about sex, not Quidditch. And I don’t want to hear any comments about broom length or stiffness. Trust me, when we’re done, Hermione will thank me for this.”

Harry blinked at him and turned a deep red. His mouth snapped shut; there was no way he'd take that bait!

Sirius drank down his shot of firewhiskey and looked pointedly at Harry's untouched glass.

Harry lifted up the glass to his lips and swallowed the foul tasting concoction as quickly as he could. The steam poured from his ears in a loud whistle and he could feel the fire building in his belly.

Sirius nodded in satisfaction and refilled their glasses.

"Keeping with the Quidditch analogy, the difference between a mediocre player and a good one is technique and a willingness to work with your partner. No matter how good your broom might be, a better flier can always outperform one with a larger broom if they know what they're doing."

Harry, who was feeling the effects of his first glass of firewhiskey on an empty stomach, nodded knowingly and emptied his glass again.

"But Hermione hates to ride brooms," he protested. "Wait, we're talking about sex. Oh, I get it. Brooms! Heh."

Sirius grinned and downed his drink, then poured another round for them both. It hadn't occurred to him that he, too, was drinking on an empty stomach or that he was already six shots down to Harry's two. "Now, let's just drop the whole Quidditch analogy. The whole point being that when the time is right, it is your duty to make sure that your partner enjoys your efforts as much as possible..."

Harry nodded knowingly, then downed his shot. Firewhiskey really wasn't all that bad! "Right!" he pronounced loudly. "Wait, what do you mean?"

Sirius waved his wand. Behind Harry, a lamp exploded. Frowning, he waved it again and a suddenly an image of a woman, naked, appeared standing in the living room. Harry stared at the image and then he shook his head. It looked a lot like Cindy.

Sirius poured another round and downed his, then slammed the glass on the table. Standing, he walked over to the woman. "Now, pay attention. I'm going to point out the female erroneous zones."

Harry absently picked up his glass and downed another shot of the fiery liquid. The image of Cindy standing naked winked at him, or maybe it was his imagination. He wondered if he should be taking notes and glanced around for a quill.

Sirius smiled happily and turned to the image. Using his wand as a pointer, he proceeded to point out various areas like the cauldron, the happy button and the left and right potion stirrers. He also explained important issues like orgasms, silencing charms, contraceptive potions and how to make the bed vibrate. He initiated Harry into the mystery of bra clasps and showed him the charm that he had invented strictly for the purpose of undoing one. Then he bragged about how he used the charm to undo the clasps of nearly one hundred women at a Ministry Ball just after he graduated.

Entranced, Harry watched in awe and tried to pour another round of drinks, spilling more than he got in the glasses.

Sirius waved his wand, returning the spilled whiskey to the bottle, and grinned happily at Harry. He was a little upset that he couldn't arrange for a live demonstration for his ward. Fiji had no dryad population that could be pressed into service the way England did.

Several hours later, Remus and Cindy returned from a day trip to England. Remus stopped and stared at the pair, then wrinkled his nose at the overwhelming stench of firewhiskey in the living room.

Harry appeared to be passed out on the couch, while Sirius had turned into Padfoot and was busily indulging in a practice few human males were limber enough to be capable of.

"SIRIUS!" shouted Cindy as she walked into the living room to see what was going on. Somehow the image of her had been dressed, thankfully, during the talk. However, what she was wearing looked like something out of the Arabian Nights, right down to the silken scarves that bound her hands and ankles.

"SIRIUS!" shouted Remus.

Padfoot looked up at them and whined; then he went back to business.

Harry lifted his head and blinked at Remus.

"Moony!" he mumbled. "He's mad. He's insane. I promise I'll never touch a girl in my life! I swear. Let me join a monastery. I'll become a Shaolin monk like we saw on the telly. I am not going to become an animagus just to do that!" He pointed at Sirius, his eyes wide.

The two adults turned to the slurring youth. "Harry, are you drunk?" asked Cindy incredulously.

He blinked and seemed to think about the question. "I'm not sure. I think I had too many whiskeys to tell." He waved his hands. "He had pictures, diagrams, talked about broom riding and doggie style and doggie style on brooms and doggie style in the Slytherin common room and polishing your wand and and and..."

He trailed off into a snore.

"He's pissed!" Remus exclaimed softly. "I can't recall James ever getting that pissed."

Cindy rounded on Sirius, furious, but like Harry, he too had drifted off.

Remus' jaw was clamped shut, but it was obvious he was trying to hold in his laughter.

Cindy waved at the image of herself. "Would you?" she asked.

He nodded and waved his wand, banishing the image.

He levitated Harry off of the couch. "I'll put him to bed. I don't think it's fair to be angry with him. Sirius, however, is another story. Once Harry's in bed, I'll brew up a hangover remedy and give you Sirius' dose."

She looked undecided for a moment. "I'm only a guest here. I really can't make him sleep on the couch, can I? It's his house, after all."

"Actually, it's Harry's house and I don't have a problem with him sleeping on the couch for a few days to learn a lesson. If you were a witch, he'd be hexed six ways from Sunday by now and he'd still have to sleep on the couch."

She nodded and looked down at the sleeping dog. "Maybe a flea bath," she murmured. "Or a trip to the vet and we'll tell him he's getting neutered."

Remus chuckled and floated Harry towards his bedroom.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Jan 9 th 1996, Waivunu Fiji...

Dear Hermione,

I'm going to kill Sirius Black. Twice. Then I'll raise him from the dead to kill him again!

Oh, all right. I suppose with that beginning you'll want to know what I'm talking about and why I would want to kill him.

I asked the wrong question in front of Cindy, Remus and Sirius. I asked what it meant when a girl knicked your boxers to wear as pajamas.

Yes, I'll admit it. I'm frightfully stupid when it comes to this relationship stuff. I swear half the time when I'm talking to you I sound like a total jerk. Anyway, that question led to a decision (made by the adults, of course!) that I should get The Talk. And this wasn't the basic, here are the fundamentals, type talk. No, this was the 'here's what you need to do to keep your witch happy and purring' talk!

Unfortunately for me, Sirius felt it necessary to drink about a third of a bottle of firewhiskey. Then he invited me to the beginning of his talk by opening a new bottle and pouring me a drink! Mind you, I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast that day, and he was already half potted.

Considering his condition and my own rapidly deteriorating one, he didn't do too bad a job. The funny thing is, he could have summed the whole talk into a simple, "take care of your partner and she'll take care of you." But no, it had to include diagrams, moving pictures, sound effects and a life size simulacrum of Cindy Adams, sans clothing. Sirius stood for that one and used his wand as a pointer.

I felt like a tourist in Wonderland. I was sure the Mad Hatter would show up any moment. The firewhiskey didn't help, either. I'm just glad Remus and Cindy showed up after Sirius and I did our rendition of the French can-can and sang Barnacle Bill the Sailor.

And then, to make matters worse, I got the talk, part two, the next morning after the hangover cure took effect. Interesting things, hangovers. I was certain my eyeballs had grown hair.

That morning, Cindy tormented Sirius, while Remus tried to undo the damage that he had caused to me. It finally took him pulling out that photo of us kissing, with you in your bathing suit, to convince me I didn't want to be a celibate monk.

So, here I am, so embarrassed I don't want to show my face outside of my room for at least forty years. I think I am going to do the totally unthinkable thing for a guy. I'm going to admit right now that, while I want to learn, I know absolutely nothing about sex and pleasing women. Assuming that our relationship goes that far, and I think someday it will, will you please remember this entry and take mercy on this dumb male and show him how to please you?

I know it's early still to be thinking along these lines, but the simple fact is, every time I ask what happens after Voldemort, I end up thinking 'I don't know, but it better include Hermione!'

I know it's barely been a week since you left, but I do miss you. I'm looking forward to our meeting in bookspace in three days. For now, I'll sign off.

*Love,
Harry*

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Jan 10 th 1996, Hogwarts...

Dear Harry,

Thank you for that entry. I have to admit I was feeling a little lonely and then you write with something that is both touching and funny at the same time.

Now, before you get all huffy on me, Harry Potter, I am not laughing at you. But it was a funny tale. I never expected you to work up the nerve to talk to Sirius and Remus about my sleepwear. Does it bother you or were you just asking if there was a meaning in it that you weren't aware of?

As to the rest of the tale, you aren't the only one that has entertained thoughts along those lines. And I also think that if things continue we will get to that point. It's just that I'm not ready for it yet and I don't think you are either. I promise you that if we get to that point, I'll make no assumptions and I'll do my best to help you if you also help me. It's not like I'm going to be an expert in the procedure.

Having said that, I'm now blushing madly and hesitant to say that I do think we can advance things a little more. My mind keeps going back to that kiss on the beach and I find myself becoming a greedy witch. I want to do that more often with you.

Now for a slight topic change. You've surprised me on a number of occasions with your comments. You seem to know what I need to hear and are willing to say it when I need it. You might think you sound stupid, but I don't think you are.

I know it's not a guy thing, but you have a heart of a real romantic. Last year forced you to grow up in unexpected ways and one of those ways is your ability to say something so romantic and sweet that it makes me feel all warm and wanted inside. It's something I hope you never change.

Finally, on a serious note:

Last night, while making prefect rounds, someone took a shot at me. I didn't see who, but I'm sure it was someone in Slytherin. Despite Malfoy losing most of his power and prestige, there is a large group of pure blood bigots in that house and Madam Umbridge has been egging them on. I didn't see or hear the spell that was cast, but I saw my body shield flare.

I know you can't really help, but I'm frightened and unsure if there's anything I can do about it. The ring protected me, and that's another major kiss you've earned. Between the ring and that body shield you taught me, most of the curses thrown in this school are ineffective against me.

What do you think I should do, Harry? Should I go to McGonagall? I might risk her finding out about the ring. I thought about going to Professor Lawton. I mean, she is our new Head of House and our Transfiguration professor, but unlike McGonagall, she doesn't seem to care much for her position as Head. Going to her might be a waste of time.

I'll see you in bookspace tomorrow and you can tell me your thoughts.

*Love,
Hermione.*

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Jan 15 th 1996, Waivunu Fiji...

I don't like this. I feel like I should be doing more. Someone took a shot at Hermione the other day, and we're basically sitting around doing nothing about it!

She wasn't hurt. It hit her body shield and was absorbed, but that's besides the point. She's describing a school where the Slytherins are running amok because of that foul Ministry liaison hag. It's unclear how much McGonagall knows, but I think she's mostly in the dark. I just can't see her knowing and doing nothing about it. Dumbledore, on the other hand... Well, that's another story.

Hermione has arranged her schedule so that she'll never patrol alone again and she told the Head of her house that she'll turn in her badge before she does another solo patrol. In the meantime, Remus is arranging for her to receive an emergency portkey. It will work if she's hurt, or if she consciously invokes it, sending her to Sirius' London home. Dobby knows how to contact us if that happens.

Isn't it my job to make sure she's safe? Shouldn't I be doing more?

Apparently, the answer to that is a resounding no. No one, not even my own girlfriend, wants me to do anything that might risk exposing our secret to the people back in Britain. I understand it, but I don't have to like it.

I saw Hermione only a few days ago in bookspace. Apparently, my entry to her about the sex talk made her decide to take things up a notch. When I left bookspace, I spent another hour in the shower, trying to calm down. I don't know who came up with the idea of cold showers, but I can tell you that they don't work well.

I think she'd be mortified if she knew how aroused she makes me. I refuse to push her at all, but I'm really looking forward to the day when we can do more.

Newcastleton, Scotland, Jan 30 th 1996...

The trip north went against all of her instincts, but she was driven by a vague, insistent voice in her head.

After killing the avatar of Voldemort, she bedded down for the winter in the drafty Gaunt manor. Her hibernation had been an uncomfortable and unpleasant experience, and her dreams had been interrupted by the voice insisting she seek the Great One to the north. The Great One would protect and defend her.

As it turned out, Remus' theory concerning Horcruxes had been right, but not for the reasons he expected. When Nagini ate Voldemort, she had absorbed his soul fragment into the Horcrux she held within her body.

It was stronger than a normal Horcrux, and it was insistent. She resisted the commands of the soul fragment for months before beginning her journey northward to the school for human wizards and the one creature capable of aiding her.

Traveling was a hit or miss affair for her. She had tried to catch rides aboard Muggle vehicles when she could. It worked well for awhile, until the day the car she'd sneaked into drove 90 ninety miles south, adding months to her journey. Since then, she had moved under her own power, doing her best to avoid detection by the Muggles.

While the Horcrux within her held massive magical potential, most of it was locked up and couldn't be released until it was activated by a Parselmouth. Unfortunately, that meant she needed human help. There was only one source possible of potential Parselmouths in the country: Hogwarts.

It was winter and she was sleepy and sluggish. Traveling in such cold was out of the question, so she'd found a quiet neighborhood, just north of Newcastleton, where she had helped herself to many of the neighborhood pets that roamed the area freely. Now she was comfortable, curled up in a basement of a building, not far from the furnace that worked steadily to heat the domain above her.

She slept fitfully, unhappy with the insistent voice in her head and the noise of the humans above.

A noise alerted her and she moved restlessly. The furnace burned steadily and she could hear the approach of one of those annoying humans. It bothered her that she could clearly hear the sound of food above her and she was stuck down here.

A door opened and someone flicked on a light. She reared up, ready to strike.

The human, a male, was examining the overhead pipes and muttering to himself. He never saw Nagini until she sank her fangs into his shoulder. He screamed and tried to break free, but he didn't have the strength. Her venom went to work almost instantly.

She released him and let the body slide to the floor. He was dead, but he was too big to consume, so she ignored him.

Slithering out the door, she headed for the steps to the rest of the house and the sound of an infant crying. She was hungry and needed to feed.

Bookspace, Feb 14 th 1996...

Harry appeared and immediately pulled Hermione into a hug. "Happy Valentine's day," he whispered.

To his shock, she began to sob. He held her, stroking her hair and whispering comforting words until she settled down.

They had run several experiments in bookspace and had determined that what happened in bookspace, as Harry called it, stayed in bookspace. However, navigating the twelve hour time difference to coordinate when they could meet wasn't easy.

He sat on the ground and pulled her into his lap, holding her tightly as she snuggled back against him. For several minutes they were silent. He knew she'd tell him what happened soon, but he wouldn't press her until she had calmed more.

OWL revising was consuming too much time and energy for both of them, so they were relying more on the journals to send short notes, only using bookspace once a week. He had kissed her seriously on several of those occasions and she had responded each time with an amazing amount of passion in return. They both recognized that bookspace was giving them an opportunity that perhaps they should be wary of.

He wiped away her tears and smiled gently at her. "Are you ready to talk about it? Did I do something wrong?"

She shook her head. "No, it's not your fault. You've been wonderful. It's Lavender."

He blinked at the venomous way she said the girl's name. "What's she done?"

"She's still annoyed because I have a boyfriend, so she started spreading rumors around that Evan doesn't exist. He's nothing more than a figment of my imagination, apparently. A number of the other students have started believing her."

He grinned. "He doesn't exist. Not really. But I can see how this would bother you."

"I don't know how to fight this, Harry. She's got most of the girls in Gryffindor thinking I'm a liar, and the rest don't talk to me at all."

"Neville and Ginny?" he asked worriedly.

"She backed away for a while, but Neville had some hard words with her about believing in their friends, rather than listening to rumors and gossip."

"Neville's a good friend. I wonder if it would be all right for me to send him a letter," he wondered aloud.

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment, then she turned a little in his lap. "You should ask Sirius about it. You don't want to blow your cover."

He nodded with a sigh. "I will. It might be something as easy as having you tell him I said hi and I miss seeing him around. He and I have more in common than most people know."

"What do you mean?"

"You know about his parents, right?"

She shook her head. Neville almost never spoke about his home life. The few times he had, he'd never mentioned his parents.

"Sirius told me that his parents were tortured into insanity by the LeStranges and Barty Crouch Junior. See, there were two wizard babies born that could have qualified for the prophecy: Neville and me."

"Does he know?" she gasped.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. There's no point in telling him, unless something happens to me. Then maybe he can finish what I couldn't."

She leaped off his lap and stood, hands on her hips, glaring at him angrily. "Don't say that, Harry Potter! You're going to beat that monster! You're going to beat him and go on to live a wonderful life!"

He held up his hands in a calming gesture. "I'm just saying it's like insurance. No one thinks they're going to have an accident, but they have insurance in case they do."

Satisfied, she sat cross legged next to him. "I know," she whispered. "But sometimes your fatalism scares me. Have some faith in yourself, Harry. We all do. Remus, Sirius, even Mum and Dad are sure you'll beat him. You're the only one that doubts your abilities."

He nodded and she sighed, knowing he still wasn't convinced. She wasn't sure what could be done to convince him.

"So, what will you do about Lavender?" he asked, trying to maneuver her towards a safer topic. The fact was the search for the Brooch had hit a dead end once again was depressing everyone at the beach house.

She looked down. "I don't know. I don't know what I can do about it. She's spreading a rumor and there doesn't seem to be a way of fighting it."

Harry leaned back on his elbows and looked thoughtful for a moment, then his expression turned mischievous. "Do you trust me?"

"You know I do," she replied reproachfully.

He sat up. "Then let me solve your Lavender problem for you."

"Harry, you can't come to Hogwarts! They'd find out!"

He chuckled. "I'm not going to Hogwarts. Not really. I'm just going to send you a letter. Make sure that you pretend to be too nervous to read it. Let Ginny or Neville read it out loud for you when Lavender is nearby." His eyes danced with mirth.

She tried to glare him into submission. The glare, however, had stopped working on Harry a long time ago, perhaps because he now knew she really didn't mean it.

He leaned over and kissed her nose softly. "Don't worry about it. Just look for an international owl at breakfast in a week or two. In the meantime, it's Valentine's Day and I figure we still have thirty minutes in bookspace. Let's take advantage of it."

He gently pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She wanted to be mad at him for dismissing her problem out of hand, but how could she be mad when he was kissing her so thoroughly?

She wrapped her arms around him and moaned against his lips. He slid one hand up over the back of her shirt and she melted against his touch.

They hadn't kissed like this often, to her disappointment, but she could understand why. Both of them were afraid it would lead to things they weren't quite ready for.

His hand traced fire against the bare skin of her arms and neck and she kissed back as best as she could. *Soon, Mr. Potter. If we keep this up and we'll be ready for more soon*, she thought.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Feb 21 st 1996, Hogwarts...

Merciful Merlin, I love that man!

He told me he would do something to get Lavender off my back, but I never expected him to be so, well, Slytherin about it.

Today at lunch a lone international delivery owl winged into the Great Hall heading straight for me, carrying what looked like a large package. Just remembering what happened next makes me want to laugh out loud.

With a trembling hand I removed the package from the owl and Ginny gave the owl a slice of ham from a platter.

I looked at the package and a spear of worry knifed through me. This was from Evan/Harry, but what was he doing? I didn't know and that worried me. I don't know why my insecurities suddenly roared to the surface but they did and was afraid of what he had sent.

"What's the matter, Granger?" called Lavender. "Perhaps it's a package from your fake boyfriend."

"Maybe he's breaking up with her," quipped Parvati.

The Gryffindor gossip twins chortled and several other girls nearby laughed with them.

I unwrapped the heavy package to find two boxes and a sealed letter. Both boxes seemed pretty heavy. I pushed the letter at Ginny.

"Read this," I gasped. In truth, Lavender's comments had hit a bullseye with me. I did believe that someday Harry would give me up for someone prettier.

She looked at me funny and opened the envelope. She pulled out the letter and a photo dropped to the table. Neville caught it. He took one look then he handed it to Ginny, blushing heavily.

Ginny scanned the letter, her eyes widening, then she glanced at the photo and gasped. Turning to me she asked, "Are you sure you want me to read this?"

"He's isn't breaking up with me, is he?" I replied.

Ginny blinked and looked at me as if I had two heads, then she turned to the letter and read it in a loud voice. As she did, a hush fell over the Great Hall as every girl there strained to hear the words of the fictitious boyfriend who now seemed very real.

"Dearest Hermione,

"I can't begin to describe how much I miss you and I'm sorry I wasn't with you for Valentine's Day. But I've sent you two gifts, which I hope will help tell you how I feel about you. I've also included a photo taken just after Christmas from your last visit. It's my favorite photo of us. I had it enlarged and it's perfect for framing. Mine sits next to my bedside and I look at it often."

Ginny paused at that point and passed the photo to Neville, who glanced at it reluctantly. She nodded to him and he passed it to Seamus, whose eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"I'm sorry your dorm mates are giving you trouble, but frankly their attitude seems very immature and childish, if you ask me. You would think they would be more interested in copying your behavior, rather than mocking it. You're the smartest person I know and you've certainly motivated me in my studies. Maybe they're simply jealous. You're beautiful, intelligent and kind hearted – everything they're not.

"I look forward to seeing you when school lets out. I'm sorry we can't see each other over the Easter holiday, but OWLS are a difficult year for both of us. I'm counting the days to your summer break and I hope you enjoy my gifts. I miss you and my heart aches when I can't be with you.

"All my love,

"Evan."

I wiped away a tear, then opened the larger of the two boxes. Inside was a box of candy from what was supposed to be the best confectioner in New Zealand. Surprisingly, the box was split down the middle; one half labeled sugar free, the other half regular chocolates. It was the perfect gift for the daughter of dentists.

The second box contained a small bracelet with a single book charm dangling from it. The chain was heavy gold and it was clearly a quality piece of jewelry. Ginny gasped on seeing it, and immediately grabbed my arm, putting the bracelet on me.

The photo got as far as Parvati, who dropped it on the table as if she had been burned. "No!" she gasped in a strangled voice. Colin Creevy snatched it up before anyone else could and he sent it back to me with a wave of his wand. I grabbed the photo out of the air and blushed heavily, seeing it clearly for the first time.

Harry had sent me a doctored version of the photo Remus had taken of our first kiss on the beach. It was a wizard photograph and it showed Evan turning to me, wrapping his arms around me and kissing me deeply. The kiss was set against a tropical sunset. To make things even worse, I wore my bikini and he wore his surfer shorts. Both outfits left little to the imagination.

Lavender sat motionless, her face flaming. Around the hall dozens of girls were glaring at her. They had been taken in by her lies and didn't like being fooled like that. Evan was very real and he had publicly called her immature and childish.

I've got to get a pensieve to show this to Harry! He not only made my year, but Lavender and Parvati have become the laughing stock of Gryffindor House. No one has ever stood up to them like he did. Lord, I love that man and I can't wait until our next visit to bookspace!

Strangely, Ginny is now suspicious. She's a little awed by what Evan did, but she says it was done in a style that reminded her of Fred and George, or even something Harry might pull. I nearly choked when she mentioned Harry, but I brushed her off, saying Evan is a bit of a prankster on occasion.

I've got to write an entry to Harry since he won't be expecting us to meet for another three days.

Headmistress 's Office, April 10 th , 1996...

Minerva sat in her office, scowling. Rumors had been floating around the school for some time, but she had dismissed them. She admitted to herself that she might have been mistaken to do so.

Remus Lupin had stopped by one afternoon a few weeks back, expressing some concern in the safety of the students. He cited one incident against Miss Granger that had apparently frightened her. As a result, the girl had gone to her Head of House and calmly told her that she would not patrol alone any longer.

And then there were the Attitude Adjustment sessions that Dolores Umbridge was holding against students who she felt needed additional instruction in proper wizarding traditions. Several Gryffindors had complained to Minerva about Umbridge back in November, but she had not listened to their complaints.

That all changed today. She had passed Lee Jordan in the hallway and noticed something strange on the back of his hand.

“Mr. Jordan, follow me,” she said brusquely. She had a sinking feeling in her stomach that she was about to find out that she shouldn't have ignored Lee and the Weasley twins when they came to her in November.

Bewildered, Lee followed her into an empty classroom.

“May I see your hands, Mr. Jordan?”

He reluctantly held out both hands and Minerva gently took his right hand and turned it palm down. Carved into the flesh were the words 'I will show proper respect'.

Her lips thinned. “So, you were telling the truth,” she murmured.

“Yes, ma'am,” Lee replied, somewhat resentfully.

She glanced at her watch. “Lunch is about to begin. After lunch you will come to my office. I am excusing you from your afternoon classes.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Lee turned to leave the classroom.

“Lee.”

He stopped by the door and turned. “Professor?”

“I am very sorry. I have failed in my duty to protect you and the others. That ends today,” she said firmly.

Lee gave her one of his wide smiles and left the room. Minerva skipped lunch; she had a duty to attend to. Her school was under attack and she had done nothing about it for far too long.

She checked her clothing one final time. A house elf had appeared to tell her that all four of her guests had arrived in the castle and were on their way up. Next to her desk was Dumbledore's old pensieve. The memories it once contained had all been removed and stored in crystal containers. Now the pensieve contained new memories, most provided in the last six hours by students.

Her door chimed and she looked up expectantly. “Come in,” she called.

The door opened and admitted Rita Skeeter, Alison Harrington, Kingsley Shacklebolt and his junior partner, Nymphadora Tonks. Minerva didn't want the Skeeter woman there, but she was a necessary evil for what she had planned.

Harrington was the chairwoman of the Hogwarts Board of Governors. She looked unhappy at her companions. She had received a request from Minerva to come to the school. What she hadn't expected was that the Headmistress would also summon Aurors and the Press.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice,” Minerva said, standing. She lifted up a wad of parchment several inches thick to show to her visitors. “I have here the sworn statements from over a dozen students, as well as formal complaints from parents demanding that action be taken immediately. In the pensieve we have memories of a member of the staff using a Class 1 Dark Artifact on students, in some cases permanently disfiguring them.”

Skeeter's eyes widened. Christmas had just come early!

While Tonks took the statements from Minerva, Kingsley activated the pensieve in presentation mode. His eyes narrowed when several heavily scarred hands appeared. “A blood quill,” he muttered.

“Who would do this?” demanded Harrington. To think that this crime had been perpetrated on the students by a member of the staff! She was outraged.

“Oh, Merlin. It was Senior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge!” exclaimed Tonks, after skimming through the first few statements.

Harrington swore under her breath. Now she understood why everyone had been summoned. Minerva was going to be bucking the Ministry with this one and she needed help from the Board and the press to do it. Rita Skeeter pulled a pad from her enormous handbag and was scribbling furiously, for once using a normal quill. This story didn't need embellishing.

“There's enough here for an arrest, Shack,” Tonks said, passing over the documents.

He arched an eyebrow and started thumbing through them. Finally, he sighed and nodded. "Yes, there is enough. Headmistress, would you be so kind as to send a house elf to summon the Senior Undersecretary?"

Minerva nodded and summoned an elf, instructing the creature to find Umbridge and ask her to join her in her office.

"I'm sorry, Alison," Minerva said, "but I can't keep silent any longer. As it happens, I ignored this mess for far too long."

"Ignored it?" repeated Skeeter.

Minerva shot her a careful look then nodded reluctantly. "Yes, ignored it. I didn't want to believe that a member of the Ministry, a close personal representative of the Minister himself, was torturing my students in the name of pure blood racial bigotry."

"This is going to bring down the current government," commented Skeeter. She was unable to hide her glee at the prospect. Unlike Cornelius Fudge, Rufus Scrimgeour wasn't impressed by her and wasn't willing to interview with her.

"I don't care," snapped Minerva. "My students are being tortured using a dark artifact. How are we supposed to teach students to become upstanding members of society if we allow this hag to go unpunished? What message will we be sending?"

The door opened and Dolores Umbridge walked in. "Minerva," she crooned in that sickly sweet voice of hers. "An elf said you needed to see me?"

She paused and looked around, noting the presence of Harrington and Skeeter and the unmistakable uniforms of two on duty aurors.

Shacklebolt walked up to Umbridge and she started to back away in alarm. Tonks pulled her wand and placed her in a body bind that allowed her to move her head freely. "What are you doing?" she screeched.

"Dolores Jane Umbridge, I am placing you under arrest for the use of a Class 1 Dark Artifact on underage wizards and witches. You will be housed in a Ministry holding cell until the Wizengamot is ready to hear your case."

Shacklebolt droned on about her rights as he frisked her, removing two wands, a dagger and a box containing not one, but two illegal blood quills, as well as several small potion vials. Tonks passed him a pair of anti-Apparation manacles.

"No!! They deserved it! They're lying brats and I'm allowed to do what I want! I'm the Senior Undersecretary! I'll have your jobs for this! I swear I will!" she shouted.

Tonks looked up from cataloging the items they had confiscated and swished her wand, silencing the Senior Undersecretary.

"Thank you, Auror," Harrington said in relief.

Tonks nodded and went back to catalog and tagging the items.

Elated and exhausted, Minerva slumped into her chair. Alarmed, Harrington conjured tea for her. "You have nothing to worry about, Minerva. The board will back your actions entirely."

She nodded slowly. The day had been long and the discovery that her students were being mistreated weighed heavily on her. "It's not over yet, Alison. We still need the Ministry to pull their claws out of our school."

"Leave that to me," Rita offered with a feral grin. "This is the kind of thing I live for. Exposing the Minister's grab for power will be a pleasure."

An hour later Minerva broke down and wept in her now empty office. She had cleansed a stain from her school, but not before her charges had paid with their blood.

Daily Prophet Headline, April 11 th , 1996...

Senior Undersecretary Dolores Jane Umbridge arrested on charges of torture!

Last night Senior Undersecretary Dolores Jane Umbridge was arrested at Hogwarts for her part in continuing the Ministry's quiet anti-Muggleborn campaign. Umbridge, age 46, was led away in chains after being arrested for using an illegal blood quill on Hogwart's students.

Use of a blood quill, a Class 1 Dark Artifact, has been proscribed for more more than seventy years. Should Madam Umbridge be convicted, each instance of use automatically carries a five year prison sentence in Azkaban.

The long day started when Headmistress Minerva McGonagall noticed the distinctive scarring on the hand of one of her seventh year students. The student, who was not named, had the words "I will showproper respect" carved into the back of his hand.

The words were clearly a result of an illegal blood quill. Upon investigating, Headmistress McGonagall received complaints from fourteen parents and students against Madam Umbridge. When Umbridge was searched, she was found to be carrying two blood quills on her person. A search of her quarters yielded one more blood quill, and a large amount of Lust and Obliviate potions. Additional potions were found in single dose vials on her person, but they have yet to be identified.

Classes have been suspended for the next fewdays as healers from St. Mungo's examine each student. One student , Draco Malfoy, has already shown the effects of exposure to these potions , and it is believed that Umbridge was using them on the male students. The Hogwarts

Board of Governors is insisting at this point that all students and staff be tested. The search for more victims continues.

Malfoy, whose father is now serving 27 consecutive life terms in Azkaban for bribery, murder and sedition, was turned over to St. Mungo's Mind Healers for treatment. Several Aurors were required to disarm and subdue the boy before he could be transported to the medical facility.

Perky Weatherbee, a Ministry spokesman, was quoted as saying that, "We fully support Madam Umbridge, who we know to be a witch of the finest caliber. We are confident that should this come to trial, she will be exonerated and these spurious charges will be proven false."

The Minister's agenda. Page 2.

Pure Blood Racism: Is it Ministry policy? Page 3.

Defiling the defilers, a history of the Malfoy family. Page 4.

Quibbler Headline, April 11 th , 1996...

Muggle Menace Manufactures Mayhem!

Pretend Muggle Harry Potter has been spotted once again, this time in the United States, where he was nearly apprehended while disrupting the annual American religious ritual where millions deposit form 1040s in large blue receptacles for shipping off planet.

He was chased by a newly discovered species of humans called IRS Revenuers, but he eluded capture in thanks to his patented bat suit. In a definite change of tactic, he opted for fluttering away, rather than his signature swooping. It is speculated that the presence of the Revenuers was sufficient to change his tactics; however, one expert suggested that swooping might involve additional expenditures and deductions under the new rules for the holiday.

Potter, now age 15, was then spotted in Italy, where he participated in the annual running of the Pasta. The Quibbler is wondering just who is supposed to be acting as Mr. Potter's guardian these days and why is he running amok in the world. Don't they know how many people are killed each year in Pasta stampedes? We call on the Ministry to take steps to insure Mr. Potter's safety. And if they refuse, we will gladly forward to him any colander that is sent to this office.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Jun 15 th 1996, Waivunu Fiji...

Dear Hermione,

I know your OWL exams have been over for more than a week, but I finished my last exam today and received my scores.

About four hours ago what was left of my brain dribbled out my ears, so I'm going to make this a short entry tonight. I'm magically exhausted. When they said my OWL exams were more practical than theory they weren't kidding. It doesn't help that the last test was my Defense class. I sure hope they find the examiner's limbs. I'd hate for them to hold that against me.

Ten more days until we're together again for two wonderful months. Bookspace has been a great help, and I haven't felt a single shred of depression, but I miss us sharing meals, or walking the beaches. I miss holding your hand and dancing with you at the Sheraton in Nadi.

Anyway, I'm going to go to sleep now before Sirius discovers Cindy dosed his chocolates with a laxative. Maybe that will teach him not to offer her a depilatory charm when he doesn't know how to cast one. Her hair is almost fully grown back now.

*Love,
Harry*

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Jun 16 th 1996, England...

Dear Harry,

You know your OWL results already and you haven't told me? Do you want to be in trouble, buster?

I'm waiting.

*Love,
Hermione*

P.S. Nine more days. And I miss those things too.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Jun 17 th 1996, Waivunu Fiji...

Err...oops?

I was so tired when I wrote that last entry I thought I did tell you. I'm sorry, sweetie. I've listed them below.

Defense O+
Transfiguration O+
Charms O
Potions/Alchemy E
Runes/Enchanting E
Government P
Estate Management E
History P
Physical Ed. O
Languages E

Eight out of ten possible OWLS.

Personally, I think I did rather well. Those are my unofficial results, which every student gets at the end of the testing. The official transcript comes ten days after the end of testing. I know I didn't do well in Government and History, but it's more of a course load than I was taking at Hogwarts. Something had to give.

I tried to talk to Sirius about possible career choices, but I just couldn't. And not just because of his sex talk. No, he and Cindy have been waging a nonstop prank war for the last few weeks. Right now it's hard to talk to Sirius without laughing. She's shaved off one of his eyebrows and with some help from Moony, painted his finger and toenails with this embarrassing pink nail polish that even magic won't remove. Moony claims he had nothing to do with it, but I'm not sure I believe him.

And if you think that's bad, you should have heard her when she woke up to find he had used a switching spell to move her breasts to her back. Merlin, I can't wait to get out of this madhouse and visit you. At least it will be quiet.

Anyway, I spoke to Remus about career choices. Have you thought about what you'd like to do? Remus thinks I'll have a lot of choices to pick from. He also reminded me that my choices aren't limited to what will put food on the table. He said I could easily play the role of gentleman Auror or something like that. It was his way of saying the Potters left me enough to insure that I would work at what interested me, rather than working just to survive.

Remus mentioned something about curse breaking that sounded interesting. I know my grades suggest an Auror track or even hit wizard, but I don't think I want to spend my days chasing down other people's problems.

Enchanting sounds like it could be fun. I like the idea of making things and then making them magical. Curse breaking sounds like it could be really interesting. You'd not only need to understand curses and ancient runes, but languages and history.

Remus seemed to imply I could graduate and do nothing if I wanted, but I'm sure I'd get bored with that fast. It might be fun to goof off for a month or two, but then I'd want something to do with my time.

Remus picked up a book called the Big Book of Wizard Careers. I'll bring it with me when I come visit. This way we can both look at our options. I think it would be fun if we could find something that we could do together. I mean....

Damn, I wish we could erase things in these books. Just forget the above paragraph. I'm presuming something I shouldn't.

I'll still see you in bookspace in two days.

Love,
Harry

Bookspace Jun 20 th 1996...

Hermione paced nervously. She had read Harry's last entry and was very pleased right up until the end. He had started to say something, then backpedaled quickly and ended his entry. It left her worried and confused.

She had sent him several entries since then, but he hadn't replied to them. And now she was sure he was late to entering bookspace.

A sudden whistling sound signaled his arrival. She lurched to her feet and immediately embraced him. He trembled in her arms and she pulled away.

"What's wrong, Harry? I almost thought you weren't going to come tonight."

He looked down at his feet and refused to meet her gaze. "I'm sorry. I was assuming something in my last entry, something I had no right to assume."

She frowned. "What are you talking about? That last entry sounded like you wanted us to be together after school, maybe even have complimentary careers."

"I do, but I was wrong to think you'd want that, or want to be with me like that."

She reached up and cupped his face, forcing him to look at her. “It wasn’t wrong of you to presume that. Do you know who I want to see across from the breakfast table in ten or twenty years time? You, that’s who. I never said anything because it implied our relationship would become permanent.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “That’s what I keep hoping will happen, but I didn’t think you’d want to be with me like that.” He looked at her then. “I know we talked a lot about sex and deepening our relationship, but I always thought that, sooner or later, you’d meet some guy closer to home.”

She wrapped her arms around him and held him. She was shocked to discover that his fears were identical to her own. She was sure he’d find some witch from Australia or New Zealand, or maybe even one of those exotic island beauties and leave her.

She pulled away a little and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “I want us to stay together. You’ve been my best friend since first year. I never want to lose that. The journals have allowed us to talk about some very private things. I think I’ve reached the point where I could tell you anything, Harry.

“Before Hogwarts I never had any real friends. We’ve grown up together and grown closer. I don’t want to lose that.”

He smiled weakly at her. “I don’t want to lose that either. We’re awful young to be talking about marriage, though.”

She grinned. “Well, we’re not talking about getting married this summer. I think Mum and Dad might have a problem with that.”

Harry’s expression grew pensive. “Right, then. So, this summer is out.”

“What are you thinking?” she asked suspiciously.

“How about a graduation slash engagement party to celebrate your graduation?”

She stared at him. “Are you serious?” she asked in a hushed, breathy voice.

He shook his head “Sirius is with Cindy, remember? I don’t think he wants to marry you. I could ask him if you want.”

“Stop with that pun! Merlin, I’m going to kill someone the next time I hear it. Now, answer the question!”

“Am I serious about marrying you? Yes,” he whispered intently. “You are a part of my life and represent something I never thought I would have. I promise you this, I will ask for your hand on your graduation day. And before then, I’ll ask permission from your father.”

He slid his hand down her arm and pulled her hand into his, then he raised it to his lips and kissed her focus ring. “I gave you this ring awhile back so you’d be able to protect yourself while I wasn’t with you. Now I want you to think of it as a promise ring. It’s my promise to you that we’ll have a life together.”

She choked out a laugh and wiped away her happy tears. “All right, but only as long as you remember your ring is my promise to you, too.”

He nodded and pulled her back into his embrace. He buried his face in her hair and smiled to himself. If he could spend the rest of his life holding her, he’d die a happy man!

Hermione's House, Oxford, England, Jun 25 th , 1996...

He stepped out of the doorway and slammed it shut behind him. He was breathing heavily. His backpack and most of his clothing were covered in lime Jello. He looked down at himself in disgust and turned.

Staring at him were the surprised faces of Hermione, Dan and Emma.

“What happened?” exclaimed Emma and Hermione together.

“This is all your fault,” he said, nodding to Emma. “You had to introduce Sirius to someone who refuses to surrender in a prank war. I barely got out with my life. Sirius was shooting feathers and syrup from his wand and she was hurling Jello by the bucketful! I swear Remus must have charmed the buckets to be refilling!”

Dan broke down, laughing so hard he bent over and held his stomach. Hermione waved her hand, cleaning the Jello out of his clothing and hair. Emma looked entirely too smug for her own good.

Harry nodded his thanks to Hermione. “I don’t know what anyone has planned, but could I shower first? Running from my room to the portal door involved Jello, some sort of rice pudding concoction and what looked like flying fish. I may be Jello-free, but I still smell.”

And that only increased Dan’s howls of laughter.

Emma shot her husband a disgusted look, then she turned back to Harry. “Of course you can, dear. You know where your room is. Go shower and meet us in the kitchen in thirty minutes.”

Thirty minutes later, he walked back into the Grangers’ kitchen, smelling and feeling much more like himself.

“So, what’s on the agenda this week?” asked Dan.

Hermione looked down at her plate. “I’m not sure. I haven’t gotten my scores, so I don’t know what classes...”

"Hermione," Harry said warningly. "Everyone here knows you passed every class with top marks."

"We heard about your marks as well, Harry. Eight out of ten, and very good grades at that," Emma said.

"Yes, well done," Dan added. "But I bet my princess sweeps the tests."

Hermione blushed and mumbled something about not being that good.

"Hermione, let's use this time to get the homework done. I have my own to do this time as well since I'm on the fast track. After that, I have the textbooks for our classes next month, and we can do like we did last year."

A small bell rang and Harry looked around wondering at its source.

"That's the bell I installed on the portal door to warn us if someone came through," Dan said.

The door to the kitchen opened and a bright blue, polka-dotted Remus tap danced his way into the room. His pants were blinking an intense orange and he was sporting a tail and horns.

"Don't ask," Remus growled, then he performed a perfect shim sham before apparating away.

Harry blinked and started laughing. "I warned him not to get involved in that prank war."

Once everyone was seated at the table and served tea, conversation turned, once again, to their holiday plans.

"My grades aren't going to be that good," Hermione said. "But Harry's right. Doing our homework and getting it out of the way would be the smart thing to do. Once that's done, we're free for whatever."

The adults nodded and Emma turned to Harry. "How are you making out? Did you bring a sleeping draught with you?"

He gestured and a bottle appeared in his hand. "Right here. I'll drag a little today since I'm twelve hours off, but by tomorrow I'll be fine."

Dan nodded. "So, did Sirius tell you anything about this bit with Scrimgeour?"

"He told me what Umbridge did and how his group in the Wizengamot was able to use that to bring him down. I think Madam Bones will make a fine Minister. She's fair, and not very corruptible. Sirius says people have tried bribing her before, resulting in arrests and trials."

"Susan says her aunt values honesty," Hermione added.

Harry glanced over to her, his brow furrowed. "Susan? Oh, the Hufflepuff? I didn't know she was related."

Hermione nodded. "She's in my study group. She told me she lives with her aunt. Her parents were killed in the first war with Voldemort."

Harry fell silent. He'd never paid much attention to Susan before and now he felt like a heel about it.

He looked up when he felt Hermione take his hand. "It's all right, Harry. She didn't want people to know or make a fuss about it. Just like Neville, or you. You never told me what was going on with the Dursleys."

"What ever happened to them, anyway?" asked Dan.

"Happened? To the Dursleys?" Harry asked. "Nothing. Why?"

Dan and Emma looked astounded. "You mean they got away with abusing you all those years?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess."

The adults scowled and Harry felt the need to explain. "You need to understand, the Ministry won't do anything because they think Harry Potter is a Muggle, or at best a Squib. And since the Ministry won't talk with the Muggle authorities, they won't have them do anything about it.

"It would be different if Dumbledore had charmed or hexed them, but he didn't. That's just the way they were."

"Doesn't that bother you?" asked Emma curiously.

He thought about it for a moment. "It did for a while. I thought about going back there one day and paying a visit, but what would be the point? My real revenge will come when I turn seventeen and I gain control over all of my inheritance. The Potter Trust owns the house on Privet Drive and they've been living there rent free. I'll put a stop to that or evict them. And that will be it as far as my revenge goes."

"You don't want to hurt them? You don't want to hex them and make them pay for what they did?" asked Hermione.

"If I did, would you think less of me?" he countered.

She nodded, unhappy with her answer.

"Now you know why I won't do those things," he said. He looked her for a moment, then grinned. "But that doesn't mean I won't dream about it."

She grinned back. She didn't want him to risk a trip to Azkaban. Besides, she had own plans for the Dursleys, and she'd be of age months before he would. And unlike Harry, who would curse them directly, she would be more discreet about it.

Waivunu Fiji, July 10 th 1996...

Sirius woke to the sensation of dozens of things crawling in the bed. He froze and cracked one eye open, then wished he hadn't. Land crabs, dozens of them, were covering the bed, and someone nearby was humming.

The prank war had been a disaster. Sirius felt he had the upper hand because he could use magic, but Cindy had enlisted Remus and Harry as allies for some of her more devious pranks. This time, however, enough was enough.

"Cindy, my love?" he said softly, barely audible over the sound of the little crabs.

"Yes, dear?" she said, breaking from her humming.

"I surrender."

She paused and stared at him. "What?" she exclaimed.

"I said, I surrender," he said in a stronger voice.

"No terms? No conditions? No caveats? No hidden magical tricks?"

"Just one."

"What is it?" she said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Marry me."

She blinked and resisted the urge to sit down. "What?"

"Marry me. What's hard to understand about that?"

Cindy stopped removing crabs from her bucket and looked at him suspiciously.

"Just what kind of joke are you pulling now, Sirius Orion Black?"

"Help me get out of this bed in one piece and I'll prove to you I'm not kidding."

He flinched as a land crab clicked its claw close to his nose. The thing stared at him as if trying to figure out if he was food. Sirius shuddered again and closed his eyes.

She stood undecided for a moment. "All right, but if this is another joke..."

"It's not! I swear!"

She pulled the flat sheet out from the bottom of the bed and then grabbed it by the corners, trapping most of the crabs. Then she tied the four corners together and tossed it, and her bucket of crabs, out the window.

Sirius opened his eyes and spotted the single crab still on the bed. He rolled away from it and fell off the bed with a heavy thump. Standing, he reached for his wand and held it straight up.

Cindy tensed, seeing him with his wand, but he wasn't pointing it at her.

"I swear on my magic that my proposal to Cindy Adams was truly given," he intoned. His wand flashed and she gasped.

Oaths based on magic had been explained to her. He had just risked his magic to prove to her he wasn't kidding.

He placed the wand on the night table and walked over to her. "I meant what I said. You're everything I could want in a wife. You're intelligent, funny, beautiful, and you're even good at pranking."

"Just good?" she teased.

"The best and I love you," he said, leaning in to nuzzle her ear.

She sighed and leaned against him. She had been hoping that things might go this way. A small part of her, however, had doubted it. Since the disaster with Anthony, she had thought she'd never marry.

"Well?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, Sirius. I'll marry you."

He tightened his grip for a moment and kissed her forehead, then he released her and went rummaging through his night table drawer as she

watched him, astonished.

"Where the blazes... Aha! There you are!" he exclaimed as he withdrew a small ring box from the drawer. Turning, he opened the box and offered it to her.

She sucked in her breath. In the box was a large three carat diamond solitaire in what looked like a platinum setting. She reached for it, then hesitated. "What spells are on this?" she asked suspiciously.

He grinned sheepishly. "There's a self-sizing charm, and it's invisible to anyone who might want to steal it. There's also a Portkey, should you ever become injured. Once you put it on, only you or I will be able to remove it. Pretty standard stuff for engagement rings."

She nodded and reached for the ring. The stone sparkled and seemed to have a light of its own. It was enchanting and her hands trembled.

"May I?" he asked.

When she nodded, he brushed the tears from her cheeks, then took the ring from the box. Taking her hand, he kissed her palm, then slipped the ring on her finger.

It warmed for a second and she could feel it adjusting to her size.

He smiled at her timidly, an unusual expression for him, and it touched her heart greatly. For the first time she saw the wounded boy who had been rescued by the Potter family. He hid behind pranks and jokes, but he was there, nonetheless. She knew about a lot of Sirius' background and now he was showing her a side that no one saw.

She pulled him close and kissed him for all she was worth. Then she pushed him back onto the bed. They had been intimate many times, but this was different.

Sirius bounced when he hit the bed. He started to reach for her, but froze so suddenly that Cindy took a step back. When his expression twisted, she backed up again, wondering what was happening.

With a sudden leap, Sirius was off the bed and howling in pain. The single remaining land crab in the room had latched onto his hand and wasn't letting go!

Once she realized what was happening, she collapsed against the side of the bed, laughing so hard she wasn't sure her legs would hold her. Sirius, however, was too busy dashing about the room, shaking his hand to remove the crab to notice her reaction.

Hermione's House, Oxford, England, July 15 th , 1996...

"Wait a moment and I'll get him," Emma said. "He's outside with Hermione. I think they are practicing some sort of charm work."

Emma turned and left a teary eyed Cindy sitting in the kitchen, clutching at her tea cup. Sometimes Sirius needed help explaining things to her. In this case, Harry was the best person to help, as he'd been raised by Muggles.

Emma paused to watch Harry and Hermione, who were both staring at some objects on a table. She moved closer and saw that the objects were plastic army men that Harry had bought two weeks earlier. She had thought at the time that they might be a gift for someone because Harry was certainly too old to be playing with army men. To her surprise, two of the army men stood and circled each other.

She moved closer.

One of the army men raised a saber and charged the other soldier, who sidestepped the wildly swinging plastic sword. The second soldier rabbit punched the sword wielder as he ran by.

"Ahem."

Both teens looked up and the soldiers froze in their new positions.

"How is this studying?" she asked, convinced they were goofing off. Not that she minded them goofing off.

"Oh, Mum, this is animation charms and techniques. The idea is to animate the inanimate. Imagine trying to fight someone when suddenly you're attacked by the dining room set?" replied Hermione.

"She's right, Mrs. Granger. It's a charm technique. Covered in both Advanced Defense and Advanced Charms."

Emma nodded, but the idea confused her. She'd talk to Remus about it next time he passed through.

"All right, but it's time you two put away the books and take a break. And, Harry? Cindy's here. She's upset about something that Sirius told her. She wants to talk to you or Hermione about it."

Hermione grinned and grabbed the bag with the toy soldiers. She held it open and one by one she animated those on the table to walk into the bag.

"Show off," Harry teased affectionately.

She blushed, but smiled at him.

In the kitchen they found a teary-eyed Cindy toying with her cup of tea.

Harry slid into a chair and wondered what could be wrong. Sirius and Cindy had shown up one night over a week ago to announce their engagement, and now she was here, and very upset.

"What's wrong? Did you two have a fight?" Harry asked worriedly.

She shook her head. "Tell me about the lifespan thing."

Harry glanced over to Hermione, who nodded to him. He turned back to Cindy. "You know wizards live longer than Muggles, don't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, Sirius said as much. He said that he could easily expect to live to one forty or so."

"Yes, that's right," Harry said with a nod. "Did he tell you that when a wizard marries a witch, the weaker partner usually gets their lifespan extended to match the stronger partner? The magic from both partners helps reinforce the weaker partner, bringing him or her up to match the other."

"But I don't have any magic to help with that," she protested.

He nodded grimly. "That's right, you don't. But you have something even more important than magic. You have your love for him and his for you. His magic will try to extend your life beyond the Muggle average, and it will succeed, to a point."

Hermione leaned forward and placed her hand on Cindy's arm. "Sirius will live to roughly twice the average age for a Muggle. And when he marries you, his magic will do the only thing it can do to bring you both into balance. It will take away years from him and give them to you, along with a little bit of his magic."

She blinked at her. "I'll be a witch?" she asked incredulously.

"No," Hermione replied with a shake of her head. "You won't be a witch, you'll become a Squib with just enough magic to power things like the potions and other items that rely on a person's magic to work. It's not enough power to actively work with, but it will be there."

"And he'll lose what?"

Harry leaned back in his chair. "He'll lose some of his magic. Not a lot, mind you, and it won't be noticeable. And he'll lose roughly forty years from his expected lifespan so that you can gain roughly the same. Marriage in the wizarding world is a sacred sharing, Cindy. It's not something people do lightly. There is no divorce in the wizarding world because there's no way to separate the shared magic of two people.

"A married couple who want to break up can only split and live apart in the wizarding world."

He paused before plunging forward. "You're only seeing the negative about this. If Sirius were smoking, you'd know each cigarette shortens his lifespan and as a doctor you'd hate that. You hate the fact that he's deliberately cutting short his lifespan, but that's not the case here. Sirius loves you and he's offering you nearly forty extra years to live together. He wouldn't make that offer if he didn't really love you. There is no guarantee that you will live that long. But consider the alternative. You live a normal lifespan and then he goes on alone for another fifty years without you? He doesn't want that. I wouldn't either."

Cindy sniffled and looked at him strangely. "But how could he give that up for me?"

"Because he loves you," he hissed in annoyance. He couldn't understand her lack of understanding. "He loves you, like my parents loved me and gave their lives for me. I'd do the same for Hermione in a heartbeat! Sirius has been dealt a crappy hand for most of his life. His family hated him for refusing their narrow-minded dogma. He found refuge with my family and then lost that when my parents and grandparents died. He needs you and wants you, Cindy. I can see it. We all can."

Hermione and Emma both gasped at Harry's words. Hermione blushed and Emma stared at the two, wondering.

"He's been alone and hurting for too long," he said, then his voice dropped to a whisper. "Can't you accept that? He wants you and wants you to live your life with him. In his mind, he isn't sacrificing anything. He isn't even giving you a gift, he's being selfish in wanting you around longer because he needs you to be with him."

Cindy nodded tearfully at him.

"I don't know what else to say. He needs you and I need you to help him in ways I can't."

"I don't think you need to say anymore," Sirius said in a choked voice behind him.

Harry stood and whirled around so fast his chair crashed over backwards. "Sirius! I didn't... If I knew..."

Sirius grinned and walked over to him. He placed both hands on his shoulders. "I know, Harry. I know. I love you, too."

Cindy stood and walked around the table until she was standing next to both of them. She reached out and touched them both. "I never thought I would have a family of my own, and now I see that's exactly what I'm getting. A husband and a son, two fine men I'm proud to call my own."

Sirius wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her closer. "I hope that doesn't mean you aren't interested in adding to that family?" he asked

hopefully.

She looked at him and smiled, then shook her head. "No, I could be convinced to add more. After all, Harry doesn't need us to teach him about pranks."

Harry stepped back in time for Hermione to grab him a tight hug, her eyes filled with tears. Surprised, he hugged her back. "What did I do?" he asked.

"For being you," she whispered back.

Emma smiled and made a mental note to speak to Dan. Sooner or later those two were going to formalize their relationship and she wanted him to get used to the idea.

Hermione's House, Oxford, England, July 17 th , 1996...

It was the bang that caught Harry's attention. It was a distinctive sound that he had heard before. Someone had arrived on the Knight Bus! He was in his room, dressing when he heard the sound of voices downstairs.

Frantic, he quickly invoked his Evan Black disguise. It wasn't much: his eye color changed to a deep blue, his hair turned to a light, sandy brown and grew longer until it was nearly mid shoulder length. Discarding his regular shirt for one proclaiming the virtues of the Sydney Slaughterers, an Australian Quidditch team, he finished his disguise and hoped no one would recognize him.

What he didn't know was that he no longer looked like the scrawny Harry Potter people remembered. He had put on a lot of muscle mass, thanks to quality meals and regular exercise, and he had shot up to a respectable five eleven. His shirt was tight, outlining his muscled chest, and around his neck he wore a leather thong with several seashells threaded through it. He was a far cry from the Harry Potter of fourth year.

He stepped from the room and walked to the stairway. Hermione appeared at the bottom of the stairs and she looked up. Her expression immediately changed to one of relief. "Ah, Evan, there you are. We have company I'd like you to meet."

She walked up the stairs to meet him.

"Company?" he asked sotto voce.

"Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, and Ron," she hissed. "They wanted to know if I wanted to go with them to Diagon Alley."

He groaned and closed his eyes. Could he take a trip to Diagon Alley with the Weasleys?

"How do I look?" he asked.

"Good enough to eat, but that's because I know it's you," she replied with an impish grin. Since their declaration that they wanted to be together even after school, their conversations had become a lot more flirtatious in nature. Hermione found it strangely refreshing to be able to hint at matters that she'd never talk about normally.

He gave her a mock scowl and she giggled.

"All right, let's see how well my acting abilities work," he said softly, then he kissed her quickly.

She grinned and took his hand, pulling him down the stairs.

Emma looked up and tried to hide the relief in her expression when Hermione arrived with Evan in tow.

"Everyone, this is Evan Black. He's a distant cousin of Sirius Black. I met him on Fiji," Hermione announced.

Harry moved to stand next to her, his arm around her waist possessively. "G'day everyone," he called with a wave. He had met several Australian wizards and those wizards he knew from Fiji didn't sound much different than they did. So his fake accent was more Australian than Fijian, but he figured the Weasleys wouldn't notice.

Ginny's eyes lit up, seeing Evan. She eyed him as if she were evaluating a piece of beef she wanted to buy and discovered she was very hungry.

Mrs. Weasley smiled and Ron frowned, spotting him. Ron had wanted to believe Lavender, even after the photo and the gifts Evan had sent Hermione. He liked her and had hoped that one day they might date, but ever since Evan came into the picture he knew she was lost to him. First it was Harry blocking his way to her, now this Evan.

Ginny walked up to him. "Hi, I'm Ginny, Ginny Weasley," she said, suddenly shy. Evan Black was taller than she expected, his skin a golden tan. Each move made the muscles in his chest ripple under that shirt.

"Hi, Ginny, Ginny Weasley," Evan replied with a smirk. Ginny's blush deepened and he chuckled.

Ron moved forward, frowning. "I'm Ron Weasley," he said, offering his hand.

Harry took the offered hand and was surprised when Ron tried to squeeze him. He tightened his smile and did nothing. The simple fact was that Ron didn't have enough strength to hurt him. King Kong's marathon body building sessions had seen to that.

A minute later Ron stepped back, looking chagrined. Harry had merely smiled and pretended that all of Ron's effort was wasted. Molly pulled him away and both Hermione and Ginny glared at him. Emma hid a smile. She recognized the pissing contest for what it was and knew who had won.

"No worries," Evan said pleasantly. He turned to Hermione. "So how are we getting to this Diagram Alley?"

"We'll take the Knight Bus," Mrs. Weasley pronounced.

"You'll love it, Evan," Ginny said timidly.

Evan grinned affably at her, surprised by her suddenly timid behavior. She was acting like she did around Harry before her first year.

"Do you have enough money with you, Evan?" asked Emma.

He nodded and tapped the pouch on his belt. "Coin and my debit card if needed, so no worries," he replied easily.

Emma nodded and turned to Hermione, handing her several fifty pound notes. "For your books. Have you your list?"

Hermione nodded to her question.

"Then I guess we're all ready to go," announced Mrs. Weasley. She turned to Emma. "I'll try to have them back in time for dinner."

"All right. Be careful," Emma called to Hermione and Harry.

Of all the people traveling, Hermione was the only one who had not been on the Knight Bus. Harry grabbed a bed and quickly pulled her down to sit next to him. She looked at him curiously when he tightened his grip around her waist and then grabbed firmly on the bed post.

She squeaked when the bus took off with a bang and clung to Harry with both hands. After looking out the front window, she buried her head against his shoulder, refusing to look again.

This was the first time in several years Harry had been back to Diagon Alley. Last summer, Hermione had owl-ordered most of her school materials so they hadn't had to come to the Alley. They had felt it was better to avoid the possibility of Harry being discovered.

They had just entered the Alley when Harry stopped and stared at the headline from the Quibbler. Hermione plowed into his back and Ginny into hers.

"Ha... Evan?" Hermione asked, correcting her mistake.

Ginny stared at Hermione, her eyes narrowing in speculation. She had been watching the interaction between Hermione and Evan carefully. It was clear they cared for each other very much, but she was sure they hadn't reached an intimate state yet, despite Lavender's latest claims.

Evan pointed to the headline at the newsstand. It read, "Harry Potter volunteers to take naked space walk!"

"Oh, that's the Quibbler," commented Ginny with a laugh. "They're always posting sightings about Harry Potter." Ginny's expression fell and she sighed, her shoulders slumped a little. "I miss him still."

When Evan turned to Hermione, she could see guilt in his eyes.

"You can't believe anything the Quibbler says. They report a sighting of Harry at least once a week."

He nodded, but she could tell he was upset. Not by the headline, of course, but by Ginny's reaction.

"Come on. I want to check out Quality Quidditch Supplies," Ron said.

"Ron, Gringotts first, then books, clothing and potion supplies. Then Quidditch," Molly said firmly.

In Gringotts, Harry followed Hermione to the counter to change her pounds to galleons while the Weasleys headed off their vault. Ginny looked like she would have preferred to stay with them.

Hermione met Ron's eyes just before he disappeared with the Goblin. His eyes flickered from her to Evan for a moment, then he nodded. Turning back to the exchange counter, she sighed. It seemed as though Ron had finally come to understand that she wasn't interested in anything more than friendship with him and that Evan was quite real.

"Are you all right?" she whispered to Evan.

"I'm fine," he muttered. "I just feel like a right prat. I ran away from all of my friends. What kind of friend does that?"

"One that wanted to remain living," she retorted as she shook her head. "Look, we'll talk about this tonight. Just believe me when I say you did what you had to do to live. Who knows what that old man had planned for you?"

Evan nodded unhappily. He believed her, but it didn't make him feel any better. One thing that Sirius and Remus had taught him was to stand by his friends.

Hermione and Evan waited by the door for the Weasleys to return from their vault.

I didn't know that Gringotts offered debit cards. Is that something new?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure. Sirius got it for me before I left Fiji. It's tied into my trust account and not the main account," he said, then he frowned. "I really need to keep a closer eye on my accounts, but it's dead boring."

"I'm surprised you did as well as you did on Estate Management then," she replied dryly.

Evan was about to reply, then he looked up and smiled at the approaching Weasleys.

"All right, first we're off for books," pronounced Mrs. Weasley.

Hermione grinned. The bookstore was one of her favorite parts of visiting Diagon Alley.

Inside Flourish and Blotts, Ginny and Ron went in different directions, looking for their books. Harry followed Hermione, carrying the books she picked out.

Mrs. Weasley came up behind them and looked at Evan expectantly. "Don't you need to buy books too, dear?"

Evan turned to her. "Oh, no, Mrs. Weasley. I'll get my books when Hermione and I return to Fiji in August. Besides, I doubt that this store will carry the books I need."

Mrs. Weasley looked doubtful and Ginny approached after seeing them converse. "What kind of classes are you taking that we aren't?"

"Well, my Runes class is a mix of runes and enchanting, just like my Potions class is a mix of potions and alchemy. But there's my languages class, where I'm continuing to learn new languages. Last year I did Arabic and Japanese. This year I'm continuing with Japanese language and culture."

It turned out that Harry had a talent for languages, like his mother Lily. He was soaking up every language he was exposed to.

"Oh, say something in Japanese!" Ginny said with a grin.

"*Watashi no namae wa Evan Black desu*," Harry said with a straight face.

"What does that mean?"

"I said my name is Evan Black," he replied with an easy grin.

Ginny grinned and turned to her mother. "I can't find this Herbology text," she said, pushing the book list at her.

Mrs. Weasley sighed and nodded. "All right, dear. Let's see what we can do."

She wasn't sure about leaving Hermione alone with that strange boy, but she had to trust the elder Grangers to have checked him out. She didn't approve of Sirius Black and was wary of anything to do with him. As far as she was concerned, he should have been taking care of his ward, Harry Potter, instead of this strange boy. It bothered her that Harry had walked out of Hogwarts and vanished without a trace. When questioned about it, all Sirius would admit to was that Harry was safe and happy.

He seemed to be a nice enough boy, but there was something off about him that she didn't like. His answers were a bit too glib and his attitude not properly respectful for a foreigner.

Watching them, she went reluctantly with Ginny.

"Maybe this was a bad idea and I should go home?"

Hermione turned to him. "You'll be fine. I think Mrs. Weasley always thought I might get together with Ron and sees you as competition. The one you want to be careful around is Ginny. She's a lot smarter than she let's on. I swear that girl should have been put into Slytherin."

He nodded absently and let her add another book to the pile he was carrying. It didn't matter to him, he was adjusting the weight with his ring.

At Madam Malkin's, Harry got the chance to help Hermione purchase a dress robe for school functions, as well as a pretty dress that she'd use over the Yule holiday. She loved going dancing with Harry and had been surprised to discover he had taken dancing lessons just so he wouldn't disappoint her.

She stepped from the changing room wearing a powder blue dress with a plunging neckline. Mrs. Weasley shook her head in dismay and Harry's jaw fell open in shock. The dress was perfect for the dancing they did, and what it did to her figure was enough to make him wish for a cold shower right there in the store.

Hermione took one look at his reaction, then turned to Madam Malkin. "I'll take it."

The shopkeeper nodded and made a note on her parchment.

Mrs. Weasley frowned. "Dear, don't you think it's a bit too revealing?"

"Actually, Mrs. Weasley, that dress is brilliant on her. She's going to be the envy of the dance floor next month," Harry said.

Mrs. Weasley frowned and debated with herself whether or not to scold this boy for butting in where his opinion wasn't wanted. Hermione used the

interruption to slip back into the changing room. A few moments later, she handed the dress to the shopkeeper.

After Madam Malkin's Hermione and Evan went to Florean's for lunch, while the Weasleys went to the apothecary for potion supplies. Hermione had owl ordered her supplies at the end of the year so she could work on her Potions homework.

Hermione and Evan had just made their selection when she heard a familiar voice.

"Oh, hello Hermione," said Luna Lovegood. "Are you enjoying your summer?"

Hermione looked up at the girl she knew only from a study group at school. "Hello, Luna. Yes, thank you. How are you?"

Luna peered down at the couple for a moment, then she fixed her attention to a spot directly between them, on the table. "I'm fine. I'd like to stay and talk, but I'm getting ready to go with Daddy for our annual Golden Ringed Platypus expedition."

Harry blinked and looked at Hermione, wondering if this strange girl was insane or not. Then the girl turned to him. "That's really a very good disguise, Harry. Normally I can see through a glamor, but that isn't a glamor."

"It was nice seeing you both, but I have to go. Take care, Harry!" she said airily, then she turned away and breezed out of the shop.

Harry turned to Hermione, his eyes wide with astonishment. "Hermione," he hissed.

"It's all right. She won't tell anyone. Even if she did, no one would believe her," Hermione said softly.

"Eh? Why is that?"

"Her father prints the Quibbler and while she is frightfully smart, she also believes in creatures no one else believes in." Hermione paused and looked thoughtfully at him. "I'm more interested in her comment about your glamor. She's right, you know. It looks too real for it to be a glamor. I can't see any of the faint, telltale shimmer one usually sees around a glamor."

"Here come the Weasleys," Harry muttered.

Both of them pasted smiles on their faces and waved at the approaching red heads. Evan used the distraction to steal a spoonful of Hermione's ice cream.

Seeing what Evan had done, Ron shot him a grin. Mrs. Weasley frowned and made a note to talk to Emma Granger about the boy's behavior and warn her that they shouldn't leave Hermione alone with him. A nice girl like Hermione really should be seeking someone of station and not a wastrel from the Pacific.

"Get all of your supplies?" asked Evan.

"Yeah, now we can go visit Quality Quidditch," Ron said with a happy grin. "Ginny and I both use Comet 260's."

"Do you play Quidditch, Evan?" asked Ginny.

Evan smiled. "I used to, but there aren't any pitches on Fiji. I still have my Typhoon Mark IV though and fly when I can."

"No Quidditch!" exclaimed Ron mournfully. That was something he couldn't understand at all. How could anyone live without Quidditch?

Evan shrugged. "It's all right. I've got my board and my bike. My PE tutor makes sure I stay in shape."

"Tutor? Don't you attend a school?"

He shook his head. "Most of the wizards on Fiji are home schooled, usually by their parents. Sirius, however, has hired tutors for every one of my classes. They arrive by Portkey before class and leave afterwards." He grinned at Hermione. "Come August, Hermione and I will be taking classes in Advanced Transfiguration and Runes."

Molly frowned. "But... what about the Reasonable Restriction to Underage Magic?" she sputtered.

Evan's expression turned serious. "Mrs. Weasley, Britain is the only country in the world that thinks that law is reasonable. I can practice magic anytime I want. So can Hermione, when she's with me in Fiji. And on top of that, she'll have help from Masters in both fields."

Ron and Molly looked appalled, but for different reasons. Ron shuddered at the idea of additional school work during the summer, while Molly was sure what they were doing was breaking a law somewhere.

Ginny looked interested. She always thought the restriction was dumb, and while she didn't quite hate school like Ron did, the ability to learn more magic during the summer would be nice. If anything, she was becoming even more envious of Hermione. Not only was her boyfriend smoking hot, but he was smart and they would be making magic together, while she de-gnomed the garden.

Two hours later they were back at Hermione's house, in the backyard with Ginny and Ron. Molly was in the kitchen, speaking with Emma. The two Weasleys looked at the pool with a little envy. They had a swimming hole, which worked for them, but it was a half mile walk from the Burrow to the hole.

"How much do you know about this boy, Emma? I don't mean to pry, but he seems a little odd," Molly said, cradling her cup of tea.

Emma smiled at her. "You don't have to worry about Evan, Molly. Hermione has him wrapped around her little finger. He wouldn't dream of doing anything to hurt her."

"Still, it seems to me that he's not being fully truthful. I'd suggest keeping an eye on him. I'm not sure I'd be willing to leave my Ginny alone with him," Molly countered.

Only because your Ginny wouldn't think twice about trying to steal him away from my daughter, Emma thought unkindly.

She nodded. "I was like that at first. But I've known him for nearly two years now. Believe me when I say I trust him around Hermione."

Molly nodded reluctantly. After all, it wasn't really her problem. But the situation still intrigued her. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you meet Evan?"

"We first met him before Christmas in 1994. Sirius had moved to Fiji and he invited us to come out to visit him over the holiday. Hermione was close to Harry and Sirius and we thought that Sirius might like a friendly face, since Harry had gone missing. He bought us the plane tickets, so we went. Evan was living with Sirius at the time. She and Evan hit it off almost immediately."

Molly scowled at hearing Harry's name being mentioned. "Yes, Harry Potter," she said with a bit of anger and sorrow. "I had so many hopes for him and my Ginny, only to have them ruined by that fool of a Headmaster."

"It was a great shame to have that happen to him. And then, when people learned how he was treated, they still did nothing against his family," Emma said. She was interested to see Molly's reaction to that statement.

Molly stared at her for a moment, then reached over and patted her hand. "They couldn't do anything, and by the time they learned of his home situation, he was already a Muggle," she said, shaking her head. "Such a waste of ability and power and to lose it so young! He and Ginny would have made wonderfully powerful children."

Emma smiled weakly. Hermione had explained about the British prejudices concerning Muggles, but this was the first time she had ever experienced it first hand.

In the backyard, Evan was off discussing brooms with Ron, while Ginny and Hermione sat at the picnic table, discussing, well, Evan.

"I know I saw the photos, Hermione, but I never realized just how fine he looked. He's almost as cute as Harry was," Ginny whispered excitedly.

Hermione blinked and tried to keep a straight face. "Really?" she replied. "I don't know. Harry was cute in an underfed sort of way. He was my friend, but I never really paid that kind of attention to him."

Ginny sighed. "I wish he hadn't left. But without any magic, he's not much use to anyone, anymore."

Hermione looked at her, surprised. "You mean if he showed up now, you wouldn't be interested in him anymore?"

Ginny shook her head. "I would be happy to know he's all right, but that's about it. Mum would never let me date a Muggle, and even if she would, I don't think I could. Now, tell me more about Evan. He seems very attentive, and don't think I didn't catch how he held your books for you."

Hermione smiled weakly. She liked Ginny, but had never seen this side of her before. It was disturbing. Covering her discomfort, she launched into a fictitious tale of meeting Evan and falling for him. Inwardly, she hoped the Weasleys would go home soon.

Meanwhile, in another part of England...

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Buttercup?" replied Xenophilus Lovegood.

"You'll never believe who I saw in Diagon Alley today," Luna said.

"Oh? Did you manage to find out if we could hire any Short Stumped Snarkles as pack animals, Lotus Blossom?"

Luna sighed. Sometimes getting Daddy to pay attention to her was a little difficult. "No, Daddy. The Magical Menagerie was clean out of Short Stumped Snarkles. They think they won't get another shipment in for two months."

Xenophilus turned in his chair and clutched one fist. "Drat! They never have anything we need for our expeditions!"

"Daddy, don't you want to know who I saw?"

"Who did you see, my little dandelion?"

"I saw Harry Potter. He was having lunch with one of the girls I know from school."

Xenophilus scowled. "How is that possible?" he muttered to himself. "I've placed Harry in Tibet for the International Naked Yeti Roundup." He turned to look at his daughter, but was only partially successful. He was badly cross-eyed, so one eye was firmly fixed on her ear. And that explained why he thought his daughter was an exceptionally bright but rather ugly child. Strangely enough, her mother had exactly the same deformity.

What was he doing in Diagon Alley, little weedling?"

"He was having lunch. A blueberry and chocolate ice cream sundae with nuts and fire ants, I think. And the Queen was there, too," Luna said. She knew the queen wasn't there, and that perhaps Harry was traveling in disguise for a reason. Adding the Queen to the story would make it more believable to people. She was tempted to add Elvis to the sighting as well, but only Americans would believe it then. After all, everyone else knew that Elvis had been turned into a vampire and was now living in Ecuador.

He made a note on a parchment and rolled it up before sticking it in his drawer. "I'll see that we update the Harry sightings, my little cherry blossom."

Luna smiled happily, then went down to the kitchen to cook dinner. She was an accomplished cook; for her it was a survival skill. Xenophilius was of the opinion that raw food was safer than cooked. She wasn't about to sit through another meal of freshly cut grass and gravel.

Hermione's House (Later that evening), Oxford, England, July 17 th , 1996...

Harry collapsed onto the couch beside Hermione and tiredly wiped his face. As he did, his features returned to normal.

Hermione watched him, shocked at what she was seeing. He shouldn't be able to do that, even with a focus ring. He had problems with a glamor spell with a wand and couldn't cast one at all with a focus ring.

A moment later, Emma and Dan joined them in the living room. Emma dropped into her favorite chair with an exhausted air about her.

"You know," she said slowly. "I used to like the Weasleys, but now I'm not so sure. The way Molly dismisses all things Muggle is disturbing."

Hermione nodded. "Ginny wasn't much different. She basically said that she missed Harry, but now that he was a Muggle, he was pretty much beneath her notice. And before that, she told me that Evan was almost as cute as Harry."

Harry cracked one eye open and looked at her. "Almost?"

Hermione laughed and leaned against him. "Yes, almost. And I could see her eying you with interest. If you were a side of beef, she would have purchased you."

He chuckled and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "She can eye all she wants, but I'm not interested and I'm off the market. Besides, I don't think that was lust she was looking at me with. There were a couple of times when she seemed to be looking as if she was trying to piece things together in her head. Mark my words, after the twins, she's the smartest Weasley and the one most likely to penetrate my disguise."

"Should we be worried?" asked Dan.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think so. Harry pulled Evan off well enough to fool her, at least for now. He made some smart comments and demonstrated some Japanese, which will keep her from connecting Harry to Evan."

"Why?" Emma asked. She had kicked off her shoes and had them propped up in Dan's lap. He was seated on the footrest and began to rub her feet automatically as he listened.

"Simple. Evan's smart; Harry isn't," Harry said with a grin.

"Harry!" Hermione admonished.

"Oh, fine. The Harry she knew well was only a mediocre student. He probably would have gotten four or five OWL's, if that many. Not the eight that Evan got, and he certainly wouldn't have learned to speak Japanese and Arabic."

Hermione smiled to herself and cuddled deeper into Harry's embrace. He was combing his fingers through her hair and she was enjoying herself immensely.

Dan frowned. "I meant to ask you. You took your OWL exams under the name Evan Black. How can you take your NEWTS under the name of Harry Potter?"

"Sirius made a deal with the Pacific Rim Ministry. They're hoping to open the first formal wizarding school on Fiji and Sirius offered to donate the land for the campus. It's in the interior and will only be accessible by Portkey. The school won't be ready for several more years, but they couldn't pass up the chance to get twenty five hundred hectares of land at no cost if they allowed for a minor name change on the NEWT exams and a few other concessions," Harry replied. "I don't know all the details, but either I'll take the exam as Harry Potter, or the grades will be assigned to me afterwards. Either way, it works."

"Nice," Dan murmured. "With that much land, they could build a campus that would rival most modest sized colleges."

"Harry, can I ask how you removed your glamor? You didn't use the counter-spell," Hermione asked from his shoulder.

He paused in combing his fingers through her hair and looked startled.

She sat up and looked at him. "Did you use your wand to cast the glamor this morning?"

He shook his head. "No, I thought I had made a breakthrough in using my ring."

She gave him a pensive look, then bounced to her feet. "I want to go look something up," she announced.

"Now?" exclaimed Harry.

"Now," she answered, then went upstairs to her room where she kept her books.

He shook his head ruefully. "She could be about to give birth and she'd be asking for a medical book so she could look something up," he muttered to himself. Then he glanced up to see the frozen expression on Dan and Emma's face. A moment later, they began to laugh.

"You have no idea Harry," Dan said with a chuckle.

He sighed and climbed to his feet. "Well, I guess I'll call it a night then. For some reason, today wore me out more than I thought it would."

Emma looked up in alarm. "Are you feeling all right?"

He smiled reassuringly. "Yes, thanks. I'm just tired."

"All right, dear. But if you start feeling ill, we're right down the hall."

Harry nodded and waved before heading off to bed.

He had been sleeping for several hours when he vaguely felt his bed shift.

"Harry?" someone whispered.

He rolled over and tried to ignore the voice.

"Harry?" the voice whispered again, only this time someone was also shaking him.

He opened his eyes and blinked sleepily. "Hermione?"

"Were you sleeping?" she asked with a grin he couldn't see.

He yawned and dropped his head back onto his pillow. "No, I was examining the inside of my eyelids for defects. Now, is there a reason for this midnight visit? Perhaps you've finally decided you want a hunk of this green eyed wizard, hmmm?"

"You know I do, Mr. Potter. But when that happens, it won't be with my parents sleeping in the next bedroom. Now, shake free of your over-sized ego and pay attention," she said in a low voice.

He sighed and sat up. "How may I serve you, Oh, luscious, intelligent one."

"Prat," she muttered.

Harry conjured a small blue bell flame and set it hovering by his night table.

He tried to ignore the fact that the small light was outlining her body perfectly. He looked at her and couldn't hide the desire he felt. It was burning in him like a raging inferno and it forced him to shift in the bed to hide the growing bulge under the blanket.

For her part, the idea had seemed like a good one when she first thought of it. But now she wasn't so sure. He had been downright adorable in his sleep. If that wasn't bad enough, he was giving her a look that she was coming to recognize. It was a look that he reserved only for her. She couldn't help it, it caused her breath to quicken and her pulse to race.

"I... ah... um... I think I know what is going on," she blurted. "And stop looking at me like that. Don't make it any harder."

He suddenly started to laugh and she glared at him. "I... couldn't... make... it... any... harder... without... hurting... myself," he gasped, holding his sides as he laughed.

Hermione blushed when she realized what she had said.

Harry finally calmed down and sat up straight. "All right, just what are we talking about here?"

"Have you ever cast a glamor on someone else?"

He blinked at her seemingly unconnected non sequitur. "No, I don't think so."

"But you have problems casting one on your self with your wand and can't cast one using your ring at all. That's clue number one," she said, ticking off one finger.

Harry nodded, still confused.

"Clue number two, you got sick after taking the animagus revealus potion, each component of which is fairly standard. It's the potion itself that made you ill, not the ingredients."

She ticked off another finger. "Finally, clue number three. Luna Lovegood. What did she say today?"

“That's really a very good disguise, Harry. Normally, I can see through a glamor, but that isn't a glamor,” Harry parroted stupidly. He looked longingly at his pillow and wondered when Hermione would get to the point.

“Only one class of wizard fits these clues. You're a natural morpher,” she said triumphantly.

He blinked owlishly. “Er... What?”

“A natural morpher, like a werewolf or a metamorphagus or a shape shifter. There may be other types, but my book is very limited about the topic.” she replied, sounding upset about having to admit about a flaw in her book.

Harry sat silent for a moment, then he thought about both his hair and Hermione's. Slowly his hair color began to change and lengthen until he had a hairstyle similar to hers. She leaned back on the bed and nibbled on her lower lip. It had taken minutes for his hair to change, but it was clearly identical to her own now.

“I tell you about this wonderful ability you have and you use it to mock me?” she asked incredulously.

He shook his head. “No, not mock you,” he replied with a grin. “But just think, you can use me to test out a hair style.”

Hermione laughed quietly. He closed his eyes and concentrated on returning his hair to normal. It took a minute, but he managed it.

“Now, Miss Granger, as much as I'd love to continue this conversation, I think we should go back to sleep,” he said, laying back down.

Hermione nodded, but she looked unhappy. “Don't you want to kiss me good night?”

He reached up, sliding one hand behind her neck and pulled her gently down to him. He kissed her hard and let one hand slide under her nightshirt, caressing her hip. She shivered and moaned softly. His tongue probed her mouth, tangling with her tongue, tasting every part of her. She wanted that hand to touch her, really touch her.

She moaned again and sighed in frustration when his hands fell back to the bed, releasing her.

“Harry, that's not fair,” she said breathlessly.

“No, it isn't, but now you understand what you're doing to me, as well. I love you, but I'm only human. We agreed to keep things slow. If you want to change that, we can talk about it. Otherwise, teasing isn't fair. I'll wait as long as you need, Hermione, but we need to cut back on the teasing.”

She stood and looked down at him. With him laying in the bed, his arousal was obvious to her. She nodded in understanding. She had deliberately changed into a very light nightshirt before entering his bedroom to tease him a little. Ginny's reaction to Evan had ignited her insecurities and Harry's obvious desire had been a quick way to relieve them. It was only now that she realized what she'd done had been wrong.

She'd apologize to him tomorrow and make plans for that conversation about moving things up a little.

She closed the door and slipped back into her own bedroom. It was far too late for her to be taking a cold shower. Frustrated, she climbed into bed with a sigh and closed her eyes. Images of a tented blanket and his hot touch against her skin danced through her mind. She groaned in frustration and turned over.

In their bedroom, Emma removed the stethoscope from the wall with a satisfied smile.

“Well?” asked Dan.

“I told you they could be trusted. She woke him up to explain what she had discovered, then they kissed for a few minutes before he sent her back to her room,” she replied. She wasn't about to tell him about some of the racier parts of their conversation. She would have words with Hermione on that subject, alone. She wasn't mad at her daughter, in fact she was rather pleased, but it was time to rehash a few key points of the talk.

“Good. I always said Harry was an honorable lad,” Dan muttered. He pulled the blanket up and rolled over.

Emma suppressed the urge to pummel him with her pillow. Instead, she climbed into bed and quickly fell asleep, dreaming of chasing Dan with a whip and a bag of marshmallows.

Hermione's House, Oxford, England, July 20 th , 1996...

The news that Harry might be some form of natural morpher sent Sirius into a fit of laughter, and he pointed out that the Potter blood had no such gifts. However, Candace Black married into the Potter line, making her Harry's great great great great grandmother. And the Black family did carry such traits.

Remus said he would make arrangements for Harry to meet with someone that might be able to help him.

Remus and Sirius were both shocked when Hermione laid out her case for the talent being there, even if it was largely untapped. The final proof was Harry's ability to change his hair and eye color, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't cast a glamor on himself.

Natural morphers were incapable of using magic to disguise themselves without it fighting against their own inherent magic. That others had been able to cast glamors on Harry suggested either an untrained, awakening talent, or just a weak one.

Remus suggested that the glamors might have been wearing off, but the metamorph in him had been adjusting his looks to match the glamor so no one knew when it wore off.

Sirius was pleased as punch. He thought this proved once and for all that Harry was a Black.

"Good morning, Emma."

Emma looked up to see Remus stepping through the door to the garage and their portal. She was shocked at how tired and ragged he looked.

"Remus! Are you all right?" she exclaimed. Then she glanced up at their calendar and understood. Last night had been a full moon.

"It was a tough transformation last night. Cindy has been studying potions with help from Harry's potions tutor, and we think she'll be able to make the Wolfsbane I need. For now, I have to tough it out," he said tiredly.

"I hope Cindy can help you, but can't Hermione make the potion? She received excellent grades on her exams," Emma told him. Hermione's OWL scores had finally arrived and, as predicted, she had swept her exams, achieving full marks in every test.

Remus shook his head sadly. "I wish that were the case, but the potion will only keep for a month and it's devilishly difficult to make. At best, she could only make the potion when she was home. She couldn't do it while at school. Harry's tried a few times, but he's not good enough to make the potion. He's good, but it takes a real master to make it."

Emma nodded. She thought that might be the case, but it never hurt to check. "So, what brings you to England this time?" she asked, setting a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits out for him.

He leaned back in his chair. "What else? I'm still looking for that brooch. It vanished into a family about a hundred years ago and hasn't been seen since. The last person to own it was a collector named Swanson, and then it vanished."

Emma frowned and sat down next to him. "Ravenclaw's brooch would be what? Over a thousand years old now?"

Remus nodded.

"So you're looking for a piece from the tenth or eleventh century that could fit in the palm of your hand," she added thoughtfully.

"Where are you going with this, Emma?"

"I'm just thinking, what if it slipped out of your world and into mine? What would the Muggles do with it? It could be in a museum or it could have been auctioned off for all we know and now it's sitting in some old lady's jewelry box."

Remus looked startled for a moment, then he shook his head. "No, Voldemort would have needed to get his hands on it in the mid 60's. Right about 1966, we think." He paused and his brow furrowed. "Although he could have stolen it, then created his Horcrux and put it back. Sitting in a Muggle museum for all to see would tickle his fancy and prove he was smarter than the average wizard by hiding something in plain sight."

Emma nodded. "Museum break-ins should be easy to find out about. Just go to the library and look through the microfiche."

Remus blinked and looked at her stupidly.

She chuckled. "Right, first things first. You rest here for a while, then we'll go to the library, where I'll teach you how to use microfiche."

He nodded gratefully. In truth, he was getting very discouraged looking for the brooch, and Emma's method did offer an avenue that he hadn't considered before.

"Remus, Hermione said something the other day that she couldn't explain. I'm hoping you can."

"Oh? What did she say?" he asked. He picked up his cup and sipped his tea.

"She said she could feel Harry's magic and was attracted to it, even back in their first year when she met him on the train."

Remus smiled. "Do you want to know the myth or the real answer? I can assure you, the myth is more interesting, if only from a historical perspective."

She leaned closer and took a biscuit from the platter. "Let's go with the myth first."

"Legend has it that a powerful wizard will call to unattached witches. His magic will seek them out, attracting them to him. A hundred years ago, a wizard like Harry would have dozens of witches seeking his attention because they honestly believed that mating with a powerful wizard would result in powerful children. The honor and prestige they could gain from having powerful children was incalculable.

"If this were a hundred years ago and you and Dan were wizards, you'd be actively trying to convince Hermione to bed Harry for the prestige and power it would bring to your family. The fact that Harry is growing into the most powerful wizard of this age would be a powerful attraction to any witch. They believed it was his magic calling to them, seeking a suitable mate."

He paused long enough to drink a bit of tea.

"The truth, I'm afraid, is something much more mundane. Witches have a greater degree of sensitivity to magic and are able to feel power levels in

wizards, even if they aren't consciously aware of it. Studies have proven that this ability has nothing to do with mating and everything to do with the fact that they are more sensitive to magic. Some think it's so they can be more aware of what their children might be doing magically."

Leaning back in his chair, he continued. "All wizards and witches have an aura around them, a glow that represents the power level of the individual. The aura is rarely visible, although I've seen Harry's aura on several occasions. And there are people who can naturally see auras, the rest of us have to use a spell to see them.

"I glow, but Sirius glows brighter than I do because he's a stronger wizard, although not by much. Hermione glows stronger than either of us. She's a powerful witch, one of the strongest I've ever met. But all of us are nothing compared to Harry. He doesn't glow, he stands as if he were the source of a raging cascade of magic. There are times when he's agitated that the magic literally flows off him like a waterfall.

"I suppose, in a way, Hermione senses this and recognizes that pairing with Harry would be advantageous. But that happened so far down in her subconscious that I don't think she's even aware it helped influence her."

"So this isn't a spell or something Harry did to her?" asked Emma worriedly.

Remus stared at her in horror for a moment. "You can't honestly believe that, can you? That Harry would manipulate your daughter like that? Merlin, Emma, Harry would do anything for her. He'd *never* hurt her like that!"

She looked down, ashamed. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for and I know Harry better than that. I'm just not sure I understand what's happening between them now that Hermione has mentioned feeling Harry's magic."

He took a moment to collect himself. He was angry and outraged that Emma would ever think something like that about Harry. But he also understood her confusion and wanted to explain it to her to help put her fears to rest.

Sighing, he raked a hand through his hair. "There's no coercion on Harry's part. His aura is mostly out of his control. No one, not even in the magical world, knows why two people fall in love. They just do. Harry and Hermione met at an important formative point in their lives and they're growing up together, each giving the other something unique."

He shook his head. "You should see Harry when Hermione leaves after the summer holiday, or after Christmas. He mopes around the house looking like he's lost his puppy. It's almost painful to watch because we know that we can't help him. That's why Sirius got those journals for them. James missed Lily quite a bit when they were apart, but that was nothing to the way Harry misses Hermione."

He paused and scowled. "We used to tease James about it, but never could with Harry. He's had it pretty rough for a while and that's something that's hard to forget. And we don't want to make the mistake of forgetting about him like we did last Halloween. The Dursleys left him with a vulnerability that I don't know if he'll ever outgrow."

Emma matched his scowl. "Yes, about that. I'm surprised that you and Sirius have done anything to the Dursleys."

"We can't," Remus replied. "Harry made us promise we wouldn't. He plans on coming down on them financially, once he turns seventeen. I think that's his only plan. He wants to show up there and hit them with an eviction notice. But he was quite clear that he didn't want us doing anything that might risk our going to Azkaban."

"You three take care of each other," she commented.

"We're family," he replied with a shrug. "My parents are dead, as are Sirius' and Harry's, so we're family. We may be small, but we're growing. Sirius is adding Cindy to the family and I think Hermione will join us as well, some day. In Harry's mind I think you and your husband have joined already."

"What about you, Remus? Isn't there room for someone special in your life?" she asked gently.

He sighed. "It would be nice, but where can one find someone willing to put up with a monster? I turn lethal for at least one night a month. That's bound to put a kink in one's love life."

Emma nodded sadly. He was right, and the odds of her finding a woman who would understand him and what he went through every month were slim. She thought about her list of unmarried friends and realized that none of them would be willing to live with that sort of problem.

Remus glanced out the window, then stood up so fast he knocked his chair over. "Oh, Merlin. Emma, get Sirius here. I think I just saw Professor McGonagall walk by in her animagus form."

Emma nodded and Remus pulled his wand, then hurried for the back door.

He skidded to a halt on the steps. Harry had the tabby in a body bind and was floating her toward the pool.

"Harry," he said nervously. "What are you planning to do?"

"Cats hate water," he replied in a matter of fact voice.

"Harry," Hermione said in a frightened tone.

He shot her a reassuring grin. "Is Sirius on his way?" he asked over his shoulder. He had levitated the cat until it floated above the middle of the pool.

I hope so. I wouldn't want to have to try to explain how Harry had given their former Professor a hated bath?

The door opened again and Sirius and Emma stepped out, then Cindy joined them. Harry didn't turn to acknowledge their presence as he continued to hover the cat over the pool.

He gestured and the cat spun to face him.

"You know, Professor, there are laws on trespassing. I dare say the Grangers have not given permission for you to be on their property. One would think your motives for being here are less than honorable," he said in a calm tone. He was anything but calm, however. Everyone around him, even Emma and Cindy, could feel the power pouring off him.

"Harry, bring her over here and release her," Sirius said wryly. As much as he would enjoy watching his former Professor go for a swim, he knew her wrath would outweigh any amusement that might be had.

"Aw, Sirius, you can't tell me you never wanted to dunk a cat in water," Harry whined.

Sirius fought hard to keep from laughing. The look on the tabby was something he would always remember, with its ears flat and its eyes nearly popping out of its head.

"No, Harry. Set her down," he said firmly.

Harry glanced over to Hermione and she nodded, then made a few gestures with her hand.

"It's a good thing I don't like the smell of wet cat. Smells almost as bad as a wet dog," Harry said with a grin, then he directed the floating cat away from the pool.

"Hey!" protested Sirius.

Remus frowned and turned to Harry and Hermione. "Which one of you cast the anti-Apparation ward?"

Hermione suddenly blushed.

"Don't be angry with her, Remus. It's necessary," Harry said as he placed the cat on the ground near the table and released the binding.

The cat's form shifted and flowed into Professor McGonagall. She frowned at Harry, who stepped back, ready to cast a shield at a moment's notice.

"I see your powers have improved impressively, Mr. Potter," Minerva commented dryly. She kept her hand far away from her wand.

"No thanks to you or that school. I'd probably be dead if I were still there," Harry shot back. Hermione walked over to him and touched his arm, trying to calm him. He spun on his heel and walked over to where his shirt lay next to his towel. He reached down, grabbed it and put it on.

Minerva blinked at the anger in Harry's words and then she spotted the scars on his back. Scars that she and others had let happen.

"Why are you here, Minerva?" asked Sirius. "Harry's right. You're trespassing."

"I came here because I wanted to check up on Mr. Potter," she replied.

"Your concern is touching, if a bit overdue," Harry snapped. *Why couldn't she have cared when I was starving and locked in the smallest bedroom?* he thought. *Or when Dudley burned my back and the Dursleys rarely bothered to use the prescription medicine on it?*

Remus walked over to Harry and spoke to him quietly. The young man trembled with a mixture of fear and anger. He knew that if the Wizarding World discovered he still had his powers, the hunt for the Horcruxes would become a race. One he probably wouldn't win.

"You need to stay calm, Harry. You're putting out a lot of magic right now and while it won't alert the Aurors, it might result in someone from the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad showing up," Remus said softly. He watched him with worried eyes. The last time Harry had been this upset had been shortly after they arrived in Fiji. He'd had a bad nightmare about being stuck in the cupboard under the stairs. It took them two days to repair the damage to the roof on that part of the house and the neighbors still didn't believe the story about a waterspout.

Harry knew that McGonagall was aware that he still had his powers and he was fine with that. But he never expected her to show up, unannounced. It jarred him badly and he was having difficulty dealing with it.

Remus glance at Hermione for a moment. "I'm going to go talk to Sirius and Minerva. Why don't you two go sit down?"

Harry nodded and let Hermione lead him over to a group of pool chairs. Cindy stepped up behind them and placed her hand on Harry's shoulder. "It will be all right," she said softly.

"Professor McGonagall won't divulge your secret, Harry. She's known about it for months and hasn't said a word," Hermione offered.

He closed his eyes and nodded slowly, trying to calm himself and ease the ball of lead sitting in the bottom of his stomach. "I know. But seeing her is a shock. She was a close friend of my parents and knew they didn't want me to live with the Dursleys," he replied quietly.

At the picnic table, another, different, but related conversation was going on.

Honestly, I didn't think my presence would have ever invoked such anger," Minerva said. She was shaken by the events.

"What can you expect, Minerva?" asked Sirius wearily. "He views nearly everything to do with Hogwarts as part of what kept him an imprisoned slave. You saw the scars on his back. That's the Dursleys' and Dumbledore's work. Maybe he's wrong to feel betrayed, but he does."

Remus walked over and joined them. Emma appeared a moment later, carrying a tray with tea and biscuits.

"He has his magic," McGonagall said flatly.

"Yes, but you knew that already. You also know that no one else can find out about it. Not until it's time to tell the world," Remus replied

"But why?"

"The prophecy is still valid," Remus explained. "That's what this is all about. He's out there, we've temporarily neutralized him, but there is still the potential for him to return. We need time to get Harry ready. With the rest of the Wizarding World thinking that Harry doesn't have any magic, and Voldemort being powerless, we've pulled the rug out from under any of his followers that still remain free."

"And I take it you two are providing the instruction he needs?" she asked archly.

Sirius grinned and pulled out a copy of Harry's OWL results from the Pacific Rim Ministry. She took the offered parchment and her eyes widened, seeing the scores.

"I had a feeling I might need to show you this. But how Harry is being trained is our business," Sirius said quietly. "Every class he takes is with someone at a Master level or above."

"He'll be taking his NEWTS at the end of this year, a full year early," Remus added with pride.

"Do you see why no one can know, Minerva? Don't argue with me over this. If I have to, I'll Obliviate you to protect that young man," Sirius said harshly.

"Maybe you should go calm down with Harry," Remus muttered.

"No, Remus. He's right. I'll offer an oath on my magic to keep silent if you like," Minerva said. She glanced down at the score sheet and noted the name, then she glanced over at Harry. He was holding Hermione in his arms, as if trying to draw strength from her. It was a scene she had seen before, with James and Lily.

"I can see why Harry's powers need to remain secret. But the ramifications of this when it becomes public? It is unlikely that he will be very welcome back in British society," McGonagall said.

"That's probably a good thing," Emma said, breaking her silence. "From what I've been able to see, British wizards are far too parochial and narrow-minded. When the secret comes out, the wizards in Britain will realize they were fooled by a fourteen year old boy who used their own prejudices against them. Will they be smart enough to recognize that and learn from it? I doubt it. No, Harry and Hermione will start a life for themselves elsewhere, I think. I hate the idea that we'll be so far apart, but it would be best for both of them."

Remus and Sirius exchanged amused glances. Emma had just announced exactly how she saw the future playing out and it agreed with their own ideas.

"If it comes to that and Harry doesn't provide you with a portal, I will," Sirius announced quietly.

Emma smiled her thanks, then turned her attention back to the Headmistress.

Minerva looked at her, surprised. She hadn't expected to hear such a cutting opinion of the Wizarding World from the Muggle mother of her best student.

Hermione stood and took Harry's hand, helping him to his feet. Then she walked him over to the picnic table with Cindy following them. He gripped Hermione's hand tightly in his own.

"Professor, my remarks and tone were uncalled for," he said stiffly. "I apologize."

Minerva stood and looked at him closely. He was well fed, filled out and much taller than she remembered. His skin was a golden tan and his eyes burned with suppressed magic. He stood close to Hermione, their fingers intertwined.

"No, Mr. Potter, your remarks were to the point and mostly accurate. I did fail to do my duty toward you. If anything, I should be the one apologizing. As I have told Sirius and Remus, I will give my oath that your secret will remain safe with me.

"They have explained what you are doing and why. Miss Granger's influence is obvious, considering the excellent grades you received. I dare say Hogwarts could not have done better for you," McGonagall replied. "And the school is a poorer place in your absence."

Harry nodded. He wasn't ready to completely forgive her, but he didn't like the level of anger her visit had invoked. One of his recurring nightmares was that Dumbledore had been somehow setting him up to take over for Voldemort. He didn't think he could turn into something as twisted as the Dark Lord, but it haunted his dreams nonetheless.

Cindy draped an arm around his shoulders. "Come on, Harry. Let's have a seat and talk like adults."

“You wouldn't have really dunked me in the water, would you, Mr. Potter? And how is it both you and Miss Granger are practicing magic?”

Harry sat down and made room for Hermione next to him. “I figured that a bath was less unsettling than killing you. As to how we can perform magic, let's just say that there is British magic, then there's the magic of other countries that's not recognized or monitored by the British Ministry, but is no less effective.”

Minerva frowned. For the second time in less than ten minutes someone was pointing out a flaw in the British wizarding world.

He nodded to Hermione, who conjured a bluebell flame in her hand, then vanished it.

Minerva's lips thinned. Miss Granger's demonstration looked like wandless magic, although not as sophisticated as Mr. Potter's earlier demonstration. Wandless magic was supposed to be nearly impossible to do, and yet two students were demonstrating the skill as effortlessly as if they were using their wands to cast first year charms!

“We spend our summers learning, Professor. First, here in England, then we go to Fiji where we receive tutoring in Runes, Enchanting and Advanced Transfiguration. Hermione also gets some extra help in her Defense work from me.”

Minerva blinked and stared at him. She had not expected that he was spending his summers working. This was a much different Harry Potter than the boy she once knew.

“So, what happens now?” asked Emma worriedly. In her mind, nothing had been resolved yet.

Harry shrugged. “That's up to the Professor. I would hate to have to take action against her, but I won't let her interfere with what we're doing. Her doing so would endanger you, Dan and Hermione.”

Emma nodded. It was what she had expected. Harry would allow nothing that would endanger those he loved, and Lord help anyone who put Hermione in harms way. She glanced over to her daughter, who was blushing and trying hard not to smile. It reminded her that she still needed to have a private conversation with her.

Minerva pulled her wand and lifted it skyward. “I swear on my magic that I will not willingly divulge the secrets of those present.”

Her wand flashed and her gaze met with Harry's for a moment. He nodded in satisfaction and Minerva breathed a sigh of relief. This was Lily's protectiveness coming into play in Harry. He wasn't sacrificing everything for a world that wouldn't care one bit for him. No, he did it for the girl who sat next to him. Harry wasn't saving the world, he was saving Hermione. The world was just going to benefit from his actions.

“Thank you, Professor,” he said softly.

“Well, with that taken care of, perhaps I'll phone Dan and ask him to pick up something to cook on the grill tonight. Professor, would you like to join us for dinner?” asked Emma.

Minerva glanced at Harry, who smiled at her.

He really didn't want to be her enemy, but he wasn't quite ready to embrace her entirely. “You would be welcome, Professor.”

“Thank you. I'd like to stay,” Minerva replied, accepting the invitation.

Hermione grinned. She genuinely liked McGonagall and respected her.

Sirius stood and Cindy joined him. “We'll pass this time, Emma,” he said as he glanced at his watch. “It's nearly four in the morning our time.”

Emma nodded and the pair went back into the house to take the portal home.

Minerva watched them for a moment, then turned back to the others. “How did they get here from Fiji so quickly? And who is that woman?”

“Her name is Cindy Adams and she's going to marry Sirius,” Harry said smugly. “They arrived as quickly as they did because they used a portal to move instantly from Fiji to England. It's magic proscribed by the Ministry because they want their ten galleon Portkey fee.”

Minerva did a complete double take. “Someone is going to marry Sirius Black?” she exclaimed.

Remus laughed. “Yeah, that was about our reaction to the whole thing. But she's good for him, despite being a Muggle.”

Minerva shook her head, marveling at the idea of it. Walburga Black must be spinning in her grave at the idea of her son marrying a Muggle.

“Remus, should we explain to the Professor everything we've been up to?” asked Harry neutrally.

Before Remus could answer, Minerva jumped in. “That won't be necessary, Mr. Potter. I will help if you think I can offer any assistance, but perhaps the less I know, the better off everyone will be.”

“It may come to that, Professor,” Harry replied. “We have some suspicions which, if they prove out, will mean us visiting the school again.”

She shook her head. “You can't, Mr. Potter. You'd be recognized in an instant and people would want to know why your back.”

Harry grinned and his hair grew longer and blond. His eyes changed to a pale gray and he grew a goatee.

"A Metamorphagus!" the Headmistress exclaimed in astonishment. "I haven't seen one since Nymphadora Tonks went through school."

Harry returned his looks to normal. "It's not a well-trained talent yet. All I can do is change hair and eye color and make more hair appear. Right useful for shaving, though. I don't knick myself like I used to."

Everyone laughed.

Dan showed up a little later, bearing fresh meat from the butcher to toss on the barbecue. Harry went over to help him, while Hermione, Remus, Emma and Minerva talked about some of the differences between Britain and the rest of the Wizarding world.

Despite the rocky start, Minerva left, hours later, feeling much relieved about Harry's situation.

Hermione's House, Oxford, England, July 30th , 1996...

"Hermione, do you have a moment?" asked Emma.

She looked up from reading her Advanced Transfiguration text and nodded at her mother.

"Harry's out for his evening run?"

"Yes, he takes that very seriously."

"And there's no complaints from my daughter about his rock hard muscles, I take it?"

She blushed and shook her head.

Emma moved to sit on Hermione's bed. "So, tell me how things are going with Harry."

Hermione's eyes narrow and she looked at her mother shrewdly. "Do you want the answer to keep the parent happy or the truth?"

"I thought we could talk to each other about anything."

Hermione huffed a few times and stood up. She paced for a moment, then faced her mother. "Well, you can relax, mum. Harry's hands don't wander without permission."

Emma frowned. "I'm not trying to start a fight with you. I wanted to talk to you because I get the impression that you're getting frustrated. You're going on seventeen and you're of legal age in the Muggle world. You could be shagging him and I couldn't tell you no."

Hermione collapsed back into her chair and looked at Emma unhappily. "He's frustrating at times. I know he wants me as much as I want him, but he's got this iron self control about him. I don't think I'm ready for that final step yet. I know Harry isn't. But something is still holding him back from going any further than a good kiss."

She paused and chewed her lower lip for a moment. "You know how you'd get together with your friends and they'd complain about the men who wouldn't commit to them?"

Emma nodded. It was a common complaint among the unattached women in her social circle.

Hermione laughed softly. "He's willing to commit; no problem there. He even promised he'd ask me to marry him on my graduation day. He told me he'd ask for your blessing first, though."

"Then what's the problem, love? That he's talking about something that's still two years away?" Inwardly Emma was howling triumphantly.

"I don't know! We kiss and when things start to get too intense, he backs off," she said. She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them.

"Does he know where his limits are?"

"His or mine?"

"Yours and his. Yours first, because to me they matter more."

"I don't know."

Emma nodded and stood. "It seems that you should be having that conversation with Harry before you go letting yourself get all frustrated because he won't step over a limit he doesn't know about."

They heard the front door close.

"Speak of the devil," Emma said with a grin. "Talk to him, dear. He's really easy to talk to and I think he's as frustrated as you are. Oh, and close the door when you do. I'd rather not have to give your father CPR tonight."

Hermione rubbed a hand over her face. Her mother was right. It was time for her to talk to him.

Emma walked out of the room and Hermione followed her. She intercepted Harry just as he was coming upstairs.

“Harry, let’s go out and sit in the backyard. I want to talk with you,” she said softly.

He nodded and followed her, wondering what was going on. On the way out into the deepening sunset he switched on the Granger’s bug lamp so they could relax without worrying about winged invaders.

She led him over to sit at the picnic table, then sat down next him when he dropped down onto the bench tiredly.

He turned and straddled the bench. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you find me attractive?”

He blinked, then frowned at her. “You know I do.”

“Then why do we always stop just when things start to get so intense? Why do you back away, especially when you know I don’t want you to?”

“It’s not because I want to,” he muttered. “It’s becoming harder and harder to do so.”

She shook her head “You sure know how to send mixed signals.”

He grinned. “I’m an expert at that.”

“So, can you explain it?” she pressed.

He looked at her intently. “You’re extremely important to me. I don’t think I have the words to explain just what you mean to me. And I want...” He trailed off into a whisper and looked away.

“You want what?” she asked gently.

“You,” he replied. “I want you, but a part of me keeps saying you couldn’t possibly want me and that you could do so much better than me. And another part says if I step over the line I’ll lose the best friend I’ve ever had. It gets so confusing and frustrating.”

He sighed in frustration. He didn’t have any answers. His dreams were filled with a scantily clad Hermione and his nightmares were her rejecting him for doing something he shouldn’t.

When she laughed, he turned back to her, surprised. He wasn’t sure if she was laughing at him or not.

“Hermione?”

“We’re more alike than I ever realized. We have similar fears. I want you too, and I’m afraid that some pretty girl will take you away from me or that I’ll lose you as a friend.”

“There is no girl prettier than you,” he countered heatedly.

She was thankful that in the darkness he couldn’t see the blush she could feel heating her cheeks.

“What do you want me to do, Hermione?” he asked, his voice laced with frustration. “I’d do anything to make you happy, but I won’t use Legilimency on you just to find out what you want. Remember what I said after Sirius’ talk? I need you to tell me.” He reached out and caressed her cheek with his fingertips.

“I want us to start doing more. Maybe not that,” she countered when his hand jerked back suddenly. “But there is more we can do.”

“Things that result in more cold showers or fewer?” he asked with a teasing grin.

She grinned back. “Fewer hopefully. And we’ll have bookspace this coming year...”

“This is my NEWT year,” he reminded her.

“Think of this way. This year I’ll be there to help ease the tension of your NEWTS and next year you can do the same for me,” she countered.

“You drive a hard bargain, but you’ve convinced me.”

He leaned in and kissed her. His hand slid up to cup her breast and her eyes sprang open. She squeaked and moved back. Harry immediately looked ashamed of himself. “I’m s-s-sorry,” he stammered.

She blinked and quickly closed the distance between them. “No, don’t be. You startled me, that’s all. You didn’t do anything wrong,” she whispered, then she grabbed his hand and pulled it up to place over her breast again. “I want you to touch me. That’s what this whole conversation has been about.”

He leaned closer to her, then glanced at the pool. A light had come on, casting a reflection on the surface of the water. “I think your parents are watching,” he murmured.

Hermione looked up and sighed. “We’ll find some time to ourselves.”

he chuckled and leaned back against his hand. "We will. But for now, I don't want to damage the trust your parents have in us. Can we wait until they've gone to work? Your parents mean a lot to me. I don't want them to get angry with us."

"Me, either," she admitted.

He turned on the bench and stretched his legs out, leaning against the table. "This is going to be a long year with me studying for NEWTS, but everything will change once they're over. Have you thought about that?"

She turned and leaned her head against his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"Once I take my NEWTS I'll be returning to Britain to hunt for Nagini, or helping Remus find that blasted brooch, then hunting for Nagini. I'll be able to meet you in Hogsmeade. We'll be closer," he said.

She shivered listening to him. His voice had dropped a register while he spoke. The thought of meeting 'Evan' thrilled her. *Lavender will scream the first time she meets him*, she thought viciously. It was a comforting thought.

"I hadn't thought of it like that," she murmured.

He pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed it. "We'll get there. Let's just take things one step at a time. But never doubt how much I need you."

He stood and offered her his hand. He was right. Her parents weren't exactly watching from the window, but they passed it far too often for it to be a coincidence. There would be other times for them to test the limits.

Taking his hand, she let him pull her to her feet. He kissed her softly, then wrapped an arm around her waist as they walked toward the house.

Author's Notes:

Bob peeked out from behind the curtain and was startled to find Alyx filling in a hole.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Alyx whirled around and tried to hide the shovel behind her back.

"Nothing! Just waiting for you!"

Bob eyed the partially filled in hole with suspicion. It looked like a grave.

Suddenly Generic Reader #6 poked his head above the dirt. "I'M NOT DEAD YET!"

Alyx whirled and smacked him in the head with the shovel and he fell back into the dirt silent. She then turned to Bob and tried to kick some dirt over the body's face. "Yes? Was there something?" she asked innocently.

Bob took a step backwards. "It's time for Author's notes," he blurted.

She nodded. "Alright, I'll be right there, you start without me!"

Bob backed away and turned to the audience. "Right then... and now the author's notes."

sanghamitra – Donuts, they are a mystery that only the truly enlightened will understand. Just be thankful that you do not have to understand donuts to understand our stories.

AK – While you're giving lessons on science, look up the meaning of the word fiction please.

Graup – McNair is trying to capitalize on Harry's fame. He is an Ex-Death Eater and using Harry's fame and reputation to further his own goals. Harry left the wizarding world long before he had established himself as Dumbledore's man, or solidly opposed to Voldemort. As to Scrimgeour, he is just your typical power hungry politician.

And no, Nagini will not be turned into something good, unless you count the snake skin shoes.

Ron will turn out alright eventually, but he needs to grow up some first. Ginny is pretty much in the same boat as Ron, but they are not pivotal to this story like they are in canon.

For the Brit pickers. We ain't Brits. So yes, they are going to "graduate". Live with it. Besides, we needed it for the story and you should be used to us pulling stuff out of our butts by now.

Beta'ing by Keith and Dorothy. Sorry guys, Dorothy made me pull the orgy scene involving Flitwick, Sprout, Griphook and Fang.

No Alpacas were harmed in the making of this chapter, but I stepped on a lemming while emailing it to Alyx. She put it in that night's stew. Someone send me a toothpick! Lemmings are stringy!

Special Notice:

This story is character driven as opposed to our usual event driven stories. It's centered around Harry and Hermione and their developing relationship. Both characters suffer from some key insecurities which will plague them for at least two more chapters before it goes totally away.

We're trying to work on a realistic relationship where the couple doesn't fall into bed within the second chapter of the story. As a result they will be having talks every so often as they deal with their insecurities. If this bothers you and turns you off, do yourself and us a favor and stop reading. Don't bother leaving a review saying you don't like it. This is a departure from our usual writing style and we're experimenting.

Key events will continue to be seen from the perspective of the principle characters even when they are not directly involved. That alone is a major change for how we write.

The Power of the Press

Chapter 5 - Year Six

Standard Disclaimer:

“Whips, chains, cat-o-nine tails. Check, check and check,” Bob said, muttering to himself in a low tone.

Alyx looked up from reading her latest manual on Taxidermy for fun and profit.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Well you wanted to invite Ed, Treck and Dazza to this chapter's disclaimer right?” replied Bob.

Alyx nodded and placed her book down next to her copy of “Stuffing your Enemy for Eternity.”

“Well, here, buy me some new toys from the catalog,” Alyx said.

Bob looked over at the offered periodical. “The Catalog of Doom?” he said dubiously then he took the catalog from her hands.

Alyx turned and faced the audience. “While my husband is doing that, I'd like to tell everyone that we don't own Harry Potter. In fact, if we did, the story would have been much better. Snape would have gotten the girl and Harry would be a mere side character.”

“OOOO!!!!”

Bob rushed up to Alyx interrupting her in her disclaimer. “Look!” he shouted frantically, pointing to a page from the Catalog of Doom. “This would be great for Ed, don't you agree?”

Alyx glanced down at the page and shuddered. “Rocket powered Buttplug with spring loaded compartment for Fire Ants. Fire Ants not included.”

She looked at Bob and scowled. “You know, I'm really starting to worry about you!”

“Oh? I'm not the one with the Frying Pan of Infinite Attacks, or the +2 Spatula of Pain. I didn't buy rocket launcher you're mounting on the truck or the small dog rated Microwave oven.”

Alyx huffed at him and placed her hands on her hips. “Honestly, a girl is allowed to have a few toys!”

“Fine, see if I try to help you anymore. I'm going back to my writing,” Bob muttered, then he turned and pushed Generic Reader #7 into Alyx's vat of piranha.

“It's too early to feed my fishies!” screeched Alyx.

Bob rolled his eyes and turned to the audience. “Oh let's just get on with the story!”

The Power of the Press

Chapter 5

Daily Prophet Lead Article, July 31 st , 1996

Sirius Black Offers NewInter-Species Protection Bill

With the fall of Minister Scrimgeour's administration, Minister Amelia Bones has set the tone for a more tolerant Ministry. In this new environment, Sirius Black, head of the Black family, has introduced a newbill calling for a more broad-minded, progressive approach to other species.

“It doesn't make sense to me to treat the other sentient species like subhumans. They think, they have souls, they deserve our respect, but we don't give it to them. The Muggles have a phrase which goes like this, 'Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you.'” Black said at the most recent Wizengamot meeting.

Political analysts are predicting a close vote on the newbill, which unsurprisingly has the backing of Gringotts and the Ministry. But there is a vocal minority in the Wizengamot who are vehemently opposed to this bill in any form.

Sirius Black represents a faction of the Wizengamot that supports the efforts of Minister Bones and her work to bring about a fairer Ministry for all magical species. Until recently, such efforts would have been in vain. Minister Scrimgeour's administration would not have allowed such a measure, but with the arrest and subsequent execution of Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary for Magic, the administration fell, paving the way for Minister Bones to take over.

Under the proposed legislation, Goblins and the major humanoid species will be afforded the same basic rights as wizards. Sirius Black says this bill will “not completely end the bias towards the other species, but it's a start. And for the first time there will be a mechanism in place which

will enable house elves to lodge complaints about mistreatment.”

When asked, Black said that the bill is a necessary first step towards recognizing the other species as equals. He noted that Britain is falling behind the rest of the wizarding world because of its antiquated ideas.

While many think this new legislation is worthwhile, not everyone agrees. Walden McNair is stepping to the forefront of the opposition. “This bill is a danger to us and our way of life. Do you think Harry Potter sacrificed his magic for house elves? Of course he didn't. And we should uphold his great sacrifice by sticking with our glorious traditions.”

Quibbler Lead Article, July 31 st , 1996...

American UFO Sightings Result of Tainted Butterbeer!

In an attempt to undermine the stability of the American Ministry, we've learned that our Ministry has been sending tainted Butterbeer to the Americas in the hope of causing mass drunkenness.

This plot was uncovered at the annual Labor Day celebration in Wisconsin. Each year in this backward state, thousands gather for the Kielbasa Art Festival, where they drink butterbeer by the barrel and eat massive amounts of sausage.

This year, they were honoring Milfred McFertile, aged 102, and mother to 67 children, 407 grandchildren and 1209 great-grandchildren . She was touted as the perfect person to honor this year, considering the number of times she's been in labor.

The tainted butterbeer resulted in hundreds of UFO sightings ranging in shapes from saucers to something one person said looked like a flying penis.

It's true we don't normally use the word “flying” in this publication, but we decided for this issue it was necessary.

The tainted Butterbeer was discovered as the cause and traced back to a distillery formerly owned by the Malfoy family and now owned by the Ministry. Ministry officials are denying they had anything to do with a flying penis, and further claim their butterbeer was not tainted until the Americans mixed it with something called Pepsi.

What Pepsi is, is a mystery, and we wonder what it has to do with a flying penis. Frankly, we're worried about the whole thing. We promise to keep you informed on this story.

Coming next week, Harry Potter single handedly defeats Germany's nude woman volleyball team . “He's got a magnificent spike,” said Olga Broomhildegarde, team captain. “We all wanted to see what he could do with it.”

Hermione's House, Oxford, England, Aug 1 st , 1996...

Rita Skeeter had a nose for a story, and some of the rumors she had heard in Diagon Alley and elsewhere made her think that one family in particular might be more involved in the Potter disappearance than anyone suspected.

It made sense, in a way. After all, while the adults in the family were Muggles, their daughter was a witch who, by all accounts, was Harry Potter's best friend at Hogwarts.

It had cost her a small fortune in bribes and promises of favors in order to locate where the girl lived. But when it came to news, she had no scruples. She'd not let anyone get in her way of publishing a story, no matter who got hurt. Occasionally, the tables were turned and she found herself being used to help expose scandals or the wrongdoings of others. Minerva McGonagall had done so just a few months ago. But she didn't mind, really. She got the majority of lead stories in the Prophet and people knew they could trust her to bring them the unvarnished truth!

Now her nose was twitching, and that meant there was a story behind the disappearance of Harry Potter. A story that no one suspected.

She had spent the day prowling around the outside of the house, hoping to get inside when someone opened a door. The wards had been a problem, but she knew a technique for slipping through them that confused most security wards.

Rita Skeeter was an Animagus, and a unique one at that. Unlike most Animagi, who mastered control of the instinctive self of the animal, Skeeter gave her form free reign, commanding from a higher level. This allowed her to maintain her talent for remembering conversations verbatim. It was this instinctive independence which allowed her to fool most wards. The bug did the work of flying and moving, while she commanded from the back of the brain, an observer rather than an active participant.

She flew around to the back of the house, her frustration mounting. She had not heard nor seen anyone since her arrival. The cars were still at the house, so she reasoned that the family had to be close by.

By six that evening she was beginning to think she'd taken the wrong approach, though the idea had seemed good at the time.

She paused and listened. When a light turned on upstairs and a radio began to play, she froze and listened carefully. Unable to hear anyone speaking over the radio, she flew up to the window, but couldn't see anyone.

A light went on in the bathroom, only to be turned off a minute later.

Her anger and frustration climbing, she was about to fly down and change forms to confront these Muggles when the yard lights came on.

Now we're getting somewhere! she thought happily. *Someone must be coming out of the house.* She leaped from the windowsill, her little wings flapping like mad.

More automatic timer circuits kicked in, activating the large blue light bug zapper Dan had installed. The random lighting was merely part of a comprehensive anti-burglar system designed to make it appear as if the house was occupied when it wasn't.

Skeeter, in allowing the insect to control her movements, had only a few seconds to panic and try to wrest control from the primitive mind flying the beetle. The attempt was unsuccessful. She saw an intense flash of blue light, then felt pain like she'd never felt before.

She tumbled to the ground, more dead than alive. Her antennae had been vaporized, and the electricity had burned a swath of destruction across her face and thorax.

In intense pain, she took over an hour to revert back to human form. Blind in one eye and totally deaf, thanks to the loss of her ears, she stumbled out towards the street, where she collapsed, unconscious.

A neighbor of the Grangers, out walking his dog, spotted the injured woman and called 999, summoning an ambulance.

She was rushed to a hospital where she would spend the next three weeks recovering enough for her to Apparate to St. Mungos. Unfortunately by then, the damage was done. As Muggle medicine and her own body had healed what it could, magical healing could do nothing for her.

Waivunu, Fiji, Aug 6 th 1996...

“Hang on, Harry!”

Sirius gunned the boat and Harry felt the slack being taken up in the rope. The parasail billowed out behind him and his feet let the ground. He continued running in midair for a moment, then laughed.

This was their 'down' week. Dan and Emma were with them and, with the exception of three hours studying around dinner time, they basically relaxed and had a real vacation. It was hard on Hermione at first; her fingers itched to open her books and reread them. But they managed to distract her.

The large Sheraton hotel in Nadi held dances every night and formal ball room dances on Saturday evenings, which they planned to attend. Harry was only a fair dancer, but Hermione enjoyed it and as long as she could put up with his need to fly, even if it was tethered to the back of a boat, he could dance with her.

Another change from last year was that in the days preceding their arrival in Fiji, Sirius had come to England and told Harry that he would be paying for everything. Remus helped Harry lay out the budget based on what he had available in his trust vault.

He was paying for a vacation for his family. He was in no danger of spending all his money, but Remus and Sirius wanted him to get used to the idea of managing the money in a real situation, rather than a classroom. Since most of his tutors had been prearranged and paid for by James and Lily, and Sirius picked up the cost of the few new ones they had to get, his trust fund was largely unused.

Dan played out the line below and Harry rose higher into the sky. Dan and Cindy had already had their turn and Sirius was driving the boat, although he claimed he'd get a chance another time. Emma, Hermione and Remus seemed reluctant to give parasailing a shot.

He grinned, seeing the boat looking so small below him. Looking out at the broad vista before him, his brow crinkled as he spotted something.

On the horizon were two specks. It looked like two people on brooms approaching fast. Without thinking, he morphed into Evan, then switched on the intercom that allowed him to talk to the boat.

“Sirius, I see two wizards on brooms coming up fast... Wait, they're splitting up. One looks to be heading for the boat, the other for me.”

“Hang tight, Harry. We're reeling you in,” came the tinny reply. He felt the tug on his harness as the electric winch began to reel him in. The winch wasn't all that fast; they'd never be able to get him into the boat in time. He wished he could Apparate, but he'd take the rope and harness with him and risk fouling the boat's propeller if he did.

Below on the boat, Harry could see Cindy, Dan and Emma going below deck. Hermione and Remus scanned the skies with their wands ready, while Sirius turned the boat around to head for shore.

The two riders came closer, one heading for the boat the other heading for Harry.

“Death Eaters!” Harry hissed.

A stunner lanced up from the boat and splashed against a shield. The Death Eater approaching Harry grinned broadly. As far as he could tell, Harry was unarmed. He had left his wand back at the beach house.

“Evan Black, cousin of the blood traitor, Sirius Black?”

Below them, the other Death Eater screamed and fell from his broom, most of his guts spilling out by a well placed cutting hex from Remus.

“Damnation,” swore the Death Eater, seeing his companion fall into the water with a scream. He turned back to Harry. “This is what happens when you consort with blood traitors! *Crucio!*”

The curse caught Harry by surprise and flew right through the shield he had erected. It struck him in the chest, and he screamed as every nerve in his body sang with excruciating pain.

Sirius slewed the boat back and forth, trying to drag Harry out from under the curse. Finally, he turned the boat around. That caused the tether to go slack and Harry started to spiral down.

His vision graying, he gestured, snap conjuring a heavy stone above the Death Eater. It appeared and gravity kicked in. Plummeting down, it struck the Death Eater and the man fell nearly a hundred feet, his skull smashed.

Harry groaned and passed out in the harness. His last thought was a dim recognition of Hermione screaming his name when he went limp in the harness.

Sirius reversed direction again and Dan came back up on deck to work the winch. Between them they managed to get his fall under control and brought him aboard.

When he awoke he was in his bed and every nerve in his body ached. He moaned softly and tried to lift his head to look around. The effort exhausted him.

“Harry, lie still. Remus should be back any minute with an anti-Cruciatu s potion,” Hermione said, her expression filled with worry. She placed a cool cloth against his forehead; it was a futile gesture and they both knew it.

“Whe... W-w-where's S-S-Sirius?”

The after effects of the curse was making speech difficult. He was wracked with tremors. This was his first exposure to the dreaded torture curse, and he now understood why it had earned the name. Every nerve in his body jolted and flared as if he was being zapped with electricity and his muscles ached terribly.

“He's checking the wards on the house right now. Dad's with him. Mum and Cindy are in Mum's room. Mum was really shook up.”

He blinked and tried to look at her, but he couldn't focus properly.

“Harry, can you switch back to Evan? We don't know if Remus will be alone or not when he returns with the potion. Because it's a controlled potion, he had to go to Britain and get some from the Ministry,” she explained.

His features rippled and he groaned in pain. His body shuddered and he shook his head. He couldn't control the transformation in this condition. Hermione nodded and waved her hand, casting a glamor on him that approximated Evan.

The door opened and Cindy entered. “How is he?” she asked as she moved to stand next to Hermione.

“Hurtsss” he hissed through clenched teeth.

He reached out and grabbed Cindy's hand. “Tell S-S-Sirius, they w-w-weren't I-I-looking for m-me. They w-w-wanted him!”

Her eyes widened with understanding and she nodded, then she turned to Hermione. “Tell me again what that curse does?”

“It's an Unforgivable curse, banned by the Ministry. It causes overwhelming pain. I've never felt it, but it's driven people insane. They say it's like being stabbed hundreds of times all over your body.”

“Bloody hurts, still,” Harry moaned. He lay back and tried to control his shaking body.

The door opened allowing Remus and another person to enter the room. Remus stepped over to the bed holding a bottle.

“Evan, I've brought a dose of anti-Cruciatu s potion. It will help alleviate the after effects from the curse. Since this is a British Ministry-controlled potion, and the attack was mostly on British citizens, I've brought Auror Tonks here to talk to us, you included.”

He nodded and Remus motioned to Cindy, who propped him up so he could drink the potion. His hands trembled so much she had to hold the potion for him. While he was drinking, the door opened and Sirius entered the room with Dan and Emma. He looked surprised to see his cousin, but he nodded to her and turned his attention on Harry.

He finished the potion and sagged against Cindy in relief. She shook her head in amazement at how fast magical medications worked.

Harry cracked one eye open and focused on Sirius. “They were after you, Sirius. That's what the Death Eater told me,” he said in an exhausted voice.

Sirius looked startled for a moment.

“Well, you don't have to worry about them, Evan. Remus got the one that came for us with a cutting hex; hit him in the belly and he went down fast, then yours. I don't think anyone will be able to find the bodies, either,” Sirius said. “It's a shame, but we were too worried about you to bother finding what was left of them.”

"They weren't Death Eaters," Tonks announced. "They're part of a new group calling themselves the Cult of Voldemort. Each member is a disciple." She turned to Harry. "And how do you know they were after Mr. Black?"

"Weren't you listening?" Harry asked, a bit annoyed. "The guy on the broom told me they were after Sirius. Just before he hit me with the Cruciatus, he said, 'this is what happens when you consort with blood traitors'."

Tonks nodded and peered closer at Harry frowning. "Why are you... Who are you?" she demanded. Being an expert in disguises, she was capable of easily spotting his glamor.

Almost instantly she had three wands pointed at her.

"Hermione!" shouted Emma. "Put that down."

Hermione shook her head stubbornly and held her wand firmly.

"Nymphadora, can we talk about this like adults? Or should we just Oblivate you?"

She looked at her older cousin. "Sirius, this is serious. I just gave a controlled potion to someone hiding behind a glamor. There's been an attack on a Wizengamot member. And just who is Evan Black, anyway? I thought I knew all of the family."

"Sirius, just tell her," Harry said tiredly. His exposure to the curse had taken a lot out of him. This was the first time he ever experienced anything so painful and the after-effects were nearly as bad as the original curse. He closed his eyes and slipped into an exhausted sleep.

"Damn," Sirius swore. "I'm going to do something I never thought I'd do."

He turned to Tonks. "Nymphadora Black-Tonks, as Head of your House, I am invoking Familiar Obligatora on you."

Tonks blinked and stared at him in shock. Remus gaped at him.

"Sire?" Tonks squeaked as the powerful family magics took hold. A glowing field seemed to engulf her, holding her fast.

"Hermione, is that your glamor?" Sirius asked.

Shocked beyond words, she nodded mutely. She had never seen Sirius like this. She had no idea what kind of magic he had just invoked, but its effect on Tonks was obvious.

"Would you dispel it, please?"

Hermione turned and canceled the spell on Harry.

"Sirius, what are you doing?" demanded Cindy, who was watching Tonks with mounting alarm. The young woman seemed to be struggling against massive forces, and losing.

"A moment and it will all be clear," Sirius said sadly.

He walked over to Tonks and turned her so she could see the figure on the bed. Her brow furrowed.

"In a little while, cousin, I will release you from the family magic, and hopefully you won't hate me for doing this to you. However, you are looking at the last hope of the wizarding world. He is all that stands between us and Voldemort returning. More importantly, he is like a son to me and I will not see him harmed. Not by you or anyone else."

Sirius moved to stand in front of Tonks and she looked at him. "Yes, that's Harry Potter. The real Harry Potter, with all the bindings removed from his magic, with all his magic intact. He is probably the most powerful wizard on the planet, except for Voldemort, and we know they have the same level of power.

"Dumbledore was playing dangerous games with Harry's life, so we pulled a hoax, making it seem like he had no magic. That had two effects. The first was that it got him out from under Dumbledore's thumb and the second is that all of Voldemort's supporters believe Voldemort to be powerless.

"As long as Harry and his abilities remain secret, he has time to train and time to live. When the time comes, a properly trained Harry Potter will kill Voldemort, then he will go on to live a long, happy life making lots of little Black-Potters.

"But for now, I need your promise to keep his secret. I don't want to force your cooperation, Tonks, but if it comes down to him or you, he wins. I *will* protect him."

"I'll willingly keep the secret, Sire," she whispered, still cowering under the powerful family magic.

Sirius stared at her for a moment then nodded. "Then I release you from Familiar Obligatora with no conditions or obligations."

Tonks staggered and nearly fell as the nimbus of energy surrounding her vanished, but Sirius steadied her.

"Cor! And here I thought Mum was putting one over on me. That's worse than an Imperius!"

"I'm sorry, Nymphadora..." Sirius trailed off at her glare.

Not as sorry as you'll be if you call me Nymphadora again," she muttered darkly. "Call me Tonks."

She looked down at Harry and nodded to herself. "All right, I can see why you want to protect this secret. I just wish you hadn't used the family magic on me."

"I wish I hadn't either," Sirius said, his complexion had paled considerably. "Remus, take them to the dining room. Talk there and let Harry sleep."

Sirius trembled and then he bolted from the room. Cindy watched him, alarmed, as he vanished.

"Go to him, Cindy. He's probably in your bathroom throwing up," Remus said. Then he tried to put on a bright face. "Shall we let Harry sleep in peace?"

Remus led the thoroughly confused people from the bedroom. Cindy went towards the master bedroom where she and Sirius slept.

In the dining room Remus conjured a tea service and poured himself a cup. He took a deep drink and shook his head sadly. "Ms. Tonks, Sirius didn't want to cast that on you. If I know him, he's an emotional wreck at the moment," he told her quietly.

Tonks looked at him, unsure whether to believe him or not.

"Why don't you first explain what just happened?" Dan asked him. It was obvious to him that something powerful had happened that affected Tonks and Sirius deeply, but he didn't understand it at all.

Remus sighed and nodded. "In the old pure-blood families, like the Potters and the Blacks, there are many types of magic which they keep secret. For example, when Harry turns seventeen he will be able to access the family grimoires and learn the secret spells of the Potter family. The Potters were well known healers and enchanters and their grimoires are rumored to be full of spells for those professions.

"A magical family is more than just people related by blood. There is a special form of magic that is reserved for the Head of the family alone. It allows the Head of the family to enforce his or her will on reluctant family members. Ms. Tonks' mother managed to escape her family and marry her Muggle-born husband before anyone could drag her before the Head of the Black family and force her to do their bidding.

"Sirius had that spell cast on him and he managed to break from the compulsion, but only at the cost of great emotional and physical pain to himself. When the Potters took him in, he vowed never to cast that on anyone. That should tell you how important Harry's life is to him. He broke his own vow and did something he hoped he'd never have to do."

"I would have listened without him casting that," Tonks said mulishly.

"Would you risk the life of someone you love on a maybe, Ms. Tonks?" Remus asked gently.

She shook her head. If she were in the same boat, she would have done the same thing.

"Remus, Harry will have this ability to compel members of the Potter family?" asked Hermione timidly.

Remus smiled understandingly. "The ability, yes. But the knowledge of how to do so? No. According to Harry's grandfather, the knowledge of how to invoke that magic was lost three centuries ago and no one was interested in trying to reclaim it."

She leaned back in her chair, relieved.

"I'd just as soon never tell him about it, but it's probably written down in one of the many journals his family has kept," Sirius said shakily from the doorway. "He'd never use it on anyone, Hermione, especially not you."

Tonks stood and stared at him. The man standing in the doorway was entirely different from the one who had commanded her obedience only a short while ago. His complexion was pasty and he looked haunted. It was Sirius, just recently escaped from Azkaban all over again.

Cindy stood next to him. She held one of his arms and was watching him carefully. Remus had been right. He had been violently ill for a few minutes, and his body was still wracked with tremors. She had never witnessed such a strong emotional reaction before, but she was coming to understand that the wizards were more tightly tied to their emotions than Muggles.

"Tonks," he began.

She walked over to him. "It's all right, Sirius," she said, embracing him gently. Her hair changed from the buttery blond to black and grew down to her waist. "I would do the same thing to protect someone I loved."

Hermione stared at Tonks and her hair. "You.. You..."

Tonks glanced over to her, looking amused. "Yes? Was there something?"

Sirius walked around her and took a chair next to Remus, then he pulled Cindy down into his lap, wrapping his arms around her. Remus grinned and slid a cup of tea over to him.

"You can do what Harry does!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Yeah, about that," Remus said, sounding embarrassed. "I had plans of getting Ms. Tonks out here at Christmas to help Harry. I guess we just let her in on the secret early."

Tonks looked between the two of them. “Harry can grow his hair?” she asked, as her hair shortened and turned bubble gum pink.

“Oh, I want that ability!” murmured Emma.

Tonks shot her a wide grin. As she did, her breasts grew noticeably larger.

“I wouldn’t mind you having that ability, either,” quipped Dan.

“Daddy!” exclaimed Hermione.

“Dan!” exclaimed Emma.

“Oh, bugger,” exclaimed Dan, knowing he was in deep.

Remus looked away and Sirius broke down laughing.

Hermione turned back to Tonks. “Harry’s got some sort of morphing ability. So far, he can change hair length and color. Eye color, too. You can do it faster than he can, though.”

“Wait,” Sirius said, holding up a hand. “There’s a lot going on and we need to do this in order. Tonks, can you get a day or two off? I want to find out more about this Cult of Voldemort, and you’ll be able to talk to Harry about his abilities. We have the space, you’d be welcome to stay here.”

Tonks sat considering for a moment. She glanced out the window at the pristine white beach. It was winter in Fiji, so the temperature was a frigid eighty five degrees. “I think I might be talked into taking some vacation time if I can use that beach,” she said with a grin.

Sirius smiled. “Deal!”

Waivunu , Fiji, Aug 7 th 1996...

Harry slipped on a robe slowly and slid his feet into a pair of sandals. Every muscle in his body ached, but he felt a hundred percent better than yesterday.

Shuffling out of his bedroom, he went into the kitchen and found, to his surprise, a hot pot of tea sitting on the stove. Filling a cup, he walked slowly out of the kitchen. It was still early, dawn was just beginning to break and everyone was still asleep. He paused in the living room and spotted a figure out on the porch, drinking and looking out over the bay.

“Good morning,” he said softly, stepping out onto the porch.

The figure turned and he could see it was a young woman he didn’t recognize.

“Wha? Oh... Hi. We met yesterday, but you probably don’t remember much of that. I’m Tonks. I won’t tell you my first name. That way you can’t use it,” she said.

Harry smiled softly. “Nympha...”

“Don’t say it! I’d hate to have to kill you. Besides, cleaning up and disposing of your body would cause too many questions,” she growled.

He nodded and slowly lowered himself into a chair, then gave a sigh of relief. Tonks nodded knowingly.

“Feel like you’ve been beaten by Bludgers, eh?”

He nodded. “Over every square inch,” he replied and then he peered up at her. “Since you’re not making a fuss over who I am, can I assume they told you about me?”

Tonks nodded and sipped her tea.

Harry lifted his cup in salute. “Thanks for having tea ready, but why are you up so early?”

“Couldn’t sleep. I’m still on England time.”

“We stock some sleeping potions to help adjust. Ask Cindy and she’ll let you have one.”

The sun was just starting to peek over the mountain tops of the interior of the island. Tonks turned and glanced out at the bay. Local native fishermen were already up and working on repairing their nets for the coming day.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured.

She turned to see Harry watching her. “Your girlfriend says you can change your hair and eye color?”

He nodded and closed his eyes. His hair lengthened and turned sandy-brown. About a minute later, he opened his eyes and she bent down to look at them. His eyes were an ice blue.

She nodded and hopped up on the railing. “Nice work,” she said, then her hair turned, almost instantly to match his eye color.

He blinked at her in surprise. "Remus mentioned he knew someone that..."

"That would be me," she said, then her nose shifted to a pig's snout and back to normal again.

When he stared at her, she laughed. "I'm a Metamorphmagus, and so are you. The difference between you and me is that I've been doing this since I've was six years old."

"When I was six, my Aunt shaved my head. I was so angry and hurt by it, but the next morning my hair had grown back completely."

"And you didn't keep trying to change stuff like I did?"

"No, he wouldn't do that, not in that house," a voice from the doorway said.

Harry craned his neck around to see Remus standing in the doorway, holding a mug of tea.

"Oh? Why not?" asked Tonks.

Harry looked down, playing with the belt of his robes. This was an area he didn't feel comfortable talking about. He had just met Tonks and it wasn't a subject he wanted to share with strangers.

"Do you remember what kind of home life they said he had in the papers, Ms. Tonks?"

Tonks glanced over to Remus. "You mean they were right? Oh, and it's just Tonks."

"Mostly," Harry whispered.

She slid off the railing, walked over to him and crouched down by his side. "I'm sorry to hear that. But not to worry, I can help you. You're gonna be the younger brother my mum was too afraid to have. I guess I was so much of a shock that she swore off having kids after me." As she spoke her ears grew, flapped a few times, then returned to normal.

Remus choked on his tea and looked at the young Auror in alarm.

She jerked a thumb at Remus. "Is he always this stuffy?"

Harry grinned. "Only when he hasn't had his morning tea."

"You know, Mr. Potter, if you weren't still recovering, I'd levitate you into the bay," Remus commented dryly.

"Oh, a live one!" Tonks said, flashing him a grin. As she did, her hair changed to a bubblegum pink afro.

Remus chuckled and shook his head. Looking at Harry, his brow furrowed in concern. "Still hurts?" he asked softly.

Harry nodded. "Shouldn't the potion have fixed this?"

"Fraid not, Harry," Tonks replied, her mood sobering. "The potion eliminates the after pain from the curse itself, but can't do anything for the pain caused by nerves being healed or repaired. But it should be gone in a day or so."

Harry closed his eyes and shuddered, thinking he had to go through another day of this.

Tonks grinned and took pity on him. "You can take a mild pain relief potion. It will help. If you had a Muggle hot tub, the jets would ease the ache also. It's one of the greatest Muggle inventions."

Remus patted his shoulder. "I'll get you a pain relief potion."

Tonks watched Remus go into the house with a thoughtful expression. "He seems quite attached to you, like Sirius."

"We're family. Pretty much all we have left is each other. They were best friends with my parents. Had it not been for Dumbledore's interference, I would have gone to Sirius right after my parents were killed. When they found out what was happening to me at my relatives, they rescued me and here we are," Harry said softly. "Remus is a quiet man, a real thinker and a whiz at teaching Defense and Charms." He smiled softly. "I suppose it's like having two dads, between him and Sirius."

Remus stepped back out onto the porch and handed him a small bottle.

He uncorked it and swallowed it down, making a face as he did. "Blah! Why can't they make a potion that tastes good?"

Remus chuckled.

Harry put the empty bottle on the table next to his chair and picked up his now lukewarm tea to wash the taste from his mouth. Once he had accomplished that and his mouth didn't taste like last year's ashtray, he turned to Tonks. "So just how much control do you have over your form? I noticed you changed your nose into a pig's nose. Can you change into a pig?"

"Only when I'm hungry," she replied with a mischievous smile and a wink. Remus coughed hard again, choking on his tea.

But seriously, a Metamorphmagus can change pieces of themselves to animal parts, but not the whole package. And unlike an Animagus, who is that animal, I can only achieve a superficial change. For example, given enough time I could copy every square inch of you. But that would only be on the outside. I could look like you, sound like you, even pee like you, but inside all my squishy stuff is still female," she said.

When Harry glanced up at him, Remus sighed. He knew that look. Harry was about to pull one over on Tonks.

"I'm sure you could look like me, but I don't think you could pass all the male tests," he said, sounding serious.

Tonks frowned. "Well, no. The reproductive functions don't work, not to mention I don't bat that way. So even if everything did function, it's doubtful I could perform."

"Yeah, but can you write your name in the snow when you pee?" Harry asked innocently.

She blinked at him stupidly. "They don't teach that!" she exclaimed. Then her expression changed. "Do they?"

"Well, you know that witches have secrets we wizards never learn. Wizards have secrets too, you know," Harry said proudly. "But if you don't believe me, ask Sirius or Remus. I'm only telling you the secret because some day your life might depend on it."

When she glanced up at Remus, he looked at her innocently and nodded with a straight face.

"My instructors at the Auror Academy never mentioned this to me when I took stealth and disguises," she muttered.

"Maybe they never expected you to be able to pass yourself off as a guy?" offered Harry carefully.

She glanced at him suspiciously. "Are you sure they teach this stuff to wizards?"

"First year health lecture. You remember. When they split the classes down gender lines?" Remus replied for Harry. A good Marauder never passed up the chance to get in on a prank!

Tonks swore under her breath and stood. "Excuse me," she muttered and walked into the house. She hadn't been taught a necessary skill and that rankled.

Remus sat down next to Harry and started chuckling. After a few minutes they fell into a companionable silence that lasted until Hermione joined them nearly an hour later.

"Remus? Auror Tonks is wondering if we have a book on weather spells. For some reason she wants to make snow," Hermione said, confused.

Remus and Harry shared one long look and started laughing, only increasing Hermione's confusion.

Several hours later, everyone was gathered out on the porch when Tonks rejoined them after taking a small dose of sleeping potion to help her adjust. She could only stay for a few days, but would take more time around Christmas and would pop over on some weekends for day visits.

Sirius grinned at her. Remus had told him about the snow prank and he thought it was a wonderful joke. "Ah, Tonks, glad you could join us. Now that everyone is awake and present, how about you explain this Cult of Voldemort business?"

"Almost everyone," Hermione murmured. She was cuddling with Harry on the chair and he was dozing again.

"Let him sleep," Cindy said softly. "I don't fully understand the curse that he was hit with, but the after-effects are truly terrible. He'll sleep until his body tells him he doesn't need to anymore."

Tonks nodded and walked over to lean against the railing of the porch. "Let's see. The Cult is something new. They first showed up a couple months ago when they attacked a local primary school teacher for teaching pure-blood children that House Elves should be treated with respect.

"There have been several other attacks since then. The DMLE is keeping an eye out for them, but this is the first time they went after a Wizengamot member. That represents a big change in the way they operate."

"Sounds like Merlin's Coven," Remus said thoughtfully.

Tonks gave him a blank look.

"About two hundred years ago a group emerged that called themselves Merlin's Coven. They tried hard to force people to accept the old druid ways, despite the fact that we've forgotten most of the old druid customs. They thought they were doing Merlin's work, but the group was eventually stamped out."

"So, is this a fringe group of nuts or is it a real threat?" asked Sirius.

Tonks scowled. "We aren't sure, to be truthful. At first it seemed like a real fringe group, but the word on the street is that they've recently picked up some big backers with real money. We suspect a few members of the Wizengamot who are trying to block your equality bill may be bankrolling, or even controlling the Cult now."

"Great," Harry murmured sardonically. "Something else to make Britain the laughing-stock of the world."

Hermione turned to him. "You're awake!"

He nodded. "Long enough to crazies out there." He looked over to Tonks. "So, what's the Ministry doing about it?"

"We're taking it very seriously, Harry, I promise you. But I can't go into specifics," she replied.

Harry watched her for a long moment, then nodded.

Tonks turned to Sirius. "When I reported this attack, Madam Bones was particularly concerned. I did report that a local citizen had been hit with an Unforgivable. I had to, in order to get a dose of the remedy. Madam Bones was considering sending you a bodyguard, Sirius. Fortunately, I managed to convince her to let me first check things out. Good thing I did," she said, glancing at Harry.

"I'll say," Harry muttered.

"The Grangers will be returning to England in two days. I'll return with them and check in with Amelia. Remus, will you double check the wards and see if I missed anything?" Sirius said.

Remus nodded. He'd planned on looking over the wards anyway. Sirius' idea of wards tended to be rather prankish in nature and this required a more adult approach.

"When do the tutors start arriving?" asked Cindy.

"Monday," Hermione replied.

"That's only three days away. Will Harry be up for classes then?" Cindy pressed.

"He'll be fine. It usually takes a day or two to recover after the anti-Cruciatius potion is administered," answered Tonks.

"I'm feeling better already," Harry murmured.

Tonks snorted. "Yeah, until you move. Right now what you're feeling is the pain relief potion."

He grimaced at her and sunk back into his chair. Hermione leaned back with him and picked up his book, handing it to him.

He took the book reluctantly. He'd been in the lounge most of the morning and every time he needed to move, his body reminded him it wasn't a good idea. With a sigh, he opened up the book on advanced Transfiguration and started reading again.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Sept 1 st 1996, Hogwarts Exp...

Dear Harry,
September first and I'm writing this to you on the Express, speeding its way north to Hogwarts. My Prefect duties are taken care of and I'm sitting in a compartment with Ron, Neville and Ginny.

Apparently Ginny spoke to several others in August, and her experiences with Evan are all the talk of the gossip mill. Several girls have passed by the compartment and stared in at me. I suspect that, thanks to Ginny's gossip, your photo is going to be more popular than ever.

Ginny is suffering from a large dose of jealousy, but she has Neville and that's keeping her occupied. I'm not sure if I should feel sorry for Neville or not, but maybe she'll settle down and not be so tempted by what she sees.

It was all I could do to keep from laughing when she told me again that Evan is as cute as Harry Potter.

Now are you ready for this? Hold onto something. Ron is sitting across from me, reading his potions book! Apparently he met a witch named Hannah Abbott in August. I don't know if you remember Hannah. She's a Hufflepuff in our year. Medium height, blond hair, usually braided into a single plait? Anyway, she made it clear that she didn't date poor students. So, for her, he's been studying! Can you believe it? Who knew that all I had to do was offer to date you both to get you to study! (I'm KIDDING!).

Despite the rocky start to August, I can't believe how much we accomplished. I am trying very hard to resist the temptation to Apparate right now, and I couldn't believe that impromptu lecture Remus gave us on warding. Who would have thought we'd have the chance to really learn something about such advanced magic? I used the morning before we left for the train to add a few wards to my parent's house. Nothing major, just a fire alarm and suppression ward, but it felt good to be able to do that for them.

I packed away your gift. I wish you'd let me open it, but I'll abide by your wish and wait until my birthday. In the meantime, you'll just have to deal with me guessing. I know it's clothing of some sort, but it also makes a clinking sound, which confuses me. Care to give me any hints?

The best part of all was when we fell asleep on the beach and I woke up to feel you pressing against me. I didn't say anything at the time, but your arm around me and your obvious desire made my day. I never felt as safe and at peace as I did in your arms. It was worth the teasing from Tonks when she found us.

I know we've talked about this before but I can't help feel inadequate when compared to some girls like Ginny, or even Lavender. Both girls are very pretty, although I do have a bigger bust than Ginny does, but Lavender has me beat in that department. She's got enough up top for four girls.

I know this is a bad way to end an entry, and we've barely been apart 24 hours, but it would help if you could explain yourself better.

Love,
Hermione

In a nearby compartment...

"Did you see the bookworm?" exclaimed Parvati.

"Parv, that isn't nice," chided Padma. She didn't understand Parvati's animosity against Hermione, or Lavender's. Personally, she thought Hermione looked wonderful and if a guy was responsible for that, more power to her.

Parvati shot her a sour look and turned to Lavender. "Did you see her?"

"I saw her," Lavender said sourly. "It's hard to believe she's our bookworm."

Parvati crossed her arms and huffed in agreement.

"Well, what did you expect?" asked Padma. "According to Ginny, she spent the summer with her boyfriend. They split their time between swimming and studying. She's got a marvelous tan and she's lost weight. When the boys notice her this year, there will be fewer for you two to share."

Lavender glared at Padma, who shrugged. She wasn't intimidated by Lavender.

Parvati leaned back on her seat, thinking. Her sister was right. This Evan boy had turned the bookworm into a beautiful young woman. Hermione carried herself with confidence and grace and it annoyed her greatly.

To add insult to injury, Ginny had met this mysterious Evan, who she called a walking hotness. And the young man literally doted on the bookworm. He all but ignored Ginny, who was one of the prettiest girls in Gryffindor!

Lavender sat steaming. She was perfectly willing to allow Hermione to win at the academics game in school. After all, no one cared about that game but Hermione and a few Ravenclaws. However, when it came to boys, *she* was the acknowledged expert. She knew how to twist them around her little finger, obtaining favors and sweets without having to expend much effort.

Despite the whispers, Lavender was very much a virgin and she intended to remain that way until she met Mr. Right. In the meantime, she had developed a knack for leading the boys of the school on with gestures and small promises that she rarely kept.

To think that the shy, frumpish bookworm had managed to bag a hunk, and had done it without any help or advice from her, rankled. To think she kept him without some sort of enticement was unthinkable.

Her eyes narrowed. Perhaps she could do something to take away the smug grin Hermione wore now days?

It was a thought worth considering.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Sept 2 nd 1996, Waivunu, Fiji...

Dear Hermione,
Not pretty enough? Hermione, you're beautiful! I'm afraid that one of these days I'll start kissing you and I won't be able to stop and in doing so I'll ruin something special. I've held you close and touched you in ways I've only dreamt about.

I want you Hermione, you know that, you've seen and felt my desire. But I refuse to do anything that will scare you off. Maybe someday when I feel more comfortable with this sort of thing I'll be more assertive. For now, I know I lack the confidence in myself to move things forward. I mean, what if I do something wrong? Or worse, what if I don't please you? What if I don't meet your expectations?

Do you see where I'm coming from?

I promise I'll make it up to you and try hard not to be so reluctant from here on. But you need to promise you'll be quite specific about the limits, all right?

Next subject. Ginny, Lavender, Cho and all the rest of those girls aren't half as pretty as you are. I wish you'd stop putting yourself down and trust me on this. Trust me when I say I know what I like in a girl and you're exactly what I like. And if that doesn't convince you, I may get annoyed, and you wouldn't want me annoyed in bookspace. Believe me!

No, I'm not giving you any hints about your birthday gift. I knew I should have owed it, but international owl is such a pain. I think I'll buy your parents an owl for Christmas so they can use it to keep in touch with you.

You left Fiji just in time. Starting next week, King Kong is taking me on a month long run around the island. That's over 200km! It isn't all going to be physical exercise. We'll stop in the afternoons for classes. He wants to get this done by the end of the month, since we're coming up on the rainy season.

Of course I'll bring the journal with me, and I'll write as much as I can.

Ginny is becoming annoying. What does she mean, Evan is cuter than me? Oh man, if I were there, I'd showher! I'd kiss you senseless in front of her and leave her wishing she were you!

I'll let you go for now. I need to find my pack and start doing laundry so I go on this marathon with King Kong wearing clean boxers.

Love,
Harry

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Sept 20 th 1996, Hogwarts...

Can I strangle that man? I opened his gift yesterday (my birthday) and I was surprised to find a fine silken winter cloak and jeweled neck chain/clasp. The notice that came with the cloak said it was made from Chinese Acromantula silk and was charmed to maintain a constant comfortable temperature, as well as being waterproof, stain-proof and fireproof!

Ginny goaded me into bringing it down to the Great Hall, since she and Neville had a gift for me as well. It was a small pile of presents, but it was nice. I only wish Harry had been there. My Mum must have known about the cloak, since the skirt and blouse she sent me matched it perfectly.

Lavender's eyes nearly popped from her skull when she saw my new cloak. The deep forest green seemed to shimmer with a light of its own.

Lavender has barely said ten words to me since the start of school. I think she's still mad at Evan's letter.

Speaking of Evan, I wonder how he's doing on his run. And I worry about it. I know Fiji doesn't have any poisonous snakes, but still, much of the area he'll be camping in is virgin jungle.

He surprised me last night. Really surprised me and I'm not sure what to do yet. We met in bookspace and he was a lot more assertive than he's been in the past.

I need to think. I love him, but after last night I need to think about this. I'll leave him a quick note. That should tide him over until I figure this out.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Sept 24 th 1996, Waivunu, Fiji...

Hallelujah!!

Someone up there likes me! No, someone up there LOVES me!

I was jogging about a hundred yards behind King Kong, roughly 161km into our 200km run. The day was misty and the sky overcast, with just a hint of rain in the air. It had rained heavily the night before and I had a good pace over the macadam road, despite the slippery conditions. We were in one of the few areas where a paved road between villages was available to run on.

My pack was nearly weightless, but Kong insisted I carry his, and the camp tent and cooking utensils, etc. Are you getting the picture yet?

Anyway Kong had just come to a washout in the road from a flood that happened the night before. It looked very fresh and unstable. I came up behind him and he was still trying to figure out how to cross. When I suggested we just Apparate over it, he told me to give him fifty pushups, while still wearing my pack and his!

I hate that man!

Anyway, while I'm kissing the road, he clambered down one side of the washout and started climbing up the other. Only he slipped and fell back into the ravine, breaking his leg so bad I had to stick him in stasis and tandem Apparate us back to Waivunu.

King Kong, according to Madam Salote, is out of action for at least two months. Even with bone knitting spells and potions, his torn ligaments will take a long time to heal.

And thus ends the marathon run around Fiji by the insane sensei. Now I know what a condemned man feels like when they get a stay of execution! I can't wait to sleep in my bed tonight. As it stands, I took a two hour bath. Cindy nearly broke down the door because she thought I'd fallen unconscious in the tub!

On another note, Hermione and I had trouble getting a time we could meet in bookspace. But we managed five days ago (her birthday) and I haven't been able to get it out of my head since. I finally worked up my courage to be a little bolder than usual. She'd told me she wouldn't let me go past the limits and if I tried, she wouldn't be mad at me.

I took her at her word and showed her exactly what I love about her. I caught her by surprise, kissing her when she first arrived and I continued to kiss her while I touched her like she's been wanting me to. I kept my hands above her clothes, but there was something funny going on about that. The one time I tried to slip a hand under her clothes, I couldn't. It was like her shirt was sealed against her body.

Her reaction only makes me want to do that for real. I can't wait until the Yule Holidays. It was the hottest thing!

While this sounds all great and wonderful, I haven't heard from her since. It's been five days and, except for a simple note saying she isn't mad at

me and that she's very busy, I haven't heard from her at all. I can't help but think I've really messed things up. It's gotten so I can't think straight.

I think I'll go write another entry. Maybe this time she'll reply. The silence is killing me. What if I've scared her off? Merlin, I hope that isn't the case. In the meantime, there's a cold lead ball in my belly and this bad feeling I can't shake.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Sept 27 th 1996, Hogwarts...

Oh God what have I done?

The last time Harry and I met in bookspace, he did exactly as I asked him to. He showed me a little more of his passionate side and, in the process, gave me the best orgasm I've ever had. And he did it without once taking my clothes off or sliding his hands under my clothing! Sweet Merlin, if he can do that to me fully clothed, he'll kill me when I'm naked.

And I've gone and ruined everything!

He did what I wanted him to do. What no one has ever done for me before and it scared me. For eight days I put the journal away and tried to pretend it was just an aberration, just a mistake, but it wasn't. It took me eight days to figure out he did what I wanted him to do. He did what I want him to spend the rest of his life doing. I need him and I want desperately to do the same for him.

But I ignored the book for eight days, except for one small message I sent him the day after we met inside the book. Now there are twelve entries from him, each more apologetic and more frantic than the last. He must hate me now.

I'm going to end this and leave a quick entry to Harry to meet me in bookspace tomorrow. Hopefully, he'll notice the book signaling a new entry and will check it.

Bookspace September 28 th 1996...

Hermione whirled when she heard the distinctive whistling of Harry's arrival. She was beyond nervous.

"Harry," she said breathlessly and lunged at him, pulling him into her arms.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, kissing his face over and over again.

He blinked at her in confusion. "What?" This was not the reception he had expected, although to be honest he wasn't sure what to expect.

She backed away a little, still holding him. "Will you let me explain?"

He nodded.

She released him and sat down, then motioned for him to join her on the floor. She frowned when he sat opposite her.

She sat cross legged and fiddled with her hands for a moment. "When we met last time, you surprised me. And because of that surprise, I treated you badly. I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I love you."

When she looked at him, he saw the tears in her eyes. Reaching out, he pulled her into his lap and held her tightly. "It's all right, Hermione," he whispered, not realizing that his easy forgiveness was only making her feel worse.

"No, it's not. I'm always talking about how we should keep talking and not hold back, and then I'm the one holding back."

He sighed and leaned back, placing his hands on her shoulders. "All right, enough of that. Instead of kicking yourself, why don't you just tell me why you ignored every entry I wrote? A quick word, a twenty minute note could have eased the anxiety of the last few days."

She nodded and looked down again. Her hands played with the edge of her shirt. She was silent for nearly a minute and Harry watched her intently.

"Last time we were here, you... you did something for me, something wonderful," she said softly, then she glanced up to see he wasn't understanding.

She sighed. "All right, I'll be blunt," she said, her face flaming. "You made me orgasm harder than I ever managed to do for myself. That... that scared me... and excited me. I needed time to think about what had happened. I needed time to figure it out."

He frowned and looked at her warily. "And what did you figure out?" The lead ball in his belly came roaring back.

"That I want to spend the rest of my life doing that with you and doing the same for you," she whispered, then she looked up at his surprised expression. "Does that make me a scarlet woman?"

He slowly grinned at her as he processed her words and the lead ball finally dissolved. "Only if you continue blushing like that," he replied, then he leaned closer, his mood changing again. "You scared me terribly. I thought you hated me." He knew they had to get past this point. He wanted to take her into his arms and repeat what he did the last time they were in bookspace, but he couldn't. Not yet. Not until they had worked this out.

She nodded and sniffled. "I know. I didn't mean for it to happen like that, it just did."

He touched her hand, slipping between her fingers. "It's all right. Next time, just leave me a message. No one likes being left out in the cold like that. It was a terrible feeling. It was like the world suddenly turned gray."

She looked at him intently. "You didn't say anything about what I said I wanted."

He grinned. "I didn't. What can I say when the girl I love, wants the same thing that I want? Do you have any idea how sexy you looked or how many times I dreamed of doing that for you? I wish this wasn't my N.E.W.T. year or I'd be in bookspace at every possible moment."

"So do I," she said quietly.

He pulled her hand close and kissed her wrist, sending a shudder shooting through her. "I'm still not going to push you, Hermione. Not in Bookspace and especially not in the real world," he said, then he grinned slyly. "At least not until our wedding night."

She looked at him in shock. "You want to wait for that?" she exclaimed.

He shook his head and she looked at him in confusion. "Do I want to wait for that? No. But I think that maybe we should. That doesn't mean we can't do other things. My parents married young and had me less than three years from graduation. I want to have a family, but I don't want to be a father right away. I want time to enjoy life with you before we think of having kids. And I certainly don't want to start that family before either of us graduate. I owe you and your parents that much."

She nodded, shocked voiceless for once. Her own feelings for Harry swelled as he spoke. She would have easily given him everything she had to offer, but he was willing to wait. He wanted to wait. She realized that his waiting only put one restriction on them and she smiled at him, then wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Tonight, their time in bookspace was limited, but she intended to see he returned to normal space with a happy smile on his face.

St. Pancras, London, October 25 th 1996...

Remus stepped from the entrance of the British Museum and turned to head towards King's Cross. Thanks to Emma's help, he had been delving through the archive of papers from the mid sixties and he finally hit on a lead.

Several security guards were killed at the British Museum in early 1966, right around the time frame that they thought Voldemort would have used the brooch to make a Horcrux. At first, he ignored the lead when the article explained that nothing had been stolen. But Emma explained that the museum only displayed a small portion of what they owned.

Cross-referencing with another article revealed that the museum's feature attraction from that month included a rare cache of medieval artifacts from Scotland.

It's a long shot, he thought, but it's really beginning to look like something now. I have to hand it to Emma. Her idea sure looks like it's paying off. Good thing, too. I wasn't sure what to do next. Now to track down that Scottish collection and see if I can find an inventory of it, he mused.

So engrossed in his own thoughts he never noticed the figure that stepped in front of him until he walked right into her. He staggered backwards and fell on his rump, his papers scattering everywhere. He scrambled to gather all his materials together, then he glanced up at the person he bumped into.

"Terribly sorry," he said apologetically.

"You seemed rather distracted, Mr. Lupin," said a familiar voice.

He squinted and peered up at Tonks. "Well, I admit I wasn't looking where I was walking," he said sheepishly and Tonks chuckled.

"Normally, I'm the one accused of being clumsy," she replied with a rueful shake of her head, then she offered Remus a hand up. "What brings you back to sunny old England?" she asked.

Remus stood and glanced up at the overcast sky. "Sunny, eh? Well, I'm still working on that project for Evan."

They had explained to her why Harry was hiding and had explained that Voldemort had performed several rituals to ensure his immortality that they were working on unraveling. They hadn't explained the Horcruxes to her. An entry in Dumbledore's journal had mentioned a standing order of the Ministry that all Horcruxes to be turned over to the Department of Mysteries for study, with no exceptions. They didn't want to risk their relationship with Tonks by putting her in violation of Ministry orders.

She nodded pleasantly. "I'm on my way to lunch. Would you like to join me?" She eyed him up and down with frank appreciation. He was dressed in a simple Muggle outfit, jeans and a shirt, but the physique of the werewolf was obvious.

He stared at her incredulously for a moment. "Lunch? I would be honored."

A short while later Remus found himself sitting across from Tonks in a cozy little Muggle pub. He watched the young woman with a bemused air. She was obviously hitting on him and it tickled his fancy. *I can't allow this to continue,* he thought sadly.

"I saw Sirius last week. He mentioned you were coming back to town and that you were trying to track something down," Tonks offered between bites of her fish and chips.

Yes, but it's turning out to be devilishly difficult," he replied.

She watched him for a moment. "Hmm. So, what's the story with you three? I mean, there's Sirius, you and that Cindy. Is there some sort of kinky three way thing going on?"

Remus choked on his drink and grabbed for a napkin to clean up the mess. "No! Nothing like that. Cindy is Sirius' fiancée."

Tonks grinned. She'd already spoken to Cindy and knew of her relationship with Sirius, but it never hurt to double check. "So? There's no Mrs. Lupin wannabe out there for you?"

Remus looked at her hard and shook his head. "No. That isn't possible."

Tonks pulled her wand and cast a privacy charm. "Why not?" she asked bluntly. She eyed him with an open expression that disconcerted him.

He shifted uncomfortably on his chair. "You're rather pushy, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "Being blunt saves time. Do you have some sort of unspeakable disease or something?"

He paled tremendously and she immediately knew she had asked the wrong question. "I'm sorry," she blurted.

"There's no wife or the prospect of one," he said stiffly. "Here it would be illegal for a witch to marry me. In the Pacific, it would merely be dangerous and inconvenient."

She blinked and her eyes narrowed. The Ministry had few laws concerning personal relationships and only one that prohibited witches or wizards from marrying someone. It was illegal to marry someone who suffered from Lycanthropy, but that would mean...

He watched her, knowing that she was puzzling it out from the clues he gave her. Then she did something that shocked him to the core. She leaned across the table and took his hand.

"Not all of the laws here are right or make sense. The ones that aren't right should be ignored. Wasn't it a Muggle saint who said, 'An unjust law is no law'?"

"St. Augustine," he murmured, feeling suddenly exposed by the conversation. Even with Sirius and Harry they didn't talk about it very often. It just was, something always there, always present, always on the edge of things, nipping at his heels and taking his life in small bites. He was firmly convinced that he owed his very existence to Sirius and Harry, who had provided him with a stable family who cared about him and his condition. They gave him the support so many other werewolves lacked.

"So, when did it happen?"

He looked down and pushed his food around on his plate. He really didn't like talking about it, but something about this woman made him want to share. He looked at her hand holding his and made a decision.

"I was seven when I was bitten. My parents were shocked when I received my Hogwarts letter. At school I met Sirius and James and we became... well, a family of sorts. My parents died before I finished school. Sirius ran away from home. In the end, the Potters took us both in. When they were killed, we grieved as much as James did."

"And now you're helping Sirius raise Evan," she said softly.

"Evan is family," he said simply.

"And your problem?"

He shrugged. "We try to get Wolfsbane, but I lock myself up anyway. The quality of what we get isn't always the best. I had one batch that was a complete failure, something we brought in New Delhi. Cindy has been looking into make it for me. Her background as a Muggle doctor helps some. She's able to help ease some of the after effects of my transformations and I think she'll be able to brew the potion after a try or two."

She smiled at him. "I'd offer to make it, but I'm not good enough at potions. I did well enough to get into the Academy, but I'm no Master."

He stared at her with his mouth opening and closing.

She laughed. "You know, you're even cuter when you're flustered," she pointed out and he blushed heavily.

"Why are you doing this? I'm deadly every month," he protested.

She waved a hand at him, dismissing his complaint. "And I'm a bitch to be around for a week out of every month. We all have our little foibles. Besides, since I met you, you've treated me differently. It's hard to explain. You're interested in what I can do, but you're not interested in me turning into some actress or something. In fact, it's been just the opposite. You seem to want to get to know me, not what I can turn into."

He shook his head. "I'm not used to having women chase me," he murmured. "Until the problem with Harry and Sirius being exonerated, I couldn't even hold down a job. I wouldn't have one now, except that Sirius and Harry both insisted I accept a salary for all the running around I do."

She canceled the privacy charm around the table, then she stood and placed a few pound notes on the table, paying for her meal. "Get used to it, Mr. Remus Lupin. You interest me and your little problem doesn't scare me. Oh, I don't intend to jump you today, but someday soon..."

With a wink and a grin, she turned and walked out of the restaurant. All he could do was watch.

She's got a cute bum, he thought, bemused.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Oct 28 th 1996, Waivunu Fiji...

You know, I had thought that having King Kong out of action would be a good thing and I'd be able to relax. But no! It seems that Master Kwang wants me to work on my reaction times since he can't run me around the bloody island.

So what does he do? He sits on the porch, sipping the tea that Cindy gives him, resting his leg and shooting stinging hexes at me while I dodge them! The man is evil and must be destroyed! I swear he's enjoying my pain. That man is one of the fastest casters I have ever run across!

I got an owl from Eton the other day. I'm glad I no longer have to take his lessons, but for all of his gruff and mean attitude, he was a good teacher. Unfortunately, I've learned all I can from him. Occlumency is an ongoing thing that I'll probably never stop learning because it's different for everyone. But Legilimency was straight forward. There are only two types and they both use the same spell.

Anyway, he exhorted me to continue with my Occlumency studies and then his letter turned into a dissertation on the use of Legilimency in a fight. While it's officially banned by the International Dueling Association, he pointed out that, in a fight to the death, nothing is banned.

Basically he wants me to be aware of the potential of using Legilimency to read my opponent's moves, and also using it to confuse my opponent by distracting him.

Professor Murphy is my Defense and Transfiguration instructor this year and he agrees with Eton that it's a worthwhile technique to use in combat. But in our classes it's really out of place. I don't think I like having Murphy as my Defense instructor. A Master of Transfiguration, he gave me webbed feet last week in a middle of a duel and wouldn't change them back until the next day. I tried to correct the condition with my metamorph skills and I ended up with twelve toes! I really need to talk more with Tonks.

Sirius thought that was amusing, until I charmed his bunny slippers to bite him. I really cringe when Remus and Cindy are away. It leaves me to deal with Sirius, the big brother and prankster, without any backup.

Don't get me wrong. I love the man and I'd do anything for him. But sometimes I wonder which one of us is the adult and which one is the kid.

Hermione is... hot? Wonderful? Amazing? Merlin, I don't have the words for it. She's sort of agreed to my idea of taking things slowly, but at the same time, we've done some things in bookspace that have shocked me totally!

We discovered something interesting about bookspace. I cannot slip my hands under her clothes, nor can she slip hers under mine. But we have no problem slipping our hands under our own clothes. She's going to research it and see what she can find out. But it's really strange. It's like the books themselves are preventing things from getting out of hand.

I remember listening to guys like the Weasley twins talk about girls and what they do and I recall thinking how great it all sounded. I guess I'm just surprised that Hermione wants to do that sort of stuff. I mean, we haven't done more than just some serious touching through clothing, but I never imagined her wanting to do that, no matter what I'd dream.

It makes her... more real? I don't know. I just know that I've always been in a little awe of her. She's so smart and, well, perfect, in so many ways. And then I discover that she wants me, that she can be as horny as I can be? It's weird, but it makes me feel better about our relationship. I know she's a perfectionist, but she's not without her flaws.

Speaking of flaws, is this a girl thing? I mean, do we really need to talk about our feelings?

She got serious on me the last time we were in bookspace and she asked what my fantasies were. I don't think I've ever been so embarrassed before so I blurted out the tamest one I could think of and she stared at me in shock. I mean, I didn't know it would end up with us talking about my time at the Dursleys. Honestly, I thought the idea of us sleeping together and just holding each other was a great idea.

I finally admitted I had racier ideas, but that one was really high up on my list. She smiled at me with that soft, special smile of hers that makes my knees tremble and she promised she'd help me make that fantasy a reality soon.

I am not going to tell her about my fantasy of doing it under the teacher's table at Hogwarts in the middle of a feast, with only my invisibility cloak to conceal us. I mean, a guy has to keep some things to himself, right?

Our conversation about the Dursleys helped me a lot. It's hard for me to talk about them without getting really angry and frustrated. I've tried talking to Sirius and Remus about them, but they don't understand the frustration. They can't comprehend how hard I tried to make my Aunt and Uncle love me, or how painful it was every time they rejected me.

I told her about my scurrying around the house in Privet Drive, cleaning and cooking and gardening and doing things without being told. I told her about the pictures I drew of Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon when I was very little and how I wanted them to love me. And later, when that didn't work, how I would have settled for them just liking me. Ultimately, I just wanted them to not hate me anymore. In the end, no matter what I did, it wasn't good enough. I wasn't good enough!

Hermione didn't understand at first, but she does now. It's part of the reason why I still have trouble accepting love from others. I've gotten better, but it still surprises me and she can see that. She told me that I'll never be truly free from what the Dursleys did, but with time and help from people like her, the effects will lessen until they are barely visible to anyone, including me. I hope so.

N.E.W.T.s are insane. I don't know why Sirius agreed to King Kong's demand for that run. Since it was canceled, I've been doing two hours of homework a night and another three hours studying. I'm spending most of my weekends studying for them. I just hope I don't burn out like last year.

Daily Prophet Headline, Oct 31 st 1996...

British Ministry Refutes Researcher's Claim

Olig Grossman, a researcher for the Munich Magical Academy, published a paper in Prophecy Quarterly in which he claims that the British Ministry had misinterpreted the events surrounding the Triwizard Tournament held at Hogwarts two years ago.

Grossman, age 47, a well known psychic and spoon bender, claimed that the Prophecy governing Harry Potter and Lord You-Know-Who would take precedence over a man-made, and invoked, magical contract.

Dr. Grossman, who moonlights running a Muggle psychic hotline, states, "Nonsense! A magical contract cannot interfere with destiny. It simply wouldn't be allowed."

Ministry spokesman Perky Weatherbee replied. "Our experts have examined the situation from every possible angle and have concluded that neither Harry Potter nor Lord Thingie have any magic left in them at all. This German nutcase hasn't a clue what he's talking about. I will remind your readers that Dr. Grossman is personally responsible for the great Muggle Spoon Bending incident of 1973 and served four years in Stuttgart Prison for his crime.

"No, Harry Potter is less than a Squib. That is certain. It's a shame it happened to such a fine upstanding wizard, but he made a great sacrifice for us and we will not listen to some foreigner making up stories about our heroes."

In all fairness, it must be pointed out to our readers that the Munich Magical Academy has been experiencing a drop in attendance over the years and this year they received only six new students.

Quibbler Headline, Oct 31 st 1996...

Harry Potter to star in Voldemort, the Musical!

The Quibbler has learned that Harry Potter, fresh from his acting debut at the Cannes Film Festival, has signed on to the production of Voldemort, the Musical. In a move designed to highlight his acting ability, he signed on to play the pivotal part of Rubeus Hagrid.

When questioned about his part, and the fact that he is a mere four foot nine inches tall and the real Rubeus Hagrid stands at over twelve feet, Potter, age 16, is quoted as saying "Size doesn't matter. Hagrid had a big heart and I intend to portray that to the world. Would you like to pet my dragon?"

Professor Hagrid is famous for rescuing Mr. Potter from the Dursleys in his first year and for his efforts to bring enlightened Magical Animal Care to the students. He introduced students to the much maligned Blast-Ended Skrewts and they still talk about howso many students survived the class with the hungry Roc.

Renowned wizarding director, Armando, who brought us such classics as "I married a Snorkack" and "Lockheart, the Man", claims that the song and dance routine performed by Hagrid in the play will highlight Mr. Potter's acting talent like never before. After all, says Armando, "Howmany other times have you seen someone tap dance while juggling two hippogriffs and singing the Hogwarts song?"

Hogwarts Library, Oct 31 st 1996...

"Aren't you going to the feast, Miss Granger?"

Hermione glanced up from her book to see Professor McGonagall standing next to the table where she sat. It was obvious from the pile of books and the neatly wrapped sandwich that she hadn't planned on joining the celebration.

"No, Professor. I have some studying to do, then I thought I would turn in early tonight."

McGonagall's lips compressed tightly and she motioned to one of the extra chairs at the table. "May I?"

"Please."

She sat stiffly in her chair. "I take it you keep in touch with your friend in the Pacific?"

"As much as I can, Professor. This is his N.E.W.T. year, so we rely mostly on letters."

McGonagall leaned a little closer and dropped her voice. "But you'll meet up with him tonight?"

Hermione nodded, surprised by her question.

"I'm not stupid, Miss Granger. I know how this holiday affects him and what it means to both of you. I should like you to pass my regards to him and my hope that he's doing well," she said, then she sighed. "I do confess that lad brought an element of excitement to the school that I now miss."

"I will tell him what you said, Professor," she said softly.

McGonagall nodded and stood. "Very well, Miss Granger. And do make sure you give him an extra hug. As happy as he seemed, I think he misses you most of all."

Hermione nodded numbly. McGonagall's attitude was very different from what she was used to.

Bookspace, Oct 31 st 1996...

Hermione paced anxiously, waiting for Harry to show up. She didn't have long to wait, as the whistling announced his arrival not long after she'd entered. As soon as he appeared, she grabbed him in a tight hug and smiled to herself when he buried his head against her neck.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Better than last year," he murmured against her neck.

She shivered, feeling his hot breath tickle her skin.

He pulled out her embrace enough to look at her. "Sirius and Remus spent most of the day making sure I was all right. I was ready to pull my hair out, but I understand why they were doing it. I can't really be angry with them for it. I don't think I'll have a repeat of last year. Besides, I have you here in my arms. How can I be lonely?"

She smiled softly. "But you know I'm not really here."

He released her and sat, then motioned for her to do the same. He spread his legs so she could sit between them, her back leaning up against him. He wrapped his arms around her. "Our bodies might not be here, but I think the most important part of us is," he whispered in her ear.

She shivered again. "What do you mean?"

"I've been speaking with my Charms tutor, Professor Peliote, about our books and she said that even if the books somehow linked our consciousness together, it would take our souls, as well. The books bring us together, and you cannot separate consciousness from the soul. The two are forever linked, or at least that's her theory. So, while our bodies aren't here, the best part of us is. The part that makes you, you."

She smiled, although he couldn't see it. "I'm impressed, Mr. Potter. That was an excellent explanation."

"Why thank you, Miss Granger."

"How are your studies really going?"

He had been lightly kissing her neck, and paused to think about his answer. "Exhausting, but not like last year. I think I've got things covered. It helps that the exams are staggered. By the time the last exam rolls around I'll have plenty of free time."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"My first N.E.W.T. is in Transfiguration in early February, Languages comes next at the end of February. I'll be finished with my exams and should know how I did by early June. It's a tougher schedule than your N.E.W.T.s, but that's what my tutors are pushing for. The bad news is, I'll be doing a lot of studying over the Christmas holiday. But I still expect to see you," he explained, then he took a deep breath and his voice dropped a register. "I need you to be with me this Christmas."

A rush shot through Hermione and she squirmed slightly in his arms before settling again. "That exam schedule seems both easier and tougher than what we go through. What will you do when it's all done?"

"I'm not sure. Probably spend a lot of time with you and your parents, if they are willing. I can't join Remus in the search until I turn seventeen, and I've already decided I won't join him until you've gone back to school. I hope your parents don't mind putting up with me during August."

She grinned. The idea of having Harry at her place all summer really appealed to her. "I'm sure they won't mind. They love you like I do."

He nodded, then he rested his chin on her shoulder. "You know you can get your Apparation license now, right?"

"I know. Professor McGonagall has announced that an examiner will be visiting the school before the Yule break to give the tests. What about you? Will you have to wait until you're seventeen, too?"

He chuckled and she could feel his chest vibrating against her back. "No. I've obtained an International license. With the distances between islands being what they are, the Pac Rim Ministry allows for a conditional license at thirteen and an unlimited at sixteen. The International is accepted by all the Ministries as being valid."

He paused for a moment, frowning. "Remus promised me that this summer he'll take me to see my parents. I've never been there before. If you have your license, maybe you could come with us?" he asked, sounding hopeful.

She nodded, afraid to say anything. She couldn't imagine being in his shoes and was happy that he wanted her there. She'd be happy to help in what she was sure would be an emotional moment for him.

"Professor McGonagall told me to say hello to you. I don't know how, but she seemed to know I would be talking to you today."

"It makes sense I guess. She knows what this day means to us."

Another thrill shot through her. "Us?" she gasped.

"Us," he replied firmly. "Remus told me this morning to focus on something positive about the day. What can be more positive than the day we became true friends?"

She smiled and pressed her arms into his, holding him tighter. "It's what I like best about that day," she replied.

"Even if Ron turned out to be a git," Harry added with a chuckle.

"He's finally settling down. Did I tell you about him and Hannah Abbott?"

"You mentioned him studying."

"He's doing more than just reading his books. He's been doing homework! All right, I know it's mean of me, but he's doing his homework. And we're talking again. Not like we used to when we weren't fighting, but at least we're not shouting at each other in the Common Room."

Harry shook his head. She was describing a Ron that defied imagination. "So you're getting along better with him now?"

"We're not close friends like we used to be. I don't think that will happen again, but it's a lot better. I'm not sure why, but since he started seeing Hannah, he's changed."

He nodded and stayed silent for a moment. An idea occurred to him but he wasn't sure if he should voice it or not. Unfortunately, she sensed his increased tension.

"What is it?"

"Remember when I suggested that he liked you?"

"Yes," she replied reluctantly.

"Well, this summer he learned that he can't have you."

Hermione frowned. "You're making me sound like a piece of beef you'd buy at the store."

He shook his head and grinned to himself. "You're looking at this all wrong. Think about it this way. He fancied you, and probably wanted you for himself. That doesn't mean he considered you as some sort of commodity."

"But..."

"Hermione, I want you. Does that mean I'm turning you into some sort of object?"

"No, but that's different. We're in love!" she protested.

"And at one point, he probably thought he was, also," Harry said softly.

Her mouth snapped shut as she suddenly realized the point he was trying to make.

"So what do I do?"

"Be as much of a friend as you feel comfortable with. Other than that, there's nothing for you to do. He's moved on and the girl seems to be good for him."

She looked over her shoulder and smiled at him. "You're getting awful smart back there. If you keep this up, you'll not need me around anymore."

His embrace tightened around her and he leaned his head against hers. "I'll always need you. I'll need you today, tomorrow and a hundred years from now," he whispered fiercely.

She blinked rapidly, unable to prevent the tears that came.

Harry lifted on arm and glanced at his watch.

Hermione frowned, seeing the timepiece. "Harry, how did you manage to bring your watch into bookspace? I thought only the clothes we were wearing could enter."

He stared at his watch for a moment, unsure. He had been wearing it when he entered bookspace. He hadn't done anything special, it just came with him. "I don't know," he said uncertainly. "I was just wearing it and it came with me."

She turned around to face him and his arms dropped away. "All right, if you didn't do anything in particular, then something else has changed. What could it be?"

"Changed? Well, you're of age and this is the first time I wore the watch trying to enter bookspace?"

He fingered his ring finger. "I can feel my ring!" he exclaimed. The ring was hidden, but it had never entered bookspace with him before.

She reached for her own ring and smiled when she felt it on her finger. Holding up a hand, she laughed when a small bluebell flame appeared, hovering over her palm. Canceling the spell, she looked at him. "What does it mean?"

Harry shrugged. "Didn't Sirius say that more features would become available in the books as we got older? Maybe this is one of them."

Hermione stood and began to pace, deep in thought.

He glanced at his watch and stood up, then moved to stand in front of her, catching her by the shoulders. "We're nearly out of time. But I need to thank you for just letting me hold you today. I needed that. It's a good memory," he said with a smile, then he pulled her close and kissed her.

She broke the kiss a moment later. "But what about..."

He grinned and leaned closer to her. "Mysteries another time. Love now," he whispered.

Laughing, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. They might be running out of time, but she'd give him a memory to remember!

Gryffindor Common Room, November 15 th 1996...

Lavender watched carefully from her prepared position. It hadn't taken much, really. A few promises she had no plans of keeping, some judicious hugs to entice the boy, and he was her willing tool. She had set him on Hermione a while back and had been carefully egging him on since.

She watched from her seat in front of the fireplace. The bookworm sat at a corner table, studiously working on her homework. She never even glanced up when Cormac McLaggen sat down next to her.

With a simple twist of her wand, Lavender could hear their conversation. Cormac was supposed to flirt with Hermione, maybe get her attention enough to cause her to break up with that guy, Evan, she was so hung up on. Then he was supposed to dump her, publicly.

Lavender had carefully worded her promise to Cormac. If he could get Hermione to drop Evan for him, she'd go all the way with him. Of course, he didn't need to know that for her, "all the way" didn't even come close to what he thought it meant. On the other hand, she was perfectly happy with the idea of him taking her all the way to Hogsmeade. The idea that a seventh year would do anything for her favor gave her a sense of power that she found intoxicating.

"Hermione, isn't it?" Cormac asked.

"Yes, that's right," she answered distractedly as she finished jotting down a few notes.

When she looked up to see who was speaking, her expression darkened. McLaggen had been shadowing her footsteps for the past two weeks and it was bothering her. He hadn't spoken with her yet, but he had a tendency to turn up where she was, watching her. She was finding the whole thing rather creepy.

Cormac McLaggen had a reputation for thinking he was Merlin's gift to women. The seventh years knew this and steered clear of him. As a result, he tended to prey upon the younger girls.

"I'm told you're really good with Potions. Do you think you could help me?"

Excellent, Lavender crowed. *If there's one thing the bookworm can't turn down, it's an appeal to showoff her intelligence.*

Hermione frowned. "I'd like to help, but I'm really rather busy with my own homework." For the first time since he left, she actually wished Harry was here to help her.

He leaned closer to her. "Are you sure? I could really use some help and I'm sure you would enjoy it," he said, smiling handsomely at her.

She leaned back, feeling distinctly threatened by his invasion of her space. "No. I'm sorry but I can't help you."

McLaggen reached out to grab her wrist. She evaded his grasp easily, but he wasn't quick enough. She grabbed his hand and twisted it sharply. He screeched and jumped away from her, holding his injured hand.

Hermione stood and a hush fell upon the Common Room as all eyes turned toward the pair. "I said no, McLaggen, and groping me is not the way to go about getting the help you claim you need."

McLaggen grimaced and shook his hand. It was numb and unresponsive. Hermione's physical training hadn't been extensive, but Harry had taught her a few simple pressure points that could immobilize an attacker long enough for her to get away, or in this case, to make her point.

He realized that this little slip of a girl was making him look foolish and decided to do something about it. He reached for his wand, then stopped when he understood that he had several wands pointed at him.

“Do it, and Filch will be mopping you up for weeks,” Ron growled angrily. Hermione was his friend, and that was good enough for him.

Hermione shot him a grateful look. Besides Ron, Ginny and Neville also held McLaggen at wand-point.

“This isn't over,” he snarled.

“Detention with Filch tonight for assaulting a Prefect,” snapped Hermione. “And if you touch me again, I'll see you need Madam Pomfrey's assistance.”

Lavender scowled. This not only hadn't gone the way she expected, but when had the bookworm grown teeth? She had been the brains behind the golden trio, not the brawn! But she had clearly just shown that she had the ability, and the will, to defend herself. Her boyfriend, Evan, must be influencing more than just her desire to look pretty.

Dammit! Lavender snarled silently. *I'll have to try something else. The bookworm is not going to get the best of me!*

Across the room, Ginny had grabbed Hermione and dragged her over towards Ron and Neville, who watched her with a measure of sympathy.

“What's with you, Hermione? You've never threatened anyone before!” hissed Ginny.

“You missed her punching the ferret in third year,” Ron said with fond remembrance. “It was wonderful.”

Hermione crossed her arms and shivered slightly. “I know, Ginny, but that slimy git has been following me around for the past two weeks. I keep running into him and the looks he gives me.” She shuddered. “I always feel like I need to bathe after running into him!”

Brushing the hair off her shoulder, she looked at Ron. “Thank you.”

He waved it away. “That's not necessary, Hermione. I've been an idiot and cost us a friendship. Hannah helped me see that. We may never have what we once did, when Harry was here... But I'd still like to be your friend.”

Hermione smiled. “I'd like that.”

Ginny looked between the two, grinning. Her relationship with Hermione had recently been a bit strained because of her fight with Ron.

Neville scooted over at the table, making room for Hermione. She waved her wand, summoning her books and book bag from the other table before sitting down.

Ginny lifted one eyebrow and sat next to her. *That wasn't the right movement for the Accio spell*, she thought to herself. *And when did Hermione learn silent casting? I'm going to see about having a talk with her. I think Evan is teaching her more than she's telling anyone.*

Scottish Museum Council, Edinburgh, Scotland, Nov 20 th 1996...

“I'm sorry, Mr. Lupin, but I'm not allowed to give that information out to just...”

The burly woman stopped and stared at the tall blonde who entered the office. The blonde opened a small wallet and handed it to her, effectively pushing Remus aside. The woman glanced down at the wallet and, seeing the badge and photo ID, she paled.

“How can I help you, Inspector Tonks?” she asked meekly. She did not want to invoke the ire of MI5.

“You can give Professor Lupin the information he needs,” Tonks said brusquely. “He's a consulting expert working with us on a case involving the trafficking of stolen medieval objects after they have been replaced by clever forgeries. He's only trying to insure that your inventory remains untainted.”

The woman gaped for a moment. “Professor? I wasn't aware... Yes, yes of course. Professor, you do realize that we've moved the entire listing to compact disc?”

Remus, who had been fighting with the woman for nearly two hours before Tonks showed up, nodded eagerly. He didn't care if the stuff was on compact discs or carved on stone tablets. He'd take what he could get and figure out how to read them later! It hadn't occurred to him that she might respond better if he called himself Professor.

The woman stood and walked to a large walk in cupboard. She came out a few moments later carrying a large box, which she placed on the counter. “Should I bill your department directly, Inspector?” she asked Tonks.

Tonks winced. That would make Remus' search official.

“That's not necessary,” Remus said. “Bill my office, please. This is rightfully considered part of my job, not hers.”

Remus pulled out a business card listing his name and a Cambridge office. Sirius had set him up last year as a researcher attached to the university, even though the office wasn't on campus. It was a Muggle identification he hadn't used before today and he had been shocked at how easily it opened the door for him.

The woman looked at it and nodded. “Of course, Professor. If I had only known...”

Remus dismissed her comments with a wave. "It is of no moment. If everything is satisfactory, I'll take the discs and be on my way?"

The woman glanced at the large box, then nodded. His card had listed him as a member of the faculty at Cambridge, and they already had a long standing relationship with the school. Billing them would be no problem.

"Yes, please," she said, pushing the large box towards him. "This contains the latest results of our national audit. Over one hundred discs listing over twelve million objects along with their photos and known histories. There is a booklet at the bottom which describes, in detail, the optimal configuration PC needed to access this and it explains the retrieval software that is included on the disc labeled Disc Zero."

Remus nodded. He didn't understand most of what she was saying, but he knew someone who would. He picked up the heavy box, surprised at its weight, then he turned to Tonks.

"If you would get the door, Inspector?"

Tonks nodded affably to the woman and walked to the door, holding it open for Remus.

Outside the building, Remus placed the box down and looked around before casting a featherlight charm on it.

"So, will this have what you're looking for?" Tonks asked as she glanced around.

Raking a hand through his hair, Remus sighed. "I've no idea. I hope so."

"You know, if you and Sirius could tell me what you're looking for, I might be able to help you. The days of the inept Fudge Ministry or the suck up Scrimgeour Ministry are over," Tonks offered.

Remus frowned and thought furiously. He was in favor of telling her; it was Sirius who was playing the cautious one for once. "I don't know. How about we talk about it?" he replied.

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded.

Holding the box under one arm, he fished a small rabbit's foot from his pocket. "A Portkey," he told her as he held it out to her.

She reached out and touched it with a finger.

"Marauder's Haven," Remus said firmly.

The Portkey activated and they vanished from sight.

A few seconds later they appeared in the foyer of Sirius' London home. He walked into the sitting room with Tonks following then he put the box of discs on the table and motioned for her to sit down.

"Where are we?" she asked, sitting on the couch.

Remus took the opposite end of the couch and turned to face her. "This is Sirius' London home, Grimmauld Place."

Tonks nodded. "Mum's spoken about this place, but she described as looking like a mausoleum."

"It did," Remus replied with a chuckle. "But then Harry talked Sirius into hiring an elf who helped clean up the place. He got rid of the old family elf, who had turned into a psychotic menace."

Remus looked around for a moment at the much improved house. A moment later, Dobby appeared and placed a tray on the table with tea and some bottles of butterbeer.

"Tea?" he asked.

She nodded and accepted a cup from him. "So what did you need to talk about?"

"You know what we're trying to do. But the problem is there is a longstanding Ministry directive that we've already violated four times. Do you think you could work on something, knowing you will be violating a Ministry directive?" he asked.

She placed the cup on the table and looked at him for a moment. "A directive? Not a law?"

"A directive. Specifically, a directive of the Department of Mysteries requiring all items of a specific nature be turned over to them for study."

She frowned. "And this has to do with Voldemort? It's related to how he could return?"

He nodded. "If it helps, think of these objects as cursed objects. In fact, one nearly killed an eleven year old girl in Hogwarts only a few years back."

She blinked and stared at him.

"Yes, they're that dangerous," he replied to her unspoken question.

"I never heard that particular story. What happened?"

Remus leaned back in his chair. "Back in Harry's second year, the Chamber of Secrets was opened and Muggle-born students were being attacked. It turned out that one of these objects had taken over a first year girl and was using her to control the beast within the chamber.

"Harry confronted the beast and killed it. In the process he rescued the girl and destroyed the beast and the artifact. He nearly got himself killed doing it."

"How come I never heard of this? It wasn't in the papers," Tonks said in protest.

"No, it wasn't. According to Dumbledore's journals, he hushed up the scandal as much as he could. It seriously eroded support for him in the Wizengamot. We suspect that Dumbledore covered it up to protect himself and to keep from drawing attention to Harry. He didn't want people suddenly looking into Harry's home life."

Tonks frowned. "Does the Department of Mysteries understand the danger?"

"They don't understand because Dumbledore and Voldemort have kept it secret. The Department wants the objects to study because they are unique; created from a black arts ritual. To them, they're a name with a very shallow and poorly worded description."

"And if they study them, they could somehow trigger the object into resurrecting Voldemort again?"

When he nodded, her frown deepened. She stood and paced for a bit while Remus watched. Her hair cycled continuously through a rainbow of colors and styles and she muttered softly to herself. Finally, she stopped and plopped down on the couch exactly where she had been only moments before. "Right then, where do I sign up?"

He blinked and looked at her in astonishment.

She shook her head. "Remus, I don't know you as well as I would like and I know my cousin and Harry even less. But I think I know all three of you well enough to know you didn't pull off this little charade of yours just for a lark. I've watched Harry train. He's training at Hit Wizard levels and studying like Beelzebub himself was out for his hide. I don't always agree with what the Ministry does, either. My take on the werewolf laws are a prime example of their short-sightedness."

She paused and took a deep breath.

Remus couldn't help notice her shirt rise and he tore his eyes away from the sight.

"If there are objects that could result in the return of Voldemort, then they need to be destroyed, not studied."

She stopped and waited for his reaction. She caught his look when she breathed deeply and crowed inwardly. *Doesn't he have any idea how drop dead sexy he is?* she thought.

"That was our thought, as well. However, destroying them was more difficult than we first thought. We finally had to enlist the aid of the Americans and an industrial blast furnace to destroy them."

"How many of these things are there?"

"Six, and Voldemort himself. It's called a Horcrux and it's receptacle for a piece of his soul. The creation of each Horcrux requires a murder," Remus replied softly.

"So, there are now two objects and Voldemort himself somewhere?"

"No. We think that destroying the first one, a locket once owned by Slytherin, might have kicked him out of the magical construct he was using. Given the fact that he needed to be close to Nagini to keep that construct alive, we think he was forced to merge with the Horcrux in Nagini."

"Nagini?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm sorry. Nagini is his familiar. It's a very large, very venomous snake. We think there's something inside the snake that's a Horcrux."

She nodded thoughtfully. "And the purpose of today's trip to the museum council?"

He leaned back on the couch and sipped his tea for a moment. "The other item we're looking for is a brooch which we believe belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw. Emma, Hermione's Mum, you've met her, she gave me the idea that the brooch might have slipped into the Muggle world."

She looked at him incredulously. "And you believe that? So little of our world falls into Muggle hands."

"If that were the case, then there would be no need for Arthur Weasley's department, would there? Besides, I've found enough evidence to suggest that Emma might have been right about the brooch. According to our notes, the brooch would have been turned into a Horcrux sometime between 1965 and 1967.

"I've found Muggle newspapers describing a break in at the British Museum that resulted in the deaths of several security guards. The strange part is, nothing was reported stolen. And during that time frame, there was an exhibit that featured Scottish Medieval artifacts from the ninth through twelfth centuries."

She frowned. "It's a mighty slim lead."

He shrugged. “It’s the only lead I have at the moment. The last trace of the brooch I’ve been able to find is roughly a century old. From there, it vanished.”

“So, how can I help?”

“You’ve been trained in investigative techniques?”

She nodded.

“I suppose you can help by double-checking what I’ve already done, then. I have this stuff,” he said, pointing to the box of discs, “to go through and that’s not going to be easy. Believe me when I say the help you provided today was invaluable. She wasn’t going to give me that inventory.”

“After you find the brooch and destroy it, how will you find the snake?”

Remus grinned. “We have an idea that the snake might be making its way to Hogwarts, but that’s not certain. Harry has a plan of tracking her down, using the snakes in Britain.”

She blinked at him in surprise. “How is that possible?”

Remus shrugged. “Ask him yourself, next time you see him. It’s his idea. He should be the one to tell you about it.”

“All right, I’m in. But I do have one question. What did you do to Rita Skeeter?”

“Skeeter? You mean that reporter woman?” he asked.

She nodded.

Remus frowned. “We didn’t do anything to her. I’ve never even met her. Why?”

“That’s weird. She claimed she was on a job in Oxford, investigating a story, when she was attacked. I automatically assumed you or Sirius had a hand in it.”

“Can’t she tell you about the attack?”

She shook her head. “No. We found out weeks after the attack when she showed up in St. Mungo’s, badly injured. She says she can’t remember a thing about what she was investigating or why. She doesn’t remember the attack at all. We found she had been sent to a Muggle hospital with severe burns on August 1st.”

“We were in Fiji by then. Whomever attacked her had nothing to do with us,” Remus stated firmly.

Tonks nodded and gave a sigh of relief. She didn’t think they were involved, but she had needed to make sure.

“Was she hurt badly?”

“Yeah. She’s out of the reporter business, I’m afraid. Stone deaf now and the healers can do nothing to help with the scarring,” Tonks replied.

“It wasn’t us, Tonks,” Remus stated firmly.

She reached over and patted his hand. “Don’t worry, I believe you.”

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Nov 25 th 1996, Hogwarts...

We’ve figured out what’s going on with bookspace!

Since I am of age now in Britain, and Harry is of age for the Pac Rim Ministry, the books are allowing us to bring objects into bookspace and allowing us to use magic. It came as a surprise to us both, but he spoke with Professor Peliote, who knew someone whose family was involved in developing these books over a century ago.

As we get older, more and more functions become available to us. It’s a very good thing that Harry and I haven’t tried to make love yet. We would have been kicked out of bookspace if we tried while we were underage. It still won’t let us do that, not for another year for me and two for Harry. We both have to be eighteen for that to be allowed.

As it stands, the books are allowing us to... Well, Ginny would call it a really brilliant broom closet session. Unfortunately, clothing is still mandatory. I don’t know whether to be pleased by that or not, but I’m thinking not.

Listen to me! I swear I sound more and more like Lavender and Parvati every day. Oh, I still love my books and love to study, but I’d also love to study every square inch of him without his clothing still in place.

Maybe it’s better this way. I want Harry and he wants me. We both know it and we both know it’s too soon. The book is forcing us to slow down and talk more with each other.

Speaking of talking. The Dursleys! Curse them! I hate them! If I had my way they would be punished severely for what they did to Harry.

We were talking and our conversations in bookspace have gotten quite risqué and frank. I told him about one of my biggest fantasies and he looked totally mortified. After he got over his shock, he finally revealed one concerning his invisibility cloak and the Head table in the Great Hall that had me blushing like crazy. His idea really turned me on, but it wasn't to last.

The problem was afterwards he was convinced I would consider him a twisted pervert.

Making him understand that he's not a pervert and that he is worthy of being loved is going to be my mission in life. He's had so many years of people telling him he's worthless and not worthy of being loved that he believes it deep down.

We've talked frankly about his time with the Dursleys and he's gotten so he doesn't get all tense and upset when discussing them with me. It still boggles my mind how anyone could treat family in that manner.

I told Harry about McLaggen and Ron. He's ecstatic about Ron. I think he misses his friend, even if he was exasperated with him so much of the time. I'd like to see them get together again myself. I miss the camaraderie we once had.

As far as McLaggen goes, Harry was angry. I wanted to know why McLaggen suddenly came on to me and Harry looked at me like I was crazy.

"Don't you know?" he said.

"Know what?" I replied.

"Hermione, you're gorgeous! You have a body that probably fuels the fantasies of every boy third year and up!" he exclaimed, then he looked at me with that sultry look of his that gets me all hot. "And you're mine," he said with a low growl.

Honestly, I am going to have to have a talk with that boy! One moment we're talking about something serious and the next he's got me panting and wishing I could peel off his clothing. How does he do that to me?

I suppose I should be grateful that I'm the only one he does that to. And that, my dear journal, still surprises me. He thinks I'm beautiful! I'd tell him to get his glasses checked, but he doesn't need glasses anymore!

On the Hogwarts front, McLaggen has backed off. I find that whenever we're in the same room together, there are always a bunch of sixth and fifth year students between us. I think Neville and Ginny have something to do with that.

And while I feel safe from McLaggen, I'm still feeling uneasy. The other day I came up to my bed and things were out of place. Evan's photo was in the wrong spot and Crooks looked like he was most put out.

I'm starting to get nervous about it because that says it's probably a girl who's been rifling through my stuff. I'll talk to Harry next bookspace slot we get. He said to remind him to show me more pressure points.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Dec 5 th 1996, Waivunu Fiji...

Dear Hermione,
As usual, you were right. Bookspace time is becoming harder and harder to use, thanks to my upcoming N.E.W.T.s. Fortunately, that will slowly go away as I finish them. In the meantime, we'll do what you suggested and use the books for mundane conversation and save the important stuff for when we're together.

And for all that, I miss you. Three bookspace sessions last month was not enough. And if that isn't bad enough, next year we have to do it all over again when you're studying for your N.E.W.T.s!

We can do this. I know we can. I promise you I will do my best to be available anytime you want bookspace time next year.

Transfiguration is becoming a real bear. One of the big differences between the British system and Pac Rim is that they expect you to be knowledgeable in at least one form of Muggle technology and be capable of transfiguring a working copy of something. You can't transfigure anything electronic, but some simple electric things or mechanical machines are fine.

Most of the students in the Pac Rim tend to pick useful topics, like knowing how to transfigure stuff they'll need to live, like fishing poles and reels, small boats or tools. Sirius and Remus thought that was a great idea and Sirius wanted me to try to understand the automobile. I told him to sod off, that no one could learn it that well without years of study. Instead, I opted to learn about bicycles. Next year I'll be looking for Nagini and making a form of transportation would be useful.

Public transportation works between towns and cities, but there's no British Rail to Hogsmeade or Hogwarts. And yes, I know I can Apparate to those places, but if I have to go off the beaten track, I'll be able to do something about it. Besides, a bicycle makes for an enjoyable way of getting around.

To that end I've been studying one basic design and the modifications needed to change it from a street bicycle to an off-road bicycle. I was ecstatic yesterday when I finally got it right. I'm extremely thankful that you showed me how to ride one two summers ago.

Now, if only you had told me not to ride it in sand, I wouldn't look like someone took sandpaper to my forehead.

Charms is getting very difficult. I don't have problems casting, but Professor Peliote is covering a lot of theory and I've had to learn more than a

smattering of Arithmancy in order to keep up with her. She wants me to take the advanced Charms N.E.W.T., not the standard Charms N.E.W.T. I'm making headway, but sometimes it feels like I'm running up a very steep hill. My math skills aren't very good, so I end up triple checking everything.

Defense is also a problem, but of a different type. We a pparate to a small island not far away; you knowthe one, we've gone to it for picnics before. Professor Murphy has had to switch over to using Golems for dueling practices. Some of my spells are blasting through his shields and I nearly killed him with a simple bludgeoning hex three weeks ago.

On the downside, Master Kwang is back in business, or as I like to say, King Kong is swinging from his tree again. At least he can't pull the run-around-the-island idea anymore. He's actually using me to help him get his leg back into shape, which you can read as: he's running me into the ground, then jumping on my aching corpse.

Christmas is coming and I'm looking forward to seeing and holding you. Don't get me wrong, we hold each other in bookspace and we could probably one day even make love there. But we both knowwe're not really there.

Your Mum stopped by the other day to have tea with Cindy. They are planning for the wedding, which I'm sure you've heard about. In case no one's told you, it's this coming summer. Your Mum also mentioned that she's seen Remus getting very chummy with Tonks. I think that's just great. Remus needs someone. If Tonks can be that someone for him, I'm all for it.

Speaking of Tonks, she and I watched an old Star Trek showon the telly two weeks ago, then spent an hour figuring out howto give us Vulcan ears. Sirius is already planning a UFO prank, but I'm not sure I can pull it off without laughing.

I'm making a lot of progress with my Metamorphmagus skills but I don't think I'll ever be as good as Tonks is. I can change body parts now, like the ears, and we've experimented with other things, like webbed feet and hands to help while swimming. But it takes me nearly a full minute to do what Tonks does in seconds. I hope I'll get better, but we'll have to see.

We'll be together soon, so I'm going to sign off for now.

*Love,
Harry*

Motherwell, Scotland, East of Glasgow, Dec 5 th 1996...

Nagini heaved a sigh of relief. For the first time in nearly a week she felt safe again. She was holed up in a old barn. The trip was taking a lot longer than she had expected and she still had nearly sixty miles to go.

Earlier last week she had slithered into the barn of a farmer a few miles south of her current location. She had been looking for a warm place to winter in. The farmer had a huge compost pile that was nice and toasty, if a bit fragrant. Warmth, however, was the key thing.

Comfortable, she curled up to begin her long winter's sleep when a noise roused her back to consciousness. She looked up to see a dog barking like mad at her. Nearby, she could hear the sound of a human making questioning noises at the dog.

When the farmer appeared around the pile, he had gasped and stepped back, while she reared up her head, getting ready to strike. The man whistled loudly and dogs, nearly a dozen of them, had come running into the barn.

The resulting battle lasted nearly twenty minutes before the farmer and most of the dogs were dead, but the damage had been done. Nagini had received multiple bites and a two foot section had been lopped off her tail by the farmer's shovel.

Wounded and in considerable pain, she had slithered from the farm, but she couldn't go far. Finally, she found an abandoned farm building several miles north of where she'd had her fight with the farmer and his dogs.

She was curled up in a patch of bright sunlight, but could slither underground in a moment's notice. Safety had become a real issue, as it would take weeks for her to heal and recover from the fight. There was also the pressing imperative to hibernate. The trip was taking far longer than she thought it would have and several times she'd tried to give up altogether. A voice in the back of her mind exhorted her to continue, however, so she had pressed on. She tried to ignore the voice, but she couldn't always succeed.

When the air began to cool, she returned to her burrow. Curling up, she took comfort in the soft rustle of her scales and began her long healing sleep. There was plenty of time, after all. Despite the voice, there really was no rush to go north.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Dec 6 th 1996, Hogwarts...

*Dear Harry,
Honestly, you can blame me for some things, but I fail to see howyou can blame me for your attempt to ride a bicycle on sand. What were you thinking?*

Still, I think your idea for the bicycle is a good one. I tried to explain the concept to Professor Lawton and she looked at me like I was crazy. She couldn't see the purpose of being able to transfigure something Muggle-made that actually worked.

I think it would be a lot harder to do here, with all the latent magic in the castle. I have an idea, but before I can try it out I need to talk to my dad about it. He knows about such things and he can probably help. In the meantime, I like the idea so I'm going to introduce it to our study group and see what they think of it.

If you happen to transfigure a spare bicycle, we can do a little traveling around Waivunu when I get there.

Mum has asked me to tell you that she expects you to come to our house on the 20th. We have a family Christmas party on the 21st and she says that it's time that I bring my boyfriend to meet the family. After the party, we'll all take the portal to Fiji, or take it the next day.

I know you're going to be nervous about meeting my family, but I'll be there with you. They don't know I'm a witch, so watch what you say. I think Mum's right, though. We've been going together for two years and we've talked about staying together after graduation. I won't say the M word, but we're getting close to talking about it, especially after that last conversation we had in bookspace concerning the number of children we wanted.

And you have no idea how grateful I was when I heard you didn't want a Weasley sized family!

One word about my family. For the most part, they're all right, but I have a cousin who's a cross between Lavender and Padma. Smart, pretty and used to getting her way. If anyone is likely to trip you up, it would be Frances.

I've had to charm my book with several more spells. Someone has been trying to break into my trunk and this book is the only thing I can think of that would be worth trying to get at. I don't have a lot of expensive, fancy jewelry or clothes in my trunk, no real valuables except for the book and your picture. If this keeps up, I am going to send the photo to my Mum for safekeeping, and place a nasty hex on the book to prevent anyone from touching it.

I've alerted Lawton to the problem and she didn't seem all that bothered, so I went to McGonagall and she gave me permission to ward the book with a nasty hex. I don't like it, I feel like someone is watching me all the time now.

McGonagall is becoming dissatisfied with Lawton, who doesn't seem all that interested in being the Head of House. She's a good teacher, but in some ways even more set in her ways than McGonagall, despite the fact that McGonagall has nearly forty years on her. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a new Transfiguration Professor next year. Or a new Head of House. I just hope it's not Hagrid.

I thought I'd fill you in on some other news. As you're aware, the Ferret never returned to school this year and for the longest time all anyone knew were rumors. It turns out that Umbridge did more damage to him than originally expected. His mother sold their manor house and their seat on the Wizengamot in order to pay for Draco being admitted to St. Mungo's long term care ward. They say he screams like a Banshee every time he sees someone wearing something pink. I think they did more damage when they removed his memory blocks than if they had left them in place.

Unless, by some miracle, Umbridge turns up alive and pregnant, the Malfoy line has effectively died out. His father is in jail and his mother has vanished. Draco's a wreck, from what we've been told, and it's unlikely he'll recover. I never liked him, but I think he would have been better off being killed than consigned to the wards of St. Mungo's for the rest of his life.

That leaves Pansy as queen of the Slytherin roost and while she does rule there, she's been largely unable to terrorize the school as effectively as Draco did. She's tried a few times, but without Snape backing up Slytherin and Dumbledore blindly agreeing to everything, they've been soundly smacked down on several occasions.

Pansy had several of her goons, including Crabbe and Goyle, try to mess with several third year Hufflepuffs. It wasn't pretty. Five fourth year Gryffindors and three Ravenclaws from sixth year jumped into the fight, then more Gryffindors showed up. By the time it was over, six Slytherins were in the infirmary along with one Hufflepuff. Professor McGonagall called in Aurors, who used Veritaserum and a Pensieve to figure out who did what. The result was five Slytherins expelled, Pansy was sent home for a two week suspension and she's got six months of detention. She also lost her Prefects badge.

It's a far cry from what used to pass for discipline in this school. I just hate how it got to this point because it ended up costing me my best friend.

I've got to close now. I'm not sure if we'll have a bookspace session anytime between now and when I get to see you, but I'm glad you're coming to Oxford. I miss you and wish you were here.

All my love,
Hermione.

Hermione's House, Oxford, England, Dec 19th 1996...

Emma had all her office papers strewn about the kitchen table. She was trying to upgrade their accounting system and the old system just didn't have enough information, so she was trying to find what she needed from the old paper records.

She looked up when the door to the car port opened and Cindy and Sirius stepped through.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise," she said as she stood up to put on a pot of tea.

"We're just passing through. There's a lot to do," Cindy said.

Emma frowned. She could have sworn Remus had passed through, going up to Scotland two days ago. "Who's watching Harry?"

"Harry is watching Harry. After all, he's coming here tomorrow. We asked if he wanted to tag along with us, but he declined. He wants to see Hermione, but I think he's suffering from a bit of Granger induced confusion," Sirius offered with a shrug.

Emma narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "Just what is that supposed to mean, Sirius Black?"

Sirius sat at the table and looked up at her with an unrepentant grin. "It's like this, Emma. He wanted to come early because that meant more time with Hermione. But he also wants to do well on his N.E.W.T.s because he wants her to be proud of him. He's trying to balance seeing his girlfriend versus pleasing her by proving he's as smart as she is. So, instead of coming here a day early and snogging Hermione, he's home studying."

"Siri," Cindy chided. "You know that isn't the only reason." She smiled at Emma. "Harry wouldn't dream of coming here early. You offered an invitation that started on the 20th and that's when he'll arrive. As often as he's been told, we're still dealing with what he learned from the Dursleys. It's hard for him to break those habits and he just doesn't think he'd be welcome if he showed up unexpectedly."

"That's absurd!" announced Hermione from the doorway. She had been home from school for exactly two days now and she had been champing at the bit to see Harry.

Cindy turned and acknowledged Hermione's comment. "It is, sweetheart, but that's the way he is. He talks to you more than the rest of us about his past, so you know how he feels. Honestly, we don't know how lucky we are. Harry has some issues, but the reality of badly abused children is such that it could have been so much worse. The physical abuse was fairly minor and he wasn't sexually molested. Emotionally, he still has trouble with the idea that people would want him around. He places more importance on the happiness of others than he does his own.

"He's gotten a lot better. But like I've said before, habits formed early are the hardest to break."

Hermione looked at Emma and, well, whined. "Muuummm," she said.

Emma shook her head. "Go, help him pack. But I expect you back in two hours, young lady."

Hermione grinned and was gone out the door before her mother finished speaking.

Emma sighed and turned back to her friend. "So? How are the wedding plans going?"

Sirius leaned back and grinned. "She won't let me give her a bash at Westminster, so we're probably going to do something small and local here in Oxford."

Cindy shrugged helplessly. "It's an unnecessary expense, Siri. Besides, the Vicar over at the University Church is a family friend and said he'd be happy to perform the service for us."

"St. Mary's?" Emma said delightedly. "You're getting married at St. Mary's?"

The University Church of St. Mary's the Virgin was one of the oldest churches in England and was said to be one of the most beautiful.

"That's what the lady wants, so that's what she'll get," Sirius said.

"So what else have you decided on?" Emma asked eagerly.

"Well, Siri took me up for a ride on Harry's broom," Cindy said.

"And she loved it. Said it was almost like a roller coaster," Sirius added.

"Roller coaster," Cindy corrected.

"Right. One of those, too," he said, nodding.

"So, anyway," Cindy continued excitedly, "we're going on a roller coaster honeymoon. Thirty-five coasters in forty-five days. We'll start on the east coast of the U.S. and work our way westward, around the world, hitting what are supposed to be the best coasters in the world."

Emma sighed and shook her head. "Only you, Cin. With all the romantic places you can go and the private beaches or mountain villas... No, you two have to pick roller coasters," she muttered.

"Hey, Disney World has room service," protested Cindy.

"Tell her about the mouse," prompted Sirius helpfully. He couldn't wait to meet Mickey, and Goofy.

She patted his hand. "She knows about the mouse, love." Turning back to her friend, she smiled. "Really, Emma, Sirius and I will be having plenty of moonlit walks and candlelit dinners. And if I know Sirius, we'll not climb out of bed until noon each day. The roller coasters are for the hour or two we get out of the hotel."

"Despite what Moony thinks, there'll be romance," Sirius added. "And lots of laughter. That's important."

Cindy nodded in agreement.

Emma smiled at them. In a way, their idea of a honeymoon was appropriate to the pair. "So when are you getting married then?"

"Harry has his last N.E.W.T. on the 3rd of June, so we were thinking that June 25th would be appropriate. That'll give us enough time to move back from Fiji. The real question is, do you mind Harry spending the summer with you? If not, I can arrange for Remus to stay with him at Grimmauld. Although, to be honest, after his birthday, he'll be of age and free to do what he wants," Sirius said. "Which, if I know Harry, probably means visiting Hermione everyday."

"We'd love to have him here," Emma replied promptly. "To be honest, we've been worried about the idea of him traveling around Scotland alone looking for that snake."

Sirius' expression turned somber. "I know, but he won't be alone all the time. Remus will be looking for clues, as well. We've told him that if he gets in trouble to either contact you and Dan or to find me and Remus. We'll all be here, unless it looks like Nagini has left the country."

Emma nodded. She wasn't very happy with the situation and planned to speak to Harry about it herself. She was worried that Hermione would spend more time worrying about him than she would studying for her own exams. And while she thought it was right for her to worry about him, he needed to understand that he needed to keep her worry to a minimum.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Dec 19 th 1996, Oxford , England...

Mum sent me to get Harry a day early. She was miffed when he didn't arrive with Sirius and Cindy, so I went to get him.

I found him in his room. Someone had bought, or transfigured, his chair into one of those high back comfortable office chairs. He was bent over several open text books and he was muttering something in Japanese. Above his desk was a pulsating light storm. I'm not sure what spell he was working on, but it sure looked pretty. And does he have any idea just how great he looks when he's working his magic?

Anyway, I watched him from his doorway and he seemed to be as nearly engrossed in his work as I get. I thought it would be a good idea to sneak up on him and surprise him, only he knew I was there. I should have realized that anyone living with Sirius Black would have warded their door to let them know when someone came through.

I snuck up to his chair and he quickly spun around and grabbed me in a hug. I was shocked and surprised, but after a few seconds I did what I was planning on doing in the first place and I hugged him back.

We didn't speak; no words were necessary. I think I finally understand what Harry meant about bookspace now. In that embrace I realized that there is a world of difference between bookspace and the real world. Oh, we can do a lot in bookspace and it feels real. But there is always the knowledge that bookspace isn't real sitting in the back of your mind.

He held me while still sitting on his chair, his head nestled between my breasts and despite that, it was an emotional moment, not a physical one. I felt safe and at peace in his arms. I felt like I was home and I knew that no matter where I was, if Harry was there, it was home. We didn't say a word, I didn't feel the need to speak and I don't think he did either. Somehow I could feel that he felt the same safety and peace that I felt.

It's funny. When Mum sent me over, knowing that Harry was alone at the beach house, I had anticipated being with him and maybe having the opportunity to explore outside of the limitations imposed by the journals. Instead, we ended up holding each other and having an emotional moment better than anything I could have dreamed of.

What is this power that Harry has over me and why does he affect me so deeply?

I used to read Mum's romance novels and laugh when authors talk about the depths of one's love, blah, blah, blah. How could I have been so wrong? I read those books and thought it wouldn't be possible for me to lose myself in someone, and here I am doing exactly that!

After that blissful embrace I helped him pack for the few days we'd be in England. Harry had spoken with Dad about the Christmas party and took his advice on what to wear for it. I haven't seen it, but I understand he purchased a new suit in Nadi, just for the party. He's got it in a garment bag that's been charmed to only allow him to open it.

I suppose I should explain that while I might be an only child, my father is not. He has three brothers and a sister, all married and all with kids of their own. My parents are the only ones to have stopped at just one child. Between my aunts, uncles and cousins, there will be over thirty people at this party. I'm trying not to worry about it, but I think most will be shocked when I bring Harry with us.

It's nearly midnight so I'm going to close this entry. Harry's asleep across the hall in the guest room and my parents are asleep in their own room. I peeked in on Harry earlier. I like watching him sleep. It's one of the few times when he lets his guard down and relaxes totally.

I can't help but wonder what it will be like to share that bed with him and sleep, safe within his arms. It's his fantasy and I think it's becoming mine, as well.

Someday soon I hope I get to learn that.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Dec 20 th 1996, Oxford , England...

It's six in the morning and I'm in England again. I've just finished my morning run and in a bit I'll start a nice breakfast for my hosts. Hermione came and got me early yesterday. I was supposed to arrive today, but plans changed.

Emma didn't like the idea of me being left alone at the beach house for a day. It's something Molly Weasley would have done, but Emma's doing it for different reasons. Molly would have assumed I couldn't take care of myself and needed her to help me. Emma said it was silly to be alone when they were waiting for me to arrive, and Hermione would enjoy my company.

I don't know if she's right, but I'll never skip the chance to be with Hermione.

She tried to sneak up on me yesterday and I think I surprised her. I spun around so fast in my chair and grabbed her in a hug. Merlin, it was heaven. All our time in bookspace cuddling and doing a little heavy petting vanished in a split second under the reality of that hug.

I've never felt so... peaceful and wanted as I did when she wrapped her arms around me. I wonder if she knows what kind of power she has over me? I'd do anything for her. Anything.

It's becoming very difficult, especially with her here in front of me, for me to keep to my promise of not letting us get too carried away. When I held her the other day and I could feel her heart beating and the soft rise and fall of her breasts while she breathed, it took every bit of self control I had. I think if she had made one move, just a tiny indication that she wanted more than to just hold me, I would have swept her into my arms and carried her to my bed.

Thankfully, we just held each other.

Later today we'll travel to London in preparation for this family party. We're spending the night at the Intercontinental Hotel just off Hyde Park. Dan and Emma have their room, Hermione has one and I have one. I offered to pay for mine, but Dan wouldn't hear of it. Still, it feels awkward. The Grangers are dentists and rather well off since they have very few NHS patients. I still feel like I should pay my way.

I think I managed to convince Dan to let me buy dinner tonight.

Tomorrow everyone is meeting at the hotel and they've rented a room to hold a catered party. Dan said between friends and family there will be at least fifty five people there.

Shoot me now. Fifty five people! I still haven't decided if I'm going as Harry or Evan, although Hermione and Emma want me to go as Harry. I probably will, since none of them are magical; they won't recognize me.

It's strange that she's the only witch. Usually, when you find one Muggle-born, there are others in the family. Since Emma's family is tiny and she has no brothers or sisters, I can't help but wonder if the magic came in from her side of the family.

I'll finish this up. Someday, Hermione and I will sit down and share these private entries with each other and laugh or cry over them. I think it will be good for us. If nothing else, I know my entries show what a mess I am.

The Granger Family Christmas Party, International Hotel, London, Dec 21 st 1996...

Hermione was in seventh heaven. She leaned close to Harry, holding his hand and sipped her drink. She had just finished taking Harry around and introducing him to all the members of her family. He seemed to be the talk of the party.

She knew that she had surprised her family. Until today, most of them considered her to be the frumpish bookworm, but here she was showing off Harry, who had shown up for the party in an Armani suit. His hair was still a mess, but that was to be expected. It even added to his appeal, in her opinion. And the suit! She had pretty much grown up with Harry, but it wasn't until she saw him in the suit that she realized how broad his shoulders had become, and how finely built he was. She'd seen him in nothing but shorts, but for some reason, the suit seemed to emphasize his physique.

He stood next to her, like some Greek god, impossible in his perfection, and then the moment vanished when he slipped his hand into hers and he looked at her questioningly. She smiled up at him and counted herself blessed.

Her maternal grandmother eyed Harry as if he was a prize bull up for auction, then shot her daughter a thumbs up after talking with him for nearly an hour. Hermione blushed when she saw her mother nodding and grinning at her. Grandma Kensington was notoriously difficult to please and Harry had passed her tests with flying colors.

"Potter? Potter? I don't recall any Potters. Where did you say you're from?" asked her Uncle George.

Hermione frowned. She couldn't help but notice her cousin Frances eying Harry with interest.

"I was raised for a while in Surrey, but my guardians were proven unfit and I was returned to my Godfather. Originally, my family is from Wales," Harry replied smoothly. These were simple questions, not like the ones from the old lady who made him feel like she was reading his mind and questioning him about his relationship with Hermione.

"So, you're an orphan?" blurted Frances.

Hermione winced and tightened her grip on Harry's hand.

Harry smiled softly. "I might not have my original parents, but I do have parents. My Godfather and his fiancée, even Hermione's parents, to an extent."

"And you go to school with Hermione?" George asked, getting back into the conversation. "She never has much to say about that place."

"I used to attend the same school," Harry replied. "But don't blame Hermione. A number of the students are children of diplomats and high ranking

members of government. They try to maintain a low profile to reduce their security problems. Academically, they're one of the finest schools in the country."

Hermione stared at Harry, surprised by his glib answer. It was a perfect explanation for why she couldn't talk about her school.

"That Hermione received an invitation to attend is a testimony to her intelligence. They take only the very best. Regretfully, when my problems at home came to light, I was withdrawn and now I attend home school."

"And where did you get that marvelous tan?" asked Frances.

Harry grinned and Hermione knew what was coming. "Fiji. I arrived here from Fiji two nights ago, but I spend most of the year living there."

Bored with the direction the conversation was turning, Uncle George excused himself, leaving the three teens to their talk.

Frances stepped forward, coming uncomfortably close to Harry. She, like Hermione, wore an expensive dress for the party. But unlike Hermione, her dress had a plunging neckline, exposing a very impressive cleavage. Hermione's dress was, in Harry's opinion, more interesting, because it showed a nice amount of cleavage without being glaringly obvious about it.

Harry took one step back. He didn't like people he didn't know invading his space.

"I must admit I never thought Hermione would bring a boy to one of these parties," Frances said. "Usually, she sits in a corner, reading a book."

Hermione flinched. She knew what was coming.

"In fact, I was beginning to think she might not even like boys, or perhaps she was too into her books," Frances said, plowing on, not understanding the simmering volcano she was creating.

Harry's expression darkened and his anger and magic flared. The overhead lights flickered ominously.

Frances stepped close to Harry and put her hand on his chest. "I'm sure she's interesting, but I'd be willing to bet I can show you a better time. Would you like to dance with me?"

Hermione sucked in a breath and glance at Harry. No one else in the room could sense the build-up of magic around him, but it was impossible to ignore the fire that lit his eyes.

"Thank you, but no," Harry said coldly. "Hermione is all I could ever want and, unlike others, she doesn't feel the need to cheapen herself by throwing herself at someone she doesn't even know."

Right then and there she wanted to throw her arms around him and kiss him senseless. Frances had been a thorn in her side most of her life and she half expected Harry would fall for her simpering attitude like many others had. Her cousin had learned the value of sex appeal early and wielded that weapon unmercifully. This was the first time she had ever run into a boy who didn't care about her charms.

Frances paled and gasped. She stepped back as if she had been slapped.

He tightened his grip slightly on Hermione. "Come on, love. Let's get some fresh air," he muttered, then pulled her with him towards the large doors and the open air balcony.

Behind them, Frances stared at the retreating couple in shock and surprise. She had always managed to pull one over on Hermione. Until tonight. It was unthinkable!

On the balcony, Harry released Hermione's hand and gripped the railing tightly. His anger was immense. He had managed to control it, but his magic was threatening to break free.

Hermione stood nearby, uncertain what she could do to help. She could feel the magic flowing off him and it was like nothing she had ever felt before. She stepped closer and placed her hand on his arm.

"Harry?"

"I'm sorry," he gasped. He was still struggling to contain his magic. Frantically he looked around for something to cast on, something innocuous. He looked down and spotted the crumpled napkin Hermione was holding and he plucked it out of her hand. His fist closed around it and he poured the magic into the crumpled paper.

She gasped, and felt the flow of magic from him change. She used her ring to cast an illusion on the door to prevent anyone from seeing the flare of light from his hand.

For nearly a minute he poured the magic into the paper, not really casting any specific spell. He was just trying to unload the excess. Finally, he stopped and took a shuddering breath, then sagged against the railing.

She gripped his elbow, supporting him. A moment later, Dan was standing next to him, helping Hermione hold him up.

Hermione blinked in surprise at her father. She didn't know he was on the balcony with them.

"I'll be all right. Just let me sit for a moment," Harry said softly.

“Do you two want to explain to me what just happened?” Dan asked quietly. Hermione recognized the tone. It was the “I’m the Dad and I want to know, NOW!” tone he took when he wanted an explanation.

“She was being rude and insulting,” Harry replied, then he shrugged. “I got angry about it.”

“Hermione was being rude?” asked Dan, a bit shocked.

“No, Dad. Frances was being rude,” Hermione replied correcting him.

He frowned. He knew how much of a problem Frances had been for Hermione in the past. “She insulted Hermione?” he said, starting to get angry.

Hermione reached out and grabbed his hand, preventing him from leaving. “You don’t have to worry about it, Daddy. Harry… Well, he put her in her place. Shocked her to pieces, really. I don’t think she ever thought that anyone would defend me, or tell her they weren’t interested. Harry did both, then we came out here because he was still very angry and that was driving his magic to a point where it was difficult to control.”

Harry looked down at his hands. The napkin had turned rock hard in his fist. He hadn’t opened it yet to look at it. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what it had become. All the talk of difficulty in controlling his magic was embarrassing.

Dan stood and placed a comforting hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Thank you, son,” he said softly. “I’ll leave you with Hermione. She’ll take care of you.”

Dan had been raised to expect that a young man would be after one thing from his daughter and for a while he believed it of Harry, too. He had been slowly changing his mind about that idea over the past year. Now, he *knew* that Harry was after one thing; Hermione’s heart. And he’d do anything to see that she was happy.

It was a humbling idea to think that Harry was different from even what he had been like as a teenager and a young man hoping to score with Emma. He had no doubt in his mind that Harry dreamed of such things, but they were secondary to his goal of having a good life, one that included Hermione by his side.

Dan walked back into the ballroom where the party was being held. Hermione watched her father for a moment before turning back to Harry. She glanced down at his hand and was shocked at what she saw.

“You’re bleeding!” she gasped and grabbed his hand, then she pried open his fingers.

The napkin that he had crumpled and poured all that magic into had been transformed into a piece of pure red crystal. She gently pulled it from his hand and wrapped it in another napkin before dropping it into her purse, then she closed his cuts using her ring.

“I ruined your party, didn’t I?” he asked, sounding miserable.

She looked at him and smiled, then she caressed his cheek. “Quite the opposite. Do you know how many years I’ve been hoping someone would put Frances in her place? It’s funny, I can help you against dementors, escaped convicts, crazed cultists and malicious Professors, but I’m helpless against my own cousin.”

Somewhere inside, a band started to play.

Harry stood and offered her his hand. “Would you like to dance, Miss Granger?”

She took his hand and smiled broadly. “I would love to, Mr. Potter.”

Together they returned to the party and danced the next several hours, ignoring Frances, who sulked along the edges of the dance floor, watching them both with undisguised malice.

The International Hotel, London, Dec 22 nd 1996...

Harry walked out of the shower and put on a fresh change of clothing. He had finished his run through Hyde Park and he needed the shower to warm up. It was cold outside and even his run did little to warm him.

He wasn’t too upset about the cold. Later today they would take the portal back to Fiji where it would be a comfortable eighty degrees or more. After dressing, he packed away his clothing and went down to the lobby level where he’d wait for the Grangers to show up in the restaurant.

He sat at a table and rummaged through his pack, looking for something to read while he waited. He pulled out a copy of the Japanese language version of Newsweek Magazine to read, opening to an article about a super tanker than had run aground.

“Are you really reading or are you just looking at the pictures?” asked Dan with a sardonic grin.

“*Watashi wa kankyou mondai ni totemo kanshin ga ari masu*,” Harry replied.

Dan frowned and Hermione grinned at him.

“What did you say?” asked Emma.

“I said I was interested in environmental issues,” he replied, then he handed her the magazine, opened to the article detailing the ongoing efforts to clean up an oil spill in the Sea of Japan.

“Are you really, Harry?” asked Hermione.

He grinned. “Yeah, in a way. I can't pretend to understand it all, but my language tutor says that I can pick up a lot of the language by reading periodicals and newspapers. Besides, it was either read the magazine or pull out my Transfiguration textbook, which would really stand out in this place.”

Hermione laughed and opened her menu. “That it would.”

“After breakfast, we'll check out and head back to Oxford. We'll head to the beach house just in time to arrive for breakfast,” Emma said. She loved the idea of being able to turn the days around so easily and use a potion to make up for the lost time. They were fortunate that the sleeping potions didn't require any internal magic to work.

Harry glanced over at Dan. “Are you sure I can't at least pay for my own room? These rooms aren't cheap.”

“Hang onto your money, Harry. Besides, we invited you to the party, remember?”

He nodded, then sat back to enjoy his breakfast. Christmas was just around the corner and he couldn't wait.

Author's Notes:

First a note about some of the things we in fan fiction take for granted.

We've changed the behavior of some things that people tend to take for granted in fan fiction. Most notably we've changed the Cruciatus to be more damaging. That is a big change to things where most fan fictions are like, “Ow ow ow, take that you villian!”

The other thing we've changed is the concept of the portkeys which we envision to be this whirling spinning thing. That change will be highlighted in the next chapter in particular.

The use of name Alison Harrington was a coincidence and not meant to reflect in anyway on the Honor Harrington series.

“Do you really think they will believe that?” asked Alyx incredulously.

Bob shrugged. “If they want to keep reading our stuff they will.”

“Oh, blackmail, I like it!”

No, Harry will not be teaching DADA at Hogwarts in Hermione's seventh year. Sorry.

McGonagall took a guess that Harry would be at the Grangers. She has Dumbledore's tracking gizmos and she had enough clues to take a stab at it and find him there.

Alright, there was a screwup in chapter one where we said Malfoy had been kissed. We've fixed that, he's in prison and hasn't been kissed. Sorry about that. Lucius wants to thank all his faithful supporters that pointed out the error to us. And he warns all the others to BOW DOWN BEFORE HIM YOU MUGGLES!!!

Sorry, got carried away there...

Noylj – Why should they move? They have their own private practice with few NHS patients. They are already set and unlike the wizards, have a nice democratic government running things.

Everyone – The reference to Emma dreaming about Dan, a whip and Marshmallows has no bearing on myself and Alyx. Anyone with a lick of sense would know that we'd use a riding crop and jelly donuts.

A word about the Weasleys. It is our intent to show the Weasleys as representative of the rest of British Wizarding society. While we will not actively bash any Weasley in this story, they will not always come out showing their best side. Ron in this chapter is shown maturing and coming back to a more likeable aspect, but as a whole, they have problems that are a result of their society and not a result of character flaws.

There is ONE more chapter of Harry and Hermione being far apart before Harry can return to Britain to begin the hunt for Nagini. Given the way this is running, we are looking at 8, maybe 9 chapters total for this story.

Thanks to every one who reviewed, and thanks to Keith and Dorothy for pointing out all doze errorz. We appreciate it!

The Power of the Press

Chapter 6 - Year Six Continued

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx peeked her head out of her office and stared at Bob who was sprinkling gray ashes on the stage.

“Watcha doing?” she asked, chewing her bubble gum.

“Disposing of the evidence,” replied Bob. He peered around to make sure no one was looking.

“Evidence?”

“Uh huh, this used to be one of our readers, power214063. He left a review saying to 'Update Soon.'”

Alyx scowled and reached for a shotgun and her favorite cleaver.

“What are you doing?” asked Bob warily. He didn't want to be around her when she was playing with her toys.

“I'm going to go find power214063's family.”

Bob shivered and wondered if he should just tell people they don't own Harry Potter and get on with the chapter.

“Um... have fun?” he said.

She turned and eyed him with a hungry look. “Don't go no where, you know how horny I get after I use my cleaver. I don't want to hunt you down.”

He gulped nervously and nodded in reply. Some times it was safer to say nothing.

“And now, on with the story!” Bob said meekly, then he turned and ran from the stage.

From the other side of the stage came the sound of screams and a shout. “Merry Effing Christmas! BONZA!”

The Power of the Press

Chapter 6, Jan 1997 through Jun 1997

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Jan 2nd 1997, Waivunu Fiji...

I know it's unusual for me to write in this when I'm with Harry, but I've gotten into the habit of writing about things to better order my thoughts and feelings. Writing in this book has been a great help in my search to understand what I'm feeling and going through.

The past holiday has been wonderful, despite Harry studying so hard. I'm very proud of what he's doing and what he's managed to accomplish. I shouldn't gloat, but I was right. Back in our first year I knew he was going to be a great wizard and I can see that now.

Something changed before we came to Fiji, something deep inside me, and I've spent a lot of time thinking about it. I clearly remember when it happened; it was at the Christmas party. I looked at Harry and, for a brief moment, thought I saw two of him. One appeared as the world will come to see him; a powerful and great wizard who believes in doing what's right. The other was the Harry I know; confused, some times scared, and looking at the world with a wonder he should have grown out of years ago. There is a wonder about him and an infinite capacity to love. I know that now.

That's the real Harry Potter and he loves me. ME! I can't believe it and I still have trouble believing it. Three days ago he finally said my Occlumency exercises had brought me to the level of practitioner and that I'd be able to keep out most intrusions. So he taught me the wanded Legilimency spell and gave me permission to try it on him.

I saw me. Or rather, I saw me as Harry sees me. I didn't see myself as I do, with small breasts and a fat bum. I didn't see the wild, out of control hair or the ugly birthmark on my shoulder. No, what I saw was how Harry perceives me and there wasn't a single imperfection in that image.

I dropped my wand and burst into tears. A second later he held me in his strong arms and he tried to calm me. He didn't understand what I saw and I couldn't explain it. His feelings for me occupy a central point in his life. I saw what he gets from me and what he wants to give me. It was dizzying and electric, as I never expected what I saw. It was like he showed me pure love and it touched me. Am I really the Hermione that he sees? I want to be. That Hermione is strong and smart and so sure of herself.

After I calmed, I needed to get away and think, so Mum and I went for a walk on the beach. Little did I know Mum had decided it was time for another one of those excruciating mother/daughter conversations that she loves so much.

“So, how are you getting on with Harry?” she asked.

“We're doing good, Mum,” I replied, hoping she would drop it.

We walked for a bit, moving past the village. The beach around us was deserted. She motioned to a large piece of driftwood and sat on it. I joined her a moment later.

“Have you been intimate yet?”

I remember feeling my cheeks burn with embarrassment as I looked at her, aghast. When she smiled, I looked at my feet, wishing I could just ignore the question. “No.”

“I’m not trying to pry or rush you, dear. I’m just trying to understand,” she said softly.

I nodded, but didn’t look at her. Squirming uncomfortably, I finally blurted, “He wants to wait and he loves me.”

“Of course he does. I was sure of that after our first summer with him.”

My blush only deepened.

I could feel her staring at me, enjoying my discomfort as she interrogated me.

“Well? Will you wait?”

“I don’t know.”

Hearing her sigh, I looked at her. She was staring out at the water, a slight frown crinkling her brow.

“I’ve watched you two grow up. You spent a summer holding hands and sharing brief kisses where other teens would have been sneaking away to get into trouble. At first I thought it was because of the Wizarding world. I mean, it seems pretty backwards compared to ours. But neither of you were raised in that world.

“We’re lucky women, Hermione. The men who love us are our best friends and they put that in front of everything. Not everyone can say that.”

“What do you think I should do, Mum?”

She’d moved closer and placed an arm around me. “You’ll do what your heart tells you to do. Harry wants to wait for now. But keep in mind, that’s that’s how he feels today. Tomorrow he may change his mind. What matters is that you’re both happy with your decisions. I’m not trying to push you into something, dear. Your father and I had a wonderful courtship and romance. We still do. Nothing would make me happier than to know you had something similar.”

That’s when I broke down and explained what I had seen in Harry’s mind. Then, to make matters worse, I explained the journals and about bookspace and what the limits were. Strangely, she had seemed rather impressed and pleased by the books. She’d known about our being able to write back and forth, but she’d been worried by the long times between visits.

It wasn’t until we got back to the beach house and I was alone in my room that I realized that, by explaining the limits of bookspace in such clinical detail, I had managed to give my mother a very accurate picture of my love life, or lack of, for most of the year.

I was mortified! I was beyond mortified! And what’s worse, she knew exactly what I was saying and didn’t comment one way or the other. It’s nice to be trusted by my parents like this, but I still feel like she tricked me into telling her about it.

Mums are sneaky. I only hope I can be half as good as my mum is when it’s my turn.

Waivunu Fiji, Jan 2nd 1997...

Hermione stuck her head out of her door to what would have been an unusual sight, if it had been someone else’s house. However, with Sirius, Remus and Harry living there, and Cindy living there part time, the sight was quite common.

Harry was in his pajamas at one end of the corridor, hurling spells towards the far end of the corridor where Sirius was busy dodging and trying to deal with a wand that had been expanded until it was nearly six feet long.

Harry had bunny ears, and whiskers, and Sirius was being attacked by a flock of ducks biting at his bare feet. Remus was laughing in hysterics and stuck to the ceiling; Cindy sat on the floor laughing and watching Sirius; obviously the result of a tickling charm.

Dan and Emma took one look at the prank battle underway and dashed back into their room. This time they were prepared. Dan leapt into the corridor holding a metal trash can cover as a shield in one hand, and a can of Silly String in the other. He immediately assaulted Sirius.

Emma had a water pistol and her own trash can cover.

Hermione rolled her eyes and stepped over to Harry’s side. She tapped him on the shoulder and when he turned to look at her, she reached up and kissed him. While she was kissing him, she put him in a full body bind, then she pivoted and sent a spell hurtling down the corridor at Sirius.

“Wait, wait, wait!” he shouted. “I surrender! And call off the ducks!”

“Yes!” Dan exclaimed. “The Grangers win the day!”

Harry looked at Hermione and his whiskers twitched. "That was cheating," he murmured.

"All is fair in love and war," she replied primly.

He leaned closer to her and she had to grab him to keep him from falling. He was tightly bound and his head rested on her shoulder.

Emma turned in time to see Harry whisper something to Hermione that caused her to blush deeply. "I don't think the war's entirely over with those two," she told the others

Hermione clutched Harry for a moment longer before releasing him from the binding. He turned and banished the ducks and the tickling charm on Cindy. Closing his eyes and concentrating, he then slowly vanished the ears and whiskers.

"Aw, I liked them," Hermione teased.

"Does someone want to free Remus from the ceiling?" asked Dan.

Hermione waited until Remus was safely on the floor before she asked, "Who started it this time and why?"

"It's Harry's fault!" proclaimed Sirius. "He was studying again and being too serious!"

"I can't be serious, you're Sirius!" Harry shot back.

Remus groaned and ducked as Sirius grinned and shot a paint hex down the corridor. The hex missed Harry entirely and hit Hermione square in the chest.

Dan examined his daughter carefully. She'd turned orange with blue polka dots and green mushrooms. "She looks like some sort of demented kids cereal," he announced with a grin.

"Uh oh," Harry said warily as he backed away. It was true that he had a lot more power than she did, but when mad, Hermione could scare any sane person.

"Oops! Sorry Hermione," Sirius called sheepishly.

Dan began to laugh, but was silenced by Emma's glare.

Hermione smirked and her fingers twitched slightly. Harry had been working extensively with her about getting over her need to move her fingers when casting with her ring. Like Remus and Sirius, she was intimately tied to her wand. He despaired of ever breaking her of the habit. She had mastered the idea of casting without an incantation, but she still needed to gesture, even if it was something minimal.

Unlike Sirius and Remus, she had mastered the idea of commanding magic directly, so she was capable of casting without using a known spell.

He winced, watching her hand twitch, then glanced up the corridor at Sirius. His head flattened and his ears grew to enormous proportions, then they started flapping vigorously. He made a squawking sound and grabbed onto Cindy. Then his head lifted the rest of his body off the ground, his grip pulling Cindy up into the air with him.

"Hermione!" Emma exclaimed.

"Not until he changes me back! I am not going to stand around looking like an advertisement for Ronald Weasley's favorite Quidditch team!" she shot back.

Remus stopped laughing at Sirius' predicament. He turned to look at Hermione and, with a negligent wave of his wand, she returned to normal color.

Checking herself thoroughly, she nodded to Remus, then looked at Sirius. He was still squawking indignantly as his head bounced gently against the ceiling. He still held Cindy, who was laughing so hard, she hung limply in his arms.

Hermione's hand twitched again and Sirius' ears returned to normal. Harry caught Cindy with a cushioning charm, while Sirius bounced, hard, on the polished wood floor.

"Hey!" he whined. "Why didn't anyone catch me?"

"We wanted to know if you'd bounce," replied Emma with a straight face.

That was the last straw. As everyone else began to laugh, Sirius glared at them all, hoping they'd burst into flames... or at least shut up!

The same night, several hours later...

The house had slipped into silence, the prank war forgotten when everyone finally retired for the night. Dan and Emma in their room, Sirius and Cindy in theirs. Only Remus, Harry and Hermione were alone in their rooms and Harry wasn't sleeping, he was immersed in Transfiguration books again.

He was jolted from his study when someone cried out Sirius' name. Drawing his wand, he bolted toward the bedroom door. Professor Murphy had

started him on a technique that involved using both his wand and ring to cast. It was difficult, as he was using his wand in his left hand, but it was a useful skill to learn.

He careened into the corridor and skidded to a halt. Tonks stood in the hall, her Auror's uniform disheveled and scorched looking. She was standing in front of Sirius' door, shouting his name.

Seeing her condition, Harry dropped the silencing charms on Sirius' room, then banged loudly on the door.

A moment later Sirius opened the door wearing only his boxers. Behind him, Cindy was putting on her dressing gown.

Tonks pushed past Harry. "Thank Merlin!"

"Tonks?" Sirius asked, confused.

"There's been another attack by the Cult of Voldemort, a bad one."

Sirius scowled. "All right. Give me five minutes and I'll meet you in the kitchen. Harry, put something strong on to drink, please, and make sure Remus is getting up."

"I'm up," Remus said from his doorway. Like Sirius, he was dressed only in his boxers.

Tonks blushed, seeing his muscular chest. She dropped her eyes for a moment and her blush deepened as she quickly looked back up and into his eyes.

Harry looked away from the pair, embarrassed for them. Remus and Tonks had been taking their growing relationship slowly, just as he and Hermione had. Seeing the Grangers awake and concerned, he walked toward the kitchen, Hermione hot on his heels.

"How come you're still dressed, Harry?" she asked

He sighed, knowing he was about to get into trouble. "I was up late, studying. There's an alternative Transfiguration for inanimate to animate that I wanted to master."

He turned and filled a pot with water and heated it with a quick charm, then he pulled out the tea they normally drank and a number of mugs.

"Harry," Hermione chided.

His shoulders slumped and he nodded. "Yeah, I know I'm over doing it, but the first exam is less than a month away."

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Promise me you'll try to take it easier? You don't want to work yourself into an illness like last year."

He nodded and guided her to the table as the others filed in. Remus kept trying to make sure Tonks was all right and she kept trying to smack him away.

"Honestly, Remus, I'm fine. I'm just a little singed," she protested. His obvious concern was enough to cause her hair color to cycle wildly. The pair had been skirting the edges of forming a relationship for a while now and still hadn't made up their minds about what they were doing.

Once everyone was seated, Tonks took a deep breath and began.

"Earlier today I was in the DMLE headquarters when someone floo'd the office with an announcement that the Mark of Voldemort was spotted in two locations."

"They're casting the Dark Mark again?" gasped Sirius.

Tonks shook her head. "No, not the Dark Mark. This is different. We now believe that the Cult of Voldemort doesn't have any of the original Death Eaters as members. If there are, they're keeping that information to themselves. The Mark of Voldemort is a V shaped snake made from smoke. It doesn't have nearly the lifespan of the old Dark Mark, which lasted for hours."

"So where were these marks?" asked Hermione.

"The first was in the Soho section of London," Tonks said, then turned to Sirius. "I knew your home was there, so I went to check on it immediately. I'm sorry, Sirius, but they torched the entire block of homes at Grimmauld Place, hoping to burn yours in the process. And when I heard about the other mark, I knew it was an attack on you."

"And the other mark?" pressed Sirius in a strangled tone. The destruction of his home didn't bother him much, but he owned the surrounding homes and there were people, whole families, living in them.

Tonks looked at the table refusing to meet anyone's eye. "The second mark was in Oxford, over Paradise Square."

Cindy gasped and clutched at Sirius. "No. Oh, no," she murmured. She lived in an apartment building at Paradise Square in Oxford!

"Was anyone hurt?" asked Hermione quietly. She had been to Cindy's place many times, even sleeping over there. It was a home away from home.

Harry stood and walked over to the potions cabinet. He pulled out a small pink bottle and walked back to the table. He poured a drink into a shot glass and slid it over to Cindy. She stared at the drink for a long moment.

"Most of the people got out of their homes at Grimmauld. I wasn't sure if Cindy was home, or exactly where her apartment was, so I ending up blowing down doors to about twenty apartments in the building before the fire got too intense. There were a great many killed or injured in the fire," Tonks said softly.

Cindy grabbed the glass and slammed the potion down. Then she turned into Sirius' chest and began to weep as his arms wrapped around her tightly.

"This is a calming potion. Does anyone else need?" Harry asked softly as he held up the bottle.

He looked at Dan, who glanced at Emma and Hermione, then nodded. Harry conjured two more glasses and poured, then passed one to Dan. He took the other glass and handed it to Hermione. Her eyes met his and he could see the grief in them. At his urging, she drank the potion, then he slid his chair close to hers and wrapped his arms around her, holding her like Sirius was holding Cindy.

The Grangers knew a number of families in the apartment complex and the odds were some of them were now dead.

"Are we safe here, Sirius? We could return to Britain and hole up at Potter Manor. It's unplottable," Harry offered.

Sirius shook his head. "No, we're secure here and you need to finish your schooling here. My mother's home is probably untouched by the fire. The house had anti-fire charms all over it, plus Dobby was there. Tomorrow, however, Cindy and I will go home. I'll help her salvage anything she can, then move her into Grimmauld. I'm also going to contract a goblin warding team to go over the Granger's house."

"How about a Fidelius on the beach house?" asked Harry.

"It's not needed, Harry," replied Remus. "We have a ward up that's rather unique. It's a repelling charm that convinces people that the one they seek doesn't live here. Doesn't matter who they're looking for, all they know is that the person they seek isn't in this house. And there are additional, more active defensive wards if they get closer."

Sirius turned slightly, pulling Cindy deeper into his embrace. She had stopped crying and was huddled against him, as if seeking his protection.

"Dobby," Remus called.

"He can't hear you, mate. It's too far away," Sirius said. "Besides, he's not bound to you. Harry might be able to call him, though. The little blighter is bound to him, after all."

Harry winced as he felt Hermione's eyes boring into his shoulder. "It's not what you think," he whispered. "I'll explain later, just trust me."

She nodded and relaxed in his embrace again.

Remus stood. "Sitting around here will accomplish nothing. Sirius, you should put Cindy to bed and stay with her. I'll go with Tonks back through the portal and we'll check on the properties."

Tonks nodded and stood to join Remus. Sirius looked grateful as he helped Cindy stand. He led her from the room, followed a moment later by Dan and Emma.

Remus looked at Harry and Hermione with an arched eyebrow. Harry got the implied message and he stood, pulling Hermione to her feet.

Satisfied that everyone was going to bed again, Remus and Tonks passed through the portal back to Britain.

The corridor was empty by the time Harry and Hermione got to their rooms. Hermione paused and placed a hand on her door, looking undecided.

Harry turned, sure that she would go into her room. He opened the door to his room and stared at the desk with his lamp still on and the pile of books laying about.

"Harry?"

He turned to see Hermione standing in the doorway. She was fingering the belt on her robe nervously.

"What's wrong?"

"Can... Can I say with you tonight? Just to sleep?"

He glanced at the pile of books then turned back to her. "I think I'd like that," he replied softly. "I'd like that very much."

She nodded and entered the room, shutting the door behind her. She cast several spells on the door to warn them if someone tried to enter. When she was finished, she walked over to the bed and quickly shed her robe, revealing a pair of boxers and a long t-shirt, then she slid under the covers of his bed.

Harry stood for a long moment, feeling as if his feet were glued to the floor. With a shake of his head, he walked to the bed and pulled off his shirt. Sitting down, he kicked off his slippers and was about to lay down next to her when her voice stopped him.

"Harry, I know you don't sleep in your jeans," she said softly.

"I was just..."

"I know what you were trying to do, but I want you to be comfortable enough to sleep."

He nodded and pushed his jeans off, leaving only his boxers, then he slid under the blankets. With a wave of a his hand, he extinguished the lights. When Hermione rolled so that she was spooning up behind him, he froze for a moment, then relaxed again.

He was acutely aware of her soft warm body pressing against his back. *How am I going to be able to sleep with her doing this?* he thought.

It was the last conscious thought he had before falling asleep.

Waivunu Fiji, Jan 3rd 1997...

The soft pinging noise didn't wake Harry. Neither did the vibration of the bed. He was just too comfortable. What woke him was the sound of someone coughing gently in his room. He opened one eye slightly, unsure what to expect.

There was a bushy haired brown mass sleeping on his shoulder, with her arm thrown across his stomach. His arm was wrapped around her with his hand lightly touched her bum.

The person coughed again.

"Yes, Mum, I hear you," Hermione answered sleepily.

"Dear, due to the problems back home, we're going to leave early. I had thought to let you stay two more days, but now I'm not so sure I should."

When Harry flinched, Hermione sighed and lifted her head to peer at her mother. "Honestly, Mum, nothing happened. I didn't want to be alone last night. All we did is sleep. As it was, I had to convince Harry not to sleep in his jeans."

He winced again and wondered if he should say something.

Hermione knew he was awake. She had tightened her grip on him and one hand was caressing his stomach lightly under the blankets.

Emma sighed. She really couldn't blame her daughter; she had needed Dan desperately last night, too. "What do you think I should do, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head, causing her hair to brush against Harry's chest, tracing an erotic trail that both tickled and started his blood boiling, despite her mother being in the room.

"I think you should trust us, Mum. We've talked about this and you yourself pointed out that I'm of age, as far as British law is concerned, and we're both of age as far as the Pacific Rim Ministry is concerned. Besides, I told you, we're not doing that yet. It was just sleeping and if I decide to share his bed, that's probably all it will be for now."

Emma stared at her daughter, undecided. She had been waiting for months for Hermione to tell her she and Harry had been intimate. But now, being confronted with the possible reality of it, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Harry had kept his eyes closed through the exchange, but now he opened them. "We didn't do anything wrong, Mrs. Granger," he told her softly. "But if you must be angry, be angry at me. Hermione isn't at fault in this."

Harry's words were enough to push Emma into her decision. She had been vacillating until he spoke. It was so like Harry to try to divert her anger away from Hermione. "Very well. I'll explain it to your father. But for both your sakes, I hope you two act responsibly. I'm not ready to be a grandmother."

With those final words, Emma turned and walked from the room, leaving Harry and Hermione blushing heavily.

Harry closed his eyes and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Are you angry?" Hermione asked. She was leaning against his chest with her chin resting on him, watching him closely.

He smiled at her without opening his eyes and touched her hair. "Angry? How can I be angry? All my life I've wanted to have someone to hold me through the night. After we became good friends, you became the person I wanted to hold me. I'm sorry that your Mum is upset, but I'm not angry, nor do I regret sleeping with you last night. It was brilliant. The best nights sleep I've ever had."

His arm tightened around her for a moment and she laid her head back down on his chest. He chuckled and squirmed under her. She lifted her head and looked at him curiously.

"Your hair," he explained. "It tickles."

She grinned at him and turned her head, dragging massive amounts of hair across his skin and he writhed under her for a moment before pulling her up and kissing her. She gasped around his lips, then opened her mouth, entangling her tongue with his.

They kissed for several minutes before the need for oxygen became critical. They broke apart, panting, and stared at each other. She could feel his arousal brushing her thigh through his boxers. A part of her yearned to reach for it and fulfill the need that seemed to pulse between them.

Harry calmed and looked at her, his eyes turning almost black. "We should get up if everyone is returning to Britain today."

Except you, he thought, trying desperately to fight the urge to drag her down and kiss her senseless.

“You’re probably right. Besides, Mum will talk to Dad, but I don’t need to drive him insane today,” she admitted with a slight grin.

“You are going to stay with me?” he asked in a whisper.

She blinked and smiled at him. “What exactly are you asking, Mr. Potter?”

“Will you sleep with me?”

She grinned. *Yes!* she shouted to herself. *And perhaps I can help move you off that fence a little.* She dropped her gaze. “If you want,” she replied shyly.

The Granger Residence, Oxford England, Jan 4th 1997...

They arrived in England and settled into the Granger’s guest bedroom with a dose of sleeping potion. When they awoke the next morning, Dan and Emma accompanied Sirius and Cindy to her apartment on Paradise Square in the hopes that they would be able to find something salvageable. Tonks’ description implied the building was still standing, but it was only after they arrived that they came to understand that Tonks had not stayed around to witness the fire in it’s entirety.

The building was a charred ruin; a collapsed shell with only pieces of walls still standing. Yellow police tape cordoned off the area and several constables sat in a police car staying warm in the frigid temperatures.

Sirius and Cindy got out of the car to stare at the rubble. Dan and Emma remained in the car to allow the other couple their privacy.

“Sirius, it’s all gone.” Cindy said. “There’s nothing here to save.”

He placed his arm around her shoulders. “I see it, love,” he replied tightly. He had checked in with Dobby and discovered that 12 Grimmauld Place had been untouched by the fire, but the other fourteen homes on the block were a total loss. Had Grimmauld Place burned down, he wouldn’t have cared. He could go to Black Manor in Kent, or even use Potter Manor up in Wales, but that wasn’t what bothered him. What bothered him was the fact that Cindy and so many others had had their lives thrown into turmoil, all because of some outdated bigotry.

She turned to him and her lower lip trembled. “What will I do?” she whispered. All of her important documents, her clothes, her books, the last ten years of accumulated life were part of the rubble behind her.

He cupped her face in his hands. “We rebuild, my sweet. That’s what we’re going to do. We were planning on getting married in a few months and building a life together. So we just started earlier than we thought. Your important papers we’ll replace, like your diploma and medical license. Your books and clothing are just things. We can get more of the same, starting today.”

He turned her and led her back to the car. There was nothing they could do or salvage from the ashes.

Dan pulled the car into the road and headed east towards the A40 and London. “So, what now?” he asked carefully.

Cindy wiped the tears from her eyes and straightened in the seat. “Sirius is right. It’s time to start over.”

“You’re welcome to stay with us, Cindy,” Emma offered.

Cindy shook her head. “Thanks, Em, but Sirius has asked me to move into his London home. I’m going to give my notice at the clinic and pass off my patients to Dr. Schultz. I’m not sure if I’ll look for something in London or if I’ll open up something on Fiji. We haven’t decided exactly what will happen, but with Sirius having his Wizengamot duties, I expect we’ll be spending more time back in London than Fiji.”

“That’s right. Besides, I need to spend more time at home, now. The block of buildings surrounding my London home is owned by myself and James Potter. I suppose that goes to Harry now. We never got around to dealing that particular aspect.

“When my family kicked me out, Charles bought the surrounding land and gave half to me and half to James. He wanted us to use it to make our fortunes and he thought it would be amusing to own all the buildings and land around my family’s property.”

“Yes, erm... About Harry...”

“Dan! You promised!” snapped Emma.

Dan scowled and glared at the road in front of him.

Sirius glanced at Cindy, who shrugged. She didn’t know what was going on either.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” he asked carefully.

Dan looked over at Emma, who ignored him. She turned in her seat so she could see the rear easier. “I caught Hermione and Harry in bed together. They were just sleeping, or so they claim. Dan is rather upset about it. Hermione, however, clearly reminded me that they are both of age according to the Pacific Rim Ministry and she’s of age according to British law, Muggle and magical. I think it was her polite way of telling me to butt out.”

Sirius nodded and looked to Dan. "And your opinion, Dan?"

Dan sighed and he gripped the wheel tightly. "I have been told in no uncertain terms that I need to recognize that my little girl has grown up and made her choice known. I've also been reminded that I was two years younger than they are now when I was first intimate. I've also had it explained to me until I was sick of hearing it, that they only slept, nothing more. It doesn't help that the boy that spent the night with my daughter is capable of vaporizing me if I so much as yell at my daughter. So I can't exactly scare him off."

He relaxed a little and his voice dropped. "What my mind knows and what my heart says are two very different things. Logically, I know I can't stop her and I know she's too smart to get herself mixed up with anyone who would hurt her. But my heart says she's my little girl and she's too young. And Harry's too young, plus he doesn't have a job, so how can he support her when his trust runs out?"

Emma reached out and placed her hand on Dan's shoulder comfortingly.

"Reasonable concerns, I'll agree. Now would you like to know a few things that will help relieve your fears?" Sirius asked.

Dan nodded, tight lipped.

"First off, I'm not worried. Both of them are very responsible. Perhaps too responsible. Harry's been so focused on his studies because they mean his freedom from Voldemort and his life beyond. And Hermione's always been a serious girl. Right now, I don't think they'll do anything to make you ashamed of them.

"And as for his trust, it won't run out, ever. The trust is only a small vault of fifty thousand galleons, but it's refilled on the first of January every year from the main family vaults. I don't know the full amount off the top of my head, but there is close to fifteen million galleons in Harry's family vaults and another four million in properties, stocks and securities. How much is in that vault in terms of antiques and rarities is unknown, but I'd guess another couple million. Harry could spend his entire trust in a year and come January, it would refill without digging into the principal in the family vaults.

"We've hinted to Harry that he has a lot more coming to him when he turns seventeen, but we haven't sat him down and gone over it to the last knut. He's been working on the assumption that his trust is what he has to work with, plus a bit more once he's of age. He could spend his entire life doing nothing and never run out of money, Dan. He'll be able to take care of himself and Hermione, and any children they have."

Dan winced and scowled at that last part.

"Look, forget his wealth, forget his fame and all that for a moment. He loves her, and from what I can see, she feels the same way about him. If you try to break them up, you'll fail and she'll hate you for it. Do you really want to do that to her and yourself?" Sirius asked bluntly.

"Sirius is right, Dan," Cindy added. "She is your daughter, through and through. She can be as stubborn as you and you know how unhappy you'd make her if you didn't approve of their relationship."

He nodded slowly and his shoulders slumped in acceptance.

Emma smiled softly at him. "I think someone didn't want to let their baby grow up."

"And you did?" he countered.

"No, I suppose I didn't. But I knew it was inevitable," she replied. "It happens to every parent and, honestly, Harry really cares for her. It could have been so much worse."

"Yeah, I know..."

"It's not the end of the world," Emma added.

"Look at it this way. In a few years time, you'll have some green eyed bushy haired grandchildren to play with," Sirius offered.

The silence that followed his statement was broken by Cindy's sudden laughter.

"What's so funny?" Sirius asked.

"Imagining Harry and Hermione's children. I can just see it. Those poor kids will never have a decent head of hair."

The car filled with laughter as they drove towards London, the somber mood replaced by a much lighter one.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Jan 5th 1997, Oxford, England...

As I write this I'm back in my room in England. It's late, nearly eleven and I should be in bed. The problem is I don't want to sleep alone. For the last three nights, Harry and I shared a bed and while for the most part, we slept, it was an experience that was both romantic and spiritually uplifting.

The second night I woke up in the middle of the night to feel Harry trembling next to me. He may have been having a nightmare, I'm not sure, but I reached out and touched him and the tremors ceased. In his sleep he rolled and embraced me in a way that would have embarrassed him had he been awake. And despite that, I felt safe and at peace in his arms.

I learned a lot about Harry and myself during the last three days and I think that the one thing I learn that meant the most to me was the realization that I belonged in his arms. It's where I want to be, now, and when we make love, it's where I want to be when I take my last breath. It's where I

belong.

This morning I woke around three in the morning. Harry was holding me and stroking my hair. He was awake and had been for hours, laying next to me and just holding me while I slept. We talked for a bit about nothing important and his stroking put me back to sleep. How can I get that at Hogwarts? Or here?

I can't.

On the plus side, my Dad came into my room tonight and spoke to me about my sleeping with Harry. It seems my Mum, and others, spoke to him about it. He wasn't happy about it at all. He came into the room and said he wanted to ask me a question.

"Go ahead," I told him.

"If I tried to stop you from seeing Harry, you'd refuse and see him anyway, wouldn't you? And hate me for it?" he asked.

I stared at him for a moment in shock, then I nodded. I felt an irrational surge of anger and a distinct urge to remind my father that I was the one with lethal capabilities, while he was just a Muggle. Fortunately, I held my tongue and my anger.

Daddy looked at me for a moment, then he nodded. "Come this summer when Harry is here, I'll not say anything, but I expect you both to be responsible for your actions. And I will appreciate if you don't rub my face in your nocturnal activities. Let me at least pretend my daughter hasn't grown up already."

I stood and walked over to him and hugged him. It's been a long time since I really hugged my Daddy, and I knew I was half a minute from a good cry. It was a major concession on his behalf. He wrapped his arms around me and I was stuck by how alike and unlike it was from Harry's hugs. Dad is strong like Harry and you can feel the love in his hugs, but there was something missing from Daddy's hug. Something only Harry can provide. I feel safe in my Dad's arms, and loved, but it's a different kind of love.

On the other hand, sitting here now, several hours later and my face hurts from the size of my grin. My father has given me permission to sleep with my boyfriend. I am a most dutiful daughter and will try very hard to obey him.

So tonight, and for the next six months, I have to sleep alone and I don't like it. But there is nothing I can do about it. I will admit that, before I left Fiji, I briefly considered staying with Harry and basically dropping out of Hogwarts. I could have taken my NEWTS in the Pac Rim, but I couldn't do that. Not to my parents or to myself.

It's not forever. Harry told me when we talked in bed that, next year, after I returned to Hogwarts, he'd ask for permission from my parents to marry me. That plan hasn't changed in the least. So, someday soon he and I will be together forever. I can wait for that, especially since we'll have the summer to look forward to.

Mrs. Hermione Potter. It has a nice, sweet ring to it, I think.

Daily Prophet Headline Article Jan 6th 1997...

*Wizengamot Member Targeted in Attack.
Ministry admits to existence of extremist cult!*

Sirius Orion Black, Wizengamot member and leading advocate for non-human species rights, was the victim of a vicious attack by the Cult of Voldemort, a new extremist group which the Ministry has acknowledged as now operating in the U.K.

Mr. Black is known for being the Godfather of the Boy Who Lived, as well as being the only person to escape from the island of Azkaban. Black, age 38, is one of the leaders of the moderates in the Wizengamot and a big supporter of the current Minister. He also recently announced his betrothal to a Muggle woman last month.

One Ministry employee, speaking on condition of anonymity, stated that he believes Mr. Black's decision to marry a Muggle and his political activism has made him a target for these attacks.

Black denied the possibility, when asked. "I fail to see how my decision to marry the woman I love has any affect on anyone. It is the business of my family, myself and Ms. Adams. The cowards who tried to hurt me missed their target entirely and instead burned out more than forty Muggle families, whose lives have been totally disrupted."

The Ministry acknowledged that the attacks were carried out by an extremist group that calls themselves the Cult of Voldemort. Kingsley Shacklebolt, Senior Auror and lead investigator into this mysterious group, called them a bizarre anomaly. "The Cult clearly claims to adhere to the philosophies espoused by Voldemort. The problem is that Voldemort, were he alive today, would be a powerless Muggle.

"Additionally, we've found that his parentage was not that of a pureblood, like so many believed. Voldemort himself was a half blood, the product of a witch raping a Muggle man through the use of love potions. Why the Cult would exist at all is a mystery to us. Wizards, worshiping a powerless half blood? It doesn't make any sense, but we'll track them down and bring them to justice."

Ministry spokesman Perky Weatherbee said "We are endeavoring to locate and Obliviate all the involved Muggles so that our world remains secure. In the meantime, there is no cause for alarm or panic. The DMLE is hunting these criminals down even now, and their ultimate goal of

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Jan 6th 1997, Waivunu Fiji...

She slept in my bed!

In my bed!!

I wanted to sit down and write this. I wanted to put into words what I felt, but I can't. Words fail me. I was never very good with words in the first place, not like Hermione. But I can't even begin to describe what it felt like to wake with her head laying on my chest. Even the small bit of drool didn't bother me!

For the first time in my life I felt... wanted? Needed? Special? Important? Damn, I don't know. I felt great. I wanted to shout how I felt from the roof. I wanted to jump on the bed and whoop like a kid.

This is so much more than just sex. Sure, it felt fantastic to feel her breasts pressed against me, and it took all of my willpower to keep my hands to myself. But this was more, much more.

And then she told me not to be embarrassed by my erection. Really! How could I not be embarrassed by it? The bloody thing had a mind of its own these past few days. I swear, if it could have, it would have tried whistling for her attention.

Hey! Maybe I can come up with a spell to do that and try it on Sirius? I bet it would freak Cindy out. Maybe something for their honeymoon? I'll think about it.

I spent a lot of time in the shower, taking care of business. Not that it helped. And it didn't help that she knew why I was spending so much time in the shower. She walked around for those last two days with a mysterious smile on her face that she wouldn't explain.

Our last night together she whispered a secret to me when we spoke in the middle of the night. She said, "My arousal might not be as visible as yours, but it's there, just the same."

Here I was sure I was coming off as some kind of constantly horny pervert and then she admitted she felt the same way.

I really hope we can do this again this summer and maybe more. I know what we agreed, but I'm beginning to wonder if that was a good idea. When I'm holding her in the middle of the night with nothing more than a t-shirt and boxers between me and heaven, it's hard to say that waiting is a good idea.

Sirius popped over for a short time today to talk about the damage around Grimmauld Place. I didn't know it, but apparently he and I are co-owners of the block! He said he was going to hire an architect to design a modern Muggle building for the block and he'd show me the design when it was ready. I agreed and told him to go ahead with the project.

I know I'm going to have to start managing my finances soon. The problem is, no one has really explained what I have. I had thought my Estate Management class would be a perfect place for that, but they didn't. We worked off a phony set of accounts. The week I paid for the Grangers to visit was the one time I did any of that sort of thing, and it all came from my trust fund. I need to speak with Sirius or Remus about it. I can't ignore it just because I have to deal with Voldemort. My dad didn't ignore it and I won't either. I'm going to need to know what I have, so Hermione and I can make our plans.

I'm basically alone here for the next week. Hermione is going back to Hogwarts tomorrow and my tutors start arriving again the day after, but no one will be here when they're gone. I have the whole house to myself. I guess it's a good thing my NEWTS are coming. Studying will keep me out of trouble.

Remus is supposed to be back here by the middle of the month.

I know I can't spend all day thinking of Hermione. If I did, she'd be happy right up until I got my grades.

If all goes well, I'll be done with school at least up to NEWT level soon. And then I can go about reclaiming my life.

Quibbler Headline Article Jan 25th 1997...

Harry Potter Wins Tour De France!

Capitalizing on his being a well toned and extremely athletic wizard posing as a Muggle, Harry Potter led his team to victory in the famed Muggle race, the Tour De France, and in doing so created an upset of unprecedented proportions. Potter, age 16, led the powerhouse team from Botswana to an upset victory yesterday and while doing so, distributed leaflets proclaiming the plight of the stunted spotted Yetis of Pango Pango.

Outraged by the incident, Frenchmen in the French province of Quebec rioted for thirty minutes before they were calmed by an offer of wine and cheese by the government. Local sources admitted that the wine came from California and the cheese was from Wisconsin, but that didn't stop the agonized locals from consuming huge quantities of the stuff.

Bookmakers across the continent were in turmoil over the upset victory, especially since only one person bet on him. Harry Potter bet on

himself at 25,000 to 1 odds. He then turned around and donated his winnings to a home for Unwed Mothers whose name started with the letter "8".

Botswana declared a holiday and as soon as they can find their national airplane, which is a Muggle device for moving people, much like a catapult, they will bring home their winning team and they will hold a parade throughout the country. Several have suggested the hugely popular pop single "Muggle Me Mama!"; sung by Harry Potter, to be the new Botswana national anthem.

Potter refused comment, except to issue a warning to Monaco to release the Fried Fritz Bellies they hold in captivity, then he donned his patented bat suit and swooped away. We were unable to confirm the rumor that he had managed to impregnate a colony of French Veelas while competing in the race. But one Veela did come forward to say "He iz a God!"

Meanwhile, Botswana, bolstered by this win, announced plans to either start their own space program or an attempt to circumnavigate the world, thus proving the world is not flat. We promise to watch this carefully.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Jan 27th 1997, Hogwarts...

Dear Harry,

Well it's official. I have been declared crazy in Gryffindor house since I've started revising for my NEWTS already. Some, like Neville and Ron, have joined in half-heartedly. No, I can't believe it, either. Ron is studying, but he's still doing what he can to impress Hannah. Ginny studies with us also, but she's not working on her NEWTS, she's studying for her OWLS, which are this year for her.

Lavender and I have had some heated words. I can't believe how angry and vicious she's become! She is so mad about Evan. For some strange reason, she seems to think that my dating Evan is an affront to her ability with men. Parvati explained that I was competing with her, until I pointed out that Evan doesn't attend Hogwarts, therefore I am not touching the pool of available boys in the school in any way. That shut Parvati up, but it hasn't stopped Lavender. Honestly, I think she sees it as some great cosmic insult to her womanhood that I am able to have a boyfriend that she can't wrap around her finger.

Ginny's basically explained that Evan wasn't interested in her in any way, and that he was extremely attentive to me. That's better than most of the boys here at school, who have to think about it before choosing between their girlfriends and Quidditch. I won't go into how many times Hannah's smacked Ron because he's ignored her in favor of food.

I think Lavender is behind the attempts to get into my trunk. I actually pity her if she succeeds. The wards I've learned will ruin the looks she's worked so hard to obtain. And even if she did get in, your photo and the book are protected by so many spells, she'd end up spending a month in the hospital wing reversing the damage.

Do you remember that crystal? The one you created from the napkin on the night of the Christmas party? I showed it to Professor Flitwick and he ran a bunch of tests on it. He's not entirely sure about it because I can't really tell him how I came about to have it, but he can't identify the material. It's some kind of crystal and he believes it would act as a focus. Now, here's the really strange thing. I've been able to use it a little as a focus, but I think it's a blood focus, Harry, like our rings. It is very sharp and it was mixed with your blood.

I don't know what good it can do, really. It's a strange oddity, but I'll hang onto it. Perhaps over the summer we'll think of a use for it. I just find it fascinating that you created it from a napkin.

I really miss you, Harry. If I stop and think about you, which I do many times every day, it feels like a piece of me is missing. I miss being able to cuddle up with you in the bed and I miss the feel of your hands on me. I miss being able to rest my head on your chest, lulled to sleep listening to your heart beat. I can't wait until the summer, but it seems so far away now. Bookspace is nice, but it's not the same. I want to relax with you in the bed next to me. I want to hold you and be held and we can't do that in the hour we have in bookspace.

When I returned to Britain this last time, I left behind the one real thing I had to give you. I left you my heart. I'm yours. I hope you know that by now.

Love,
Hermione.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Jan 28th 1997, Waivunu Fiji...

Sweetheart,

You left your heart here, and took mine with you. Without you I am lost and without any direction or purpose.

I agree that bookspace is nice, but it's lacking in substance. There is a certain undefinable quality to having you in my arms and feel you softly breathing while you sleep. You gave me a wonderful gift and then circumstances took it away. Like you, I miss it terribly.

The only consolation I have is that this summer we will have time for each other and I will help you as best as I can with your NEWT studying. After the summer, unless I really mess up in my NEWTS, I will be at every Hogsmeade weekend you get. I will be there for you as much as I can.

Hopefully this will all be done by your graduation. I'd like to think that particular milestone would be the point where I can finally start to live my life the way I want to, and with the people I want by my side.

I received my portkey to the testing center in Wellington, New Zealand. That's trip of more than 1,500 miles, via portkey, so I've been told to expect to arrive a day early so that I can recover from the trip. If it's anything like that first portkey I took from Fiji to Oxford, I'll need the time to stop my stomach from threatening. I think I may be developing a resistance to the potion they use for the really long distance portkeys. They don't seem to do me any good at all.

Merlin, I am coming to hate portkeys!

Remus has been by a few times but he hasn't stayed around for long. Neither has Sirius. He's been involved in helping Cindy replace most of what she lost in the fire. It's not too bad, but the nights get a little lonely.

Remus thinks he has a lead on the missing brooch. A consignment of Scottish Medieval Jewelry was sent to a museum in Calgary, Canada. According to Remus, there is a photograph of what looks like the brooch in the catalog. The problem is, the item appears to have been altered somewhat, so he won't know until he can get close enough to cast a detection spell.

The last I saw him, he was packing his bags and getting ready to head to Canada. That was four days ago.

Sirius dropped by last night to talk to me. Did I tell you that he and I both own the block of homes on Grimmauld Place? According to Sirius, my Granddad bought the land and homes from the Blacks, using the goblins as intermediaries. So the Blacks never knew who was buying the block. Anyway, Granddad did this after Sirius came to live with them.

It was thought that Sirius would be denied any of the Black money, so Granddad thought it would be interesting if my father and Sirius owned all the land around the London home of the Blacks. They were equal partners. My Granddad did it to help Sirius, plus he thought it would be amusing for the Blacks to discover the disowned son owned the block.

Well, you know what happened. Their plans never came to fruition and Voldemort sidetracked everything. Now, nearly seventeen years later, Sirius is looking to build a Muggle apartment building on the block. Only thing is, the top floor will be split into two penthouse apartments, one for Sirius and one for me.

Sirius also told me about my family fortune. I knew the Potters were well off, but I never knew how well off. Let's just say that if you want to spend your life going to University, you could. Once we're married, you'll never have to pick a career based on what it pays. You'll be able to do whatever you want and I'll be there supporting your decision every step of the way.

I still think it would be fun for us to do something where we could work together if we wanted to.

It's getting late here and I need to get to sleep. Classes start early these days.

*Love,
Harry.*

P.S. Sorry this isn't a more romantic letter. I've tried writing them but they keep coming out sounding lame and dumb.

Calgary, Canada, Feb 1st 1997...

Remus collapsed back on the bed. He was mentally exhausted, yet strangely exhilarated.

Sometime during the last century, a jeweler had taken considerable energy to convert the brooch he was looking for into a pendant. That was why he'd had so much trouble locating it. It was classified as both a medieval object of Scottish origin, and as a work of art designed by a prominent turn of the century jeweler/artist.

It was a clever piece of work, really. The artist had carefully crafted it so that the brooch slipped into place and unless you knew it was a separate piece, it looked like one item.

Tonight had been harrowing. He had slipped past the Muggle security cameras and guards, making his way to the guest exhibition area of the Glenbow Museum. Once there, he had to duplicate the pendant using some gold and gems Sirius had supplied for the project. He was unable to conjure noble metals, like gold and gems; few wizards were. Instead, he'd had to transfigure existing gold and gems to achieve a believable replacement.

After he made the duplicate, he carefully switched it with the original, avoiding the pressure sensitive alarm. Then, despite his invisibility cloak, he had to slowly backtrack, re-enabling the cameras and other alarms that he had disabled. All in all, it took him nearly three intense hours to get into the museum and get out again with his mission accomplished.

“So, that's it, eh?”

Remus sprang from his bed, and promptly tripped over the shoes he had kicked off his feet only a few minutes before. Flailing wildly, he pulled the small lamp from the bedside table and it smashed into the floor next to him, breaking into hundreds of pieces.

You do that almost as well as I do," Tonks said with a smirk.

He peered up at her from the floor. "Tonks? What are you doing here?"

"I had to come over to this side of the pond for a prisoner transfer. It went sour - some sort of paperwork foul up - and I hopped over here from Quebec," she said with a satisfied grin.

He climbed to his feet and stared at her. No one used a portkey for nearly four thousand kilometers and walked away without hours of vertigo! "You did not just portkey here. How long have you been here?" he asked, looking around for an invisibility cloak.

"Remus, Remus," she said shaking her head and grinning. "I'm immune to portkey vertigo. When I take a long distance portkey, I change my ears to remove the inner ear canal. Presto, chango! No vertigo."

"Doesn't that mean you arrive to your location deaf?" he asked incredulously.

"What did you say?" she asked, straight faced. Seeing his expression, she began to laugh.

He tried to glare at her, but felt his lips twitch into a grin and knew he couldn't hold it. She walked over and poked him in the shoulder, which started him laughing.

Chuckling to herself, she turned to sit in a chair and promptly tripped over the same shoe he had tripped over.

He darted forward and caught her inches from the floor. She was cradled in his arms, looking up at him in surprise.

"Well, isn't this cozy?" she asked softly.

Remus blushed heavily. She had been actively pursuing him for months now and he had managed to fend her off, despite the fact that he clearly liked her. Her eyes seemed to glow in the low light of the room and his heart began to race.

She reached up and slid her hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down into a kiss. Remus seemed stunned, like a rabbit staring down a snake. His hands were frozen in place and if he removed them, she would fall to the floor. Pulling her upright only had the effect of pulling her closer.

She kissed him and in doing so, sealed his fate forever. Instinctively, he pulled her deeper into his embrace and responded to her kiss. He gasped and pulled back slightly when she grasped his butt with both hands and squeezed. She grinned sheepishly at him and he smiled back, then let her go.

"I think we need to talk," he said softly.

She looked at him warily for a moment, then nodded reluctantly.

He motioned for her to sit at the table and moved to sit across from her. Between them lay Ravenclaw's brooch, a valuable artifact of the founders and a Horcrux of one of the worst Dark Lords in history.

He sat for a moment and tiredly rubbed his temples with his fingers. The moon was less than a week away and he was starting to feel the affects of his curse.

He sighed and grinned ruefully at her. "I'm not sure where to begin."

"Why don't you tell me what you're feeling, then?"

He nodded and looked down for a moment. "All right. I'm confused. Why me, Tonks? You've been chasing me for a while now and I don't understand it. I'm a lethal monster every month. According to our government, I'm not allowed to hold any job, except for the most degrading of positions. If it weren't for Sirius and Harry, I'd be destitute and living in a hovel. Why would a woman as beautiful as you want me? What can I possibly offer you?"

She reached across the table and took his hand in her own. "An honest heart, Remus. That's what you can offer. I've watched you at work and at play. I've seen how you care and I've seen you sneaking looks at me. I know you care about me."

"I do, but..."

"But?"

"I'm afraid," he replied in a whisper.

"Of me?" she asked incredulously.

He shook his head. "Not exactly, but what we could have and lose. Despite the strides made by the government, there still is a large anti-werewolf sentiment in the Ministry and in our society. If you marry me outside of Britain, you could lose your job. If we have a relationship and a family, the Ministry could take away our children. All I can offer you is misery."

"So, you're afraid of what can happen if we were together?"

"Aren't you worried about it?"

She shrugged. "No, not really. Look, I like you a lot. I think it would be very easy to fall in love with you, if I haven't already. So what happens if we do

fall in love? First, we could leave England. I'm an Auror and could find work in my field almost anywhere. I also hold a Mastery in Transfiguration thanks to the Auror academy and for other obvious reasons. Second, we could stay and tough it out, trying to hide what we have from the Ministry, but sooner or later they will catch onto it."

As she spoke, she ticked off points on her fingers.

"Third, you're an expert in Magical Creatures and you have a qualified teacher's certificate from the Pacific Rim Ministry. What you're doing for Harry now, you could do for others. Wasn't it you telling me about that school they plan on building on Fiji?"

He nodded uncertainly. "Doesn't it bother you that you want to be with a monster?"

She scowled at him fiercely. "Do you want to go out and infect other people?"

"Merlin, no! Why do you think I lock myself up in a concrete bunker every full moon?" he retorted.

"Then stop calling yourself a monster! You aren't!" she snapped. Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly and her pink hair faded to a soft buttery blond and shortened into a pageboy cut.

"Look, Remus, tell me you're not interested in me and I'll back off. Tell me that you don't care and I'll leave you alone. But don't use your curse as an excuse. You walk around suffering nobly and denying yourself any sort of happiness when your curse isn't causing that. Your curse isn't an obstacle, it's a challenge. We don't control who we fall in love with, and I can't help that I find you highly attractive, despite your curse. So, tell me to back off and I will. Otherwise, drop the excuses."

He looked down at the table for a moment then looked her in the eye. "I may be cursed, but I'm not stupid. I can't tell you to back off, as much as I think I'm unsafe. I don't want to be alone anymore," he replied in a whisper.

Tonks nodded to herself and stood. She walked around the table and gently sat on his lap, wrapping her arms around him. "So you won't be alone," she answered huskily, then she kissed him.

The kiss seared through Remus and his inner wolf howled in approval. Without a thought, he easily lifted her in his arms and took her over to the bed, where he laid her. She lifted up her arms to him and he fell into her embrace.

Two hours later, a much happier Tonks and Remus sat around the little table drinking coffee that room service had sent up.

She poked at the brooch with a finger. "Doesn't look like much," she commented.

He reached out and gently pulled her hand away from it. "Don't touch it unless you absolutely have to. The diary possessed Ginny Weasley in her first year and every one of these things we've found has had influences on people."

"Influences?"

He nodded unhappily. "I hate touching them. When I do, I can feel the wolf screaming in anger. It's very unsettling. Sirius said it was like holding pure hatred. Harry knew instinctively not to handle it and wouldn't let Hermione touch it."

Tonks nodded slowly, then she reached for her wand and cast a standard detection spell on the brooch. For a moment nothing happened, then it started to glow a deep red-black and it buzzed angrily. Tonks' expression changed and she shifted back in her chair, away from the Horcrux.

"Frightening, isn't it?"

She nodded and tore her eyes away from the dark object. "What will you do with it?"

"Tomorrow I'll contact Sirius' American friend, Samantha. Then I'll hop on a Muggle plane to Pittsburgh, where I'll meet up with her. From there, we'll go to an industrial blast furnace to melt the Horcrux down."

"Would you like some company?"

He blinked and slowly smiled. "I think I would like that very much."

She glanced at the clock next to the bed. "I guess we should get some sleep then."

He grinned and stood, then he walked around the table and took her by the hand. "Or we could just wait a day since we probably need to use the bed again to err... sleep."

She stood and let the bathrobe she was wearing slip to the floor. "That's an even better idea," she murmured, reaching for him.

12 Grimmauld Place, Feb 3rd 1997...

Cindy walked into the foyer of the old home and entered the spacious sitting room. She sat tiredly in one of the chairs and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Rough day?"

She smiled and opened her eyes. "You wouldn't believe the hoops you have to jump through to get copies of your licenses and diplomas. And if you

Sink that stuff is hard, try getting copies of more basic stuff. My birth certificate for example. You have to provide at least two valid photo ID's to get your birth certificate, and then they won't give you a new master unless you can bring in the ruined old one, but that's ash in Oxford, so all I can get is a copy. I learned that after standing in line for two hours and arguing with a bureaucrat for another hour."

Sirius walked over and sat down on a small footstool. He picked up her feet and peeled her shoes and socks off, then he started to massage her feet.

Cindy's eyes fluttered closed and her head dropped back against the chair. "Ohhhh."

Dobby popped in with a tray. He placed a small glass of wine by her chair and then popped away again. A moment later he reappeared, removing Cindy's shoes and socks and leaving her favorite slippers behind.

"You know, you have to marry me now, Sirius Black. You've been spoiling me something awful since we came back from Fiji. And your foot rubs are something to die for. I could make a fortune renting you out."

Sirius smirked at her. "Sorry, love, but I only give foot rubs to you."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Pity, that. But that just means more for me, I guess. Honestly though, you have magic in your hands. Is this something all wizards do or did I just get lucky?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "You got lucky. Master Kwang taught Harry, Remus and myself how to give massages. Harry needed them when he first started out training and he wanted to learn because it helped Remus after his transformations," he paused and his expression grew sly. "I wonder if he's demonstrated his ability to Hermione yet? Remus swears he's much better at it than I am."

She looked at him sternly. "Siri, let Harry and Hermione find their own way. The last thing we need to do is push them along. As it stands, Dan is barely accepting the changes. Let them grow in their own way."

Sirius shook his head. "It's a shame he's having problems with it. I warned them both over two years ago that this was going to happen."

"Let's see how you react when your daughter is with a boy," she teased.

He stopped rubbing her feet and looked at her in astonishment.

"What?" she asked.

"You know," he said in a wondering tone. "it just occurred to me that having a daughter, or a son of my own, is a real possibility now. I never believed it would happen."

He looked away from her, suddenly emotionally choked up.

She sat forward and reach out to touch him. "Siri, don't look away."

He turned back and she smiled gently, seeing his eyes moist with unshed tears. She reached up to cup his cheek. "You might have lost some of your life in prison, but you got out in time. It's still possible to have what you thought you missed out on."

"A family of our own?"

She nodded. She had come to realize that Sirius was an incredibly complex person with many facets to his personality and she loved them all. "I'd like that very much," she whispered.

Smiling, he stood up and offered her his hand. When she looked at him suspiciously, he sighed. "Come on. I have something I want to show you. You've had a rough day, but I've finally finished one of my projects."

"Oh?"

He nodded and looked like a ten year old wanting to show off his new puppy. With a laugh, she stuck her feet into her slippers and let him pull her to her feet and out of the sitting room, towards the back of the house.

He stopped at a curtain and turned to her. "My cousin knows an Unspeakable. He helped me track down some obscure spells."

"And?"

He pulled back the curtain revealing a bronze plaque next to a door. The plaque read "Doctor Cindy Black".

She turned to him, arching an eyebrow. "Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we?"

"Well, maybe a little," he admitted sheepishly, then to her surprise he handed her his wand. "Hold that."

He pushed the door open and motioned for her to enter the darkened room

She stepped into a room that was nearly pitch black. "Lights!" she called.

Nothing happened.

The sound of the light switch clicking was quite loud and the overhead electric lights flooded the room with a cool blue-white fluorescence.

She turned back to Sirius, who was standing with his hand still on the switch. He was looking inordinately smug about having figured out how to make the lights work.

She looked around. The room seemed normal, until she realized that she was staring at a projection screen television and a state of the art stereo with multidisc CD changer. There was even a cordless phone!

“Siri?” she said softly.

“This isn't just one room, either. There are five of them; a bath, a kitchen, a sitting room, a study and a library, although you need to buy the books for it. The rooms contain all the usual Muggle stuff. The sitting room has a telly and a wireless, the study has a computer, the kitchen has all the usual appliances.”

He paused and grinned at her. “The bath has something called a hot tub in it that sounds like a lot of fun.”

She nodded slowly, taking it all in. “Why did you give me your wand?”

“So I couldn't ruin anything in here. The room is warded to prevent magic from outside coming in here. Even Dobby can't come in to this suite. He's been given specific instructions not to enter these rooms.

“My friend helped me figure out how to power everything and protect it from outside magic. At first I thought I'd do one room for you and it sort of grew from there. I almost put in a bedroom, but I didn't want you sleeping in here without me. Besides, it's only for a year or two. Once Grimmauld Apartments are constructed, we'll move into the penthouse and I'll redo the setup in the penthouse with your help.”

She turned to him, her eyes glistening. “Why? Why go through all the effort?”

He walked over to her and touched her cheek gently. “Because I asked you to share my world, not to give up your own,” he replied softly.

She choked back a sob and flung her arms around him, hugging him tightly. He smiled and rested his head against hers. Her lousy day was forgotten in the wonder of her feelings for the wizard who had changed her world view so radically.

Waivunu, Fiji, Feb 6th 1997...

Tonks opened the door and stepped into the living room, then stopped and stared. Harry was levitating himself, while sitting in a lotus position. She had seen him do that before, but this time he was upside down and reading a book.

Remus stopped behind her, then coughed lightly to catch Harry's attention. He looked up from his book and slowly rotated along one axis until he was right side up again, then he floated down to the floor.

“Welcome back,” he said with a smile.

“What were you doing?” exclaimed Tonks.

“Studying,” Harry replied firmly.

Remus glanced at his watch, concerned.

“Don't worry, Moony,” Harry said. “I spent some time fixing up your bunker. You have fresh water, food, even a change of clothes. I've also refreshed the heating charm, since it seemed to be weakening. It gets down to sixty degrees at night around here.”

Remus nodded at him gratefully. They had rushed as best as they could, but it had taken them too long to make it home. Tonight was a full moon and he was running very late.

“Thanks, Harry,” he mumbled, then he turned to Tonks. “Harry will show you to my room. You can sleep there tonight.”

When she nodded unhappily, he walked out of the living room, heading for his bunker.

“Don't worry, Tonks, he'll be all right. It's only one night,” Harry offered.

She crossed her arms and nodded absently.

“So you and Remus, eh?” he prodded, smiling.

She glanced over at him. “What of it?” she asked warily. She had seen how the three of them behaved and knew to expect teasing of monumental proportions.

“Oh, I think it's brilliant. He needs someone that can see beyond the wolf.”

She looked at him intently. “What would you know about that?”

“Hello? Boy-Who-Lived, remember? Hermione is the only girl I know who's interested in me, Harry, not some made up legend or the fact that I'm

rich. I could understand it if I had actually done something, but I have no recollection of Voldemort's attack. I was fifteen bloody months old. For all I know, I threw a teddy bear at the blighter," he retorted somewhat bitterly.

She nodded thoughtfully and sat down on the couch. "I've been in the same boat. One of the things I like about Remus is that he isn't interested in me pretending to be someone else. He is fascinated with the ability, but he's never asked me to use it. I can't tell you how many boys, in school and then in Auror academy, had requests. They seemed to equate metamorph with some kind of versatile Veela sexpot."

"Even the Veela reputation is over done. They usually find one mate and stick with him, rather than sleeping around. But we are a strange group, even by wizard standards. Werewolf, exonerated convict, and me," he said in agreement. "I take it you're spending the night?"

She grinned. "Why? Want me to change into Hermione for you?"

He smirked. "No, but if you're interested in Remus, I'll make sure you have what you need to help him tomorrow. Do you know how to give a massage? He often needs help the next day from muscles that have been over stressed."

She frowned. "It's that bad?"

He nodded. "It can be. It would be easier if we had a steady supply of Wolfsbane. Cindy said she was going to try to brew it, but that plan was hosed when the homes were burned. She'll probably have it ready for next full moon though."

Tonks made a face. "My potion skills aren't good enough for that. I got into Auror academy well enough, but..."

A clock in the room began to chime softly. Before it had finished, a howl came from outside. Tonks started and shivered involuntarily. "He's all alone," she whispered.

Harry nodded unhappily. "But he knows that family is nearby. I had hoped I could be an animagus like my Dad so I could be with him when he transforms."

"Yeah, but Metamorphs have more fun," Tonks said with a grin. She was trying to latch onto any topic to distract her from what was happening in the bunker. "Your talent is slowly improving. At the rate you're going, you'll be able to change most of your features in a year or two. You can do most of your body parts now, so it's just a matter of practice and putting it all together. Considering how late you started, you're really doing well with it," she praised after tearing her eyes from the darkened windows that faced the bunker.

Harry stood. "I hope you don't mind, but I wasn't planning on company tonight, so dinner is going to be fairly simple."

She smiled wanly, trying hard to ignore the noises coming from outside. "I don't mind. Can I help any?"

"Sure, another set of hands won't hurt," he said over his shoulder as he walked into the kitchen.

Tonks followed and he motioned to the cabinets with the dishes.

"You're starting your NEWTS this year, right?"

Harry grinned. "Yup. I received my portkey to the testing facility in Wellington, New Zealand today. My first test is in three days, but I go a day early to recover from the portkey sickness."

Tonks shook her head. Harry's skills were very good, but he hadn't studied human anatomy that well to make major changes like she did. The best he had accomplished was mimicking the effects of Gillyweed and other body altering potions and he still took nearly a minute to make the changes. He could make some internal changes, thanks to her coaxing, but there was still things he couldn't do, like removing the inner ear.

"What's your first exam, then?"

"Transfiguration."

"Worried?"

"No, not really. I'm more worried about going to New Zealand than I am about taking the test. I figure I should pull an Exceeds Expectations at a minimum for Runes, Potions and Languages. I pulled O's in Defense, Charms and Transfiguration," Harry replied.

He popped open the oven and placed a pre-made platter inside.

Tonks watched him curiously. "So what are we having?"

"It's a staple of the island; baked fish and plantains with a coconut sauce."

He closed the oven and turned around.

She sat at the table frowning. "Plantain? Isn't that a banana?"

He grinned. "Sort of. You'll like it. It's tasty."

"Great, now show me your twelve basic transfigurations and then show me the alternate castings. And use your wand, not that ring thing of yours," she said.

The focus ring fascinated her and Remus had talked about taking her to get one, but she hadn't gotten it yet. Harry's ring was a little different, being hidden behind a charm so it really looked like he was doing things wandlessly. The first time she saw him cast with it, she had been totally floored by the idea that he was casting wandlessly.

Harry grinned, not minding her impromptu quiz. Tonks held a Mastery in Transfiguration and had helped him several times on the topic. He also knew she was trying to find reasons not to pay attention to what was happening in the bunker. Besides, it would pass the time until dinner was ready.

Bookspace February 13th 1997...

As soon as the disorientation ended, she looked around and spotted Harry. She rushed into his arms, fighting back tears. Harry, for his part, was caught entirely by surprise. He held her until the storm had passed, softly stroking her hair and whispering words of comfort in her ear.

"Hermione, what's wrong?"

She sniffled and then smiled when he handed her a conjured tissue. She took a moment to compose herself.

"Lavender is at it again," she replied softly.

"Why are you letting her get to you? Or has this gone beyond rumor and innuendo now?"

She shivered and he tightened his grip on her. "She's spreading some really nasty rumors, but I heard from Padma that she's also tricking several boys into doing whatever they can to make me break up with you."

"Break up with me?" he repeated dumbly. He couldn't see how that could happen.

She nodded against his chest. "Padma warned me about it. She heard about the plan from Parvati. Later that same day I was approached by Ernie McMillan, who asked me out. I told him no, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. I finally had to pull my wand on him."

Harry scowled. "What else?"

"I had to hex Lavender after she tried to break into my trunk. I think she's after my journal in the hope that it contains some juicy gossip. I nearly lost my prefect status over it. Professor Lawton wanted to remove me, but McGonagall wouldn't let her. Lavender ended up in detention and Lawton now hates me."

He nodded and conjured another tissue, then he cupped her cheek and lifted her head to wipe away the tears. "The only way we could possibly break up is if you told me you didn't want to be with me anymore because you didn't love me."

She nodded uncertainly again and he smiled, then he poked at her cheeks. "Show me that smile," he said softly.

She gave him a tentative smile.

"Lavender is an annoyance, sweetheart. You are so much smarter and better than she is. But if you want, I think I can find ways to occupy her time so that she leaves you alone."

She looked at him worriedly.

"No, I won't be coming to the castle either," he replied to her unasked question.

"I don't know."

He kissed her forehead and leaned his head against hers. "Just say the word and we'll tie her up in knots and they'll never be able to trace it back to you."

She remained quiet for a few moments, weighing her options. "No, I think I will take care of it. I guess deep down I just needed to hear you say nothing she did would affect us."

"You know it wouldn't. I'll let you deal with her, but if you need my help, tell me what you want done. You know I'd do anything for you," he replied softly.

She smiled and her heart melted, then she reached up to caress his cheek.

He smiled and sat down. Ever since last Halloween they almost always ended up sitting in the same position, Harry would sit with his legs open and she'd sit, leaning up against his chest with his arms wrapped around her.

She sat and cuddled back against him. Now that they could perform magic in bookspace they were able to conjure objects and items to make them more comfortable. Harry conjured a soft cushion to lean against and she conjured a blanket to cover them both.

"How did you do on your NEWT?"

"The preliminary grade is an Outstanding, possibly with distinction, but there was a problem at the test and it might cost me my grade," he said, sounding unhappy.

She sucked in her breath. “What happened?”

“You remember when I said I was testing as myself?”

She nodded.

“Well, that was wrong. Actually, I am testing as student X, still disguised as Evan. My grades were to be assigned, when all the tests were complete, to a new file in the name of Harry Potter. In the meantime, I'm taking the test anonymously.”

She nodded again. It seemed like a reasonable way of doing it.

“At first, everything seemed alright...”

Harry walked into the room, his paper work clutched in his hand. He had just finished a grueling four hour written examination and the next six hours were dedicated to his practical, which was worth more than half his score.

“This is examination room thirty one?” he asked from the door way. The signs on the door had been mixed up earlier, so a lot of students were having difficulty locating the room they were supposed to be in.

Inside the room, the three judges looked up from the table they sat at. “Yes, come in, come in,” said the man sitting in the center. “I'm examiner Wentworthy. This is examiner Trent and examiner Mobius.” He gestured to his companions, then he glanced down at his paperwork and frowned. “You're... student X?”

“There is a special memo attached to his file from the office of the Minister, as well as Magical Law enforcement, that this student is to remain anonymous for legal reasons,” offered Trent.

“Damn unusual,” muttered Mobius.

“Ah, I see it,” Wentworthy replied, shuffling his papers. He paused and read for a moment before nodding to himself, satisfied that all was in order.

Wentworthy glanced to his companions, then motioned Harry in. He stepped up to the table and handed the senior examiner his paperwork, which also identified him as student X.

Harry stood nervously in front of them, his attention fixed on the senior examiner. He was unprepared for the attack when it came, but his defenses kicked in before he even knew what was happening.

He anchored the probe and sent a powerful blast back down the tendril of magic to its source.

Harry staggered back a step, then pulled his wand. His other hand flared with magic around the hidden ring and he turned to face Mobius, who was slumped over in his chair, convulsing. The man, in an attempt to learn his identity, had tried to use Legilimency on Harry. He had not anticipated that Harry was capable of defending himself or that his active defenses would strike back viciously when attacked.

The other two examiners leapt from their seats in astonishment and stared at Harry.

Hermione gasped. “What happened?”

“It was a mess for a while. I think I spoke to twenty Aurors and ended up sharing a pensieve memory, plus I had to let a master Occlumens examine my shielding technique. It meant I started my practical three hours late and nearly exhausted. As it stands, I was examined by two examiners, not three.

“Normally, the grade granted is an average taken by adding up the examiners grades. I just hope they remember to divide by two and not three.”

She shook her head. “Oh, Harry,” she murmured. “Only you would find a nosy examiner and end up knocking him out. Will he be all right?”

“He'll be fine, once the headache passes. But they said they were going to charge him with using Legilimency on a student. That's a fifteen hundred galleon fine and the Pacific Rim DMLE is planning on investigating why he never registered as a Legilimencer.”

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. “I don't remember us registering when you taught me the spells. And you never mentioned Eton registering you.”

Harry grinned. “Oh, we're registered via the Ministry in Dubai. Apparently, they have very loose registration requirements. Besides, the British Ministry doesn't require registration for Legilimency. Although there is the Mind Arts Council, membership in that group is purely voluntary.”

“So do you think your scores will be affected?”

He sighed and rested his chin atop her head. “I hope not. Examiner Wentworthy said it wouldn't be held against me, but this is a government we're talking about. You know how they work.”

She nodded and shifted slightly in his arms. This was the time she enjoyed the most. They'd sit like this, talking for most of their hour and then he'd start kissing her neck and shoulders. It amazed her how they could go from a serious topic to making out so quickly.

He traced a trail of soft kisses from the top of her head to the back of her neck. She turned in his arms and pushed him down so she could straddle

him. Her hair cascaded down to encase them in a curtain, blocking out most of the light and she leaned down to kiss him.

For now, life was good.

The Beach House, Waivunu, Fiji February 16th 1997...

Harry walked out of his room, heading towards the kitchen. Under his arm was his Japanese language textbook and he was muttering to himself in a mix of English, Japanese and Arabic.

"What's got you so worked up this morning? Your test?"

He stopped and spotted Tonks, sipping tea at the table. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat

down across from her. "No, I think I'll do alright on the test. I'm trying to solve a problem of Hermione's and all I can come up with result in dismemberment and bloodshed."

Tonks blinked and leaned forward. "What's the problem?"

He shifted his cup a few times in his hands. "She's being harassed by Lavender Brown, one of the girls that's in her house, same year. She's been trying to break into her trunk to get at her journal and trying to trick Hermione into compromising positions in the hopes of her breaking up with me."

Tonks scowled. "Why would this girl care who Hermione dates?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't understand it. She seems to take the fact that Hermione is dating Evan as a mortal insult."

"Jealousy," Tonks said sagely.

Harry stared at her in astonishment. "Jealously? Of what?"

"You and Hermione," she replied, then she waved a hand. "You're not looking at this from a girl's point of view, Harry."

"That's because only girls can understand that. If I understood that point of view, I'd write a book and become very popular."

She glared at him. "Are you done being a wise ass and are willing to listen?"

He flushed. "Sorry," he muttered. "Please continue."

"She's jealous, Hermione has become a beautiful young woman and she's been working out with you enough for it to show. And you? You are a walking dream. I love Remus, but you are seriously hot, Harry. If you didn't have Hermione, you'd have witches all over you like a heat rash. This Brown girl has problems with that. I bet she can't stand the fact that Hermione has one fine looking hunk of wizard for a boyfriend."

Harry nodded slowly. "Makes sense, I guess, but that still doesn't help me figure out how to stop it without going to Hogwarts and tearing into her. I had several ideas, but..."

"What is Hermione going to do?"

"I don't know. Last year I sent a letter that was read aloud in the Great Hall that had her backing off. She said she'd take care of it, but I worry about her," he admitted.

"If you want my advice, do nothing unless Hermione asks. You helped her once, but it's really her fight. She needs to stand up for herself and your helping her won't teach her that."

He frowned at the idea.

"You don't like that because you think it's your job to protect her, right?"

Reluctantly, he nodded.

"You can't be there for every fight, Harry. You've given her a set of tools. Give her the emotional support she needs, but let her fight her own battles. You can protect her whenever possible, but it's not always possible. This is one of those times."

"I guess," he replied dubiously.

She grinned. "Growing up is so much fun, isn't it?"

He glared at her hotly, but she refused to burst into flames.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Feb 17th 1997, Hogwarts...

Dear Harry,

I know this is a little difficult to read, my hand is still shaking. Every time I think about it, my blood boils. Two days ago I finally had the opportunity I wanted to deal with Lavender and I did it!

I want to thank you for your offer of help. But I needed to do this myself. I needed to know I was capable of standing up to her bullying and disgusting comments. Ginny helped a little, by arranging for a crowd. She messed with the moving staircases, causing a huge crowd of students to form while they waited for the stairs to move properly. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning.

It all began two days ago in sixth year Charms. Professor Flitwick was late for class, and Lavender picked up on a theme she had been harping on all week. She was especially mad because she had earned another week of detention for trying to break into my trunk again. This time I caught her and hit her with a fifty point deduction and a week's detention, something which I had already cleared with McGonagall, should the occasion arise.

"Hey Granger, I bet your south Pacific boyfriend is probably getting it on with someone right now," Lavender called from across the class.

Several of the girls in the class snickered, but I held my tongue. I had put up with her all week and I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of knowing that she was bothering me.

"At least he'll know what to do if you ever decide you want to know why the rest of us humans enjoy sex so much," she quipped.

I said nothing, I just stared down at my books and remembered how much you desired me. That you find me attractive in that way makes me feel so loved. Anyway, I continued to ignore her and a moment later Flitwick entered and began the class, to my great relief.

I hoped that would be that, but I was wrong. After class, she started up again. I was one of the last to file out of the room, only to find my path blocked by Lavender, Parvati, Mandy Brocklehurst, several Slytherin girls and a few others that were probably just observing.

"You must be using a potion to keep that boy of yours, Granger," Lavender said snidely. "He couldn't want to shag you, that's for certain."

I ignored her and tried to push my way past them. Little did I know that Ginny had messed with the staircases, causing a major backlog of students. The crowd behind the girls continued to grow. Lavender, gaining courage from the crowd of laughing girls, pushed me.

Once.

When she tried a second time, I used that hold that you and Master Kwang taught me. I spun on my heel after grabbing her hand and she went flying against the wall. Not even a second later, I had my wand out to cover the fact that I had stuck her to the wall with my ring.

Lavender wailed in pain. I might have broken her wrist a little, but it was an accident. Really!

I am ashamed to say I had reached my limit. I put up with her all week and this was enough. I walked up to her calmly and she stared at me fearfully, unable to move from the wall.

"Unlike you, Lavender Brown, I do not have to be a slut to keep my boyfriend," I said in a voice loud enough to be heard throughout the hall. "My boyfriend loves me. He's my friend first and foremost. And we're still virgins, a condition, which if rumors are true, you left behind two years ago.

"My boyfriend has told me he intends to marry me. Can you say the same about any of your many boyfriends, Lavender?" I asked.

Lavender's eyes flared with anger, and then she did something that she now probably deeply regrets. "Figures!" she spat. "You wouldn't know what to do with a cock if you saw one. I bet your boyfriend is really small. Why else would he hang around with a pathetic bookworm like you when there are women like me really who know how to please a man?"

"Miss Granger, you will release Miss Brown from the wall and go to my office. Miss Brown, you will go to Madam Pomfrey about your wrist, then come to my office when she releases you," Professor McGonagall said coldly from the doorway of the classroom. She stood there with Professor Flitwick and both looked incredibly angry.

I gasped, seeing the Headmistress and immediately released Lavender. Suddenly I was terribly ashamed of myself. I turned and pushed my way through the crowd, heading towards McGonagall's office. I was sure I was going to be expelled.

So there I was, Harry, in McGonagall's office, waiting for her to come and pronounce my doom. I was sure I was about to be expelled and have my wand snapped. My mind was racing furiously, and I was thinking, "I can go to Fiji and finish out my schooling there using my ring, since I won't have my wand."

And then McGonagall entered the room. She sat down and looked at me with that look of hers that makes you want to crawl under a chair and whimper for Mummy.

"Miss Granger, I had been wondering when you were going to put that harpy in her place," she said.

I blinked. "Er... excuse me, Professor?" I said meekly.

McGonagall tutted for a moment and pinned me with her murderous gaze. "Come now, Miss Granger. I am well aware of the problems you have been having, and I have spent the past week shadowing you in my animagus form. I knew sooner or later you would snap. I am grateful that you managed to do it and only break one bone."

All right, now I am confused, I thought. Is this really Professor McGonagall?

McGonagall shook her head. "Really, girl, she's been provoking you all week since you caught her trying to break into your trunk again. Your response was rather mild. I remember one time Lily Evans put a boy into the infirmary for a week because of his misplaced hands. While they could never prove that she was responsible, he was incapable of having children after that point — although James might have had something to do with that."

"So, I'm not going to be expelled?" I asked in a squeaky voice. Merlin, I hate how I sound sometimes!

McGonagall leaned closer. "No, you're not going to be punished at all. But I will warn you, I will not tolerate fighting at all in my school, especially Muggle fighting. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Professor!" I said, squeaking again.

"Excellent. Dismissed, Miss Granger."

I got out of there faster than you can reach for the snitch Harry! And I would swear that I heard McGonagall laughing behind her door, but that couldn't be, could it?

I ran all the way back to Gryffindor tower, where Ginny met up with me in the Common Room. She confessed that she had blocked the stairs in the hope that I'd stand up to the harpy. Both Ron and Neville congratulated me on standing up to her, and then they congratulated me on getting married!

It was only then that I realized I had basically proclaimed to the entire school that my boyfriend wanted to marry me. I was mortified!

Don't get me wrong, Harry. I love you with all my heart and I want us to be together forever. But I expected to announce that sort of thing to my family and friends in a more controlled setting, not in a pique of anger at a jealous cow!

Yesterday, Lavender's parents were called to the school. Her father is a Muggle and apparently a strict Catholic who doesn't like the fact that she's a witch. He ran into her in the hall in front of the Great Hall and he laid into her, calling her a harlot and threatening to enroll her into a convent. Everyone heard him shouting at her. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

I don't know who is more embarrassed at this point; me or Lavender. Everyone now knows my boyfriend wants to marry me, and Lavender was called some really horrible things by her own father before McGonagall could usher them all up to her office.

The end result of this is that Lavender's cost Gryffindor one hundred points and probably the House Cup. Last night, she tentatively apologized to me. She's been keeping to herself pretty much. Poor Parvati seems lost without her Lav Lav to keep her occupied. The other good result is that the sixth years seem to be studying more now that Lavender's been reined in.

Oh, good grief! I've spent the whole letter telling you about Lavender and I haven't said anything else!

I'll write another entry in a day or two after you've digested this venting mess. I'm sorry I laid this on your shoulders, but I just had to tell this or I'd burst.

How's the studying for your next exam going? Languages, right?

I miss you.

*Love,
Hermione.*

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Feb 18th 1997, Hogwarts...

Dear Hermione,

I'm impressed! I had been worried about you and what was going on, but it sounds like you managed to put her in her place without bloodshed. I know this will sound silly, but I'm proud of you love, very proud of you. And I have to confess I had thought of things I could do to Lavender, but all of them resulted in bloodshed and much screaming and shrieking on her part.

While it made for a pleasant little fantasy, Tonks helped me see that I couldn't protect you all the time. And you proved that point marvelously. BUT! I will say this. I'm a dumb male, I can't help feel protective about you. I won't fight your fights, but if I can stop you from getting hurt, I will.

Your letter gives me hope that you won't be bothered by Lavender anymore. As much as I love holding you in bookspace, I'd rather be holding you and caressing you out of love than consoling you when you're upset.

My next NEWT is in Languages. Well, really it was Languages OWL last year, this year it's really Oriental Cultures NEWT, but I just call it Languages because I opted to center it around Japan.

I have to go to Japan to take it on the 23rd, so I'll be leaving on the night of the 21st, then I'll take a day to recover from the blasted portkey

vertigo. I am so tempted to apparate the distance. Merlin, I hate international Portkeys!

After this exam, I have Charms and Potions/Alchemy, back in New Zealand, which isn't as exciting as going to Japan. Frankly, I'm not worried about most of my exams, but I am worried about the Defense exam. Last year I injured one of the examiners. He recovered, but now that they know what to expect, I think I'll be facing a lot harder test than last year.

Remus and Sirius are at the beach house only a day or two a week now, so living here has suddenly gotten rather lonely. I don't know what I'd do if we didn't have bookspace and these journal entries.

Another thing that helps is the fact that Cindy comes by several times a week when Sirius isn't here. She's really into astronomy and she loves the fact that she can hop over to your parents and switch from day to night almost instantly. Sirius gave her a permanent portkey, so it's like a three second trip from London to Oxford. I understand he's given one to your Mum so she can visit Cindy at the London house as well.

You should see the telescope that she set up here. It's huge! It's funny, she won't let Sirius touch it unless she's watching him carefully. If she treats their kids like she treats that telescope, they will be eighteen before Sirius is even allowed to look at them. She's been teaching me Muggle astronomy, which isn't the same as what they taught at Hogwarts. The zodiac isn't nearly as important for one thing. She could be a wonderful teacher. She loves the subject and she's managed to pull me in with stories of black holes and comets.

In a way, she's a lot like your mum, and she really cares about what I'm doing and how we're doing. Did you talk to her about bookspace? She called it the backseat with no consequences. I didn't understand that reference.

Well, time to go for now. I still have some writing to do. I'm trying to get better at reading and writing Japanese, so I've been translating one of my defense notebooks into Japanese. If you think my handwriting is bad, you ought to see that! It looks like someone dipped Hedwig's feet in ink and then had her walk across the paper while drunk!

Until next bookspace, I wish you were here.

Love,
Harry

Mitsumi Magical Academy, Kyoto, Japan, February 23rd 1997...

Harry looked down at the slip of paper in his hand, then up at the sign hanging from the building. He was on his way from his hotel to the testing location for his languages course. Ostensibly, the building appeared to be a slaughter house and was therefore in the seedier part of town. To the Muggles, it was a nondescript building that housed a business that few were interested in. To a wizard, it was home to one of the premiere magical schools in Japan.

He double checked the sign against his slip of paper. Speaking the language was fairly easy for him, reading it was an art that he knew would take him years to master.

Nervously, he pushed open the door.

Inside was a clean office with a receptionist perusing a magazine at her desk.

"Ohayo gozaimasu," he said, approaching her.

"Good morning to you, as well," she replied in Japanese. "Are you here for the testing?"

He nodded. "Yes, I am," he replied.

"Your name please?"

Harry handed over his paperwork. The woman took his papers and quickly looked through them. Her eyebrows rose, reading the note from the Pacific Rim DMLE.

"Yes, we were told to expect you, sir," she said, smiling brightly at him. "If you would enter that door and proceed down the corridor to the waiting room, someone will call you shortly."

"Thank you," he replied with a nod of his head, then he turned and walked through the door and down a long corridor. The corridor emptied out into a room with several rows of bench seats. Inside the room were two men and a woman. He moved over to an empty bench and sat down.

The room was nondescript and bland with bare walls. With a glance at his watch he reached down into his bag and pulled out a book on Advanced Transfiguration theory. But before he could open it, one of the people in the room interrupted him.

"Excuse me," said one man in Japanese. "But the examiners are running late today. They told us to tell anyone that in that they would be delayed."

Harry smiled at the man. "Domo, domo arigato."

The man's eyes lit up with pleasure. "You speak Japanese?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, I'm here for the test... the examination?" he replied in Japanese.

“You have an unusual accent,” the woman commented.

He smiled at her. “It's not easy to forget one's milk language. I'm British.”

The woman nodded knowingly. “Yes, getting the idiom and vocalization right is never easy.”

“Why did you chose Japanese to study? Surely there were easier languages for you to learn?” asked the third man. “French, Spanish or even German, and much closer to home, at that.”

Harry shrugged. “I have a talent for languages. For my OWLS, I covered Japanese and Arabic. But I'm fluent in French already. The truth is, the Japanese culture intrigues me and their magic is very different from that in the west, so I continued my studies into Japan after my OWLS.”

The man nodded. “Still, despite the accent, your Japanese is quite passable. Have you traveled much in Japan?”

He shook his head. “Regretfully, not as much as I'd like. I spent time in hospital in Tokyo and I did manage to tour that city a bit. The Imperial Palace is very beautiful.”

“You have nothing like that in your country?” asked the woman.

“We do, but it's different. English Royalty seem to like large imposing structures. We have the quiet gardens, beautiful ponds and carefully sculpted landscapes, but the Imperial Palace had a soft, almost ethereal quality to it. I suppose it's a matter of what you grow up with,” he replied.

“That is true,” said the first man. “I recall visiting Washington DC many years ago and I was struck by the monuments and buildings. I found it all rather intimidating. It was not what I was used to.”

“And what of Japanese Magic? Do you find that different as well?”

Harry grinned. “That is one of the best parts. I find it hard to believe that there were Samurai Wizards who were capable of casting using special swords. The Wakizashu?”

He frowned as he mangled that last word, then repeated it properly. “The Wakizashi.”

The three people nodded approvingly. “Yes, they were a force to be reckoned with. But what of modern magical Japan?”

Harry launched in a long explanation about the Japanese shields he had studied. Some of the more powerful shields could be tied to an object, like a ward. And Japan was one of the few countries who boasted knowledge of shields capable of stopping kinetic projectiles, like bullets.

“You seem uncommonly interested in defense related topics,” commented the woman.

Harry shrugged helplessly. “It is a necessity in my life. As much as I would like to spend time studying the transfiguration spells for Japanese gardens, at this point in my life, defense is more important. Perhaps in the future I'll be able to study other things that interest me.”

Harry glanced at his watch and was surprised to discover he had spent the last two hours conversing in Japanese to these people.

“Perhaps someday you will come back and learn what it means to be a wizard in Japan,” the first man said.

“Yes, immerse yourself in the culture. That is the way to truly learn what it means,” offered the second man.

The woman stood and looked to her two companions, then she face Harry. “You have passed your exam, student X, and as headmistress of the Mitsumi Academy, I would invite you to return someday. Perhaps you could spend a term doing independent study on those transfiguration spells you are interested in.”

“This was the exam?” Harry stammered in English. He was so shocked he had reverted back to English.

The older man grinned at him. “Quite right, old bean,” he replied in a flawless English that would have sounded at home in Cambridge. “We find it's often better to just converse with the student instead of holding a formal, ritualized examination. I don't know what my fellow examiners think, but I think you did an outstanding job today. You could easily make your way through any prefecture in the country with little difficulty.”

“His pronunciation was a little off,” said the second examiner.

“And yet his knowledge of our past and our culture is excellent. And not muddled by the revisionist dung the government is trying to force down our throats. No, I think his performance was one of the best I've seen, considering he is a Westerner,” countered the woman. “Outstanding, in my opinion.”

The second man grudgingly acknowledged the point with a shrug. “Yes, but I still think he should work on his accent,” he muttered.

“I will work on it,” Harry promised. He wasn't sure if it were alright for him to speak at this point, but he couldn't help it. Especially if they were going to argue his grade in English right in front of him.

The woman smiled and turned to Harry. “There you have it. Your language OWL was an Exceeds Expectations, and you have surpassed that. You will receive formal notification of your grade when you complete the testing cycle. You have heard the judgment of the examiners, and their thoughts on how you can improve. This concludes your NEWT examination for your languages requirement.”

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), March 1st 1997, Waivunu Fiji...

Well it's official. Everyone is mad at me now.

After the test I decided to take an day or two in Japan. I had enough money and quite frankly, the thought of taking that portkey back to Fiji made me ill even without actually taking it.

I hate wizarding transportation! I'm sure I could apparate the distance, but Sirius and Remus are worried I'll splinch myself. Have they no sense of adventure?

So I take those disgusting potions that are supposed to help reduce portkey vertigo, but don't, and then I'm off for several hours of spinning like a top.

No one has explained it right, so I looked it up. The history of the portkey was fairly straightforward to locate. It was created in 1762 by a Frenchman who wanted to travel from Paris to his Chateau in Normandy. Apparently, he was incapable of apparating without splinching himself, so he sought other means of magical transport and came up with the torturous portkey.

Portkey facts:

Top speed is limited by the magical core of the person using it.

Average Speed: 820mph

Maximum Safe distance to travel without Portkey vertigo: 350miles

RPM: 10-30

Are you seeing the picture here? Everyone walks around telling me how powerful I am, then they hand me a spell which is powered by my own core. The trip from Waivunu to Kyoto, distance of approximately 4,500 miles, still takes me three and a half hours!

Let me repeat that.

THREE AND A HALF HOURS OF SPINNING LIKE A DERVISH!

Is it any wonder that I broke my word and apparated? I mean, it was bad enough going to Wellington, New Zealand for my Transfiguration NEWT. That particular trip is a lot shorter and it was still over an hour at that.

I would have gotten away with it, except that I discovered something that no one else has discovered before. When you are apparating that far, you need to take into account the curvature of the Earth. So off I went, apparating some 4,500 miles and I came out several thousand feet above my destination.

Fortunately, I've fallen before and heights don't scare me. I apparated again, but this time I got sloppy. All right, I was kind of in a rush. After all, the ground was approaching very quickly!

So I arrived in the living room of the beach house (which had been empty when I left it), to discover that Remus, Tonks, Sirius and Cindy were sitting around trying to figure out where I was. Oh, and I guess I should mention that my arrival was accompanied by a clap of thunder so loud it broke every window, glass and plate in the house.

Sirius was seriously pissed. It took several hours of much yelling and screaming while I'm walking around repairing stuff before he calmed down enough for me to explain the portkey problem.

On the plus side, we've proven I can apparate intercontinental distances, now that I've figured out how to add an altitude component to the coordinates, and from here on I'll take a Muggle airplane to Wellington for the rest of my NEWTS. Thank Merlin. If I have to take one more portkey, I'm going to hurl and never stop.

I think once he got over the shock, he was actually pleased that I was willing to do something and get in trouble for it. Or as he said, "Good! I'm glad to see you're still enough of a kid to do something stupid."

Should I feel good about that or not?

Did I mention that Hermione is mad at me, too? Cindy told her mother, who sent Hermione an owl explaining what I did. I wasn't going to mention it at all, but when I went into bookspace, there she was, scolding me for doing something so rash. Merlin, she's beautiful when she's angry! Still, by the time she was done she made me feel three inches tall. How was I to know that apparating that distance would hurt her feelings? I swear I'll never understand girls!

Thankfully, none of them know about my little slip in my first apparate. By my calculations, I arrived at 7,400 feet above sea level. Pretty cool, eh?

You know, maybe I won't show this book to Hermione when we're older. There's some things in here I don't know if I really want her to see.

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts, April 4th, 1997...

Minerva opened the door and stepped to one side to allow Sirius to enter. He nodded congenially and took a seat in front of her desk. As she walked back to her desk, a house elf appeared with a tray of tea and biscuits.

You are looking well Minerva," Sirius said with a disarming smile.

She scowled at him as she sat down behind her desk. "Don't give me that smile, Sirius Black. I know you're here because you want something."

He nodded in acknowledgment. "Yes, well, it's like this, Minerva. You know what we're doing in relation to the person we've been helping."

Her eyes widened slightly and she nodded. "Yes. Not the details, but enough to understand it's importance, and why we need to keep it secret."

"We have reason to believe the final piece of the puzzle is heading in this direction on the mistaken idea that it might find an ally to aid its cause. It won't find any ally of course, but we want to take certain precautions. We can't stop it from entering the school, nor can we prevent it from leaving. What we can do is erect a ward to warn us if that happens. And that brings me to the reason for my visit. I'd like your permission, and your assistance in placing such a ward on the school. As the Head, you are the only one capable of warding the school."

Minerva's frown deepened. If what she believed was true, then her charges were once again about to be put into extreme danger.

She flicked her wand several times, placing privacy and anti-eavesdropping charms on the office.

Sirius sat back and watched with a slight grin. He knew she would want more information.

Once she was done, she turned back to Sirius. "Now, why don't you explain exactly what you mean by this moving puzzle piece you spoke of."

He launched into a description of the Horcruxes and how they had destroyed every one that Dumbledore had identified. He then explained what they thought had happened to Voldemort with the destruction of the first Horcrux after Harry left the school.

She stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. "So, Riddle is a spirit again, but he's possessing the snake?"

"Not quite. We don't think it's a true possession. We think that the presence of the Horcrux within the snake has locked Voldemort's spirit up in that object. The Horcrux is a powerful talisman in it's own right, but Nagini lacks the ability to activate it. And his spirit, being locked away while still magically powerful, has no way of focusing that magic enough to invoke any spells. At best, he controls a snake, but he can't cast magic."

"What about the students? Won't this place them in danger?"

Sirius sighed. "Honestly, Minerva, it will. But the fact is we know how to detect a Horcrux. Destroying one is rather difficult. Harry might be able to do it, but I lack the power, as do most wizards and witches. And like it or not, we're certain it's heading in your direction.

"The snake is dangerous and highly venomous. We have reason to suspect that it's been traveling north since the summer following the tournament, but it's progress is slow. Scotland is not conducive to a snake of that size. It's too cold, even in the middle of the summer. Our last reported sighting was sixty miles south of here in a Muggle town. We think it will take her most of next summer to cover the remaining distance."

When she frowned again he leaned forward in his chair. "If you think it would help, I could talk to the Board about bringing Remus back as DADA Professor next year and Harry wouldn't be far away."

"Remus would be a big help. I'm beginning to think Albus was right about one thing. The DADA position is cursed."

She paused and her expression tightened. "So Mr. Potter will be scouring the countryside looking for a snake? Alone?"

Sirius shrugged apologetically. "Mostly. We don't have anyone who can accompany him, and he is the only person we know who can talk to snakes. He hopes to enlist their aid in the search."

"Are you sure that's wise? Can't you accompany him?" she asked. Harry wasn't her student anymore, but she still felt a measure of responsibility for him.

"As much as I'd like to, I'll only be able to be with him a small part of the time. I'm getting married early in the summer and my duties in the Wizengamot are increasing, as the Minister has started to rely more and more on my help," he replied. "I don't like it anymore than you do, but by the time he begins his search, he will be an adult wizard and fully accredited by the Pacific Rim Ministry."

She nodded unhappily. "Please tell him that he will be welcome in the castle, should he need anything; a hot meal, a warm bed or such. I understand the need, even if I do not like what he will be doing. He continues to sacrifice himself for our world."

Sirius shook his head. "No, he's doing it for Hermione and his family. He's not trying to save the world. He can't do that. But he can save Hermione and her family --- his family. That's what he's focusing on. And despite all that, he's still enough of a kid to do dumb things on occasion."

"Oh?"

Sirius leaned back comfortably on his chair and grinned broadly. "Let me tell you about his Languages N.E.W.T. and his hatred of intercontinental portkeys."

Tuvutha, Fiji, June 5th 1997...

Harry limped towards the clearing and paused just inside the jungle that surrounded the small fishing village. One arm was in a makeshift sling. His shirt was torn, most of its cloth gone, donated to make a bandage that wrapped around his forehead. A burn on his left knee resulted in a slight limp.

He straightened up and surveyed the small village carefully. This was his goal, to reach the village. He was going to get some answers, or he was going to start collecting scalps.

He winced and wished once again that he had taken that course in field medicine. He knew a little, but not enough to heal the compound fracture in his arm. Fortunately, that had been the last injury he had received during the last six hours. Had it been one of the first injuries, the test would have ended as quickly as it began.

He shivered in the bright humid heat. His injuries were giving him considerable difficulties and he wasn't sure, but he thought he might be going into shock from his arm. The only thing keeping him going was a massive pain numbing charm that he cast every few hours - and anger - intense and highly focused anger over what he had endured so far.

He faded back into the shadows of the jungle and carefully moved around the outskirts of the village. Few people were visible anywhere, not that he was really concerned about it. The village was for show; no one really lived on this island. Tuvutha was a volcanic rock that jutted some three hundred feet above the ocean, covered in jungle.

Three and a half miles long by a mile and a half wide, it was used by the Aurors in this part of Oceania. Of course, the Muggles thought it was that size. The Aurors had increased its size until it was more than thirty miles long and fifteen miles wide.

He grumbled and for the millionth time in the past forty hours, wished he had not agreed to this special test. Why had taking a hit wizard exam sound so cool at the time? he grumbled to himself.

I have to be insane. Yes, that's it. I'm nuts. If I get out of this, I'm going to kill Remus for suggesting it. No, wait, I'll lock him in his werewolf form and sell him to a zoo! The thought warmed him somewhat.

He crouched down in the shadows and surveyed the scene, trying to decide what to do.

It began nearly a week ago, on June 1st, when Remus and Professor Murphy spoke to him about the possibility of taking the Hit Wizard exam.

“So, what's it entail?” Harry asked.

“It's no walk in the park,” Remus cautioned. “If you take this test, you could end up seriously injured, or worse.”

“On the other hand, if you pass, and I think you will, you would jump from earning a NEWT to earning a Defense Mastery,” countered Murphy. “I wouldn't suggest it, except that your examiner from your OWL exam suggested it to me and it sounded like a good idea. If anyone can pull it off, you can.”

Harry looked at his instructor for a moment. The man was absolutely brilliant when it came to teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration. “What do I have to do?”

“Honestly, I'm not sure,” replied Murphy. “The exam changes every year, so no one knows what it's all about. When I took it, I, along with four others, had to go subdue a family of giants that had moved into central Asia.”

Harry nodded absently, Murphy's Mastery hadn't come from the Pacific Rim Ministry, so he wouldn't know about their testing methods at all.

“If I fail?”

Murphy frowned. He hated when Harry doubted his own abilities. “If you fail, you take the regular NEWT a little later than expected. If you pass, you make it beyond NEWT level in a single shot.”

He thought about it for a moment, then he grinned. “Why not?”

Murphy leapt to his feet. “That's the spirit!”

Remus nodded and looked uncomfortable.

Two days ago he had been taken to a dock and placed on a boat with several other men. He had been told that the test had begun and to not ask questions. He would be told what he needed to know, when he needed to know it. Then they put a hood over his head and someone snapped a bracelet on him.

They explained the bracelet was an anti-apparation bracelet. He nodded uneasily under the hood. He was starting to get the feeling that he was in over his head. Around him various men made crude jokes and comments about the rookie kid who thought he was good enough to take the Hit Wizard exam. Several men laid bets as to the outcomes, most of which included dismembering or death, usually in a grisly manner.

The boat traveled for several hours, then the motor was cut. He perked up, trying to get a feel for what was going on. They hadn't docked and he didn't hear surf hitting the shore.

Someone jerked him to his feet.

“You have your wand on you, kid?” hissed a voice.

He nodded. The Aurors of the Pacific Rim expected him as a westerner to rely on his wand and not his ring. Only islanders native to Fiji and the other Pacific islands used the rings.

The man pushed him and he stumbled. Someone caught him, hauling him upright roughly.

“Due south of us is the island of Tuvutha. Other than wizards, no one lives on it. There is a small village on the south western shore, which is operated by us. Between you and that village are obstacles. Your job is to get to that village. Don't let anyone or anything stand in your way.”

“I understand,” Harry replied, somewhat nervously.

“Good,” the voice said. “You start now by swimming.”

And with that, he was unceremoniously pushed over the side of the boat. The motor gunned and it pulled away, while he struggled with the hood. When he got it off, he could see the boat moving away at a good clip. It was dark; dawn was still hours away. In the distance, a mile or more away was a low dark hump on the horizon.

Cursing his luck, he concentrated, calling on his metamorphagus abilities. No one except his family knew of his talent, and while he could not transform as fast as Tonks could, he could transform nearly every part of his body. His feet elongated into flippers and he grew webbing between his fingers. Finally, he grew gills in his neck, emulating the effect of Gillyweed perfectly. The gills were the most difficult part, but Tonks had drilled him extensively about making changes like this.

He summoned a small orb of light and fixed it so it always moved towards the island in the distance, then he slipped below the waves. If they wanted to play games, he could do the same. Without giving it any consideration, the bracelet snapped open and dropped from his wrist.

Rules, he thought, were made to be broken.

An hour later, he slowly surfaced near the shore and examined it carefully. His eyes and ears were barely above the surface of the water. On the beach were two men who were staring out to sea and looking anxious.

“Any sign of him?” asked one man.

“Nothing,” complained his companion. “I don't get it. Why are we testing a kid?”

“Because the boss said we are. Just remember we're to stop him anyway possible, but not kill him. So keep your curses to something that won't kill right away. I found a new bone crushing hex I can't wait to try out.”

“I still don't like it. Since when are we supposed to test children?”

Harry had heard enough. He used his ring to summon two coconuts, hitting both men within a second of each other. They fell to the sand without a sound. He closed his eyes and returned his body to normal, then he sprinted towards the fallen pair.

If they were talking about using magic that wouldn't kill him outright, he'd have to be equally brutal. He stopped at the pair and stunned both, then he dragged them up into the tree line using his ring. There he searched each and stripped them of several knives, wands, focus rings, portkeys and everything else he could find.

He cast an anti-apparation ward on their belts and removed their shoes, banishing them into the ocean. The island was a mix coral and volcanic rock with a sand beach. Walking barefoot would be a humbling experience for these two trained wizards. The razor sharp rock would teach these burly wizards a lesson in humility and it would set the stage for every 'obstacle' he ran into from that point on.

Finally, he stunned them again, and buried them under some loose palm fronds so they wouldn't be seen.

It would be hours before they woke up and when they did, they would consider themselves two of the luckier members of the team assigned to stop this student. After all, they got out with all their limbs attached.

He shook his head. He was exhausted, hungry, thirsty and in considerable pain. It had taken him thirty six hours to cover a distance of nearly thirty miles to this village. In doing so, he had engaged four hit wizards in three running battles, had run into a colony of South Pacific Horned Acromantulas and had subdued another six wizards by taking them in ambush.

For his efforts, he had a broken arm, a cut on his scalp that burned and throbbed, a flash burn on his knee and he was sure he had sprained, or broke his big toe on his right leg. He walked with a limp but between the pain in his left leg and the pain in his right, the limp sort of balanced itself out.

Circling the village, he could see it was clearly guarded by Aurors and they were not happy about their current assignment. He looked around and started collecting coconuts. He was going to need to time this precisely.

Eight Aurors were visible, and another two he could detect were standing in front of one building, and disillusioned.

He moved slowly, banishing coconuts at any Auror that isolated himself from the others, then summoning the Auror to him. Then he'd remove their wands and rings and any other toys before placing them in a full body bind and silencing them.

One by one, the Aurors fell to his flying nuts until only four remained, two of them still disillusioned. Then things changed suddenly. One man stepped from the building the two disillusioned Aurors were guarding and placed something to his face.

Uh oh, Harry thought. Those are Muggle infrared goggles. Cindy told me about them when we watched that movie.

The man turned and stopped, looking in Harry's direction.

"Damn! Busted," he hissed to himself, then he gestured, sending his pile of coconuts hurtling at the small group of Aurors.

Five Aurors, including the one using Muggle technology, versus twenty coconuts. Not good for the Aurors. Harry winced as he heard the crunching of bones and screams. His coconuts hadn't been well aimed, and in his haste, sent with a little too much force.

Harry sprinted for the building, stepping over one downed Auror who was gripping his crotch and moaning loudly.

"Sorry," Harry muttered. He hit the door at a run and stepped inside. Once inside, he cast a cannon blast charm with his ring and a solarium with his wand. The combination had the same effect as a flash bang grenade, in that it stunned everyone inside. Before anyone else could move, he had them covered at wand point.

"No one move," he said, letting his anger loose. His aura flared and wrapped around him like a loving embrace and his eyes glowed, lighting the interior of the building.

Four men sat at a table staring at him. On the table before him was a map of the island. Remus stood to one corner, a grin slowly forming on his face as it dawned on him what was happening.

"Harry!" he exclaimed.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed a distinctly American voice.

"Indeed," said another, this one Australian.

A gray haired man stood and walked over to Harry. "Send for a healer," he snapped after taking in his condition. "You managed to surprise us, Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced at Remus questioningly.

"It's alright, Harry. Mr. Smith is the head of the Pacific Rim DMLE. He's known about your identity since last year."

Harry lowered his wand and looked around warily. "Does this mean the test is over?"

Everyone chuckled at that and Smith motioned for him to take a seat.

"Yes, the test was over when you reached the edge of the village. None of us expected you to attack the Aurors who were looking out for you."

Harry flinched slightly and the door opened, allowing a woman dressed in healer green to enter. From outside, someone shouted for more healers.

"Er, about that... I'm sorry?"

Smith grinned and ran a hand through his graying hair. "No worries, Mr. Potter. If you can sneak up on my Aurors, then they needed the object lesson. Now then, you wouldn't by any chance know where my team of people are that were supposed to stop you?"

Harry let the healer help him into the chair and hissed when she pulled off the bandage that he had around his head. With his free hand, he started to pull rings and wands from his pocket, dropping them on the table.

Remus took one look and turned away, trying hard not to laugh.

Murphy, who had been sitting silently at the table, barked out a laugh and pointed a finger at Smith. "What did I tell you? I told you he'd do it," he all but chortled at the head of the Pacific Rim DMLE.

Harry winced when the healer carefully examined his arm. "I sort of left them all over the island, although I did leave one surrounded by acromantulas," he said softly. Seeing their alarmed looks, he rushed to explain. "He's safe. They can't get to him, but he can't get out of the hole I put him in."

That set Murphy off on another round of laughter and this time Remus joined in.

The healer straightened up and turned to Smith. "Begging your pardon, Director, but my patient needs to go to the infirmary. His left arm is badly broken and he's got the start of a nasty infection. He'll be fine in a day or two, but I need to treat him."

Smith nodded and looked sourly at Murphy.

The healer turned back to Harry. "Can you walk? Never mind, you shouldn't walk with that broken toe and the burn."

She conjured a stretched and floated Harry onto it, then she handed him a potion. "Drink it all," she commanded.

Harry nodded and drank down the foul tasting brew. Almost immediately his eyelids started to droop. His last recollection would be of Remus bending over him, patting him on the shoulder, and saying he'd be nearby.

Murphy, Remus and Smith watched the healer walk Harry out of the building, then Remus turned to them. "He should have been told that getting to the village was enough. Don't hold him responsible for any damage he did once he got here."

Smith waved Remus silent. "Don't worry, Mr. Lupin. I wasn't lying when I said that if he could sneak up on my Aurors and subdue them, they deserved it. I have no intention of doing anything except offering your charge a job. Most candidates never make it to the village. Those that do are in worse shape than he was in. He took on a team of six Aurors and four hit wizards and made it through. His time could have been better, but he's young and inexperienced. With a little training, he could be the best there is."

"Not to mention, once he arrived at the village, he attacked it," added Murphy gleefully.

Smith shot him a sour look. It was one thing for his Aurors to be caught flat footed, but he didn't need this crazy American rubbing his nose in it. He shook his head and reached for a folder he had nearby. He opened it and he pulled out some parchment. "His OWL scores were excellent, and his NEWTS are even more impressive."

"You have his final scores?" exclaimed Remus.

"I was going to share them with Mr. Potter when he arrived, but I had not expected he would arrive here injured like he was."

He reached for a quill and added a quick addition to the parchment, then passed it to Murphy.

Murphy scanned the grades and grinned broadly, then handed it to Remus.

Defense M
Transfiguration O+
Charms O
Potions/Alchemy E
Runes/Enchanting O
Estate Management E
Languages (with Oriental Cultures sub) O
Apparation certificate assigned.
Portkey creation certificate assigned.

A Mastery in Defense awarded, automatically conferred an outstanding NEWT.

Remus' expression broke into a wide smile.

Seeing it, Murphy laughed. "I told you, Remus. The boy's a natural."

"Do you think he'd be interested in a job offering, Mr. Lupin?" asked Smith, trying to hide his eagerness.

Remus shook his head. "Not immediately. You know his history, Mr. Smith. He has unfinished business that he needs to attend to back in Britain."

Smith nodded. "Yes, I can understand that. But I think we might be able to help, especially if he'd be willing to accept a reserve position."

Remus leaned forward, looking interested. "A reserve position?"

"Tell him the whole story, Frank," Murphy said seriously.

Smith leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar. "It's like this, Mr. Lupin. For nearly fifty years now the British Ministry has been a growing problem on the world stage. It's changed in recent years, what with Minister Bones taking the helm, and Mr. Black has been a big help. But the international community is worried. We all know that one slip and we could be back into something as bad as the Scrimgeour Administration or worse. We also know that your Dark Lord problem isn't going away anytime soon. Frankly, the internationals are worried. If something isn't done, our world could be in danger if your war spills into the Muggle world."

"You, Mr. Black and Mr. Potter are at the heart of that problem and we've done all we can do on the sly to help you."

Remus' eyebrows rose. "I thought it seemed strange that the Americans had been so willing to help us destroy those dark objects."

Smith grinned. "Now what you don't know is that we've been watching and helping where we could. My head of the Auror academy in Japan sat in on Harry's language exam and came away very impressed. He feels that he would make an excellent field agent or investigator. We understand that Mr. Potter is well off and doesn't need the job, but if he accepted a position with us, he'd have our protection, even in Britain, should conditions change in the government. Not to mention access to resources he wouldn't normally have."

Remus stared at him for a moment, then turned to Murphy with a suspicious look. "You're not really a free lance Defense instructor, are you?"

Julius Caesar Murphy smiled benignly, but refused to answer the question. The original Defense tutor that James and Lily had contracted had died in the intervening years. Murphy had approached them when they put out the word they were looking for an independent tutor. He had been the only one to reply to their request for a tutor.

Daily Prophet Headline, June 6th 1997...

*DMLE Conducts Raid Against Doomsday Cult.
Four perish in the raid.*

Ministry spokesperson Perky Weatherbee announced that the DMLE conducted a raid last night against the Cult Of Voldemort, in which four people were killed and two DMLE officers were injured.

In the past year, the cult has been responsible for one attempted robbery of Gringotts, which failed spectacularly, and several attacks against prominent members of the community, including Wizengamot member and Ambassador candidate, Sirius Black.

Last night's raid came after a tip was received that cult members would attempt a ritual that, if successful, might have brought Voldemort back to life. A researcher for the Department of Mysteries, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said, "there was very little chance of success in this ritual and it would have killed the participants to perform it. However, had they brought back Voldemort, they would have achieved one of two things. Either they would have brought him back, magic and all, which would have returned all magic to Harry Potter, our hero, or they would have brought him back as a Muggle, forcing Harry Potter, at some point in his life, to fight the Muggle Voldemort."

DMLE experts agree with that assessment, but hastened to add that, "This increases the risk and threat of the cult to our way of life. They are obviously searching desperately for a way to bring back their fallen Master. We will continue to work to suppressing this dangerous sect wherever it turns up.

"Last night, two teams of Aurors stormed a building in Hogsmeade that the cult was using, interrupting a foul ritual. In the process, four cult members perished and many others escaped. Six Aurors were injured, but only two seriously enough to require an overnight stay at St. Mungo's. Also freed in the raid were four Muggle teenage girls who were being drained of their blood for the ritual. The girls were taken to St. Mungo's, treated and obliviated before being handed over to Muggle authorities."

It is estimated that at least sixteen cult members escaped before anti-apparation/anti-portkey wards could be put in place.

Minister Bones and Wizengamot member Sirius Black toured the building after the raid. Black has been asked to represent the British Ministry at an upcoming Paris conference. For the conference, the Ministry and the Wizengamot have opted to confer Black with Ambassador status.

Black has been a target of the cult at least once, although there is a rumor that another attack occurred while he was overseas. The most recent attack came this past January, when the buildings owned by Black and his muggle fiancée were burned to the ground.

Both Black and the Minister declined to comment, sending our reporters to the Ministry Department of Public Relations instead.

Celestina Warbeck denies pregnancy by former boyfriend, page 2

Severus Snape Parole denied again, page 3

List of Cult dead and DMLE injured, Page 17a.

Quibbler Headline, June 6th 1997...

*The Lost Continent of Atlantis Rises from the Ocean, Then Sinks Again!
Harry Potter blamed!*

In a bizarre turn of events yesterday, Atlantis, the mythical continent that sank under the waves eons ago, rose to the surface yesterday, surprising Muggle merchant shipping and people everywhere.

Reporters flocked to the scene only to discover an ongoing party being hosted by none other than Harry Potter, who had recently returned from his broom trip to the moon. His trip makes Potter, age 16, the first teenager to walk on the moon. We were unable to confirm if he planted a flag made from a pair of panties and claimed the orbiting orb for Botswana.

We feel this once and for all time proves that Harry Potter is not a Muggle, like so many believe. Instead, we've come to suspect he's been hiding behind the pretense of having magic and he's really from the planet Crypton, like another famous supposed Muggle.

Potter was at the head of a huge conga line consisting mainly of Mermaids and Centaurs. When the reporters arrived, he declared the party over and left after donning his patented bat swooping suit. He stated that Atlantis was far too muddy to hold a party, and swooped away leaving the astounded newsman standing there. The Mermaids and Centaurs vanished seconds later.

Fourteen Muggle news crews and a reporter from the Daily Prophet were killed when the continent slipped beneath the waves again.

When this paper asked the Ministry about the reappearance and disappearance of Atlantis, the Ministry spokesman, Perky Weatherbee, had this to say. "What? Are you insane? Why don't you leave me alone already? Are you following me? I'll call an Auror! Stop following me! I'll scream! I'm warning you!"

Clearly the Ministry's effect to pacify the population is not working with the Ministry spokesman. We urge Minister Bones to publicly admit they are putting dynamite, a dangerous Muggle chemical, into our butterbeer supply.

Coming Next week: An expose of King Tut Tut's Tomb and the Potter Walk, the dance craze that's sweeping the Muggle world, and why it involves sheep.

The Granger Home, June 10th 1997, Oxford England...

The train pulled to a stop with a lurch and a squeal of metal on metal, then everyone stood, reaching for their various packages. Hermione opened the cat carrier and placed an unhappy Crookshanks inside. Fortunately, Crookshanks knew he was on the way home and wouldn't be caged for too long. Outside, hundreds of anxious parents milled around, while Hogwarts house elves unloaded trunks from the baggage cars.

"What kind of plans do you have for the summer, Hermione?" asked Hannah Abbott. She stood next to Ron, holding his hand. It had taken a while before she was accepted in their little Gryffindor group, but Hermione had welcomed her with open arms. She admired the red haired witch for her ability to get Ron to grow up, something which he had fought her tooth and nail over.

"I won't be going to Fiji, as Evan is coming here. I expect we'll spend the summer enjoying the weather and doing some studying. He promised to help me start studying for our NEWTS."

"What about his NEWTS?" asked Neville, now looking at her with interest.

She shrugged. "He took his NEWTS a year early, but he hasn't shared his grades with me yet," she replied with a bit of a pout.

Ron frowned and shook his head. He didn't want to think about studying for exams that were a year away. He opened his mouth, then closed it immediately after seeing the warning look from Hannah.

Hannah enjoyed having fun like Ron, but she had patiently explained to him that the better educated people were capable of having more fun than those who let their education slack off. Then she proceeded to entice him into studying and kept him going until he developed decent homework habits.

Hermione held Crookshanks' carrier and she peered around it, trying to see the steep stairs on the train. A hand reached up and pulled the carrier from her grasp, then another hand gently took hers, helping her down the stairs.

She looked up and gasped when she spotted Evan staring at her with a goofy grin on his face.

She squeaked and hurled into his arms. Crookshanks complained loudly when he flailed for a moment, trying to maintain his balance.

She held Evan tightly for a moment, just reveling in the feel of his body pressed against her. She smiled to herself, feeling him inhale deeply, his face buried in her hair. She loved when he did that!

She finally pulled back enough to look at him. Her eyes darted to the bandage attached to his head and she could feel something bulky under the shirt on his arm. "Harr... mmmph!"

He dived in and kissed her, hard, muffling her before she could finish saying his name. He was in his Evan persona and she had nearly ruined it by calling him by his real name. For her part, she instantly realized her mistake, but she apologized by holding him tightly and kissing him for all she was worth.

When they broke apart, he leaned his forehead against hers, but still managed to avoid the bandage. "I've missed you," he whispered.

She gazed into his eyes intently and everything seemed to fade into the background. It was just them and no one else. They were alone in the world. "I've missed you too," she replied.

A cough behind them distracted her and she looked around, suddenly realizing where she was and what she was doing. She saw her father coughing uncomfortably and her friends standing nearby, grinning madly at her. She colored from her toes to the tips of her ears and she stepped away from Harry, latching onto his hand.

"Ron, Ginny, you remember Evan?" she asked, then she turned to Neville and Hannah. "This is Evan Black, my boyfriend."

Hannah and Neville's eyes lit up at the idea of meeting the mysterious boy from the South Pacific. Hannah ran an eye over him. He was as tall as Ron, but broader and more muscular in the shoulder. The bandage on his head gave him a very rakish air.

"G'day," Harry said, offering his hand to Neville.

"Merlin, what Hippogriff ran over you, Evan?" asked Ginny with a smirk. Despite his obvious bandages, she thought he still looked hot.

Harry shrugged. "Left overs from my Defense exam. If you think I look bad, you should see my examiners," he replied with a satisfied smile.

Hermione peered at him, her expression turning to one of worry. "Wasn't your exam four days ago?"

"It was, but I only got out of the infirmary two days ago," he replied.

"Did you pass, at least?" asked Neville. He had become a lot more confident, with Ginny's help, but the idea of an exam that landed him in hospital for two days boggled his mind.

Harry gave another satisfied grin. "You could say that."

"Hermione says you two will be spending the entire summer in England?" asked Hannah.

Harry nodded. "That's right. I'm done with school for the moment. I'm hoping that between my helping Hermione with her studying, we'll be able to see some of the sights around Britain."

Hey, why don't we all meet up in Diagon Alley later in the summer? We could get our books and school supplies then," Ginny said, a bit awkwardly. She was firmly interested in Neville, but she had to admit there was something about Evan that pulled on her; something she couldn't put her finger on.

Harry glanced over to Hermione, who nodded. "Sounds like a plan to me. Right now though I best release her hand and let her say hello to her parents."

Hermione blinked and suddenly looked ashamed. She had been ignoring her parents! She turned and stammered a hello. Her mother came up to hug her and Harry released her hand. He stepped back and Dan gave him a knowing smile.

Ginny, Ron, Neville and Hannah moved off in search of their own families.

Harry looked around until his eye fell on Lavender, who stood, head down, next to a stern looking man. This was a far cry from the Lavender he used to know. He almost felt sorry for her.

He walked over to the pile of trunks and quickly located Hermione's. With a swish of a fake wand, he removed it from the pile and placed it on a trolley.

Looking up, he spotted Tonks smirking at him from her position further up the platform. He grinned and nodded to her, then started to push the trolley towards the spot where the Grangers stood.

He stopped a few feet away and picked up Crookshanks, placing him atop the trunk on the trolley, then he waited for Hermione and her parents to finish.

Ten minutes later they were all in the Granger's car, heading for Grimmauld Place.

"We're not going straight home?" Hermione asked in surprise.

Harry shrugged and pointed towards her parents. "Ask them, they have plans that are a secret."

Emma smiled knowingly and Hermione gave a shudder. "Hang onto your hat, Harry. Whatever they have planned, it's a doozy. When Mum looks like that, we're in trouble."

Dan and Emma laughed, but neither offered to shed any light on their plans.

Hermione turned to Harry. "All right, what's wrong with your arm and your head?"

Harry sighed and launched into an explanation about his Defense exam and how he had been injured. In the case of his arm and his head, the open wounds had picked up a tough infection that he needed to smear with a salve twice a day. The wounds were healing, but slowly and both would leave scars.

"So you spent a day and a half battling with ten adult wizards and a colony of tropical acromantulas to reach a village and in the process you got hurt. Not just a little hurt mind you, but badly injured. That arm fracture was nothing to sneeze at. I hope they gave you an outstanding for your effort."

He grimaced. "Actually, I didn't get an O for the exam."

He grinned and handed her his official results. She took the parchment with a glare, then her forehead wrinkled and she nibbled on her lower lip for a moment while she tried to figure out what it was saying.

"You've been awarded a Mastery?" she whispered, looking up from the parchment.

He nodded, grinning broadly at her. Only her seatbelt prevented her from hurtling into his arms again. She leaned as far as the belt would allow and he leaned close enough for their heads to touch. "I'm so proud of you," she whispered to him.

For Harry, this was a defining moment unlike any other. His eyes grew shiny and he ducked his head. "Thank you," he replied in a whisper.

She knew instantly what was happening and she caressed his face with one hand. Her approval meant everything to him, and to know he had made her proud of him moved him deeply. She knew that this was tied to his upbringing. He wanted her approval and even though she had been giving it freely for the last six years, saying that touched him deeply.

"That's nothing, pumpkin. Harry, tell her about the offer they made you," Dan said from the driver seat.

Harry nodded and looked away while wiping at his face. She reached out and took his hand in hers, squeezing hard for support.

"I've been given a reserve position in the Pacific Rim Auror force. Subject to my completing an accelerated run through their academy, the position will switch to full time Auror. I'm not sure I want to be an Auror and they know that, but they urged me to accept the position. so I did. It will give me access to resources I wouldn't have otherwise."

"If you don't want to be an Auror, what do you want to be?" Emma asked from the front seat.

"I'm not sure yet. I do know that I have several opportunities open to me. I've even been invited to spend a year at the Mitsumi Magical Academy in Kyoto. That's one of Japan's finest schools. I want to keep my options open for now. The Mastery is nice, but it shouldn't be much of a surprise. I've been training for that for three years now. In fact, the last three years I've managed to cram nearly six years of schooling in, add that to Hogwarts

time and I've had almost nine years of material in six years. My Transfiguration and Charm scores are more useful for career choices and I think Languages might help also."

He paused and smiled at Emma, then he held up Hermione's hand clasped in his. "Besides, once Voldemort is out of the picture, I think I'd like to do something that lets me keep my best friend close by."

Doctor Emma Granger, dentist, glanced at her husband, Doctor Daniel Granger, dentist and nodded. "Absolutely," she said in agreement.

It wasn't until nearly three in the morning before Harry was able to crawl into bed. Sirius, Cindy and Hermione's parents took Harry and Hermione out for a night of dinner and dancing to celebrate his wonderful scores and her return from Hogwarts.

He was fussing with the bandage on his arm when Hermione slipped into his room. Surprised, he looked up at her, the bandage falling from his fingers. "Hermione?"

"It looks like you could use a hand with that," she said in a calmer tone than she felt.

He glanced down at the fallen bandage and grimaced. "It's not easy to do and every time I use magic on it, it goes on too tight."

She walked over and picked up the bandage. "Well, let's get this on you and then get into bed. It's been a longer day than I like."

"B-b-but, your parents?" he stammered.

"Will understand and expect us to be cautious. Mum and Dad do not want to be grandparents just yet," she replied firmly.

He blushed and his mouth opened and closed a few times while she grinned at him. His mind was having difficulty putting thoughts together. It had been a long time since they'd been together like this.

A few moments later, she finished tying off the bandage. She didn't comment about what was sure to be an nasty scar where the bone had broken through.

He stood and nervously pulled back the sheets, then she climbed into his bed. The situation astounded him. Her parents were asleep on the other side of the wall! He climbed into the bed and she rolled into his arms.

"I have missed this so much," she whispered, already beginning to fall asleep.

He held her tightly and raised his head so he could kiss the top of hers. "Me too," he replied. "Me too."

Authors Notes:

Bob's letting me do the notes this time around. He took my toys away though, so I can't torture or maim any of you. He's taking all of the joy out of it for me.

Yes, Harry was a Horcrux...right up until he refused to participate in the tournament (first chapter). When his magic fled, the Horcrux (and any tracking charms, etc) had nothing to sustain it and was destroyed.

Nope, Harry will not be teaching at Hogwarts.

Cut the journal entries out? Um, no. This story is character driven. It's going to be slow paced, as we've mentioned before. If that's not something you're interested in, there are other stories available for your enjoyment. Go find one.

The saving roll on a Nuclear bomb? Easy. It's 22 on a 1d20!

~Intercepts all the donuts sent our way and beats Bob off with a bat (that doesn't sound right, does it?).~ What are you people thinking? He hasn't had sugar in almost a year and you're going to pump him full of the stuff? He'll be bouncing off the walls for hours! And if my ass gets any bigger, I'll be walking through doors sideways. Bastards!

How are the journals able to tell the exact age of the users? Magic! The exact enchantment? It's called The Ages Tellus charm! (Our new motto is 'We excel at being snide'. We were going to go with 'Smart ass is our middle name', but were afraid people would take us seriously.)

Odd little disclaimer world? I hate to break this to you (actually, I don't) but that world is our reality. That should tell you everything you need to know about us...and probably quite a bit you didn't need to know at all. Welcome to our rabbit hole. Please fasten your seat belts and keep the screaming to a minimum.

As for lurking readers, we don't mind them. In fact, some of them are quite tasty with a bit of mustard and mayo. There's no need to identify yourselves. The scent of fear is obvious and pinpoints your location nicely. You will be harvested on our next grocery shopping trip. Resistance is a waste of time, so please don't struggle.

I bet you're all longing for the days when Authors Notes actually answered your questions, aren't you? Bob never should have let me do this...though he isn't any better. ~Cackles~

Erm...right. Back to the program.

Can Harry eventually transfigure a motorcycle? Possibly, but he'd have to know a lot more about engines and design before trying it. In any event, he won't be doing it in this story.

Someone's waiting for the snogging to get serious. I'm not sure how serious you're talking here, but we don't write explicit sex scenes. We're more the fade-to-black types. The best you're going to get in this story is us killing the lights before you see anything and turning that back on in time for the "What the hell did we just do and when can we do it again" awkwardness that sometimes follows. Sorry, no wank material here.

Yes, the Death Eaters appeared in Fiji, but if you read it again, you'll see they were after Sirius, not Evan/Harry. He was just a convenient target, nothing more.

Let's see. In TpotP, Nagini is large, extremely venomous and magical. She also has a Horcrux inside her, Voldemort screaming at her, and she's intelligent. What does all this add up to? Several dead farm dogs. We're not talking about a rattlesnake or a cobra here. We're talking about a large, magically enhanced reptile in a FICTIONAL environment. She wins. Sorry.

Don't worry, Donald. I never chase after our generic readers; I set traps. Lace up those runners if you wish, but watch your step! ~Evil Grin~

For those wishing to see a bit more Japanese, here ya go. Aren't we generous? And the fact that it was in the outline to include the bit with Harry's Language NEWT has nothing to do with how generous we are. Really. ~Nods~

And coming soon! A Harry Potter, Japanese anime crossover called Elven Cried: The Sad Tale of Dobby Gone Bad. (Kidding Ask for it and we'll mock you!)

Cindy's potion brewing skills: She's had 12 years of medical training with an emphasis on biological research. She's also a decent cook. What does that add up to? She can follow a recipe and brew a potion. Hermione could also do it, except that she's not around often enough. Harry doesn't like potions. He could probably do it, but he's just a tad busy at the moment.

We've always envisioned potions as a rather simple thing (disregarding Snape). Follow the recipe in the book exactly and you'll succeed. Even a Muggle would be able to do it. It's the ingredients that are magical, not the person stirring the pot. Now, that may not be canon, but... Well, you all know how we feel about canon, right?

Will there be an epilogue for this story? Yes, it will read something like this: Seventeen Years Later...

I'm kidding! Put down the torches and back away! Yeesh, you people are so violent...

Kittycatgirl: Yes, you can keep the story, but only on one condition. You must name it George.

Compiling all of our disclaimers and AN's into one story? What a truly frightening thought!

No, the Anti-Cruciatius potion is not canon as far as we know.

James: Wait. Wait. You pissed on your cat? You actually laughed so hard you urinated on your cat? I don't know where to take this, as I have so many places I can go with it. And I can only imagine the expression your cat was wearing as it tried to clean itself! Oh, and leave us your girlfriend's email address, would you? We'd really love to explain to her just why the cat is so angry with you!

I really didn't think this was necessary, but what the hell... Warning: Do not read a chapter until after you've emptied your bladder or put on a diaper. You'll save yourself animal abuse charges and having to deal with homicidal felines in the future.

Crabbe? As the brains of Slytherin House? There's a plot bunny in there. ~Glares~ Sorry, Infin1x, we have to kill you now. Don't struggle, it will only hurt more... Bob! Fire up the barbecue, please. We have another vict...volunteer!

~Bob poke Infin1x with a fork~ Is it tasty? Will we's like it?

Damnit, Bob, we are not doing a Harry Potter/LotR crossover and you are NOT Gollum!

~Watches Bob pull out a Darth Vader mask~

That's it for the AN's folks. I'm sure Bob will be back to write them next time.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go hurt my husband.

The Power of the Press

Chapter 7 - Year Seven Summer

Standard Disclaimer:

Bob walked out onto the stage and looked at the audience who were eagerly awaiting what he had to say. They knew it was important, after all, only Bob says important things on stage.

“A number of you have complained about Alyx and her violent author's notes from the last chapter,” Bob said.

“In fact, she's really a sweet and gentle girl. She isn't violent at all... well except for that time her Dad ran over her foot with the truck. And trust me, her peg leg is harmless! She'd never dream of using it for anything other walking on. Her other uses for the leg is a private matter between her, myself, my proctologist and the splinter removal company.”

“No, you see Alyx is really a mild tempered individual. A truly sweet girl who wouldn't harm a flea.”

Perspiration formed on Bob's forehead and he glanced nervously towards one wing of the stage. Sticking between the curtains was the double barrels of a shotgun.

Bob swallowed nervously. “So anyway, I'm proud to be her husband... yeah, she's great! Even if she does eat potato chips in bed and...”

The sound of triggers cocking was clearly heard and Bob flinched. “And now on with our story!”

He turned and walked to the wing of the stage where Alyx met him, still holding the shotgun. “You call that a disclaimer? I mean I appreciate the kind words, but it isn't getting you off the hook. The next time you mix up the heating rub with a personal lubricant I'll kill you. Slowly.”

Bob nodded. “Well, they know it isn't ours don't they?”

She shrugged. “If they don't, nothing we say will convince them.”

“On with the story?” he asked.

“You're not off the hook yet,” she growled.

“Yes dear,” he replied, then he flipped the switch turning on the rest of the chapter.

The Power of the Press

Chapter 7

The Granger Home, June 11 th 1997, Oxford England...

Harry woke early, despite getting to sleep very late. His first impression was one of confusion until he realized he was in his room at the Grangers. His second impression was of a very warm and soft Hermione curled up against him, her head on his chest, sleeping soundly.

He glanced over at the clock, but he was too late to join the Grangers for breakfast. They'd already left for work.

“Mum's already been here and gone,” Hermione said sleepily. “Now go back to sleep, Harry.”

He ran his fingers through her hair and she sighed and snuggled closer. His last thought was that he'd never get back to sleep.

Two hours later he awoke to feel Hermione giggling against him.

“Hermione?”

“You have very sensitive skin,” she murmured.

“What?”

She ran her fingertips very lightly along his ribs, barely touching the skin and he shivered from the sensation. She giggled at his reaction and he sighed before he reached up to cup her cheek.

“I'm glad you're having fun,” he said dryly.

She giggled again and rested her head against his chest. “So, what now? You're done with school, but you can't use a wand here, not until your birthday.”

“We'll work on your homework. That means you'll do it and I'll be here to help, though you won't need it. But no matter. I do have some reading material of my own, as well as some equipment to look over.”

"Are you going to explain now about this reserve position you spoke about?"

"It's not all that complicated. Sirius, Remus and I have been played for fools, to an extent. We might have fooled the British Ministry, but the Americans and the Pacific Rim knew who I was shortly after I arrived in Fiji. My defense instructor, Professor Murphy, is a trainer of senior level hit wizards. He was assigned to be my instructor by the United States Department of Magic. It seems that a good many of the other countries have been angry with Britain and their attitude, especially where it concerned Voldemort and myself.

"Officially, I am a reserve, unpaid Auror, attached to the Pacific Rim Ministry. I have an open invitation to their academy, but they wanted me to take this position so that I could legally rely on their resources while I hunt for Nagini.

"They know I may not want to be an Auror, but they were really frothing at the mouth to get me to sign on. All I have to do is agree to attend their academy and they'll issue me a hit wizard license when I complete an accelerated set of classes. It's nice to know I have these options, but I'm not really set on doing that for the rest of my life."

He paused and took a deep breath.

"So what do you want to do?" she asked softly.

"I don't know, but I'd hate to think that fighting was my sole talent."

She sat up on the bed, letting the sheets slip from her body. He sucked in a breath, seeing how thin and nearly translucent her nightgown was.

"You pulled full marks in Transfiguration, Languages, Charms and Runes. Defense is not your only talent, Harry." She looked around, frowning. "But you're right. I have a lot of homework to do, so let's talk about this later."

He nodded and resisted the urge to pull her down into the bed for some serious exploration without bookspace applying limits on them.

An hour later, Hermione set up on the picnic table in the back to do her homework, but found herself watching Harry, rather than working.

Not far away, Harry fussed around with a small tent. Once he had gotten it erect, he crawled into the tent and vanished. The tent shimmered for a moment, then it, too, faded from sight.

Alarmed, she stood up. "Harry?" she called loudly.

There was a sound of rustling canvas and then his head appeared, floating a couple feet above the ground. "You've got to see this," he exclaimed. "It's like a small apartment in here. There's even a small library!" He frowned. "The topics are pretty limited though; Defense, Healing and Law, mostly. A smattering of other things related to survival."

When she looked down at her stack of books, then longingly at the tent opening, he knew what she was thinking. "Hermione, do your work. The tent isn't going anywhere. I'll grab a few of the books and come sit with you and read."

She smiled and turned back to her own books. Harry vanished for a moment, then reappeared. When he exited the tent, it became visible. He sat next to her, reading a text on advanced curse detection and breaking, skills every investigative Auror should have.

Every so often, he'd curse a coin he had placed on the table, then test a few spells on it, observing their results. Hermione would pause to watch, and then she'd turn back to her essay, never noticing that Harry would stop his work to watch her, as well.

Without realizing it, they had set the pattern for the next two weeks. They'd study during the day, and to his surprise, she would ask for his advice and opinions on her Defense and Transfiguration homework. At night, they'd retire to his bed, where they would lie talking and lightly cuddling until sleep took them. They were still going slowly with the physical aspects of their relationship, but without the limitations of bookspace, they were enjoying a more pleasurable time together.

Hermione's parents weren't oblivious to what was going on, but Dan, who had the most objections, seemed resigned to it. Emma, on the other hand, walked around with a smug grin on her face.

Varied Locations in Britain, June 25 th 1997...

Harry looked up from the skillet he was using to cook an omelette when Remus and Tonks walked into the room from the back door. He blinked at them in confusion – he hadn't expected them to show up today – then turned and moved the omelette to Hermione's plate.

"Good morning, you two," he said, setting up to cook another omelette. "I wasn't expecting you today. What happened to Sirius?"

Remus shuffled his feet and looked uncomfortable. "Right. About that, Harry..."

Harry turned off the stove and turned to face Remus. "He's all right, isn't he?"

"He's fine, he's just... Well, I know he promised to come along with us, but like yourself, he hasn't been back there since that night. He lost his nerve this morning. Cindy is with him, but he was hitting the firewhiskey pretty hard," Remus said sadly.

Harry sighed and nodded unhappily. "I think we should stop by Sirius' place before we go, then. He needs to know that I understand and don't blame him."

All right. Finish your breakfast and then we'll swing by Sirius' place," Remus said.

Harry nodded absently and turned back to making his breakfast. "Have either of you eaten yet?"

"We're good. I made us something to eat before we left," Tonks said, then she frowned. "Although I will admit I'm not nearly as good a cook as you or Remus."

Harry shrugged. He was a decent cook, thanks to the Dursleys, but he wasn't always comfortable with it.

Hermione, meanwhile, was watching and surprisingly, wolfing down her omelette. In her mind, Harry was a wonderful cook, far better than she was, and her mother had made sure she knew her way around the kitchen.

"I do all right, I suppose," he admitted. Then he grinned wryly. "If nothing else, I could be a cook or a landscaper if push came to shove."

He levitated his omelette from the pan onto a plate and moved to the table to sit. Remus poured a cup of tea for himself and for Tonks, then joined them at the table.

Harry grinned weakly at Hermione when he spotted her clean plate. She made it perfectly clear that she loved his cooking.

"I was hungry," she mumbled, suddenly feeling awkward.

"Good. I like cooking for you," he said.

It was a simple admission, but it still touched her. This day wasn't turning out like she thought it would. Already there were uncomfortable emotions rising to the surface and they hadn't even left Oxford!

An hour later, the four of them walked into the foyer of Grimmauld Place. Harry looked around in amusement, Sirius had always called the place a dump, but it looked far from that these days. Polished dark wood floors and cheery lights gave the place a happy contrast. Harry knew most of this was the work of Dobby, who was only working for Sirius until Harry could move into his own house.

Dobby appeared in the foyer and bowed slightly. Sirius had asked Dobby to wear a miniature uniform and Harry had to admit, he made an interesting looking Beefeater. Dobby had his choice of uniforms and Harry was never sure what he'd be wearing on a day when he arrived.

"Master Padfoot and Miss Cindy are in the sitting room," Dobby announced.

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry replied, then he turned and opened the door to the main sitting room.

Cindy sat uncomfortably on one end of the couch. Sirius lay stretched out with his head in her lap. It was obvious that he had been crying shortly before they arrived.

"Sirius?" Harry asked worriedly.

He opened his eyes and looked up at Harry miserably. "I'm sorry. I've failed you like I failed your parents."

Cindy moved to caress him again, but Harry stepped closer and grabbed onto one of Sirius' ears. Sirius' eyes widened and he turned to face Harry.

Harry could tell Sirius had been drinking. He knew he'd need to be forceful to get through to the man. He pulled Sirius into a sitting position.

Once he was sitting up, Harry released him. Sirius rubbed his ear and looked at him with a pained expression.

"You only fail them, and me, when you refuse to live, Sirius Black," Harry said angrily. "You saved me from Dumbledore and the Dursleys. It is not a failure if you can't visit my parents' graves with me. Remus will show us the way, and we'll go another day when you feel up to it. But it is a failure to give up like this and admit defeat."

As he spoke, tears rolled down his cheeks. He loved his parents, of course. After all, they'd given him life. But the truth was, he didn't remember them. The man before him, however, was his father in all the ways that really mattered.

Sirius looked up into Harry's eyes, startled by the intensity of emotion he felt from him. Around him, the others seem stunned into silence, watching a drama that was intimate and personal and yet so much a part of what they were all involved in.

"But I convinced James to switch to Peter. If that wasn't bad enough, I gave you to Hagrid so I could chase after the bastard! I can't even work up the courage to face their graves!" Sirius protested brokenly.

Harry knelt in front of Sirius and leaned back on his heels. "You did. You made some mistakes and as soon as you could, you fixed them. I don't blame you for what I went through with the Dursleys, Sirius. I don't blame you for the death of my parents. You were just one small cog in a machine built by Dumbledore and Voldemort.

"Dumbledore is dead and together, Sirius, we will kill Voldemort so that our family will survive. You saw to that by stepping in and derailing Dumbledore's plan.

"You fixed things as soon as you could. If it weren't for you, I'd still be with those Muggles, or worse. I know. Moony told me how you convinced him that Dumbledore wasn't being truthful and that it was your plan to pull that stunt, faking my loss of magic. Don't you see? You corrected the errors the

way my parents expected you would. They know that and I know it.”

Sirius shed silent tears listening to Harry.

Harry ran a nervous hand through his hair and looked away. He was suddenly aware that he was crying in front of his family.

Sirius wiped his face and heaved a sigh. “How did you ever get so smart?” he asked.

Harry choked on a laugh. “My mother, I think. Or maybe from Remus' side of the family. Can't be from your side; you're too stupid.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, then Tonks started to giggle, while Remus preened and looked proud. Sirius looked at Harry for a moment longer, then he barked out a laugh in that strange style of his.

Sirius started to stand up, but Cindy placed a hand on his shoulder, holding him in place. “Sirius, relax,” she said. “Harry said he doesn't need for you to accompany him.”

Harry stood and patted him on the shoulder. “Someday, Sirius, when you're ready, we'll go and sit by their graves and tell them about our adventures on Fiji. Today, Remus will take us.”

Harry walked to Remus as Sirius moved into Cindy's embrace.

Remus held out the portkey for the others. Tonks, Hermione and Harry reached for it and they all vanished.

Sirius looked at the spot where they had stood a moment before, then turned to Cindy. “I've made a right fool of myself today, haven't I?”

She patted his cheek fondly. “Yes, but you had a good reason for it. And while you might have made a fool of yourself, most of it came from a bottle. Do have any idea what just happened here, Siri?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, my pup is growing up.”

“He's grown into a fine man, Siri. You and Remus should be proud of that. You both made it happen, despite his rough start. His parents would be so proud of him, and you for what you've done for him.”

He nodded sadly. “I just wish it hadn't been necessary.”

“We all do. Now, let's get up and be about our business. We have a wedding in four days and I still haven't bought my nightgown for our wedding night.”

Sirius' expression brightened. “Do I get to help with that?”

She laughed and hugged his arm. “Maybe, if you help me finish the seating chart the caterer needs.”

Godric's Hallow, June 25 th 1997...

Harry looked around curiously once he had recovered his footing. He would have preferred another method, but he was the only one who knew that way of traveling yet. Since Remus was the only one who had been here before, a portkey was the preferred method of travel.

They were on a footpath at the bottom of a gentle slope. Around them were thick woods that blocked and dimmed the sunlight.

“It's at the top of the hill,” Remus said, then he took Tonks' hand and started walking up the path.

Harry reached for Hermione's hand and followed the pair in silence. He was grateful that Hermione was here, but right now he didn't need to talk. She knew that he would speak when he was ready.

After a short walk they came out on top of a small hill. The path wound its way towards a small cemetery. The cemetery was built around a small chapel, and around the entire area was a wrought iron fence. The gate was marked with the names of Gryffindor, Finch, Stevens and Potter, each name marking a cadet branch that at one time carried the title of Heir of Gryffindor.

Harry turned to Remus, who glanced at the gate, then shrugged. “Each family made its mark here. Your family is the sole surviving line of Gryffindor. The other branches have all died out now.”

He paused and looked at the gate again. The names represented many people, perhaps hundreds, now gone. He reached out and touched the gate, testing its reality. *This is my family*, he thought. *No, this was my family. Sirius, Remus, Cindy, Hermione and the others are my family. This is my history and I am their legacy.*

He pushed against the gate and it swung open noiselessly. He glanced at Remus who smiled. “I've visited here several times each year since that... day. It doesn't take much to refresh the charms on the place.”

Harry nodded and smiled his thanks. Gripping Hermione's hand he walked through the gate. He looked at the small chapel for a moment, but turned away, looking for a specific spot.

“It's this way, Harry,” Remus said, pointing. He led them around the side of the chapel. There, under a huge oak tree, lay a simple stone marker.

Harry sped up, crossing the other graves with barely a glance until he reached the marker under the tree. There, he knelt next to the stone, examining it as if it held the answers he sought.

James Potter
27 March 1960 - 31 October 1981
Lily Potter
30 January 1960 - 31 October 1981
Beloved Parents, Faithful Friends
Truly missed
CERVUS LACESSITUS LEO

Remus and Tonks moved to sit at a nearby bench, leaving Harry and Hermione alone at the grave.

He ran a hand over the cool marble, then he conjured a handful of flowers, which he laid at the base of the headstone.

He looked up at Hermione, who stood nearby nibbling her lip worriedly. "I always thought that visiting this place would mean a lot to me. I mean, when I was growing up in my cupboard, I used to dream that my parents would show up one say and say 'We're sorry, it was a terrible mistake, we're here to take you home'. But that never happened."

He sighed and his shoulders drooped a little. "I thought I would feel remorse, but I don't. I mean, I feel the hole they left behind when they left me, but it's been a part of me for so long, and Remus, Sirius and you have filled so much of it. I'm sad, in a way, that I couldn't be with them. But how can I miss what I don't remember? I can't miss what I never had, can I? Does this make me a bad person, Hermione?"

She smiled sadly at him and moved to stand closer. Her own heart was breaking for him and a single tear rolled down her cheek. "No, it doesn't make you a bad person. It just means you're human. They were taken from you so long ago you don't remember them."

He nodded slowly and turned back to the headstones. "I'm sorry," he said simply to the cold stone. "We could have had so much and it was taken away from us. You probably already know it, but Remus and Sirius have been taking care of me."

He stood and placed a hand on the stone. "I hope that I'm good enough. I try to live up to what I think you'd like me to be. You were my parents, but I don't remember you, except for some nightmares. I don't remember you at all, and for that, I'm sorry."

He reached for Hermione's hand, the pulled her close and wrapped an arm around her waist.

"This is my Hermione," he said to the stone. "Someday, after I kill Voldemort, I'm going to marry her and we'll build a family of our own. I'll do my best to be the type of parent I know you would have been."

She turned into his chest and bit her lip. It had dawned on her that he wasn't mourning his parents; they were strangers to him. He was mourning a concept of parents and family that had been denied to him for most of his life.

She looked at the stone again. "*Cervus lacessitus leo*," she whispered.

Harry smiled. "Appropriate, don't you think? It suits me and my father. I wonder if it was the family motto or just his?"

Seeing her confusion, his grin widened. "*Cervus lacessitus leo* : The stag at bay becomes a lion," he translated. Her knowledge of Latin was limited to her spell vocabulary, while Harry had picked up the language on a lark. It annoyed Sirius when Harry spoke to him in Latin, and anything that annoyed Sirius was well worth the effort.

She smiled up at him, comprehending. It was appropriate, considering his connection with stags and the Gryffindor line.

He wrapped his other arm around her, holding her tightly and laid his head against the top of hers.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

He kissed the top of her head. "Never better. I can't be upset when I'm holding you."

They stood like that for several minutes before he released her and they walked over to the bench where Remus and Tonks sat, talking softly.

The two adults smiled at the teens approach. "All right there, Harry?" asked Tonks.

"Fine," Harry replied.

Seeing both Remus and Tonks frown at him, he grinned. "Really, I'm just fine. I needed to visit this place to understand."

"Understand?" echoed Remus in confusion.

Harry nodded and waved a hand towards the graves. "These were my family, people who lived their lives and, through them, allowed me to be born. I am their legacy, but they're not my real family, they're my history. My family, the people I can reach out and touch right now, who alter my life by being a part of it, are you and Tonks, Sirius and Cindy, Hermione and her parents. That's my family now. Family is people you love and who love you. Blood is part of it, but the love is even more important.

"James Potter was my father, but you and Sirius earned the title of Dad."

Remus stood and walked over to Harry, then clapped a hand on his shoulder. His eyes were suspiciously bright. Tonks sniffled on the bench. She was a late comer to the group and after a few welcoming pranks, had been accepted by all with open arms.

Harry's right, she thought. *We are a family*. It was a difficult concept for her. She had parents who loved her, but Sirius, Remus and the others accepted her for what she was. Acceptance was a rare commodity for the young metamorph.

"It'll be fine, Remus," Harry said. He had rarely seen the older werewolf so touched before.

"You know it will, cub," replied Remus.

Harry looked around. "Remus, who owns all this? Besides yourself, who keeps it up? The lawns look freshly cut and raked. Is there a caretaker?"

"You own the land," Remus said quietly. "Magic does most of the upkeep, but like I said, I come here every few months to refresh the charms."

He pointed south, towards a thick picket of trees. "That way lies Potter Manor, and your parents' cottage. A little further south of the cottage is the village. The cottage is just a burned down shell. No one wanted to touch it. I'm not sure if it was in memory of your parents, or fear that the ground had been cursed."

Harry nodded grimly. He would do something about that. Perhaps rebuild the cottage. But not today. He wouldn't worry about that until he officially came of age in Britain in another month.

He looked at Remus. "Thank you, for what you've done here for them, and for me."

"We're family," Remus replied, testing the word out for himself and liking it. He always thought of it like that, but it wasn't always easy to say so.

"Shall we apparate back to Hermione's place?" Harry asked.

"If you don't mind, I think I'd like to show Tonks around a bit more."

He nodded and watched them walk over to another pair of graves. Harry had spotted them on the way in. They marked the resting place of his grandparents, killed before his father had married his mother.

"Harry, I'm not sure I can apparate that far," Hermione said uncertainly.

He tore his eyes away from Remus and Tonks and looked at her. "I think you're underestimating your abilities, sweetheart. But no matter. Do you trust me?"

"You know I do," she said.

He gathered her into his arms, holding her tightly. "Close your eyes," he whispered.

She leaned against him, her eyes shut tightly. There was a brief sensation of motion, and then he tilted her chin up and kissed her lingeringly. When the kiss finally ended, she sighed happily against his chest.

"You can open your eyes," he whispered.

She looked around in astonishment. They were in her room!

"What was that?" she asked in a shocked voice.

"That," he said smugly, "was an International Auror Teleport. It's banned here in the U.K., but I'm going to teach you how to do it tomorrow. An average wizard has a range of nearly two thousand miles with it, instead of the usual one hundred to two hundred miles of an apparate."

"Why is it banned here?"

Harry sighed. "Because it's untraceable and there are no wards preventing it. Aurors outside of Britain learn it in their last year at their academies. It's not taught to the general public, but I have permission to teach it to my family, as long as I get an oath that you won't show it to others and will only use it when you know you won't be seen. It's not a perfect spell, though. Never open your eyes while teleporting. Trust me on that."

Hermione nodded absently and moved to sit on her bed.

He watched her for a moment, worriedly. "What's wrong?"

"Aren't you worried that with all the help you've been given by the Pacific Rim that you'll feel obligated to go back there?"

Harry leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, looking at her. "I suppose that's a possibility, but would it really be all that bad? I've been invited to attend the Mitsumi, to study. Their Ministry wants me, in particular their Magical Law Enforcement, but they aren't the only Department interested. I'm not saying I will go that route, but it's nice to know I have options."

"But what do you want to do?" she pressed, then laughed when he wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Besides that!" she exclaimed. Their sex life was steadily improving, even if they were still both technically virgins. Between them, body modesty had already vanished.

"There are no magical universities in Britain or Europe, Hermione. If you want to go for your Mastery here, you need to accept an Apprenticeship under a Master, and that Master can keep you up to seven years. I know you want to continue working for a Mastery in Arithmancy and maybe

Runes. We could do that elsewhere.”

She leaned back against the headboard, thinking. She did want a Mastery in Runes and Arithmancy, as they were prerequisites for getting into spell crafting. “So I could go to a school in Japan and get a Mastery there without an Apprenticeship?”

He nodded and tried not to grin. He could see she was weakening. The Apprenticeship system in Britain was downright feudal in nature. The Master had control over the apprentice and was allowed to do nearly anything he or she wanted to. It was the primary reason why so few people went on to obtain a Mastery in any subject.

“I don't speak Japanese,” she noted.

“There are translation spells which you can use until you learn. It's not an easy language to learn, but it's worth the effort. Besides, we're not limited to Japan. There's a whole world out there waiting for us. And there are a lot of places that speak English.”

“And what would you do?”

He shrugged. “Same as you, only different subjects. Transfiguration and Charms.”

She shook her head. “It's so far from home, though.”

“And I would buy a portal door to wherever we stay. Look, sweetie, you don't need to decide today. I haven't made a decision myself. But I want you to promise me that you'll at least consider it. I don't think either of us want to stay in Britain afterwards.”

Hermione frowned and got off the bed. She paced in front of Harry a few times before turning to him. “I don't understand this. Why are we the ones who are so backward? Portals are a prime example of that. Illegal in Britain and barely used in Europe, but they are everywhere else!”

“You know the answer to that already,” he replied calmly.

When she turned away to begin pacing once more, he came away from the wall and placed a hand on her shoulder to stop her. “We've talked about this before. Wizarding Britain is behind most of the rest of the world, except for the European nations that seem eager to follow us. Meanwhile, our society has a moral system that more closely resembles Imperial Britannia at the height of Queen Victoria, than it does modern Muggle Britain.

“You saw Molly last year. She didn't like the idea that other countries were ignoring British law. And she didn't like that I was so assertive with her. Britain and the continent are so conservative, it's remarkable that they even allow new spell development.

“Madam Bones is working hard on fixing that, and Sirius is helping, but I don't expect she'll make any major changes anytime soon. Look at Sirius' equality bill, it was passed, grudgingly, but is rarely enforced. The Minister is stuck trying to implement slow changes because sweeping reforms would spark a revolt among the purebloods.

“Look at the Yanks, or the Pacific Rim. Both Ministries are working to integrate themselves with the Muggle governments. They are openly embracing the newer Muggle technologies. The Yanks are even working on something called technomancy, which combines technology and magic together. If you don't believe me, ask Remus what your chances are of landing a Ministry job.”

She frowned at him and sat at her desk. “So you think we should abandon Britain altogether? Our home?”

Harry scowled back at her. “Now, I didn't say that and you know it. All I'm saying is that there is little either of us can do as fresh graduates. I have a Mastery under my belt, but it's not the one I really want. I'm willing to spend the five years of schooling to obtain Masteries in Charms and Transfiguration, and then maybe spend a few more years outside of Britain, getting experience before coming back to help move things forward.

“This is my home,” he said firmly. “But I can't do anything about it until I have some real life experience under my belt. You're in the same boat, sweetie, like it or not.”

She leaned back on her chair, thinking. It was a bold move, but she was already aware of the difficulty she'd face trying to get a Ministry job, considering her background. Having a Mastery would make that so much easier. Even a Muggleborn was respected when she has a Mastery in a subject. The Mastery opened doors that her heritage slammed shut.

Slowly she nodded. “All right, I'll consider it. In the meantime, I want to see the book you learned the Auror Teleport spell from.”

Harry nodded and summoned the book to his hand, then gave it to her with a broad grin. It wasn't exactly the same book he had learned from. His book was more practical in nature. The one he gave her was an in-depth examination of the process, including the theory behind it.

She turned and took a seat at her desk, opening the book.

“Call me when you're ready to try it,” he said, kissing the side of her head. She was already engrossed in the book.

“Uh huh,” she mumbled.

He chuckled and walked from her room.

The Granger Home, June 29 th 1997, Oxford England...

Harry walked out into the backyard holding a tray of drinks. Emma followed him a moment later carrying another tray with snacks on it. He placed

the tray on the table and sat down next to Hermione, exhausted from the day and, for the first time in hours, comfortable.

Hermione opened a butterbeer and passed it to him before taking one for herself. "Well, that was fun," she murmured tiredly.

Harry kicked off his shoes and banished his socks to his room, then he sighed, brushing his bare feet in the cool grass. Hermione grinned and echoed his actions a moment later. They both had spent a good deal of the evening dancing and their feet were sore.

Remus and Tonks appeared at the apparation point with loud pops and spotted the trio sitting at the table in the dark. They angled over to join them.

"Why are we sitting in the dark?" asked Tonks.

"It's quiet and not so bright," Hermione replied. She was leaning up against Harry.

As if to belie that statement, the yard lights switched on. Harry flinched and blinked under their harsh glare.

"Drink too much, cub?" Remus asked in amusement.

He shook his head. "No, just that one champagne toast. I just wasn't expecting Dan to switch on the lights."

The back door opened and Dan stepped out into the yard. He joined them at the table. "There's just something about weddings and receptions that exhausts me," he complained as he sat down.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Did Sirius and Cindy get off all right?" asked Emma.

"I don't know. We'd have had to stick around to find that out," answered Tonks with a snort and a laugh.

A complete and shocked silence fell on the table for a moment before Harry began to laugh. A moment later everyone joined him.

When the laughter finally died down, Remus replied to Emma's question. "They left for the airport just fine. I'm surprised that Cindy convinced Sirius to use Muggle transportation."

"Come on, Remus. Not everyone likes international portkeys," Harry said sourly. His hatred of them was legendary. "Besides, a flight to the States is a lot shorter than a flight to Nadi."

"Cindy convinced Sirius to travel as a Muggle for this trip. He has his wand with him, but he's promised to keep the magic to a minimum," Emma commented.

"I have to admit I was surprised that the ceremony was so... ordinary. I expected that sometime after the service there would be some sort of magical ceremony," Dan said quietly.

Emma nodded in agreement. "Yes, what about the whole lifespan and magic merging thing?"

Tonks shrugged her shoulders and glanced at Remus, who could only shrug in return. "I don't really know. My mum told me about the magic merging when she gave me the talk, but she never told me the exact details. She said it was something the couple learned closer to their wedding. The Ministry didn't want people merging magic during a casual encounter."

"Sirius explained it to me," Harry said softly. "When he gave me the talk, he was already thinking about marrying Cindy and had looked up the information. It's another case of the Ministry being pigheaded, if you ask me. It's not something that can happen accidentally."

Dan turned to him. "So, how is it done?"

Harry blushed and was thankful that, even with the yard lights, his blush wasn't that obvious. "Well, the merging isn't something that happens instantly. It can take up to a year or more, depending on the strength of the people involved.

"There's a short ritual that starts the merging. That's usually done by the couple, in private. Did you know that failure to perform the ritual, or if the ritual fails, you have the only acceptable grounds for annulment by the Ministry?"

Dan leaned closer. "But how is it done?" he pressed.

"Ah..." Harry said, looking very uncomfortable. "I'd rather not say. It's private."

"Harry?" Hermione said.

"Later," he replied in a strangled tone. He was reluctant to explain to the parents of his girlfriend what was entailed in the ritual. It was a private matter between the couple and not something you normally spoke of with future in-laws. Dan was just getting used to them sleeping in the same bed; he wasn't ready to entertain the idea that they might have sex. And he certainly wasn't ready to hear about a ceremony that involved certain bodily fluids.

Hermione sat back and huffed. She hated not knowing something and this was clearly magical, so it had not come up when her Mother gave her The Talk.

Don't worry, Hermione," Tonks said easily. "It's listed in several common books, and if you really wanted to know you could always ask someone, like that red head's mother."

Harry choked on his drink and coughed loudly. *Ask Molly Weasley? Oh, Merlin, can I get the pensieve memory of that conversation to see?* he thought.

Remus pounded on Harry's back and grinned. He knew of the ritual, and while he never thought he'd ever perform it, both Sirius and James had explained it to him. Unlike Harry, however, he knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Hermione glared at Harry and he winced, knowing full well that she would be demanding an explanation in private.

"So, what's this about you talking to the press, Harry? Do you know how dangerous that was?" Remus asked.

Harry shrugged. "Evan spoke to the press, and he wouldn't have done so, but it seemed the best man was too busy ogling the pretty blond in the front row on the groom's side."

Remus blushed and looked away from Harry's gaze. "I guess I deserved that."

"Be thankful, Remus. I was half tempted to tell that reporter from the Prophet that the Quibbler had the story right all along."

Hermione started to choke on her drink. She sputtered for a moment, then glared at him. "Don't do that! It's bad enough that Luna knows about you without you fanning the fire."

He grinned. He'd never tell the Prophet any such thing, but he could dream, couldn't he?

Disney Contemporary Hotel, Disney World, Orlando Florida, June 30 th 1997...

Cindy breathed a sigh of relief when Sirius closed the door after the bellhop left. Their flight had arrived barely an hour ago and it was very early in the morning.

Sirius pulled off his tie and smiled tiredly at her. "I never knew sitting could be so tiring," he said. "I've flown enough times now, you'd think I'd be used to it."

She laughed. "We have some flights that will be a lot worse, love. That flight from Los Angeles to Sydney will seem like forever."

"I'm not going to worry about it," he said bravely. "Right now, it's four in the morning and I think we need to get some sleep."

She nodded and walked into the bedroom with Sirius close on her heels. She opened the large steamer trunk they were using and wondered why the wizards seemed so enamored of steamer trunks. With a mental shrug, she pulled out her nightgown and headed into the bathroom.

Sirius looked out at the panoramic view of the Magic Kingdom and chuckled to himself. *Magic? If they only knew,* he mused. Despite the late hour, the park was lit up, as was the edge of the man-made lake. They were in one of the many executive suites, which included nearly every luxury one could possibly imagine.

Shaking his head in amusement at his own thoughts, he moved away from the window and started to strip down.

From the bathroom he could hear Cindy getting ready and he grinned. He had seen her nightgown, but hadn't seen it on her yet. That was something he was looking forward to with anticipation.

By the time he was down to his boxers, she stepped out of the bathroom wearing a light robe over her nightgown. "Your turn," she told him.

He grinned and headed into the bathroom, pausing only long enough to kiss her cheek.

Cindy smiled to herself and marveled at the changes in her life. Sirius had appeared on the horizon, thanks to her friends, and he quickly filled a place she didn't even know was empty. Their romance blossomed so quickly that it had at first worried her that it was an infatuation.

That worry dropped away as Sirius started showing her more and more aspects of his personality and his world. He was eager to show her the magical world; the good along with the bad. She knew that despite his fears, he would make a wonderful father. It was obvious from the way he treated Harry.

Sirius was a complex man who hid much behind a mask of practical jokes and a happy-go-lucky nature. But she had seen beyond the mask and held him when he wept for friends lost and years wasted in prison for a crime he didn't commit.

She thought herself to be extremely lucky to be loved by such a man and would have been surprised to know that Sirius thought the same thing about her.

Sirius stepped from the bathroom and turned off the bathroom light. He grinned and approached Cindy, who stood waiting for him. She smiled softly and then she turned and shut off the lamp near the bed. The room fell into darkness with the only light coming from the illumination of the park in the distance.

She turned to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Finally, this day is over and I have you where I want you," she whispered.

He leaned down a little and kissed her while his robe closed. "My mother wouldn't have approved, but I am so happy you're now Mrs. Black," he replied after breaking their kiss.

She stepped out of his arms and let her robe slip to the floor, where it pooled at her feet. Sirius gasped; she looked almost like an angel in her nightgown. For a brief moment, he recalled a conversation he once had with Harry about there being two types of nightwear for women; the type that keeps them warm and the type that makes them hot. This was definitely one of the latter category.

She put a hand on her hip and twisted slightly, posing for him. "I take it you like what you see?"

He nodded dumbly, unable to find the words.

She smiled to herself then stepped close enough to reach down and caress his erection through his boxers.

He moaned slightly and his boxers exploded.

Literally.

There was a sharp snap and pieces of cotton flew everywhere. She jumped back in alarm and his pelvic region suddenly lit up like someone had turned a spotlight on it.

"What the...," Sirius gasped in alarm.

Two eyes appeared and blinked at him. He blinked back and looked back at Little Sirius, who was giving new meaning to the words 'get head'. His erection twisted and bent so that there was a ninety degree angle in the middle. The head swiveled until it spotted Cindy who, by now, was sitting on the floor, staring at Sirius' suddenly sentient penis in awe. One eye deliberately winked at her and she blinked in surprise, then, to Sirius' consternation, she started to giggle.

His erection wolf whistled at her, twice, and she blushed heavily.

"Hey now! That's my wife..." Sirius trailed off and wondered just who he was arguing with. After all, he wanted to use that particular organ on her.

The head twisted for a moment and glared up at Sirius before turning back to Cindy. It winked again and then began to sing.

*I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts
There they are all standing in a row
Big ones, small ones, some as big as your head
Give them a twist a flick of the wrist
That's what the showman said
I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts
Every ball you throw will make me rich
There stands my wife, the idol of me life
Singing roll a bowl a ball a penny a pitch
Roll a bowl a ball a penny a pitch*

Sirius groaned and buried his face in his hands, while Cindy howled with laughter.

"Now you stop that!" shouted Sirius, which only caused Cindy to laugh even harder.

His erection twisted again and looked up at him and quite clearly blew a raspberry in his direction. Sirius stumbled backwards and fell into a chair. His erection changed songs.

*Day-o, day-o
Daylight come and me wan' go home
Day, me say day, me say day, me say day
Me say day, me say day-o
Daylight come and me wan' go home...*

Sirius groaned and grabbed at the singing penis, which made a strangled noise.

"Help me!" shouted his penis. "No, wait, do that again!"

Cindy peeked her head around the edge of the bed to see Sirius trying to strangle the little crooner and she started laughing again. Sirius let go of himself and shot her a sour look. He didn't know who was responsible, but someone was going to pay for this!

Daily Prophet Headline, June 30 th 1997...

Sirius Orion Black Marries Muggle!

Yesterday, in a small private service consisting of mostly Muggles and a few wizards, Sirius Orion Black, age 36, wed Cynthia Patricia Adams,

age 34. The ceremony took place in the famous chapel of St. Mary's, in Oxford.

Black has been long listed as one of Britain's most eligible bachelors, topping out that list at number eight for the past three years. He is most famous for his role in Harry Potter's life and as such, his wedding resulted in more press present than actual participants of the service. It had been hoped that Black's marriage would have resulted in a public appearance by Harry Potter, but that wasn't the case.

Potter, age 16, heroically sacrificed his magic so that we may live happily without the threat of You-Know-Who. Although there have been numerous sightings of Mr. Potter over the past three years, none have been confirmed.

Evan Black, a cousin of Mr. Black, offered a statement to the press following the service. "Mr. Black appreciates the interest his wedding has generated, but he asks your indulgence as he and his newbride desire nothing more than to have their privacy while on their honeymoon."

When pressed, Evan Black admitted that Mr. Potter regretted his inability to attend his godfather's wedding, but that he was not in the country and had other obligations. Mr Black refused to divulge any further information concerning Harry Potter.

Sirius Black is a current member of the Wizengamot and one of the Ministry's strongest supporters. Currently, he holds the only Ambassador-at-Large position, standing in for the Ministry in several recent international conferences. Prior to that, he spent twelve years in Azkaban prison, wrongly accused and never tried for the crime he was accused of.

Mr. Black escaped from prison for the express purpose of coming to the aid of his godson, Harry Potter. He spent an uncomfortable year on the run from Ministry Aurors until his name was cleared in the scandals that followed the fall of Cornelius Fudge as Minister of Magic.

It was rumored that he played a key role in the downfall of Minister Fudge, and in the disappearance of Harry Potter. Efforts to locate the missing hero have failed because the Ministry does not track Muggles.

Mr Black was attended by long time friend and known werewolf, Remus John Lupin, and his younger cousin, Evan Black.

Ms. Adams was attended by Emma Granger, Muggle, and her daughter Hermione, a seventh year student at Hogwarts. It is rumored that the Grangers were instrumental in arranging for Ms. Adams to meet Mr. Black.

Ms. Adams is a doctor of some sort, a respected job among the Muggles.

Quibbler headline, June 30 th , 1997...

Stubby Boardman Marries Duck!

In a move that surprised no one, Stubby Boardman, former lead singer of the Hobgoblins, married long time sweetheart and known reversemagus, Doris Purkiss.

Ms. Purkiss is famous for claiming that Stubby Boardman really was Sirius Black. She is also the only known duck capable of changing herself into a witch.

The ceremony was attended by friends of Mr. Boardman's and Ms. Purkiss' paddling. We were unable to attend the party that followed the service, but we were told by reliable sources that guests were served cheese and quackers.

See photos page 6 and 9.

Coming next week. Harry Potter invades Antarctica! Claims the continent for Cyprus, then challenges Canada to an arm wrestling match.

Little Whinging, Surrey, July 20 th 1997...

"Are you sure about this, dear?" asked Emma as she pulled out onto the motorway.

"Do you think I shouldn't?"

"I'm not saying that, Hermione. I just want to make sure you're absolutely certain why you're doing this."

Hermione sighed and looked out the window for a moment, trying to order her thoughts before replying. "I told you that he's told me that when I graduate from Hogwarts, he'll ask me to marry him, officially, ring and all?"

Emma resisted the urge to let go of the steering wheel and hug her daughter, opting instead to grin broadly. She couldn't help but marvel at the thought of her daughter in love. Before Harry, she thought Hermione would never get her nose out of her books to discover the world. "Yes, I think I recall you mentioning that before. I'm not surprised that he'd mention it before he actually asks you. Your father did the same thing."

"He even intends to ask you and Dad for permission sometime after I return to school," Hermione added.

"How do you feel about it?" Emma asked calmly.

"I love him, Mum. I want to marry him and I don't want to wait for us to get married. I'd marry him tomorrow, if I thought I could get away with it."

Emma nodded. Her daughter had just confirmed that they hadn't been fully intimate yet. It was information she was interested in. She'd never admit it to Hermione, but she was downright nosy about her daughter's love life. She and Dan had a wonderful relationship and she wanted Hermione to be as lucky as she was.

"I love him, but despite all the good in him and the things I love about him, there is still a part of him that isn't quite... complete. Those people made him that way and I will spend the rest of my life trying to correct that."

"You've read that literature then?"

"I did, and for the most part, he is not that way. I've seen him with small children and in every argument we've had he has not ever been violent. His... damage lies in another area."

Emma frowned. She had been concerned that Harry was still having problems from his experience with the Dursleys. It was commonly known that children who are abused while growing up often become abusers, thus continuing the cycle.

"Oh?"

Hermione sighed. "He lacks confidence in himself and us. He won't let us get too intimate because deep down I think he's still convinced he isn't worthy of my love. I think he's afraid that someday I'll leave him and he's keeping us from taking that last step because it," she replied, then her voice dropped lower. "I think he's scared he won't be able to please me physically or emotionally."

Emma nodded. "And how does your cursing the Dursleys help that?"

"It doesn't," Hermione said firmly, "except that it lets me vent some of the anger I've felt. I'm not angry at Harry, so it isn't fair to vent it at him. They have had no punishment for their crimes. Harry is going to force them to start paying to live in Privet Drive, but that's not enough."

Emma nodded slowly. "Yes, I can agree with that, but won't you get into trouble with what you have planned?"

Hermione's grin sharpened and her eyes narrowed. "No. If I cursed the Dursleys directly, I could be arrested, but I'm not going to do that. I'm going to set some one time wards that will vanish once they're triggered. They'll make the Dursley's think they are having a particularly nasty string of bad luck. The effects will, for the most part, be subtle and difficult to attribute to a spell. Besides, I won't cast with my wand, so it can't be traced back to me."

"But you won't hurt them?" Emma asked again.

Hermione shook her head. "No. Like Harry, I have no intention of hurting them. Now, if they hurt themselves, that's another matter."

Emma glanced at her daughter. "Hermione," she said warningly.

"Oh, honestly, Mum Do you really think I'd hurt anyone? As much as the Dursleys deserve it, I have no intention of hurting anyone. What happens when the Dursleys react to the problems as they arise is their problem," she replied in a patient tone.

Satisfied, Emma stopped her line of questioning and went back to a subject she wanted to know more about. "So, he's going to ask you to marry him?"

Hermione nodded a bit dreamily. It was something she was looking forward to. Harry had spoken with her on a number of occasions about the future and the one thing he stressed over and over were the options. The world would be there for them to explore after she left Hogwarts and she wanted to do that with him.

"Yes, and he intends to ask you and Dad for permission," she replied softly. It was old fashioned and not necessary, but Harry wanted their approval.

"Well, I think your father is ready for that news, if not being asked. It is a bit old fashioned though."

"It's a lot less old fashioned than what normally happens in the wizarding world. During the seventh year, many parents negotiate arranged unions for their children."

Emma scowled. "Are we going to have someone asking about you, then?"

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt it. I've made it plainly clear over the last two years that I am with Evan. Besides, I'm Muggleborn, therefore beneath notice of most pure blood wizards. I would be shocked if someone approached you, but even if they did, I have the right to say no."

Emma shuddered. "Arranged marriages? In this day and age?"

Hermione shrugged. "I know. But like Harry keeps saying, think Britain at the height of East India Trading Company in the nineteenth century. Arrogant and prideful, they even looked down on white Europe. It's not really a problem, Mum. If necessary, you could even tell someone that you already have an agreement with Sirius, for Evan and myself."

Emma nodded, relieved to know there was an easy way out. She pulled out of the far lane heading toward the Little Whinging exit. She drove into the small township, slowing considerably. "How do you want to do this?"

"You just need to drive by the places I tell you. I can lay the spells from the car if it isn't going too fast."

All right, where to first?"

"There's a small park off Wisteria Walk," Hermione replied, as she consulted a map. "That's the fourth left from our location."

"Who is this spell aimed at?"

"Dudley."

Emma nodded. She had heard the stories from Sirius and Remus about Dudley and the rest of the Dursleys. Harry didn't talk much about that time, except with Hermione, and rarely he'd have terrible nightmares about being locked in a cupboard. He's lucky he's not claustrophobic, she thought. She shivered involuntarily. She could recall twice Harry having severe nightmares that woke everyone up. The look on his face was something she'd never forget.

She spotted her turn and took it. After traveling several blocks, they came upon a small playground that looked like it had seen better days. There were signs posted stating that the park closed at dusk and trespassers after closing hours would be prosecuted. Despite the signs, the park showed signs of heavy vandalism. It seemed out of place in this neat and tidy village.

Emma spotted a place to pull into and she brought the car to a stop.

"This is the place," Hermione said softly, while rolling down her window. "Harry said his cousin often destroyed the playground equipment when they couldn't find a victim to pick on."

Hermione mumbled a Latin incantation under her breath and her hand glowed briefly in the bright sunshine, then the glow faded away.

"What did you do?" asked Emma.

"It's a punishment spell, keyed on Dudley Dursley only."

Emma frowned. Sometimes Hermione was very reticent with her information. "Which does what?" she asked in that commanding tone mother's often used.

"It will help teach Dudley not to hurt others. Every time he tries to hurt anyone, he'll have a violent physical reaction. A small experiment in continuing Doctor Pavlov's work."

"I thought you said you wouldn't hurt anyone!"

Hermione sighed. "It's not going to hurt anyone, Mum; embarrass maybe, but not hurt. Dudley will experience a bad reaction every time he tries to hurt someone. It's not going to hurt him, except perhaps to force him to change his ways while he still can. I harbor no such hope for the other Dursleys.

"Each spell will trigger on the worst of their behavior and inflict a punishment accordingly. Petunia's worst trait is pride. Vernon's is anger. Dudley is a spoiled bully. For Petunia and Vernon, the spells will do little more than exacerbate their traits. What happens as a result of that is up to them.

"Dudley is a little different. His spell will attempt to make him change his ways. A reasonably minded person would learn from the experiences and move on. What Dudley does is another matter entirely."

Emma nodded unhappily. She couldn't fault her daughter's logic.

Within an hour they were back on the motorway heading toward Oxford.

Little Whinging, Surrey, July 22 nd , 1997...

It had been raining for two days and Vernon Dursley was in a foul mood when he left the house. Grunnings had posted a loss in the last quarter and auditors from the corporate offices of the parent company had arrived to look over the books and the facility in the hopes of finding ways of cutting costs.

Rumors were rampant about layoffs and other cost cutting measures. Being one of the executives, Vernon wasn't too worried. It was the little guy that got laid off in times like this. But he was concerned that this could cost him his company car. That would be a disaster beyond the two hundred jobs they expected to trim from the company.

He grumbled and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Had that Potter boy still been with them, he would have blamed him for losing that large Chinese account to the Italians. As it stood, he wasn't sure that those freaks weren't somehow involved anyway. They were everywhere and he knew it, even if no one else did.

Up ahead a traffic light turned red. Unknown to Uncle Vernon, all the conditions for Hermione's curse were coming into play. It was rather specific, requiring a rainy day, and a very special vehicle stopped at the red light in front of him.

Without thinking, he moved his foot from the brake pedal to the accelerator and pushed down. Hermione had been very specific with her curse and Vernon accelerated through to nearly fifteen miles per hour in the short distance before slamming into the back of the stopped police car.

His airbag fired, pinning him painfully into his seat and his head smashed against the headrest causing pain to flare in his skull. His rage climbed to uncontrollable proportions.

Constable Shelly Parks looked in her rear view mirror and growled in the back of her throat. Her pants were soaked in hot tea and this was going to require a mountain of paperwork!

“A32, I've been rear ended at the intersection of Piston and Peterborough. Requesting a senior constable and backup,” she spoke into her radio, then she opened her door. *At least the rain will cool me off*, she thought sourly.

“A32, affirmative, backup and supervisor en route,” said a voice over the speaker.

She stepped from the car just in time to see Vernon boil from his vehicle.

“You bitch! What asshole taught you to drive?” he shouted. The vein in his forehead throbbed noticeably.

He marched up to her, and she took a step backwards in surprise. Normally, people who hit police cars tend to be rather polite and a bit afraid. This whale of a man was neither and acted like he wanted to hurt her.

“Sir,” she said in a calm voice. “If you will just calm down we can get through this with as little fuss as possible.” She reached for her nightstick, just in case. She knew help was on its way, but the man considerably out massed her. If he started swinging, she'd be in trouble. She needed to keep him calm until help arrived!

Vernon was not in a mood to calm down. If anything, he saw her attitude as a way of patronizing him. He closed the distance, getting into her face. “Don't tell me what to do, dearie,” he snapped. “I pay your salary. This is your fault! Look what you did to my car!”

“Sir, if you don't calm down, I'll be forced to arrest you,” cautioned Constable Parks, feeling her own anger begin to rise.

Vernon turned purple and raised his arm. He wasn't really thinking and Constable Parks wasn't about to take the chance that he was merely gesturing. She tried to step back only to discover he had backed her up against her car. A moment later, several burly constables who had just arrived on the scene swarmed over Vernon.

He screamed incoherently and swung wildly, hitting Constable Parks in the cheek. She slammed into her patrol car, hitting her head. Dazed, she slid to the ground. All around Little Whinging, sirens sounded as the call for assistance was sent out by the supervisor on the scene.

Within minutes, Vernon was handcuffed and thrown into the back of a police car. It would be three days before he could be bailed out of jail and his solicitor would eventually plea bargain his sentence down to time served, a fine, fifty hours of community service, a driver refresher course and a course on anger management. The fine would make a serious dent in their savings.

North of Carlisle in Cumbria, England, July 30 th , 1997...

If it wasn't for the cooling charm, he would have collapsed from the heat hours ago. He was dressed in heavy denim, with high top boots and a heavy flannel shirt. In one hand he held a staff, which he used occasionally to pry up a deadfall. There was nothing magical about the staff except that he had used magic to create it. Other than that, it was merely a long walking stick.

Emma had taken Hermione out shopping and he had been told he couldn't come along since this was a girls' shopping trip. He grinned and told Hermione and her mother that he'd use the time to scout out an area north of and not far from Little Hangleton.

There was a lot of agriculture in this area of England, with small patches of forest tucked in among the fields. Between the fields were hedgerows of bushes and trees. It was one of these hedgerows that he was poking through at the moment. This was his eighth hedgerow and he had been at this most of the day.

Harry pulled his canteen from his belt and took a drink of cool water, then he stopped and tensed. He had the distinct feeling that someone or something was watching him.

He turned slowly, his eyes scanning the area, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He couldn't see any people or detect any magic. Looking at the ground, he noted an old rotted log nearby and walked over to it.

“Come closer and I will bite you,” said a voice.

Harry stopped and smiled. After hours of looking, he had finally found what he was looking for.

“Hello. I mean you no harm,” he replied in parseltongue.

A flat, black head poked out from under the log. *“A speaker. It has been a long time since there were rumors of a speaker.”*

A moment later the snake came out from under the log and slithered onto it. It was barely two feet in length, and poisonous. The common European viper was the only poisonous snake indigenous to Britain, and while it could inflict a painful bite, it was rarely lethal.

“I'm looking for a snake,” Harry said.

The snake eyed him for a moment and he suddenly had a feeling that the snake was considering calling him stupid.

“Do I look like the food that flies?” replied the snake dryly.

Up, it's official. It thinks I'm stupid, he thought sourly. He was sure if the snake could laugh, it would. "I know, but you're not the snake I'm looking for. This one would be much larger than you."

The viper raised its head and nodded slowly. *"Larger than me? I am very large for my kind and my bite is fierce. One female even admired my scales last mating season. Silly thing, she was lucky I didn't bite her."*

Mating among snakes is dangerous! he thought. *Hermione nibbles, but I'm glad she doesn't bite!*

"Yes you are very large, but have you heard of the snake I'm looking for? It would be much larger and very dangerous."

"All snakes are dangerous. I might have heard of the one you speak of. What is it worth to you?"

Harry paused, dumbfounded. What did he have that might interest a snake? It wasn't like he could offer to give the snake a few galleons. Then it hit him. He gestured with one hand and a moment later a squealing rat flew across the field, stopping to hover near Harry.

The snake reared up, its head flattening slightly and eyed the rat carefully before turning back to Harry. *"Not only a speaker, but a worker of magic?"*

"I am," Harry replied. *"I would offer you this meal if you can help me. Help me and I will give you this gift, plus I will make your nest warm for the coming winter."*

The snake turned to the rat, which continued to squeal unhappily. It knew the rat would keep it fed for at least a month. Here was food, easily obtained and fresh.

The snake turned back to Harry and curled its body around until it could rest its head on the coils.

"I will help you, speaker," the snake hissed. *"Rumor has it of a great visitor from a land far away that has been freed. I have not seen the visitor, but I have been told that she feeds on any who cross her path and she carries a taste of sickness about her, even though she doesn't appear ill."*

Harry sat on the ground a few feet from the viper. He knew he was safe the moment the snake agreed to help him. *This sounds like Nagini*, he thought. *The sickness could be the snakes sensing the horcrux inside her.*

"What do these rumors say she is doing?"

"She moves towards the cold, which is most unusual for our kind. I do not like the cold, it makes me slow and sleepy."

"Can you spread a message to your kind and other snakes?"

"Perhaps."

"Would you tell the others that a speaker seeks this visitor from another land and I will be looking for news of her? I will be asking other snakes."

"After I eat this fine meal, I will pass your message. Others will know of your need and speak to you."

Harry nodded and looked at the rotting log. With a wave of his hand the log glowed briefly. *"Your home will always be warm for you now."*

"I thank you, speaker."

With a gesture Harry moved the rat to a spot in front of the snake, then released it. The rat stared up at the black onyx eyes and quivered. With a blinding thrust, the snake had the rat in its jaws, and its coils looped around the prey while it waited for the venom to take effect.

Harry stood slowly so as to not alarm the snake, then he backed away. He shimmered for a moment and vanished from sight without a sound.

Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Ministry Building, London, July 30 th 1997...

"Are you sure about this?" asked Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Yes. We received the information and a confirmation of it this morning," replied Director Hammer.

Kingsley looked down at the parchment detailing the information again.

"Assemble your team, Kingsley. If we do this right, we can roll up the entire cult."

He stood and rolled up the parchment. "Yes, Ma'am. I'll take two troops, plus a technical squad and a forensics group."

"Very well. I'll have one troop assembled as a ready reserve if you need them. And I'll alert the medical staff," Director Hammer said calmly. "Good luck, Kingsley, and bring my Aurors back safely."

"I'll try, Director. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to prepare a briefing for later. I'll do a surprise recall. That will keep the possibility of the news leaking to a minimum."

Connie Hammer nodded and waved a dismissal.

Kingsley turned and left the room, determined to succeed. As he walked out, his mind was already whirling with possible plans. It would not be an easy job.

The Granger Home, late afternoon, July 30 th 1997, Oxford England...

Harry faded back into view to the sound of someone shrieking. He immediately ducked and rolled to one side. His hand flared with magic, and he looked around wildly for the threat.

"Harry James Potter! Don't do that!" shouted Emma. She had been lying on a lounge, catching some sun, and his arrival had startled her. One moment she was alone and had untied the strap to her bikini top to even out her tan on her back and the next minute he was there. Fortunately, she had been lying on her stomach. While she didn't mind an even tan on her back, she had almost never gone topless, except when she was alone with Dan, long before Hermione had been born.

Realizing she had been sunbathing, he blushed and quickly averted his gaze. It didn't help matters that Hermione was sitting on the grass not far from the back door, holding her sides and laughing at both of them. Hermione had just exited the house when he arrived.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Granger," Harry mumbled. "I expected you'd still be out shopping with Hermione."

Emma sat up and adjusted her bikini top, then looked around for the book she had thrown in her fright. "You can turn around now," she said, then shot him a glare. Her book was in the pool, on the bottom.

Following her gaze, he spotted the book and summoned it. After he applied a quick drying charm, he handed it to her. She took the book, then looked sourly at her daughter, who was still chuckling.

"Will you do something with him?" she demanded. "Teach him to make a noise like that popping thing you do when you apparate."

Hermione stood and brushed off her shorts. "Honestly, Mum, his apparation is nearly silent anyway. I suppose we could put a bell around his neck."

"Maybe some kind of siren or alarm of some kind?" Emma countered.

"I'm right here, you know," Harry said, feeling a bit put out.

"Yes, dear, we know. How did your trip go?" asked Emma calmly. Now that the crisis was done with, it was time to gently tease her daughter's boyfriend.

Harry moved over to sit at the picnic table. "It was hot, and the snake I found wasn't interested in cooperating until I fed him."

Hermione sat next to him at the table. "So, what did he say?"

"Nagini is moving north, like we suspected. The snakes call her the great visitor from another land. It makes sense, I suppose. After all, her species isn't native to Britain. He also said that she's a big predator and I got the distinct feeling that he didn't want to meet up with her.

"He agreed to pass along a message that I am searching for her and would be seeking out other snakes to ask for information," he finished, then he paused and frowned. "Although I suspect I'll have to feed each snake before I get my information."

"Feed them?"

He nodded to Emma. "I had to pay for my information with a freshly caught rat."

She gulped and looked a little woozy.

"Where are Remus and Tonks? I thought they would be here today."

Hermione laughed and shook her head. "Apparently Tonks has discovered my father's love of all things Doctor Who, including his library of video tapes. They're inside right now watching one and arguing over whether the Doctor used a space enlarging charm on the Tardis or some alien technology."

The back door opened and Remus walked out into the yard and joined them at the table.

"Where's Tonks?" asked Emma. "Isn't she joining us?"

"She had to go. That watch of hers started buzzing. She said it was signaling an emergency recall," he replied, then he turned to Harry. "How did it go today?"

Harry grinned broadly. "Much better than I expected. It took some bargaining, but I found a talkative snake that was willing to help. It's a little difficult dealing with them; they don't think the way we do."

Emma leaned forward. "Oh? How so?"

Harry shrugged. "They see things differently. For example, they don't use names. They give appellations to some things, the great visitor, a speaker

and so on. Most snakes lead a solitary existence, so individual names aren't necessary. Had I asked for Nagini, he wouldn't have known what I was talking about.

"As far as the snake was concerned, I was a speaker and a user of magic. If I said I was Harry it wouldn't have understood at all. That's a strange way of looking at things, going about the world not giving names to things, or to yourself."

Harry turned to Hermione. "Did you get all your shopping done?"

Hermione shot her Mum a glance, then nodded. "Yes, it's all taken care of, now."

Remus' expression brightened. "I got another postcard from Sirius. They were in Japan, but they are now headed back to Europe. I think they go on to either Turkey or Germany."

Harry winced. "Is he still mad at me? I wish you hadn't told him."

Remus grinned. "Hey, it was either you or me, and I'm not about to take the fall for your prank. I think he's moved beyond mad and is planning his revenge."

Harry flinched and Hermione glared at him. "That's it. We're going to elope!" she snapped. "You and your practical jokes. Think what he'll do to us!"

There was a moment of total silence, then Emma finally spoke. "Hermione, is there something you want to tell me?"

Hermione turned white and looked down. "Er...no," she said.

"You might as well tell her," Harry said with a loud laugh. It was a rare event when she spoke without thinking first and he wanted to enjoy it. "After all, she's not about to forget it or let it go."

She shot him a glare, then her shoulders slumped. "All right. I might have helped Harry with his honeymoon prank."

"You?" exclaimed Remus. "You came up with the singing penis? Cindy said she never laughed so hard in her life."

Hermione looked aghast. "Of course I didn't! I just figured out how to do it, that's all. The idea is all his."

"And the eloping part?" pressed Emma teasingly.

"Bollocks. I hoped you'd forget that," she muttered.

Harry looked worried. He was unaware of how much information Hermione had shared with her mother.

"That's my fault, Mrs. Granger. Hermione and I have spoken about our future together and I've promised her that I'd ask her parents for permission to marry her, then ask her officially on her graduation day. She's treating her focus ring like it's a promise ring," Harry said, jumping to her defense. He was blushing heavily now and Remus was beaming like the morning sun.

Emma sat silently for a long moment, her expression stern.

Harry quailed back from her look. He'd blown it! Now they'd never give their permission!

She smiled slowly, then laughed at his expression. "Oh, Harry, if you could only see yourself! You have my permission, of course." When he began to grin, she added, "But don't forget, you still need to ask Dan."

Harry's expression fell again and he wondered if Hermione would seriously consider eloping.

Hermione grabbed his hand in an iron grip. She was nearly bouncing in her seat and her ring was sparking with excess magic. He returned her smile and nodded to Emma. He'd talk to Dan. He might not be a Gryffindor any longer, but he still had the courage of one.

Emma turned to Remus. "Will you join us for dinner?"

He stretched and nodded. "I might as well. My dinner plans went out the window when Tonks left for the Ministry."

Barnard Castle, County Durham (Northeast England), July 30 th 1997...

Tonks knelt by a fallen stone wall and waited for the signal to begin the assault. This would be one of the largest attacks ever made by the Auror force since its inception in 1282.

Acting on solid intelligence from an inside source, the Aurors would be assaulting a general assembly of the Cult of Voldemort tonight in the hopes of destroying the sect once and for all. According to Kingsley Shacklebolt, they had information that this meeting would include every member of the sect. It was too juicy a target to bypass.

The Director had granted Kingsley two hundred Aurors, two Auror troops, with another one hundred in reserve to storm the castle.

The opening start to the conflict began with a technical squad placing powerful anti-portkey and anti-apparation wards that covered a significant area, including the castle, the grounds and part of the nearby Muggle village. The only portkeys that would work were ones created by the DMLE

and coded with the proper signature.

A dozen Aurors then blasted the main gate of the castle with the bombard spell, destroying it, and signaling the start of the Auror attack.

Tonks leaped over the wall, and tripped. Her fall couldn't have been more opportune, as it removed her from the path of a killing curse hurled from one of the castle's arrow ports.

She shook her head and climbed to her feet, then she sprinted forward, just behind her mates. Her position, bringing up the rear, allowed her to spot the three wizards attempting to flee the castle via broom.

"Broomers!" she shouted.

Five Aurors turned back and followed her pointing arm.

"Tonks! Take five and handle the broomers," shouted Kingsley, then he turned back to rejoin his men.

Tonks nodded and snapped off a spell. Despite the distance and the altitude of the three wizards, she hit one broom and it immediately started to spiral towards the ground with its rider screaming.

The other two wizards immediately fired back, then dove for the ground, landing just behind the low stone wall she had been using for cover only a few minutes ago. Two of her Aurors screamed from curse hits and fell, leaving her and three others.

She dove for the ground, trying to find cover, and the others copied her move. Two killing curses flew their way, missing them completely.

Crawling forward, she signaled to two Aurors to head to the cultists' right while she went left, with the third Auror following her. A particularly nasty curse flew over their heads and exploded against the castle walls only a few yards away. The explosion made her ears ring and showered her with dust and rock chips.

"Shit," she breathed, then she tried to burrow deeper into the ground. A scream to the right told her that at least one of the Aurors that went that way had been injured.

She aimed and fired off a heavy blasting hex at the rock wall and it exploded violently. Someone ahead screamed and stood.

Wands flashed and then she was flying, thrown backwards by a nearby blast. As she flew backwards, time seemed to slow and she could clearly see her opponent: Walden McNair, a Wizengamot member who had managed to escape the purges that followed the fall of the Fudge Administration. Then she hit something solid and a wave of pain washed through her. Her vision grayed and blackness consumed her.

The Granger Home, July 31 st 1997, Oxford England...

Harry woke to a pair of smiling brown eyes.

"Happy birthday," she whispered. She had been lying in his loose grip for the past hour, waiting for him to wake up.

He pulled her a little closer and snuggled his face into her hair. "Thank you," he said softly, holding her tightly.

She snuggled closer. For most of the past month and a half they had become more intimate without taking that final step. In doing so, she had seen new aspects of him, and he had awoken feelings in her she had never thought possible.

The fact that they were sharing a bed had brought new changes to her life that she hadn't expected. Her father seemed more resigned than pleased. He had started treating her more like an adult than a child and it was an attitude she knew could vanish with a single misstep. At the start of the summer, before Harry had arrived, her mother had asked if she wanted to see her doctor and get on the pill. Hermione explained to her mother that she had taken a potion that was good for four months and wouldn't need to take it again until early October.

That particular fact lead to an uncomfortable discussion about wizarding birth control methods and how they related to Muggle methods.

Another conversation with Harry had convinced her that she really didn't want to pursue a Mastery in Britain, or anywhere in Europe, for that matter. She had questioned Remus and Tonks about the Apprenticeship approach used and discovered it was more like a form of indentured servitude than a true course of study. Depending on one's 'Master', one could live a miserable seven years, or a good seven years.

Harry's idea of attending a magical university was sounding more and more appealing. And attending it with Harry made it sound like a wonderful idea.

She looked up at him. "You're of age now, you know. Add to that your N.E.W.T.s and you're a fully trained wizard."

He ran his hand up her back to caress the back of her neck. "It's going to take me a few days to figure it all out."

"What's to figure out?"

His expression soured. "I start taking over the Potter Trust. I won't have full control until I turn twenty-five, but tomorrow I need to meet with the Goblins at Gringotts to go over the accounts and start approving their decisions. I also need to make plans for the Dursleys and then..."

She gently placed a hand over his mouth. "Hey, no more. Save the serious thoughts for tomorrow, all right? Today is a day to celebrate."

He nodded and smiled at her. Just as he started to lift himself up enough to kiss her, an annoying buzz started up on the night table. He sighed and reached for the mirror.

“Hello?” he said, holding the mirror up so Hermione could see it as well. The surface turned black and shimmered, then Remus appeared. He looked tense. His clothing was rumpled and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Harry?”

He tensed. “I’m here, Remus. What’s wrong?”

“Harry, that thing you learned, that apparation technique, do you think you could use it to pick up Sirius and Cindy? They should be in Germany or Turkey by now.”

Harry blinked stupidly for a moment, then he nodded.

Hermione sucked in a sharp, worried breath. She had learned the technique and had used it a few times for short distances, but Remus was asking for Harry to carry two people hundreds of miles.

“Remus, what’s wrong?” she asked.

His image turned towards Hermione. “I’m at St. Mungo’s. Tonks has been badly injured in a raid. I’m not family, so the blasted healers won’t talk to me. The only thing I can get from one of the Aurors is that she’s in bad shape and they don’t know if she’ll make it.”

It was impossible to miss or ignore the anguish in his voice.

“I’m getting up now, Remus,” Harry said. “I’ll phone Sirius on Cindy’s mobile and warn them I’m coming. Do you know where Mrs. Tonks and her husband are?”

Remus shook his head. “No, I don’t. Tonks said they were on a vacation and the Aurors haven’t been able to reach them. Look, Harry, Sirius, Cindy and you are her only easily locatable family, but Sirius and Cindy are out of the country.”

Harry passed the mirror to Hermione. “Here, talk to him while I get dressed and dig out that phone number Cindy gave us. Keep him calm.”

She nodded and took the mirror, while Harry sat up and threw his legs over the edge of the bed. He summoned the clothing he needed and started dressing, half listening to Hermione talking to Remus.

Once he was dressed, he opened his trunk and pulled out his mobile phone and his small book of phone numbers. Hermione continued assuring Remus via the mirror and Harry cursed the fact that Sirius wanted to do his honeymoon as a Muggle, so he hadn’t brought a mirror with him. All he had was his wand.

The door opened and Emma peeked in. “Breakfast is ready for the birthday... What’s wrong?”

He stopped thumbing through the book and walked over to Emma and explained the situation to her. She paled and placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“It will be all right,” he told her. “It has to be.” He was afraid for Remus, who had finally found something good and now stood on the brink of losing it.

Emma nodded uncertainly and walked over to sit on the bed next to Hermione. Remus spotted her and they spoke for a moment, while Hermione held the mirror, then she closed the connection and started to put on her robe. She might sleep in Harry’s bed, but she hadn’t moved into his room yet.

“I’ll tell Dan and then we’ll go, Hermione,” Emma said.

Hermione looked up at her mother. “Go?”

Emma’s expression hardened. “Yes. Your father and I will go with you. We’ll help keep Remus company. He shouldn’t be alone, especially if things go badly.”

Hermione looked at her mother in surprise, then nodded. It would mean a drive to London instead of apparating.

“Take the Grimmauld Portkey,” Harry said. “Then taxi to St. Mungo’s.”

Hermione nodded and Emma rushed from the room. Hermione paused and turned at the door.

“Harry, why does Remus think you’re part of the Black family?”

He looked up from his phone book. “I’m Sirius’ heir, until he has a child of his own. He formally adopted Evan Black under Muggle law on Fiji and I’m in his existing will as his heir. It’s temporary, since both Cindy and Sirius want children. And it gives me a real dad,” he replied with a smile. “It didn’t seem all that important, but now it turns out he was right after all. If he was unreachable, I’d still be able to get in to see Tonks and get the information we need.”

She smiled softly. “I’m going to get dressed, then I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

He nodded and opened up the phone book again, this time he started punching in numbers on the keypad.

Ten minutes later, after a hurried explanation to an increasingly worried Sirius, he walked into the kitchen. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small money bag, which he handed to Hermione. She looked at him curiously.

"St. Mungo's won't accept Muggle money. There's enough money to spend in the cafe on the fifth floor. If I know Remus, he hasn't eaten and Merlin knows how long we'll be there. I'll get it back from you when I arrive."

She nodded reluctantly and pocketed the money bag.

"Did you get a hold of Sirius and Cindy?" asked Dan.

"Yes. They're packing and preparing to check out right now. I know where I'm jumping to, then I'll meet up with them."

"Are you sure you'll be able to do this, Harry? This is a long time for you to carry two people," Hermione asked worriedly.

He shrugged. "It shouldn't be a problem. After all, I Apparated from Japan to Fiji, didn't I?"

Hermione scowled at him and folded her arms across her chest. "Alone, and using a method that requires a third of the power that this teleport spell uses."

"Can you think of another way then? A Portkey would take them nearly an hour to get here and they'd be sick as a dog when they arrive. A Muggle plane would take hours and if I Apparate that far I'll set off alarms all over the place," Harry said testily.

Hermione's shoulders slumped in defeat. She knew he was right. There was no quick way and, unlike Harry, most wizards had a range of only few hundred miles using Apparition. That range reduced dramatically when Apparating someone side along. It would take Sirius twenty or more jumps to bring Cindy here and he'd be exhausted when he arrived.

"You're right," she said softly.

Harry eyed her for a moment, then he sat down next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Would it ease your concerns if I brought them here one at a time?"

She thought about it for a long moment, and Harry was certain she was looking at an imaginary blackboard, reviewing equations. Finally, she nodded uncertainly. She hadn't been able to work out the power requirements in her head, but she'd never admit that to him.

"Are we all set, then?" asked Dan.

Harry stood and bent over to kiss Hermione's head, then he straightened up. "I think so. I'll see you at St. Mungo's in a bit."

His body seemed to shimmer and ripple, then he seemed to flatten and faded from sight. The whole process took less than a second and was totally soundless.

Dan shook his head and muttered to himself about what kind of trouble he could have gotten into if he could have done that as a kid.

St. Mungo's, London, July 31 st 1997...

Hermione paced nervously next to the St. Mungo's apparition point. They had been at the hospital for nearly an hour already and were still waiting for Harry to arrive with Sirius and Cindy. Fortunately for Harry, the Apparition point was off to one side of the lobby and not many people bothered to sit around watching it. In fact, this section of the lobby was deserted.

She was watching the point when Harry faded into view with Cindy. A split second later a loud pop was heard. It didn't quite work. He was trying to make it seem like he was Apparating, but it still took time to cast a spell to make that popping noise. Anyone watching would suspect something was off with the Apparition.

Cindy was hugging Harry and her eyes had a wild look about them. He had warned her to close her eyes and she hadn't listened to him. Hermione had learned the hard way that the visual effects of the Auror Teleport were nearly as unsettling as an international portkey. Despite Harry telling her to keep her eyes closed, despite the book strongly urging she keep her eyes closed, she had teleported from Grimmauld to Oxford one day with her eyes open.

The Auror Teleport was tightly tied to the mental abilities and acuity of the person. Keeping your eyes open was like a trip through your worst nightmare, only it looked real.

Harry pushed Cindy towards Hermione, who gently grabbed her arm and took her over to a chair.

"I'll be right back," Harry said, then he faded from sight with a soft pop. He was getting better at combining the spells.

Less than a minute later he was back with Sirius holding his arm tightly, his eyes screwed shut. Harry grinned tiredly and Hermione frowned, seeing it.

"Where is she?"

Fourth floor, Spell Damage and Magical injuries,” replied Hermione.

Sirius turned to his bride. “Are you all right?”

She nodded shakily and promised herself that next time she'd listen to Harry when he told her to close her eyes. The last thing she wanted to see was herself under an autopsy knife again!

Hermione stepped over to Harry. “What about you? Are you all right?”

“I'm a little tired, but otherwise fine,” he replied with smile. “Don't worry, if I get a chance later, I'll kip out at home.”

She nodded unhappily and fell into step next to him, behind Sirius and Cindy.

Sirius stepped out of the lift, leading Cindy, Harry and Hermione. Not far from the lift were several couches where Dan and Emma sat watching Remus pace.

Sirius walked up to Remus and laid a hand on his shoulder. His fellow Marauder looked like hell. He had been up most of the night and the lack of information was visibly aging him.

Sirius looked around and his expression hardened. “Evan, attend and learn,” he snapped. Harry, Cindy and Hermione stared at Sirius in shock. Sirius ignored them and walked over to a man dressed as a senior healer.

“You there,” Sirius said in a commanding tone. “I understand my cousin has been hurt and we are being refused information on her condition. Tell who ever is caring for her that Lord Black, the Head of her family, is here to inquire about Nymphadora Tonks, and be quick about it.”

The healer, obviously much older than Sirius and probably one of the senior healers in the hospital, blinked at him stupidly for a moment. Sirius glared at the man and, to Harry's surprise, the healer suddenly nodded rapidly.

“Yes m-m-my lord,” he stammered. “Healer Boswell is handling that case. I'll summon her immediately.”

The healer scurried off and Sirius turned to Harry and winked. He leaned a little closer to Harry and whispered. “I'm on the committee that decides how much to fund for healer research grants.”

Harry shook his head and started to chuckle. Hermione and Cindy moved closer, curious to know why he was laughing. “So, it was all an act then?” Harry asked, still chuckling.

Sirius buffed his nails on his shirt, then inspected them. “Of course it was, but I was raised by pure-bloods. What is it the Muggles say? I can walk the walk and talk the talk.”

Harry shook his head. He was about to reply with a short rotund woman dressed in healer green approached Sirius.

“Lord Black? I am Healer Boswell. This is quite an honor,” she gasped.

“My cousin?” Sirius asked frostily.

Boswell bobbed her head several times. “Ms. Tonks is recovering nicely, although it was doubtful for a while. She was thrown up against a stone wall and had numerous injuries, most of the blunt force type. Let's see, broken bones in one arm, both legs and her hip. Her spine and neck weren't damaged, thank Merlin. She had a fractured skull and a ruptured spleen and kidneys due to the impact. She was bleeding internally when she arrived here.

“We were forced to regrow her hip and one complete set of leg bones. Everything else was repaired well enough. Right now, our principal concern stems from her concussion. Until she awakens, we won't know if she's suffered any neurological problems.”

Boswell took a deep breath and her expression softened. “Barring that, I think she'll pull through, but I do not believe she'll be able to return to being an Auror for at least a year. Her injuries simply won't permit it. It will take her time to recover and regain her strength.”

Sirius nodded gravely. “May we see her?”

Boswell glanced around, noting everyone clustered around her and Sirius and she frowned.

“Not all of us,” Sirius said quickly. “Just myself, Mr. Lupin and my wife Cynthia. My wife is a Muggle physician, she might have ideas which you could use.”

Boswell nodded reluctantly. She really didn't want Lupin near her patient. The man was a known dark creature. She leaned closer to Sirius. “If my lord would keep an eye on the werewolf...”

Harry's eyes flashed angrily at the insult to Remus and Sirius held up a hand, stopping Harry from doing anything. “Evan, stay here with Hermione and her parents. I, or Cindy will be out shortly and someone can take their place.”

Sirius turned and glared at Healer Boswell.

Realizing she'd just made a major mistake, the healer backed away fearfully. “This way, my lord,” she squeaked.

Harry motioned for Hermione and her parents to move to a pair of couches by the lift, while Sirius led the others towards Tonks' room.

“Sirius really surprised me. For a moment, I thought I was seeing a black haired Malfoy,” Hermione said softly.

Harry nodded absently, his eyes fixed on the door the others had vanished behind. Finally, he tore his gaze away and looked at her. He cast a quick privacy charm around the area before speaking.

“It's part of how he grew up. The Blacks and the Malfoys had similar attitudes and money. Sirius and Andromeda were the only two that were capable of breaking away from that mold. I've seen him pull that routine a few times and every time he tells me to pay attention. I think he wants me to know how to act that way, also.”

Emma frowned. “Why would you need to?”

“The Potters have a longer history than the Blacks do,” Harry said softly. “And while Sirius can legally lay claim to a title of Lord, I could claim Godric Gryffindor's title of Duke, if I were so inclined. I am the last remaining Potter and that makes me the Head of the family, not that it's much of a family these days.”

He shook his head and his expression changing, becoming pensive. “I wasn't raised in that environment and I honestly don't think I could treat others that way. It's bad enough that Sirius wants to give up the Potter proxy after I deal with Nagini.”

“What does that mean?” asked Dan.

“Sirius has been voting for my family since he claimed his family seat in the Wizengamot. He wants to return the voting rights back to me. It's one of the few real bones of contention between us. He's in favor of the Wizengamot and keeping it going,” Harry said, then he paused and sighed. “I would like to see it replaced with a more modern representative body, one voted into office.”

He smiled at Hermione, who smiled back at him. “It's one of the things Hermione and I both feel strongly about. There may be a Potter seat on the Wizengamot, but the only way I'll occupy it is to help transition from what we have now to a democratically elected body. I suppose had I been raised by my parents or by Sirius, I would be into all that stuff. But I was raised in a Muggle home. Vernon had nothing good to say about the aristocracy.”

That man probably had nothing good to say about anything, thought Emma. I wonder if Hermione's curses have kicked in yet?

“So, you won't assume that seat?” asked Dan.

Harry shook his head and reached for Hermione's hand. “Not without a lot of convincing on the part of someone. I see the Wizengamot as a symbol of everything that is wrong with Wizarding Britain.”

“What will you do, then? If Sirius gives up the proxy?”

Harry frowned at Dan's question. “I'm not sure,” he said uncertainly. “I guess I'll find another person to be the proxy until it's no longer necessary. I don't want to tie myself down here after Hermione graduates.”

“Harry and I are looking into obtaining our Masteries,” Hermione added quietly. “We can't do that here or in Europe, but there are some wonderful options in the Pacific and the Americas.”

“But you have a Mastery,” protested Emma.

He smiled at her. “I know, Mum,” he replied, his gaze lingered on Hermione for a moment, softening as it did. “But I think Hermione would prefer I do something other than hunt dark wizards. I'm good at fighting because I have to be, not because I want to be.”

Emma's eyes glistened and Hermione tightened her grip on Harry's hand in support. They had spoken about this several times and she had discovered there were a lot of aspects to Aurors other than just chasing down dark wizards or upholding the law. Some of those careers sounded quite exciting to her, especially magical forensics.

A cough interrupted the conversation and everyone turned to see Sirius standing nearby.

“How is she?” asked Harry.

“Awake and in a lot of pain, even with the potions. Skele-grow, you know the routine,” he said tiredly.

Harry nodded. He knew what that was like, thanks to Lockhart.

“I spoke to the healer and firmly told her that Remus is to be allowed to see her whenever he wants. In the meantime, I'm going to go get in touch with Andromeda. She and Ted are vacationing in the States. Once that's done, I'll have Dobby set up a room for her at my place. She's going to need help for a few weeks, then it's all about getting her strength back.”

“Do we know how Tonks was injured?” asked Emma.

Sirius nodded. “It seems the DMLE managed to get some information on a general meeting of the Cult of Voldemort, and they assaulted the castle. Kingsley Shacklebolt is with her right now, questioning her. She and several other Aurors were tasked to stop some wizards from escaping on their brooms. In the firefight that ensued, two Aurors were killed and at least one cult member got away. Tonks saw her attacker clearly and recognized him as Walden McNair, a member of the Wizengamot and a Department Head for the Ministry.”

Harry scowled. “It's about time. I don't know who he bribed to escape the purge after Fudge, but it always shocked me that Minister Bones didn't do

something about him.”

“Don't blame her, Harry. She tried, but by the time she took office, McNair's files had vanished,” Sirius replied.

“Did they catch him?” asked Hermione worriedly.

“No,” Sirius said. “Shacklebolt says they'll send people to his home and all of his usual hangouts, but he knows they're looking for him now. He'll go to ground.”

He ran a hand tiredly over his face, then he turned to the Grangers. “Look, there isn't much that can be done here. Why don't you guys head home after you say hi to Tonks? Cindy and I will catch up with you later. I doubt Remus will leave Tonks' side.”

Dan and Emma exchanged a glance. “Are you sure, Sirius?” Emma asked uncertainly.

“Yes, there's no reason for everyone to sit here all day. You should be able to visit with Tonks in a bit, then you guys can head home.”

Harry leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He thought about the problem of Tonks being on medical leave for so long, and McNair, the only member of Voldemort's inner circle who was still at large.

“Sirius?” he said.

“Yes?”

“Did you talk to the board about Remus?”

“I did. It's all set.”

Harry grinned. “Why can't Tonks, as soon as she's feeling better, help Remus, especially around the full moon?”

“What are you two talking about?” asked Hermione. She hated not knowing.

Sirius smirked at her. “You'll find out eventually, and don't try to wheedle it out of Harry. He gave me a vow of secrecy,” he replied, then turned back to Harry. “It's a good idea. I'll ask Remus what he thinks of it.”

Over the course of the next hour, each of them spent a brief time with Tonks, who was struggling with the pain from a massive dose of Skele-Grow, and it would not be her only dose. Afterwards, they took another taxi back to Grimmauld Place and portkeyed home from there.

It was mid afternoon and no one was in a mood to celebrate anything. Seeing Tonks in so much pain had a sobering effect on everyone. Emma was especially upset at the monkey wrench this had thrown into their plans to celebrate Harry's birthday. Eventually, they decided to wait until Tonks came home from St. Mungo's to celebrate her return and Harry's birthday together.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Aug 1 st 1997, Oxford England...

Nothing went right yesterday. Wait, let me amend that, almost nothing went right.

Our plans for Harry's birthday were put on hold due to what happened to Tonks. Well, most of the plans. One thing, however, went even better than planned.

Harry and I made love for the first time last night. It turned even better than I could have hoped for! And I will admit, I planned for it to happen. Harry and I have been slowly increasing the level of intimacy since school ended. His resolve had been weakening and it broke last night like I hoped it would. I wanted to give myself to him. It was his birthday and I wanted to show him that I was willing to commit to us enough to make love with him.

I wore the negligee that I bought just for this purpose. It's a soft baby blue and translucent enough to leave little to the imagination. His reaction when I took off my robe and let it slip to the floor was everything I could have hoped for.

“What are you doing?” he gasped in surprise. I could feel his gaze on me like a burning spotlight. Until this point, we had been relying mostly on some very nice mutual masturbation. But I wanted more. After all, this was the man I wanted to marry. Why shouldn't I give myself to him like this?

“Don't you like your present?” I asked him.

He nodded mutely and I was shocked by the look of raw, almost feral hunger in his gaze. He wanted me, he needed me. Not Ginny, not Miss Lavender with the boobs of four girls. Me!

I won't go into complete detail here, since I hope I'll be able to share this book with a daughter someday, but I will make two observations. The first is losing your virginity hurts! I don't care what anyone thinks, it hurts. A lot! I've read romance novels where the girl loses her virginity with an earth shattering orgasm. They lie. The authors are either male, or have forgotten what happened when they lost their virginity, or they are simply going with the male driven myth that the “pain will go away”. No such luck.

And that ties into the second observation I made last night. Harry is a wonderfully kind and considerate lover.

He held me tight and cast a field first aid charm that took away the pain. It was only then that I saw how much it affected him, as well. He was upset

and wanted us to stop. Up until that point, he had been trying to make the experience the best he could for me, but it broke his heart to see that he had hurt me. For a brief moment his tears mixed with mine, but I told him I had expected it to hurt the first time.

I didn't orgasm and it took a some convincing to talk Harry into finishing. Once the pain was gone it wasn't unpleasant, it was -- different. I could literally feel his heart beat. It was like nothing I had ever felt before when he orgasmed inside me. There was a burst of heat and the look of awe he gave me made me shiver.

When we woke this morning I felt pretty good, his first aid charm had done the trick and I was feeling brave. I woke him up by stroking him, then we made love again. I understand what Mum said about fireworks now. I'm sure sex can be nice by itself, but when it's with someone you love, it's like nothing I've ever read about before.

Harry took me to the edge of an orgasm and then he made love to me, throwing us both over the edge with a shattering climax. I was lost and helpless, completely unable to think coherently while my body shuddered through the experience. I happened to glance up into his gaze and his slight lopsided smile and knew then I was safe and always would be in his arms. He pulled me up and into his lap, still connected and he held me like I was the most precious thing in the world. It was a feeling even more breathtaking than the actual act!

There are still obstacles for us to overcome; school, Nagini, the Wizarding World when they learn that Harry is still a wizard. But we'll get through them.

It's strange, really. I always thought that this moment would come with a mind shattering sense of change. Think about it. Many seem to think losing your virginity is a transition point where you move from child to adult. I don't sense any of that at all. What I do sense is a feeling of completeness. What we did was right and he makes me feel special and whole.

Harry is out with Dad at the moment and Mum is at the surgery today. Harry's setting things up for his visit with the Dursleys. This morning he's visiting with my parents' solicitor, arranging for several letters, and then they will go arrange for a car for the visit. Dad's solicitor is an old family friend and the only other Muggle I know that knows about our world. My father told him about the wizarding world when I was accepted to Hogwarts. He wanted to make sure I was covered by our insurance.

Harry's supposed to go to Gringotts tomorrow to get the keys and information on his holdings. This is where things start getting tricky. Gringotts will have to inform the Ministry about Harry's coming of age and his assuming control of the estate.

Sirius and Harry have worked things out so that they are doing this through the Pacific Rim Ministry, which doesn't have any anti-Squib/Muggle laws against inheritances. Our Ministry may scream bloody murder about it, but there won't be anything they can do to stop it. Harry's concern is that the Ministry may decide to investigate.

Tonks is going to be in St. Mungo's longer than we thought. The healers changed their minds about when she would be released. They intend to keep her in hospital at least five days, maybe a full week.

It turns out she is experiencing some neurological difficulties they are looking into. She has a problem with the vision in her left eye, she doesn't seem to be able to focus properly, and she has a twitch. All symptoms of a brain injury. The healers are confident they will be able to clear it up, but they need a few extra days.

It's strange. He's been gone for only a few hours and I miss him dreadfully now. I'm not looking forward to Mum coming home. I'm sure she suspected what I was planning since she was with me when I bought that negligee. Mum won't want to know the gory details, but she will want to know more than I'm comfortable telling her.

Maybe I'll go start revising for my N.E.W.T.s again. It's something to do until the others get home. If I sit here thinking about this morning I'll be ripping his clothes off as he walks in the door!

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Aug 1 st 1997, Oxford England...

She's laughing at me. No, she's not making fun of me, it's just that she caught me writing in my journal a while back and she's been itching to know what I would say about today and last night. I don't intend to show this to her, at least for now, so my thoughts are still safe. I hope.

No, really, I know they are... I think. Maybe.

Mr. Granger and I went together today to make arrangements for our visit with the Dursleys. After we left the car company and had finished with his solicitor, he took me to lunch. Little did I know how uncomfortable that lunch would be.

"Harry, I won't hide the fact that I don't like the idea that you're sleeping with Hermione," he said to me.

I nearly spit my drink all over the table to that. "What?" I sputtered.

Dan frowned and looked at me hard. "Come on, Harry. I know you're not stupid and neither am I. Hermione and you have been sharing a bed since she returned from school."

I looked down at the table for a moment before meeting his eyes. "I love her, Mr. Granger. Perhaps that isn't what you want to hear, but it's the truth. And she loves me."

Dan grimaced and leaned closer. "Then tell me what your intentions are."

"Damn," I swore under my breath, then I squared my shoulders. "With your blessing, I intend to ask her to marry me when she leaves school. It was my intention to ask her at her leaving ceremony."

"And the snake?" Dan asked.

"Nagini or not, I'm not letting Voldemort run my life, sir. Hermione will be nearly nineteen and I will be nearly eighteen by then. We don't need anyone's permission, but I would like your blessing. After that, well, we've talked about a few plans, mostly about school, assuming that Nagini is out of the picture by then."

Dan nodded slowly. "Assuming I gave my blessing, what then? Would you marry right out of school? What would you do? Where would you live?"

I sipped my drink and grimaced. "Some of these things I've discussed with Hermione. Others we haven't talked about yet and I don't want to make decisions without her. Everything is predicated on my finding that snake. If I do, then we're free and clear and we'll probably marry and go off to university, either in the States or in the Pacific. If not, we may still marry, but I'd try to talk Hermione into going to school without me. I don't think I'll be successful in that attempt, but I'd try, at least."

Dan nodded thoughtfully and turned his glass idly in his hands for a minute, then he looked me again. "All right, you have my permission. I know something of your financial situation and I know you won't have a problem keeping a roof over her head and food on the table."

I breathed a sigh of relief and then our conversation moved onto other subjects. For a brief moment I felt the insane urge to say to him, "Oh, and by the way? Your daughter is an absolute minx. We shagged half the night away last night."

Fortunately, I have long since learned to curb my inner stupid. Sirius taught me the lesson of keeping my mouth shut when I don't have anything useful to say. And believe me when I say I'll never complain I'm bored after a fishing trip. He left me to clean and gut the fish and he made me to do it the Muggle way.

As it stands, I'm pleased that I did get his blessing. Sirius told me there were several boxes of jewelry that belonged to my Mum and other Potters in the vault. I'll have to remember that and check them out. If there isn't something suitable, I'll find a jeweler for her ring.

Last night she came to bed wearing this little scrap of clothing that wouldn't have kept an ant warm and we made love. I was appalled by how much pain it caused her and wanted to stop right then and there, but she wouldn't let me. There is a big difference between knowing that something will hurt and actually seeing it happen. I felt terrible knowing I had hurt her.

This morning she woke me and we did it again. Mind you, I'm not complaining. I'm really pleased that my first aid charm helped her so much. There was a world of difference between what happened last night and what happened this morning. This morning I know she enjoyed it and wasn't in pain, but I'll always feel a little guilty about that first time.

As to making love to Hermione, I can not find the words that would express the experience. Our relationship has moved to a new stage and I welcome it. I think I was stupid in trying to avoid this step. I want to wake up with her hair tickling my face in the mornings and I want to go to bed loving her for as long as I live.

Right now, she's rereading her fourth year Potions book on the other side of the room, revising for her N.E.W.T.s. I'd like to help her, but her course work is too different from my own. I can help her with specific problems, but in general, her Potions class has little in common with the Potions/Alchemy I took in the Pacific.

Every time I look at her, I can't help but grin. I don't think I'm the only one because she has this satisfied smile on her face.

Maybe I'll work on my shields and take my mind off her for a while, if that's possible. Or I can day dream about the coming night and hopefully a repeat of this morning.

Hogsmeade, August 2 nd 1997...

Nagini topped the small rise and paused. Below her lay the small village of Hogsmeade and in the distance, she could make out one wall and two towers of Hogwarts castle.

A part of her was relieved that her long and dangerous journey was finally coming to a close. It had taken her two long and difficult years to travel only a few hundred miles.

She surveyed the village and considered the possibility of finding food. The voice that had been hammering at the back of her mind had grown silent for now.

Finally coming to a decision, she slithered down the hillside in the hopes of finding a small dog, or perhaps a child to snack on. The voice wouldn't mind a short delay, not with the castle in sight.

Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, August 5 th 1997...

Petunia gasped and stared through the blinds at the jet black stretch limo which had just stopped in front of their house. Conditions in the Dursley household had taken an unexpected turn for the worse in the last few weeks. Anything was a welcome distraction and a limousine pulling up in front

was a major distraction.

Dudley was ill. He had returned to the house on several occasions, having soiled himself, but he refused to explain it to Petunia or Vernon. Vernon was convinced it was those freaks doing it to him. Or Dudley's weirdo friends, who Vernon didn't approve of. He was certain Piers was a poofster.

Vernon had spent several nights in jail before being released on bail. On the advice of his solicitor, he had pled guilty to reduced charges and accepted the judgment of the court. The court had fined him and ordered him into anger management classes, along with a remedial driving course.

As far as Petunia was concerned, his anger had only increased since entering the classes.

Every little thing got Vernon angry these days. His tea too cold, a meal slightly overcooked, the weather, a noisy neighbor. It was getting on Petunia's nerves and she had made a career of ignoring his rants. Until now. Now she was finding him impossible to ignore. Vernon's complaints grated on her like nails against a blackboard.

Vernon's doctor had warned him about his weight and high blood pressure and cautioned him to try to avoid stress. *He's supposed to relax? Right!* Petunia thought spitefully. *If there isn't any stress, Vernon will find a way to create some! The mouth that walks!*

She had learned a bitter truth when they discovered that Harry had vanished. Vernon had used the boy as his outlet for his aggressive tendencies. Without the boy here, he picked on her and Dudley mercilessly. She tried not to think about that freak very much anymore. He was gone and that was all that mattered.

As Vernon's anger and general stress levels in the house increased, Petunia found comfort in ordinary things, turning them into a ritual. She routinely spent hours on her knees in her garden or cleaning the house. It had become her obsession.

It's like we've been cursed, she thought. *But that isn't possible. We've gotten rid of that Potter freak and his kind. I don't care what Vernon says, they aren't paying any attention to us anymore.*

She tore her eyes away from the limo to a spot of imaginary dust on the blinds and she scowled. No matter what she did, the house just wouldn't stay clean!

Hermione's curse was magnifying Petunia's worst qualities, and her pride in maintaining a clean home was driving her slowly insane.

She was about to reach for her cleaning rag when another car pulled up behind the limo. A police car! She gasped and wondered what trouble would be visiting them now.

"What is it, Pet?" asked Vernon from his favorite chair, where he'd been reading the paper.

"I'm not sure, dear. There's a police car out front," she replied, not seeing Vernon's flinch. "And a limousine."

"A limousine?" he repeated stupidly, then he folded his paper and placed it on the stand next to the chair and stood.

"People are coming to our door!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I do hope this is good news for a change. I mean, a limousine? Maybe we've won a prize or something."

A knock came from the front door and the two adult Dursleys exchanged anxious glances.

"I'll get it, dear. You relax in your chair."

Vernon nodded and swallowed nervously. A vein in his forehead began to throb in time to his heartbeat. The presence of the police worried him. He had learned that he couldn't bully the police, and people that he couldn't bully intimidated him.

A moment later, Petunia led two police officers and three other people into the living room. There was an older gentleman with graying sideburns and he carried a brief case. Behind him was a young woman and a young man, both wearing sunglasses. Something about the young man set Vernon's teeth on edge.

Petunia glanced at the young man and privately wished her Dudley looked as dashing as this young man did in his Armani suit. He was tall and broad shouldered and carried himself with confidence. *Dudley would do well if he took after someone like this*, she thought.

"Mr. Dursley, Mrs. Dursley, my name is Arnold Nottingham. I am a solicitor and representative of my client who happens to hold the title to this home," said the gray haired man.

"WHAT?" bellowed Vernon. The vein in his forehead started to visibly throb and his face turned a deep red.

Nottingham reached behind him and the young woman handed him a folder. He extracted several papers and looked down at them. "According to an agreement made on 1 November, 1981 between yourselves and one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, deceased, you would be allowed to stay in this home, rent free, for as long as you were providing care of your nephew, Harry James Potter, son of James Potter and Lily Evans Potter."

"NO! That freak left here years ago!" Petunia protested. "This is our home! My home! I clean this home!"

For some reason Petunia's last remark made the young woman smile.

Nottingham smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid that is no longer the case. In fact, you've been in violation of the agreement since November of 1994."

Petunia sank down onto a chair and stared at Vernon in consternation. "What do we do?"

"Now, see here," blustered Vernon. "You can't barge into my home and start making up stories..."

One of the policemen stepped forward, holding his nightstick in one hand. Vernon took a step back, recognizing him as one of the policemen that arrested him last month.

"You want to calm down, Dursley," growled the officer menacingly.

There was a moment of silence while Vernon glared at the constable, who refused to be intimidated. Finally, Vernon gave up and sat down next to Petunia. At that moment, Dudley entered the house smelling like an unwashed toilet. He took one look at the crowd and the policemen who were eying him carefully and he yelped, then ran upstairs.

"You'll have to excuse our Dudley," Petunia said softly. "He's been sick a lot lately and we haven't been able to get him the help he needs."

The young man stared up the stairwell at the retreating form for a moment, then he caught the satisfied smirk the young woman was wearing. He eyed her speculatively for a moment, then he turned back to Nottingham and the others. Whatever she was hiding, he'd find out later.

Nottingham cleared his throat. "Now, if I may continue? My client is willing to forgo seeking back rent for the past three years that you've been in violation of the original contract, but he insists that you start paying rent on the home. After all, at fair market value, he could be bringing in over two thousand pounds per month for the residence. All he asks is sixteen hundred."

"Outrageous!" shouted Vernon. "I won't pay it! We had a deal with Dumbledore. I want to talk to that old man!"

Nottingham nodded. "You did have a deal, however Dumbledore is dead and he had no legal right to make such a deal in the first place. If you are unwilling to pay the monthly rent, these nice policemen are prepared to witness my serving an eviction notice. In which case, you would have seventy two hours to vacate the premises."

Vernon's face mottled and his hands clenched. Petunia reached out and tugged on Vernon's shirt. He turned and glared at her.

"Dear, remember what the doctor said about stress and your blood pressure," she reminded him. It was a futile gesture and she truly meant well, despite the fact that she only succeeded in driving his blood pressure even higher.

He grimaced and turned to Nottingham again. "I want to talk to the so-called owner, then. This is our home and I'm not about to give it up or start paying someone else for a place we've lived these past seventeen years!"

Nottingham turned to the young man. "Well?"

When the man removed his glasses, Petunia gasped and went white. She thought she'd seen the last of her freakish nephew, yet here he stood, bold as the sun!

"This house belongs to me and my family," Harry stated in a soft voice. "I could easily, and without regret, throw you out of here today. But I'm not as vindictive as you were to me."

Vernon surged from his seat and the two policemen stepped in front of Harry, their expressions full of hope that Vernon might actually try something.

"You! You fucking freak! This is all your fault! This house was supposed to go to us after you were killed..."

"Vernon!" shrieked Petunia, horrified by what he had just admitted in front of witnesses.

Vernon glanced at her and it dawned on him what he had just said, in front of a solicitor and two police officers.

Harry shook his head, his expression grim. "Why am I not surprised?"

Hermione removed her own glasses and stepped closer to him. She looped her arm inside his, providing him with the support he needed. She understood that, deep down, he still felt a need to gain his Aunt's acceptance. That would never come now.

Nottingham turned to one of the policemen. "You might want to contact an Inspector. This may have turned from a simple serving to a possible conspiracy case."

Vernon growled and lunged for Harry, plowing through the two policemen, his arms outstretched as if he meant to throttle him. Harry stepped to one side and grabbed onto Vernon's arm, pulling him even further off balance.

Vernon crashed into the wall. Dazed, he shook his head and leaned against the wall wondering how it gotten in his way like that. Then, before he could quite comprehend what had just happened, both policemen jumped on him.

Petunia shrieked and grabbed a heavy glass ashtray. She turned to throw the ashtray only to discover she was facing down Hermione's wand at point blank range. She gasped and fainted backwards into her chair, the ashtray falling to the floor with a heavy thud.

Harry glanced over to see Hermione putting her wand away and he winked at her. Nottingham and the two policemen were so busy with Vernon, they never noticed Hermione and her wand. It wouldn't have mattered if Nottingham saw the wand, of course.

The two policeman made short work of handcuffing Vernon. He was still stunned from hitting the wall and unable to put up much of a fight.

Hermione cast a ring-based Ennervate on Petunia and her eyes fluttered open. She didn't want Harry's Aunt to miss one bit of this.

A yell came from the top of the stairs and Dudley literally bounded down them, his fists balled and his face contorted in fury. Just as he reached the bottom of the stairs, he stopped and his expression altered dramatically. There was a foul noise and he gagged. Harry pulled Hermione closer to him, away from Dudley, who turned and dashed back upstairs again, one hand over his mouth and another clutching his bum. No one could ignore the increasingly foul odor, or the loud sound of Dudley being violently sick before he reached the safety of the bathroom.

"So, what now?" asked Harry turning back to Nottingham and trying to ignore the pitiful sounds or retching coming from upstairs.

Hermione stepped away from Harry and smiled benignly at Petunia, who was still staring up the stairs in horror.

Nottingham shrugged. "I'd suggest just serving the papers and washing your hands of the whole affair. There is enough of a paper trail from what I could tell to bring this to trial but a conviction would be difficult. Dumbledore is dead and we have only what Vernon said in anger. That's not a very solid case. As it stands, I'd say there is an attempted assault charge on top of possible conspiracy."

Harry sighed and shook his head, his eyes firmly fixed on the floor. Hermione moved a bit closer to him. "What are you thinking?" she asked in a very quiet voice.

He looked up at her, his expression torn. "I'm trying to figure out what my Mum would want me to do."

She inhaled sharply and moved close enough to hug him. He leaned against her, drawing strength from her for a moment, then he looked up.

"No," Harry said sharply. Petunia looked at him fearfully while Nottingham and the two policemen looked at him in confusion. "As much as I would like to deny it, these people are my last living relatives. I will not sink to their level and be as vindictive to them as they were to me," Harry said in a firm voice.

He turned to Vernon. "You will pay the rent I set or you will move out. But I will not press charges against you. What you did here, in front of the police, is a problem of your own making and you will face that on your own. You are a petty man, Vernon Dursley, and I have it in my power to make your life as miserable as you made mine. But I will not stoop so low. I like to think I'm a better man than that and will not kick a man when he's down, even if he is a pitiful excuse for a man."

Harry turned then to Petunia. "You are my mother's sister, but you are nothing like her. Where she was kind and loving; you are cruel and full of spite. You let your greed and the smooth talk of an old man convince you to treat me, your only kin, as little better than a slave. That is your loss. My parents, those freakish bums you used to complain about, were rich and I have inherited that fortune. Had you treated me like a part of the family, I would have gladly shared all that I now own. Now you have nothing and only yourselves to blame for what is happening here today.

"We share blood, Aunt Petunia, but you are not part of my family. Mr. Nottingham is my representative and you will deal with him from here on. It is my distinct hope that we do not meet again."

Harry turned and took Hermione's hand and started to walk to the door. He paused just by the door and turned to Petunia again. "How do you think my mother would have treated your son had the roles been reversed?" he asked, then he walked out of the house.

"Blimey!" muttered one of the policemen.

"My sentiments exactly," added Nottingham. "I thought it might come down to this."

Nottingham turned to Petunia. "Well, Madam? Will you accept the wishes of my client or shall I serve the eviction papers that Mr. Potter had me draw up?"

One of the policemen helped Vernon roll over and sit up. He nodded to Petunia in resignation. There was little they could do about it. After all, the freak owned the title to the house.

"Excellent," Nottingham said with a smile. He loved it when people caved in. "I'll keep the eviction papers on file for now." He carefully tucked the papers into the file folder, then put the folder back into his briefcase. He paused and looked at Vernon carefully. "You are aware that, should you decide to destroy this house, my client has ways of finding you? Ways you cannot hope to avoid?"

Vernon glared at him, then nodded and looked away, defeated. He knew there was no hiding from magic.

Nottingham smirked to himself and looked at the policemen. "Officers? Do you need me any further?"

"We've got it from here, sir," replied one of the policemen. The other was helping Vernon to his feet.

Nodding, Nottingham turned and left the house. Behind him, the two officers debated whether to bring Vernon in or not. Without Harry pressing charges and Dumbledore being dead, the case against them was really very weak.

In the limo, Harry sat staring out a window, but he really wasn't seeing anything. Hermione sat next to him, watching him carefully. Finally, he blinked and turned to her with a soft smile. Nottingham climbed into the car and picked up the phone to talk with the driver for a few moments. He wanted to stick around to see what the police and the Dursleys would do about the changes forced upon them.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Hermione asked.

He nodded. "I think I'm more surprised than anything else. I wanted to hurt them like they've hurt me, but in the end I just couldn't do it. For all her faults, she is still my mother's sister and I don't think my mother would have approved of me hurting them. They might learn from this, but I doubt it."

"If I may, Mr. Potter?" interjected Nottingham. "The desire to lash out against those that hurt us is primal. It's part of who and what we are as people. That you rose above that imperative speaks very well for your character. I admit that, in the short run, I would have made a fair amount of money suing them and representing you. Instead, I came away impressed by your integrity."

Harry flushed at Nottingham's words. "I can't claim entirely altruistic reasons, Mr. Nottingham. It's just that in my limited experience, people like that will either change for the better, or someday, someone tougher and meaner will come along and teach them a lesson. I just didn't want that someone to be me."

"For what it's worth, I'm proud of you, Harry," Hermione said with a beaming smile.

He smiled back at her. Her approval clinched it for him. He was certain he had done the right thing now. He reached up and gently caressed her cheek.

"Is that wedding bells I hear in the distance?" asked Nottingham, slipping from his role of solicitor to his role of old family friend.

Harry grinned and looked over at the old man. "Not until next summer, at the earliest. We haven't set a date or anything."

"And you haven't asked me," Hermione added in a dry tone.

He grinned at her. "I told you, at the leaving ceremony."

She huffed a moment, then broke into a giggle. "You still need to talk to Daddy."

Harry buffed his nails and looked at her smugly. "Took care of that little chore on August first."

"And you didn't tell me?"

He shrugged and his grin widened. "I would have gotten around to it, but I was waiting to see how long it would take before your Mum told you."

Hermione chuckled. "I'm surprised she hasn't told me yet. Daddy tells her everything."

The conversation died as the police left the residence without Vernon in handcuffs.

"They probably issued him a summons to appear before a magistrate," Nottingham said, then he knocked on the glass separating them from the driver. A moment later the engine started and they pulled away from Privet Drive for the last time.

As the limo pulled away, Harry turned to Hermione. "Would you care to explain the satisfied look on your face when we visited my relatives? You seemed inordinately pleased with yourself."

She sighed and looked out a window for a moment, knowing there was no escaping. She turned back to Harry and launched into an explanation of the three spells she had cast. As she spoke, Nottingham's eyes widened.

"My word, Hermione!" he exclaimed. He was about to start in on her when Harry began to chuckle.

"Don't be mad at her, Mr. Nottingham. I can't tell you how tempted I was to curse them for all the years of abuse and starvation. In the long run, all she did to my Aunt and Uncle was make their more endearing qualities more noticeable. As to Dudley, he will learn to be nice, or suffer the ridicule of his friends for his problem," Harry said, then he pulled her hand up to his mouth and kissed it.

"I don't approve of her using magic on them and if I know her, she only did it because I refused to do more to them."

"They got away with hurting you for years," Hermione protested softly.

"Yes, but they are part of my past, not part of my future," Harry replied. "Now, no more cursing them, all right?"

She nodded, silently pleased that he didn't ask her to lift the existing curses.

Nottingham shook his head. He never suspected Hermione would have a vindictive streak. One thing was clear, she would not allow anyone to hurt Harry and get away with it.

Hogsmeade, August 5 th 1997...

Tom slept for the most part and his dreams were a disturbing mix of snake and human memory. It was getting harder and harder to rouse from his slumber and struggling with the Horcrux exhausted him. Every so often he'd awaken and look through Nagini's eyes and try to determine where they were and if they were still on track.

For the most part, Nagini stayed on course, but she meandered heavily while hunting. In fact, he had no clue where they were, so it came as a great surprise when he looked out at the village of Hogsmeade below them. They had made it.

He reached with what little power he had, trying to increase his connection to the snake. She had eaten recently and she was sluggish and

lethargic.

Nagini lifted her head and looked around, unsure why she felt so compelled to examine her surroundings. Perhaps she sensed a predator nearby?

In the distance, Tom could make out two of the towers of the castle. And the wards, he could see the flows of magic surrounding the structure, protecting it. He peered at the wards, absently identifying them one by one, until he came upon a new one. The ward covered the school in a dome shape and it sparkled with flecks of coal black.

He puzzled over it and sank back down towards the Horcrux, wondering what this new ward could possibly be. In the meantime, Nagini lifted her head higher and she tasted the air several times. Humans were approaching! It was time for her to move.

She slithered down off the rock and headed in the direction of Hogwarts. Behind her, she could feel the approaching humans as they thrashed clumsily about in the undergrowth.

Meanwhile, Tom contemplated the concept of the black flecked ward and started to work out the equations in his mind to determine its purpose. It was a new ward, one put in place after he left Hogwarts for the last time.

He paused in his calculations as he sensed the Horcrux around him begin to vibrate. Then it dawned on him.

"DANGER! DANGER!" he screamed to the snake. It must not cross the ward! Whatever it was, it was reacting with the Horcrux, which meant it was either there to destroy it, or detect it. In either case, it was a danger to himself and the snake.

"DANGER! DANGER!" he shouted over and over.

Nagini slowed and came to a complete stop. She couldn't see the ward, but Tom could. She was only a hundred yards from the edge, and Ravenclaw's scrying gem was humming with energy, being so close to this ward.

Nagini, who no longer recalled having the gem inside her, felt a slight discomfort and a vague unease, as if there was a powerful predator ahead, one which was a danger to her. The nagging, annoying voice in the back of mind said the place ahead was her destination and it was dangerous. She could not proceed openly. She must use guile and find another route into the castle.

She tasted the air again and turned to head into the forest. The forest smelled of man-horse and one of their foals would be quite tasty. She had eaten a small dog, but that would not hold her long, and she would need her strength in order to find a secret way into the place of stone.

12 Grimmauld Place, London, August 8th 1997...

Tonks didn't know whether to snap at him or not. It really was sweet, but also annoying as hell.

Remus was hovering.

He wasn't exactly carrying her into the house, although she could tell he had thought about it. Instead, he was walking slowly behind her, only a foot or so away, ready to help her at a moment's notice.

She wouldn't admit it aloud, but she knew she needed help. It just rubbed her wrong to be needy at the moment.

Her bones had been all healed, but the week spent in bed had weakened her. Plus the enormous amount of muscles and tendons that had been stretched out of shape made her feel like someone had been beating her with a cricket bat. She moved like she was an old woman of a hundred, rather than her twenty five years.

"Go into the living room, Tonks," Remus said from behind her.

She nodded and moved from the foyer to the large living room. Inside the room was a large banner with a "Welcome home!" written on it, and a large group of people.

"SURPRISE!" shouted the assembled crowd.

She blinked and stared incredulously at everyone for a long moment in disbelief.

"What?" she stammered.

Sirius broke away from the group and stepped forward. "We wanted to welcome you home properly, since you'll be spending some time here."

"Sirius, about that..."

He held up a hand, silencing her. "I won't hear it, Tonks. You're a member of this family and I'm not going to let you go back to that cramped shoe box of a flat. Besides, Remus will be happier if you are close by and Cindy will be around in case you need help. Your Mum has a portkey, so she can drop in anytime she wants to see you."

Tonks nodded reluctantly. She hadn't been told about her move to Grimmauld Place until last night, and up until that point, she hadn't been looking forward to being alone in her place.

She looked around and was surprised to find Kingsley and Alastor Moody present, along with Minerva McGonagall, Harry in his Evan persona and

Hermione and her parents.

Remus steered her gently to a couch central to the room and Emma placed a piece of cake and a drink on the table next to her.

A moment later, Minerva McGonagall joined her on the couch along with Remus.

"Remus tells me that you're on indefinite medical leave?" asked Minerva.

Tonks nodded unhappily. "The department healer said I won't be able to even return to limited duty until after the new year."

"Then perhaps I might ask if you would like something to occupy your time?"

Tonks stared at her for a moment, blinking, then she shook her head. "I don't know if I could teach..."

Minerva smiled and shook her head. "You are young yet, Miss Tonks, and no doubt someday you would make a fine teacher, either in Transfiguration or in Defense. But what I had in mind was more of an assistant position. My new Defense instructor comes highly recommended, but he will need some help and someone to fill in for him at least three days every month. It would allow you enough free time to work on your recovery, and let you keep up on your important Auror skills, plus be an educational experience."

Tonks turned to look at Remus, who smiled back at her benignly.

"Helping this old wolf?" Tonks asked, a smile slowly forming. Suddenly the next year wasn't looking so bleak after all.

"I'm not that old," Remus muttered.

Minerva smiled thinly at Remus, then turned back to Tonks. "Yes, you would teach the classes at most three days a month, and the rest of the time either help in the class or help afterwards. Your position would be as an assistant Professor. Madam Pomfrey would be available to help you as you recover from your injuries. And we would expect you to help keep the students in line."

Tonks nodded. She knew from her own experience that the teachers helped the Prefects by patrolling the castle late at night and there was always one teacher on duty should a Prefect need help.

"I'll do it. As much as I love Sirius, I can't see myself sitting around this house for the next five months."

Minerva smiled. "Excellent. We look forward to having you join our staff. Remus will fill you in on all the pertinent details."

When she stood and walked away, Tonks turned to Remus and tried to hide the wince.

"I know you're hurting," he said quietly.

"I don't need a nursemaid," she snapped, then her expression changed. "Remus, I'm sorry, that was uncalled for."

He looked at her, and she could see the hurt in his eyes, but he tried to shrug it off. "It's all right. I guess I'm not used to having someone close to me being badly injured."

She reached out and took his hand in hers. "No, I shouldn't have snapped at you, especially since you've been helping me and been by my side since I woke up."

"I can't help it, I care for you more than I can say," Remus admitted.

Tonks felt a rush of pleasure at his words and was about to reply when they were interrupted.

"You know, I've tried talking Amelia into sponsoring a bill to repeal those pesky Werewolf restrictions so you two kids can think about tying a knot or two," Sirius said, popping up from behind the couch.

"Were you eavesdropping on us?" Remus asked, annoyed. He had enough trouble talking about his feelings with Tonks. The last thing he wanted or needed was help from Sirius!

"Eavesdropping? No, I didn't drop any eaves back here. I was umm... looking for my wand."

Remus could hear Harry's snicker from the other side of the room.

"I do believe that Cindy has control of your wand these days, Sirius," Tonks said with a grin.

Remus pulled his wand and hit Sirius with a stinging hex, causing him to yelp and move away from the couch with a hurt look. He watched his friend rejoin Harry, Hermione and her parents and then Sirius handed Harry a coin. Remus frowned. Harry was betting with Sirius again! The last time they'd done so, Harry had bet Sirius wouldn't water ski using a boat that had been Disillusioned.

The Pacific Rim Ministry had not been pleased over the large number of Muggles they needed to Oblivate from that incident. The fine was more than Remus would have made in a year of teaching at Hogwarts! Sirius got a warning not to do it again. Remus thought they should have spanked him...publicly, with lots of pictures published in the papers.

"What was that all about?" asked Tonks.

"I'm not sure," Remus said softly. "I'm almost afraid to find out. Getting involved usually ends up with me being humiliated or having to fight for my life or my sanity."

"Oh?"

He turned to look at her. "Yes. One time I found myself coated with golden paint and thrown into a room with starving niffles." He shuddered. "It wasn't a pretty sight."

Across the room, Sirius was muttering under his breath.

"I told you not to bet on that," Harry told him with a chuckle as he pocketed the money. "The pair of them are like you and Cindy. She'd jump at the chance to be with him more often."

"Yeah, yeah," Sirius muttered to the general laughter of everyone. "And while we're talking about couples, what about you and Hermione, eh? You two seem to be more chummy than usual."

Dan's expression darkened for a moment, then he sighed and shook his head. There was no fighting progress, even if this was progress he didn't like to hear about.

Harry reached for Hermione's hand and smiled at his godfather. "I got lucky. I fell in love with my best friend and she loves me. What more could I ask for?"

"How about falling in love ten years from now?" muttered Dan.

Emma smiled prettily and stomped her foot down hard on Dan's foot. He gasped and started hopping up and down on one foot.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I thought I was stepping on an obstinate father bug," Emma cooed, then she patted her husband's cheek fondly.

Hermione grinned. She knew her father was only putting up a token resistance at this point.

"Come on, Evan. Let's go talk to Tonks, while Mum strokes Dad's ego and calms him down," she said.

Harry blinked at her and Dan groaned. "Betrayed, I tell you! Evan, have sons. Daughters are evil."

Harry chuckled and followed Hermione over to talk with Tonks and Remus.

Sirius laughed and shook his head at the parting pair, then he grabbed Cindy as she walked by. She had been making sure that Dobby was passing out drinks, not that Dobby needed the supervision. "Aha!" he exclaimed, grabbing her and dipping her backwards. "I have you now, my pretty!"

Dan shook his head. "We never should have shown him the *Wizard of Oz*," he commented to Emma.

Cindy grinned at Dan, then looked up at Sirius with an innocent expression on her face. "You know that means you have to ravish me right here, now that you've claimed me."

"Here? In front of everyone?" he said doubtfully.

"It's a Muggle tradition. Why do you think Dan never says that to Emma? He's too shy to do it in public," she replied.

Dan nodded. "I hate doing it in public," he said in agreement.

"I don't mind," added Emma.

Sirius straightened up and released her. "In front of everyone? A tradition? How come no one ever told me? Lils never said anything like that and I'm sure James would have mentioned it." He scowled. Muggles sure had unusual ideas. Not that he was against the idea of making love to his wife, but in front of all these people? What would Moody think? Moony would make fun of the size of his wand!

He turned to Cindy with a confused expression. "You really want me to do it here in front of everyone?"

She grinned, reached up and twisted his nose. "Gotcha," she said with an impish grin, then she walked off.

Dan and Emma laughed at Sirius' expression when he turned to face them. "Whew, I thought for a moment she was serious. I mean, I'm not into that sort of thing, but tradition, I would have done it for tradition's sake."

Dan and Emma could only laugh harder.

Across the room, Harry and Hermione ran into Minerva before they could reach Tonks and Remus.

Minerva smiled, seeing her best student and her boyfriend. "Miss Granger, and Mister Black. It is good to see you again."

"Hello, Headmistress," Hermione replied.

Harry nodded. "Hello, Professor," he replied.

Minerva smiled. She realized that to Harry, she was still just a Professor. "Have you been enjoying your summer so far?"

"It's been the best," Hermione said joyfully.

Harry smiled softly. "That it has," he agreed.

"Your guardian told me about your N.E.W.T. Results, Mister Black. Quite impressive, if you don't mind me saying so. I understand you were actually granted a Mastery in Defense?"

"And a reserve Auror position with the Pac Rim," added Hermione proudly.

Minerva lifted an eyebrow and turned to look closer at Harry, who suddenly felt like a first year who'd been caught out after curfew. "Really? I hadn't heard that."

Harry shrugged. "It's not that big a deal. I'm not sure I want to be an Auror and my grades were good enough to pursue a Mastery in Transfiguration. I have an open invitation to attend the Mitsumi Magical Academy in Kyoto."

She nodded knowingly. In the past one hundred years it had become common practice to seek a Mastery outside of Britain and Europe. In fact, her own Mastery had been obtained at Capetown Magical University in South Africa, just prior to the outbreak of World War II.

"The Mitsumi Academy is a fine institution, and they are quite progressive. They have a program designed to move magical students into Muggle universities that other institutions are just now starting to copy," Minerva said with approval. "You would do well there if you can understand the language."

"Evan speaks Japanese," Hermione offered. "And he says there are translation charms I could use."

Minerva looked at Harry appraisingly. It never occurred to her that he would be multilingual. "It would be an excellent selection, and, of course, your position this year as Head Girl would help gain acceptance at the school."

Hermione gripped Harry's arm hard and gasped. Head Girl? It had been something she had always wanted.

He pulled her into a hug. "I'm very proud of you," he said softly.

"Yes, well done, Miss Granger. I suspected you were Head Girl material for the longest time, although your escapades in your earlier years gave me pause. Especially the one involving the troll," Minerva said dryly.

Harry laughed and Hermione blushed thoroughly.

Minerva eyed the pair, then she turned to Harry. After all, she couldn't leave him out of the conversation. "And what about you, Mister Black? I heard about your little experiment in Apparition."

Harry's jaw snapped shut and he looked away. He didn't want to dredge that topic back up. It had taken three separate trips into bookspace before Hermione would stop talking about his recklessness. He glanced up and winced. She was glaring at him again!

Minerva smiled to herself and nodded before walking away. They had been good children and were turning into fine adults. But every so often she needed to remind them of their foolish days, if for no other reason than keeping them humble.

She looked around and spotted Sirius. Yes, she thought. Perhaps it was time for me to perform my humbling service again. She grabbed Cindy by an arm and dragged her over to where Sirius stood. "My dear, has Sirius ever told you of the time he spent two days in the girls' changing rooms under an invisibility cloak, and then had the audacity to claim he had been locked in?"

Sirius blanched and Cindy looked like Father Christmas had just arrived with a bag of presents, all for her.

Office of the Minister, Ministry of Magic, London. August 10 th 1997...

"Ambassador Black is here as you requested, Madam Minister."

Amelia looked up from her notes and straightened her papers. "Send him in, and bring a service of tea for two, then see we are not disturbed for any reason."

"Yes, Ma'am," replied her secretary.

A moment later, Sirius entered her office, followed by her secretary carrying a tea service. Amelia sat calmly and silently while the girl served their drinks. Once she was done, she quickly left the room, closing the door behind her.

Amelia leaned forward a little. She knew this game well and planned on playing it by the rules. "I am thankful you are taking such good care of Auror Tonks, Ambassador. She is a valuable member of our Auror force and we simply do not have the budget to see to all her needs."

Sirius' eyebrow raised to his hairline and he knew something was up. Normally, he and Amelia were on a first name basis.

"She is family, Minister," he replied softly. "While the Blacks might not have acknowledged the bond under the old Lord, I am not subject to such limited views. I have reinstated her mother back into the family line."

“Still, with your help, she secured temporary employment while she recovers, and her position at the school will place her in a prime position to pre-screen Auror candidates.”

Sirius nodded, accepting the point. He wished she'd get to the real reason for the meeting. He hated playing political games.

Amelia smiled at him; she realized he was waiting for her to open the real conversation. She reached into her top drawer and removed a large crystal ball. She placed the ball in a holder on the desk and it started to glow.

“There, now the room is sealed from all forms of eavesdropping.”

He stared at her. He had heard about this artifact, a device that was supposedly created by Merlin himself. Whatever she wanted to talk about was more secret than the highest State secrets!

Amelia leaned back on her chair and she steepled her fingers together. “Purely by chance, I was approached by Dirk Cresswell, manager of our Goblin Relations Bureau. He had received a strange notice from Gringotts pertaining to an old, and until recently, thought extinct family.

“Your involvement in that family is well documented, and so is your guardianship of a distant cousin, an Evan Black. Strangely enough, we have been unable to determine which part of your family he stems from.”

She stopped when he raised a hand. “Amelia, I know what you're hinting at and I'm afraid I can't tell you anything more about it except to say that this is a matter best left untouched and unspoken of.”

Amelia frowned. This was not a response she had been hoping for.

“Sirius, this matter isn't to be taken lightly. Charges could be pressed. You, Evan and everyone else involved could go to Azkaban.”

Sirius leaned forward. “Madam Minister, there are forces at work and plans in play that are designed to insure the safety of Wizarding Britain and, by extension, you and your government. We only learned about them ourselves at the beginning of the summer. I ask you to not push this.”

She frowned and picked up a parchment and read from it. Maybe she could pry some information loose by revealing some of what she knew.

“Evan Black, age 17, is a reserve member of the Maori Auror division of the Pacific Rim Ministry. The first record of young Mr. Black appeared shortly after Mr. Potter's disappearance, when he was listed by the Pacific Rim as being home schooled by some of the most prestigious instructors in the world. According to our sources, three of his tutors were Hit Wizard instructors, one for the Americans, one from Japan and one from China. All three instructors were still on active duty and continued to train their people while they were also providing training to your cousin.

“His remaining instructors were the ones originally hired by his parents, as outlined in the Codicil to their Will.”

“Minister,” Sirius said painfully.

She laid the parchment down and smacked her hand down on top of it, making him flinch at the sound. “Damn it, Sirius, what is going on here?”

He sighed. She knew too much. “Amelia, if I offer you an oath on my magic that what is happening is not illegal, nor is it aimed at harming any living citizen of this nation, will you stop this now?”

Amelia paused to consider that. *Potter is obviously capable of performing magic, and he's been trained by an international cast of professional hit wizards, the best of the best*, she thought. *But why?*

“Really, Minister, there is nothing wrong with Harry receiving his inheritance. The Pacific Rim Ministry has no laws preventing a Squib from receiving his inheritance like the British Ministry does. And as for Evan...”

“Oh, cut the crap, Sirius. We both know Harry and Evan are the same person! Furthermore, Potter can do magic.” she snapped. She paused and her expression changed. Something tickled at the back of her mind, some intelligence reports she had read months ago.

“Oh, Merlin! This is it, isn't it? The internationals are moving against us?” she said suddenly, surprising Sirius.

Several months earlier she had read an intelligence report concerning joint operations by several Ministries to influence Britain. It was recognized by the nations involved that Britain represented the European nations and they would follow her lead. The Ministries involved represented the bulk of the magical world with the exception of Europe and certain small central American Ministries.

Sirius thought furiously. His back was against a wall and he had to give her something to calm her down. “Not quite, Amelia. I don't know what you're thinking, but yes the internationals are involved, and what Evan is involved in is designed to appease them, and keep your government in charge. Take Evan out of the picture and the results could be catastrophic.”

She looked at him curiously.

“We weren't aware of their involvement until they revealed themselves in June of this year. Up until that point, we always thought it was just our small group that knew the truth. Evan has a very important job to do and the internationals want him to do that job. That's why they trained him as hard as they did and that's why a seventeen year old is the youngest Auror on record,” he told her.

“The internationals like your government, but they acknowledge the fact that you could easily be replaced with someone as bad as Fudge because most of our government is still corrupt. They want to give you the chance to clean things up and they know that if Evan fails in his task, your government will fall and our world could be exposed. They will not allow that to happen. They want to give Evan a chance to do his job, otherwise

they will become more directly involved.”

Amelia straightened in her chair. “What can I do to help?”

“Bury those reports from Gringotts, make sure people forget they exist and pretend this conversation never took place,” Sirius replied.

“Sirius... I...”

“I know, Amelia, I don't like it either. That boy is my son in every way that matters and the fate of our nation is riding on his shoulders. He knows it, and he's dealing with it. And when it's done, he'll want nothing more than to fade into obscurity and live a normal life.”

She nodded, then she pulled out a small piece of parchment and scribbled some notes on it. When she was done, she slid them across the desk to Sirius. “Give this to Evan. It's an emergency Floo address for myself and a Floo address to an Unspeakable safehouse, owned by a Ministry healer. Should he need help, he can go there and there will be no questions asked.”

Sirius pocketed the paper and nodded. It would be useful for Harry to have.

“Will that be all, Minister?” he asked.

She nodded and he stood up and left, leaving her alone in the office. She leaned back on her chair, considering what she had learned. *Potter still has his magic, so our 'experts' were wrong, she mused. And that means... Sweet Merlin, he's hunting Voldemort! That's the job the internationals are so worried about. If Voldemort comes into power, our world would be exposed.*

She sat up and shivered. The idea that a seventeen year old, even a highly trained seventeen year old, was hunting that monster was enough to make her stomach churn. She considered setting up a task force to shadow him, then discarded the idea. Right now, she was the only person in the government, besides Black, who knew about Potter.

She wouldn't admit it to Black, but she had personally Obliviated the six employees who had come into contact with the Gringotts report. The Unspeakable who had researched Evan Black had been sent to Station Zebra to investigate a bogus report of Yetis living on the continent of Antarctica. He would be out of the country until she decided to recall him.

Amelia stood and walked over to a window.

The window was charmed to show a pretty pastoral scene with some snow capped mountains in the background. It was so realistic, she could open the window and feel a soft breeze scented with the mountain flowers.

It wasn't real, but that didn't stop her from treating it like a real window and staring out while she ordered her thoughts. And right now, her thoughts needed ordering. Her government hung by a thread and only a handful of people knew about it. And its fate lay in the hands of a seventeen year old who had been chosen by prophecy.

Authors Notes:

~Glares at Bob~ Why am I doing the AN's again? It's your damn story! And apparently, I don't do them as well as you! ~Glares at Crys, then kicks him in the shins~ Be glad I didn't aim higher up!

Ahem...right, so on with the damn notes. I'll tone it down this time, since SOMEONE didn't like them last time.

Yes, Hannah Abbott does have red hair – except in Bob's world, where he sent her to a muggle salon for a dye job!

Wavelink99: We will not disclose how we differentiate between a generic reader and a “loyal follower” (Hey Bob! We have followers! I think we need to start our own cult.). It's taken us years to perfect our technique and we're not about to give it away. Oh, and it's nice to know you don't trust me with the AN's. If I could get Bob to feel the same way, my life would be freakin' peachy!

Melferd: ~Perk~ A small tactical nuke? For me? How lovely! If only all reviewers offered such wonderful toys! You're a gem.

Dazza: Ask Bob. It's his story.

~Blinks~ Hell, I could have saved myself a lot of time by answer every question that way. Damn it!

Erm...actually, he says he answered that question for you on the group, so let's move on, shall we?

Hemotem: Actually, we tend to forget the disclaimers and AN's rather quickly. I think it's the drugs wearing off.

Iluvchocs: We were seriously thinking of building a shrine dedicated to your review. Bob for the chocolate, me for the sacrificing of impatient reviewers. But Bob never got the sweets and I didn't hear any screaming. ~Sigh~ You're nothing but a tease.

GreatWarlord: This story is written by Bob, edited by me, and beta read by the amazing Keith and Dorothy. However, most of our other stories were written by both of us. It's surprisingly easy to do, if you outline your story before hand. We knew where we were going with our stories at all times. ~Nods firmly~

(Bob here) Why are Keith and Dorothy so amazing?

I fix your mistakes, Bob. They fix BOTH of ours. Plus, they each have the cutest pair of bunny slippers...Now shut up and let me finish this.

Donald: I really couldn't tell you. Neither can Bob. You'll have to ask Mr. Lovegood, I'm afraid.

~Smacks Noylj with my telescope...a Meade LX 200 16"~ How's that? Does that work for ya? No? I could hit you again...just don't bleed on my shoes. They're new, ya see, and bloodstains are a pain to get out.

James: No, we meant Bonzai. See, it's this thing we call humor. Unfortunately, not everyone gets it.

Lilly_Kris: There's a link right under the banner that reads "Email Alerts". Click it and all your worries will disappear. Well? Go on! Click it! NOW!

Genericrandom: You think we're strange? You're the one reading this, so I think you might just be up there with us!

~Blinks~ Er, I think I just called you all strange. How impolitic of me...

Biblios: Your mother-in-law arrived in three pieces – you really should have chosen a more secure carrier, as Acme doesn't have the best reputation. Please send super glue and duct tape, ASAP.

~Roasts Teganii over an open flame~ You opened YOURSELF up to that. This is what I get for thinking I'm the only smart ass here.

Mickey: Your seatbelt is fashioned with a padlock for added safety. We're all about the care and well being of our reviewers. Ignore the screams and trust us. Come on, you know you want to!

As for your question about the Mastery, you missed the point. Harry didn't take the standard N.E.W.T for Defense. He took the Hit Wizard exam...and pass it with flying colors...and coconuts.

As for the broken bones, you missed something again. It was a compound fracture (worse than a simple break) AND a tropical infection from the open wound on his arm and the cut on his forehead. Hope that helps clear things up.

You know, I think I'm going to buy stock in adult diapers. The number of people who seem to wet themselves, their cats, their chairs and just about everything else will send stock prices through the roof. I'll be rich! "So, Alyx, how did you make your fortune?" "Urine speculation."

So, where was I?

Infin1x: Bookspace requires clothing. No, really. The warning is right there on the cover. Didn't you read it? Trying to go in naked would mean getting kicked right back out. As for the age of consent, the inventor was an American. Yeah, that's it.

Thanach: Bob thanks you for the 11 cloned Snapes. I know you sent 12, but I kept one for myself. Hey, I need something to get me through these AN's, don't I?

PhishBulb: The exits are clearly marked. Please, use them.

Webdoc: No, Wizards Fall isn't finished.

Slayersfan01: Because burning a witch at the stake is considered rude. Burning your child at the stake is considered rude and abusive. Seriously, though. Keeping Lavender from going to Hogwarts won't make her any less magical, will it? Her power won't just dry up and go away. It's better that she learns to control it, rather than turning her priest into a Blast-Ended Skrewt by accident, don't you think?

Jeff: How many chapters will this story be? I don't know. I just write the AN's. And apparently, I don't do that as well as Bob. ~Glares at Crys again~

Piad2691: Please floss after eating Lavender. There's nothing more unsightly than food stuck in one's teeth. Also, you might want to add a bit of fiber to your diet for awhile.

Faith: We rarely hurt people on their first review. It's better to break you in slowly. This way, we don't alarm you into fleeing. Chasing people is fun and all, but it's more enjoyable when we blind-side them. ~Smiles sweetly, while Bob hides the branding iron behind his back~

Ronnie McMains: You haven't read Attack of the Fan Fic Authors? Wise choice. I don't suggest reading it unless you're heavily medicated first.

LDA: A story with a powerful Vamp!Harry who hooks up with Tonks? I think I say with complete certainty that we will NEVER write a story like that. Unless it's a parody and includes Smurfs and a toilet brush named Neil. Thanks for asking.

~Smacks Alex2877 in the head with the FPIA+5~ Brilliant! I love new toys! But I have to ask, how did you find this? I thought I had the only known FPIA in existence! Alex? Umm, Alex? ~Glances down at the twitching, bleeding form at her feet~ Damn it! Ask first, then hit... I really need to remember that.

Aberbadger: I read your questions about the Quibbler articles to Bob to refresh his memory of your review. His answer, and I quote, is: Yes. He's just so helpful, isn't he?

Philipe: Nice fish slap, I must say. I know you've had a lot of practice with it on the forums and Bob does make a tempting target. However, I do make one request. Next time, please clean it first. Between his hard head and your swing, I spent several hours cleaning fish guts out of my

hair. ~Shudder~

Solicitor: You must have missed the sign on the door. It clearly says "No Solicitors Allowed – Trespassers Will Be Tortured – You Will Be Bent, Mutilated, and HACKED INTO BITS if you annoy us." Guess what? I'm annoyed. Mostly because I have to do the Authors Notes, but that's besides the point. Screaming is allowed, just try not to bleed to much, eh?

To the newreviewers who came out of the woodwork this chapter: Welcome to our little corner of the nut house. Take your medication, don't back-talk the nurse and you'll survive relatively unscathed.

If we didn't get to your question and it's burning a hole in your brain, notify me so I can watch. Then hop on over to the group and ask it there.

Also, thanks to Keith and Dorothy for the beta work. They got this back to us incredibly fast, so everyone bowdown to them, then send them donuts and chocolate, please.

That's it, folks. My job is done. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got Solicitor staked down in my fire ant farm. The honey is warm enough to spread evenly now, so I'm off to entertain myself.

~Glares at Crys as she exits the Notes~

The Power of the Press

Chapter 8 - Year Seven Fall

Standard Disclaimer:

It was the intense groaning that first alerted Alyx to the problem. She cautiously approached the stage, wondering just what madness Bob was up to this time.

“Voila!” Cried Bob.

Around the stage were all sorts of heavy equipment that made Alyx nervous. Being a woman, power tools automatically made her nervous. But the kicker, was the unlicensed Nuclear Particle Accelerator that was whining and glowing a bright orange.

And if that wasn't enough to make her worry, Leo, her pet Llama trotted by on five legs!

“What are you doing? We only lease this theater! Look at the damage to the stage!” she shouted angrily.

Bob glanced up and hastily pushed a piece of broken floorboard behind him. “Damage? What damage? Have you taken your medicine today?”

Alyx marched over to Bob and got in his face. “What are you up to this time?” she said, shaking a finger under his nose. “You're supposed to be working on chapter 9!”

Bob backed up slightly under the intense onslaught. “I've been working on it. But I heard rumors that Kieth had finished beating it and we'd have our file back soon.”

“Beating? He's not wanking off you moron! He's Beta'ing!”

Bob paused and his brows furrowed. “Oh, I thought that sounded strange. Isn't that what Dorothy is for?”

Alyx turned a bright red and Bob reached for a fire extinguisher.

“Try it and we'll be having Bob Balls, sauteed in a wine sauce for dinner,” she growled.

He hid the fire extinguisher and pretended he never would have considered such an insanely rash act.

“Now what are you doing?” she asked again through gritted teeth.

“I'm making a permanent disclaimer so we don't have to do it every time,” Bob proclaimed proudly. “It's perfect, it tells people we don't own Harry Potter and we make no claim to any rights to the Potterverse. It insults JKR rudely several times and makes claims that Alan Rickman blows chunks...”

He trailed off as Alyx achieved an even darker shade of red. Frightened, he edged away from her and wondered if that website offering do-it-yourself divorces and mail order brides really worked.

Alyx picked up a eighty pound sledge hammer. “Where is this permanent disclaimer?” she asked, sweetly.

“HA! I knew you'd take that attitude, so I made it invisible. It's the only disclaimer in the world made from unobservium!”

Alyx blinked and turned back to stare at Bob. She dropped the sledge, which conveniently landed on Turnshie for updating so late.

“If it's invisible, how can they see it?” she screamed.

Bob looked at the large empty space on the stage and frowned. “Oh.”

“Yes oh! Oh this is ludicrous! Just start the chapter!”

“Ok,” Bob agreed happily. He handed her a box of popcorn and they both moved over to a couch to sit down and enjoy the chapter.

The Power of the Press

Chapter 8

Daily Prophet Headline August 15 th 1997...

Prisoners Escape from Parole Board!

The Ministry announced today that during a routine prisoner transfer from Azkaban to the Parole Board office, four prisoners overwhelmed their guards, stole their wands and fled the building, evading capture.

An alarm went out immediately, but the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's efforts were hampered by the fact that the stolen wands were standard Auror issue and untraceable. Additionally, the chaos surrounding the escape added to the confusion during which, at one point, the DMLE thought they might have a hostage situation on their hands.

Among the prisoners that fled the scene were Augustine 'Cannibal' Crenshaw, noted for murdering his family by transfiguring them into chickens and eating them; Mundungus Fletcher, a notorious thief and dealer in black market dark artifacts; Matilda Snickhurst, kidnapper and trafficker of children, and Severus Snape, former Potions Professor at Hogwarts, incarcerated for abusing students.

Ministry spokesmen Perky Weatherbee noted that Mr. Snape's escape was most unusual, as he had the shortest sentence of the four. Snape was sentenced to five years in prison for abusing his students using a mix of magic and intimidation.

The DMLE again denied the rumor that Mr. Snape had been placed in the cell once occupied by Sirius Black, a known childhood friend of Snape's and a school companion. Black, now Ambassador at Large for the Ministry and a Wizengamot member, escaped from Azkaban so that he could go to the aid of his Godson, Harry Potter.

Potter, who turned seventeen just this summer, was one of Hogwarts' most promising students. When forced by Albus Dumbledore into the Tri-Wizard Tournament, he refused, sacrificing his magic and saving our world by causing You-Know-Who to lose his magic.

The DMLE warns all citizens that if these prisoners are spotted, they should not be approached. Contact the DMLE for Auror assistance immediately.

Diagon Alley, London, August 25 th 1997 ...

Hermione checked her watch for the fifth time and gazed out into the street. She was sitting with her friends, enjoying some of Florean Fortescue's ice cream, and waiting for Evan to arrive. He had received an owl late last night asking him to stop by the Japanese Embassy to pick up a package. He was supposed to go to the Embassy, get whatever was waiting for him, and then leave to catch up with Hermione in Diagon Alley.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon," offered Hannah quietly.

"Isn't that him now?" asked Ginny.

Hermione looked and spotted him instantly. He was wearing the Armani suit that looked so good on him, and carrying a burnished aluminum briefcase. His suit and briefcase made him stand out like a sore thumb among the wildly garbed wizards. He looked more like a young executive than a wizard.

He might not be the height of wizarding fashion, she thought, but he is so fine looking.

She quickly stood and walked towards him. He spotted her and smiled broadly. As soon as he could reach her, he pulled her into an embrace and gave her a searing kiss. She melted against him, enjoying the thrilling rush of feeling she got from being in his arms.

"I take it from your kiss that you missed me?" she whispered when they finally broke apart.

"You could be in the other room and I'd still miss you," he told her softly. Then he wrapped an arm around her waist and looked to her friends. "Did I miss much?" he asked, eying the mountain of bags and bundles surrounding the table.

"We got most of our shopping done already. Now we're just relaxing and having some ice cream," Hermione replied, tugging him over to the table.

He slid into the seat next to Neville and Hermione slid in next to him. He nodded to everyone and then waved to Mr. Fortescue. "Well, I could use some lunch before I think about ice cream."

"Did you get everything squared away?" Hermione asked.

Mr. Fortescue, summoned by Harry's wave, walked over and handed him a menu.

He glanced down at the menu and tapped a selection with his wand, then he handed it back to Fortescue. "Yes, some minor paperwork and a few extras that someone felt I might need. They told me I start work on September second," he said with a smile.

"What will you be doing, Evan?" asked Hannah. She sat next to Ron, her hand firmly gripping his.

"I'm working for the Pacific Rim Ministry through the Japanese Embassy. I expect it will be rather dull work, but it's only for a year, until Hermione leaves Hogwarts. Then I suspect we'll find something more interesting to do with our time."

"I bet," murmured Ginny, eying him with interest. "You look better without the bandages."

Harry smiled. "I'm glad to be done with the potions, too. I've been hurt before, but that tropical infection was difficult to get rid of."

"It's a shame you'll be in London. With Hermione being Head Girl this year she can go to Hogsmeade whenever she wants," Ron said with a friendly smile.

"All she need to do is tell me and I'll come up for the weekend," replied Harry. He had to caution himself. It would be so easy to fall back into old patterns with his former best friend.

He grinned and looked at Hermione, who blushed slightly.

"I don't know," Hannah said dubiously, "London to Hogsmeade is a long distance to Apparate. I don't think I'd want to risk it."

Hannah, like Hermione, had been able to get her license just before Christmas holiday last year and was, at best, uncomfortable with the method of travel.

"You do what you're comfortable with. Out in the Pacific, we become accustomed to longer distance Apparitions because of the distance between islands," Harry replied.

"You never said exactly what it is you'll be doing at the Embassy," Neville commented. He liked Evan. There was some quality, some inner confidence about him that he found appealing and wished he had for himself.

"I'm working with the Embassy's legal group," Harry said smoothly. "They are part of the DMLE. I was fortunate that a position opened up in London; I could have been posted anywhere."

"Actually, that sounds rather exciting, to work at an Embassy. Who knows what country you could end up in?" Hannah said with a grin. It certainly seemed more exciting than what she knew of life growing up in Essex.

"I don't know. I think I'd prefer to stick closer to home; maybe play Quidditch," Ron replied.

"You'll still travel playing Quidditch, mate," Harry said softly. "Your British league plays exhibition games in Europe and the Americas."

Ron nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, I'm heading into the Ministry. Susan Bones says she can help me get a job there," added Hannah. To her, a job was merely a stepping stone to the next step in her life, as a married mother.

"Professor Sprout said she might consider me for a five year apprenticeship, but only if I agree that I'll apply for her position when she's ready to retire," Neville said somewhat nervously.

Everyone turned to stare at him. Most people never considered going for a Mastery these days.

"From what Hermione tells me about her, that's a good offer Neville," Harry said carefully. Professor Sprout was a kindly middle aged woman, she wouldn't abuse Neville in any way, like so many other Masters.

"Will she let you live at home?" Ginny asked worriedly. An apprenticeship could put a big kink in their relationship.

Neville smiled at her. "Normally, I wouldn't even consider it, but Professor Sprout is a nice lady. I'll be able to get my Mastery in Herbology under her, and still live at home. Gran's getting up in years and I don't want to be too far away from her. Besides, life under Professor Sprout won't be that bad and she's got a lot she can still teach me. It won't be like what happened to Cho Chang."

Harry glanced at Hermione with a curious expression.

"She was in the year ahead of us," she explained. "She wanted to become a Runes Mistress, so she accepted an apprenticeship from a Master in Cornwall. He beat her nearly to death, then kicked her out for refusing to do something he wanted. No Master will touch her now."

He shook his head. "Mitsumi is looking more and more appealing," he muttered.

"Mitsumi? What's that?" asked Ron.

"Evan has been trying to convince me to attend a magical university in Japan with him," Hermione said softly.

"What? Leave Britain?" exclaimed Ron. "Why? Evan has a job, so why go back to school?"

"I don't have the Mastery I want," Harry replied.

"You make it sound like you already have a Mastery," Hannah said with a laugh. She leaned against Ron, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"I don't like the sound of that, leaving Britain. You hear such horrible things about the other countries. Charlie, in Romania, says that the wizards there sometimes act so savagely. Even when we went to Egypt, it took us forever to find a place that served a decent butterbeer and a good roast," Ginny said with a shiver.

Ron nodded absently. He wasn't against the idea of other countries. He knew that if he was tapped for a team he might end up playing on foreign soil someday, but he wouldn't want to live there all the time.

Harry frowned. He was about to say something when Hermione gaze captured his. She imperceptibly shook her head and he nodded slightly in return. Now was not the time, nor the place to get into an argument with her friends.

Fortunately, Fortescue arrived with Harry's sandwich and Ron used his arrival to order another triple decker banana split with the works.

"Pig!" Ginny said with a laugh.

“I’m still growing,” Ron complained.

Hannah hugged his arm tighter. “Don’t worry, he’ll be working it off later.”

Ron blushed heavily and Ginny snickered at his discomfort.

“Speaking of that, did you hear about Theo Nott and Tracey Davis?” asked Neville.

“What about them?” asked Ron with a darkening expression. He didn’t like Slytherins.

“They’ve been arranged, as of last month. It’s official. Gran and I saw Davis at the Ministry. They had just filed the papers.”

Ron shook his head. “I’m glad Mum and Dad don’t go in for that sort of thing.”

“Actually, Ron, they do.” Ginny said softly.

“What?” he exclaimed.

“Bill told me that they will ask you if you want them to make a formal arrangement. None of our brothers wanted it, but they will ask if you want one.”

Ron leaned back in his seat and looked dumbfounded. “I had no idea. No one has asked me about it.”

“They’ll probably wait until just before you leave for school. Fred and George turned them down, said they’d prefer to do that sort of thing on their own,” Ginny replied. “I asked Dad about it and he told me that it’s one of the few traditions they will observe, but they aren’t too sure about it. Mum and Dad didn’t have an arranged marriage. They’d been going steady since third year and everyone just assumed it was all arranged for. That’s what they hope for us.”

As Ginny spoke, Harry noticed Neville watching her intently and it dawned on him that she just might become ‘arranged’.

“Hannah and I have been going together for a while now, so I hope people make the same assumption,” Ron said, pulled her a little closer. She smiled and laid her head on her shoulder.

Hermione leaned into Harry’s side and he grinned at her before offering her a chip. He swallowed the last of his sandwich and looked at everyone. “So? Are we still shopping?”

“I need to get some new quills,” Hermione said, sitting up.

“I still want to check out the brooms,” Ron added.

“I need new chaser gloves,” Ginny said.

“Well, I guess I’m off to get quills then,” Harry said, then turned to Hermione, motioned for her to slide out of the seat.

Quibbler Headline, August 27 th 1997...

The Great Giant Flobberworm Trace Found!

Once again the Quibbler is the first wizarding publication to bring ground-breaking proofs of the stranger creatures that inhabit our world. The Great Giant Flobberworm has been spotted many times in history, but never before with such definitive proof.

As our more dedicated readers will remember from our annual Creature Feature issue, the Giant Flobberworm is generally a benign larger cousin of the regular flobberworm, measuring up to twenty cubits in length. The Great Giant Flobberworm is much more dangerous, at over three hundred cubits in length, and massing more than twenty Hogwarts Expresses combined!

The Great Giant Flobberworm is carnivorous and is especially fond of espresso and Stone Bee Honey, which, fortunately for us, is exceeding rare.

Until now, there has been no verified proof of the existence of the Great Giant Flobberworm. That is, until we discovered the Muggles using one of the tunnels left behind by the massive creature’s passage. Stretching from Folkstone, in southern England, to Coquelles, near Calais in France, this massive tunnel is clearly a relic of a Flobberworm passage.

The Muggles are claiming they built the massive underground tunnel, but the signs of the Great Giant Flobberworm’s passage are everywhere in the tunnel.

We attempted to contact the Ministry concerning this, but have been told that they have filed for a restraining order against us. This just confirms that our suspicions about the Ministry being controlled by Heliotropes. Obviously, they are afraid we are getting too close.

Next Week:

Catholic Church closes it’s doors in light of Joseph’s confession. “We had a good run, but it’s time to go home,” says the Pope. Christian world stunned, Jewish and Muslim leaders offer lowcost conversion kits.

Steven Spellberg denies any plans to make a film about the sacrifice of Harry Potter.

The Granger Home, August 31 st 1997, Oxford England...

Harry awoke in the middle of the night and knew instantly that something was wrong. Hermione had rolled to the far side of the bed and was crying softly. He rolled over and wrapped an arm around her.

"Shhh," he said softly. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to wake you," she replied, turning in his arms.

"It's all right, something is bothering you. Tell me."

She looked at him in the dim room, his eyes sparkled faintly in the darkness. "It's just that this is our last night together."

He smiled and pulled her into a hug. "No, not entirely. The Hogwarts wards won't stop an Auror Teleport. I can come to you, or you can come to me. I thought about that, too. We might not be able to share a bed every night, but we can be together more than anyone suspects."

"Really?" she said, smiling tremulously in the darkness.

"You aren't the only one affected by this. It's times like this I wish there was some way we can do some kind of bond that allows us to talk with our minds, share experiences and such," he said regretfully.

"Sounds like a wonderful fairy tale. Maybe someday we can invent a spell to do that," she replied with a chuckle. "I'm afraid the best we can do is the journals."

"And I will use mine faithfully, but all you'll have to do is ask and I'll teleport to you."

"Really?"

He nodded and kissed her forehead. "Really. Even if all you want is someone to hold in the night, I'll be there. It's not our last night together. This summer was the start of a lifetime of nights and days together."

She snuggled closer, reassured by his words and his presence. Tomorrow she would return to Hogwarts and she'd be sleeping alone for the most part. But for now, he was here and that was all that mattered.

The Great Hall, Sept 1 st 1997, Hogwarts...

Hermione surveyed the Gryffindor table with satisfaction. The sorting was over and they had twelve new students in Gryffindor, a record for her time at school. There had been a bumper crop of new students this year; nearly fifty. She had the numbers, broken down by Muggle or wizard born, that allowed her to know which of the new first year students would need extra help.

Down the table from where she sat, Lavender ate quietly with Parvati, Seamus and Dean. Apparently, she was still recovering from whatever punishment her father had inflicted on her over the summer months. Hermione watched the girl for a moment longer and nibbled on her lower lip worriedly. Lavender seemed a pale echo of her former self and Hermione wondered if it would help if she attempted to make a peace between them.

Ron sat not far away with Neville and Ginny, and he kept glancing over at the Hufflepuff table where Hannah sat. He had revealed that his father had asked if he wanted them to arrange a union for him, but he turned them down. He had spoken with Hannah a few days earlier and they had come to an agreement of their own.

On the train trip up from London, Ron announced that he was officially courting Hannah. Courting was similar to an arranged union, but was generally something agreed upon by the couple. No one was surprised by the announcement, but there were congratulations all around for the happy couple.

Hermione was happy for them. Hannah was a sweet girl who liked the idea of a large family and loved children. She was also adept at nudging Ron in the directions she wanted him to go without him realizing it.

She looked back up towards the head table and smiled at Remus. Next to him sat Tonks. She still limped a little, but she was getting better.

Minerva stood and the hall slowly fell silent.

"Welcome back to another year at Hogwarts. This year we're pleased to welcome back Professor Remus Lupin, who will be taking over the position of Head of Gryffindor House. Professor Lupin will be assisted by Miss Nymphadora Tonks. Miss Tonks is an Auror who was recently injured in the line of duty and is recovering from those injuries. We are lucky to have her expertise and experience available to us this year."

She paused while Gryffindor led the students in applauding Remus' return.

"In case you don't know, our Head Boy and Girl this year are Mr. Anthony Goldstein of Ravenclaw, and Miss Hermione Granger of Gryffindor."

As always, no student is allowed into the Forbidden Forest without the escort of a teacher. Mr. Filch has posted an updated list of the banned items next to his office door.

"Finally, we will host a Yule Ball this year on December 19th, the day before the train leaves for London. Since many of our seventh year students are in the process of making arrangements for their post-Hogwarts lives, you will be allowed to invite anyone you wish from outside the Hogwarts student body. As always, the dance is closed to first and second years, third years must be invited by an older student in order to attend."

She paused again and took a breath. "And now, what has become tradition here at Hogwarts, let us complete our welcoming feast with the school song."

Hermione winced and fervently wished someone would put that ditty to one standard piece of music.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Sept. 2 nd 1997, Little Hangleton...

Dear Hermione,

I know it's only been one day, but I thought I'd leave you a letter to let you know I'm thinking about you and missing you. I'm sitting in my tent, not far from the old Riddle Manor.

You should have seen your Mum today. Sirius was busy at the Ministry and I was packing my things so I could get a mid afternoon start. The backpack you bought me is marvelous, by the way! I love the bottomless feature and the ultra light charms. Did you know this thing has a negative G setting so I can literally leap twenty or thirty feet? I swear it must cut my weight to an eighth of what it should be.

Anyway, I'm double-checking everything, making sure I have my tent and other supplies, when your Mum comes in the room all teary eyed and sniffing. I felt awful! She walked over and made some light conversation, asking if I packed my socks and if I had enough clean underwear, then she grabs me into a tight hug like the ones you give me. Only then she starts crying harder!

Hermione, how am I supposed to deal with your crying mother? I patted her back and told her I'd be fine, but that's the sum total of what I know of how to soothe a crying female! At least with you I can distract you by nuzzling that spot below your ear that turns you on, or I can try to make you laugh. But come on, this is your Mum here! I certainly can't use the Dursleys' technique either, so I was at a loss.

Anyway, after nearly thirty minutes of her crying and me conjuring tissues, she settled down and sat on my bed while I continued packing and checking everything. She made me promise to teleport to your place at least once a week for dinner, and she made sure I had an extra battery for my mobile phone. Honestly, has she forgotten about our mirrors?

I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing near Little Hangleton. Well, I got to thinking this morning and changed my plans. I know Nagini started out from there and I want to survey the house for myself. I don't think Remus missed anything, but it won't hurt to check it over with the detection spells I've learned.

One of my Auror investigative textbooks called it an immersion technique. Basically, by visiting the location and trying to put myself in the criminal's mindset, I'm supposed to get insight into them. Whether that's true or not, I can't say. I just thought seeing the house would help put things into perspective for me.

It's over three hundred and fifty miles from Riddle's place to Hogwarts, but I should get a clue or two here. I've got to make sure I'm done no later than the end of this week, then move on. It's going to start getting cold soon and the snakes will go into hibernation, costing me a source of valuable information. I am tempted to jump directly to Hogsmeade, but I may miss something if I do.

The more I think about it, the more it sounds like a logical plan. Sure, I could run around chasing after snakes, but I needed a solid place to start from and this is about as solid as I can get.

I've got my tent set up on the other side of the family graveyard and my warning wards out in force. It's not the most pleasant of locations, but I really don't want to sleep in that house, or worse, down in the graveyard. That place is creepy.

Oh, one more thing I just remembered. Your Dad, just before I teleported away, came in and offered me fifty pounds. He said he wanted to make sure I had enough cash on me. Your parents are a treasure, Hermione. I know there will be points when we both will think they are annoying, but they really are special. They are the kind of parents I always wanted for myself.

I'm going to sign off now and get to bed. It's going to be difficult to sleep without you, but I keep telling myself this is the final phase and once it's done, we can be together forever.

*All my love,
Harry*

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Sept. 3 rd 1997, Hogwarts...

Back to school.

N.E.W.T.s this year!!!!

Miss Harry.

The Gryffindor Head Girl's room is accessible from both the common room and a private door near the fat lady. It's a nice cozy room with a lot of bookshelves and a small common room that normally I would have shared with the Head Boy, had he been from Gryffindor. As it stands, I have it all to myself, but Ginny has been up to survey the space and suggested that it would be a good place to hold girls' night.

I reminded her about this being my N.E.W.T. Year, but she flatly told me I can't study all the time. Her comment reminded me of when Harry got so terribly sick studying so hard. She's right, I've got to pace myself, make sure I get enough sleep and eat right.

I spoke to Lavender today. She is much changed and frankly I'm a little scared by it. Gone is the happy-go-lucky buxom blond that could only think about boys and fashion, replaced with a soft spoken, almost timid girl. I don't know what her father did to her this past summer, but we've all noticed the changes. She also seemed rather unprepared for school this term. Her uniform shows obvious signs of being transfigured.

I think one of my first duties will be to get the girls together to see if we can do something to help her. She's of age now, so she doesn't have to return to her family home for holidays or when we leave. I'll talk to Ginny and Parvati, see if we can come up with some ideas.

The Head Boy is an arrogant prig. Yes, I said prig. He is. He seemed to think that it was tradition and customary for the Heads to be very... friendly. I rather frostily reminded him that I had a boyfriend. I even went as far as to hint that it was all arranged, just to divert him elsewhere.

I think that's the last I'll have to worry about Mr. Goldstein. I feel sorry for the other girls, however. Once he struck out with me, he zeroed in on several sixth years from Hufflepuff.

I heard from Harry last night. I must say I was glad to read his letter. I was feeling a little sorry for myself and blue without him. I wrote him back this morning, asking him to be careful. I don't think I'm going to have a single nail un-bitten before this year is out!

Last year we fought our urges in bookspace and managed to avoid any complications. Now we have this new teleport spell. He could be here, in my bed every night, if I asked him. I am going to try to keep that to a minimum. I have to keep reminding myself that this is my N.E.W.T. year. As much as I would want him here, I want to show him that I'm as good with my studies as he was with his.

I was tempted to ask him to teleport up here every night. I considered asking McGonagall for permission. Fortunately, I caught myself in time. I realized that this is no longer his school and he's grown way past considering this his home. Fiji and my parents' place in Oxford are home to him, not this castle.

Besides, if he's here every night, I think I would have a lot of trouble concentrating my studies. The things that man does to me! Honestly! I used to wonder about our love lives and listen to the girls in the dorms talk. I was sure I'd never do half the things they talked about, and now I find myself wanting to do that with him and more. How can I study with that kind of temptation around?

It's funny. He really applied himself since leaving Hogwarts and he claims it was mostly inspired by me. Now I find myself approaching the same tests and I want to get a good grade so he will be proud of me! Talk about role reversal!

Crookshanks loves the private apartment. He's already claimed one of the high back arm chairs near the fireplace as his personal throne.

I'd better end this for now. It's nearly midnight and I think I'm tired enough to sleep, even without Harry.

Little Hangleton, Sept 4th 1997...

Harry sat up in bed and blinked for a moment. He looked around, confused, before remembering where he was.

The tent given to him by the Pac Rim Ministry was moderately comfortable, but it was designed for field Aurors on extended assignments, not for luxury vacations. As such, it contained only the bare essentials; a small one-person bedroom with a double wide bed; a bathroom with a sink, shower and toilet; a small kitchenette that came stocked with a year's supply of basic provisions. Next to the kitchenette was a small study with a desk and shelves of books and a Wizarding Wireless. The one surprise was the Muggle short wave radio that had been adapted to work around magic using Technomancy.

Had he been a real field agent, he would have been instructed to listen on the short wave radio for coded messages, since the distances in the Pacific were too great to overcome with things like the Wizarding Wireless, owls or even his mirror.

During the summer he had learned to use the complex-looking radio and had programmed it to a number of his favorite stations. With a flick of a finger, the radio turned on, set to Radio Japan. As he stood, he gestured towards the kitchenette, starting up a pot of coffee, then he did a quick check of his wards before heading into the bathroom to perform his morning ritual.

After breakfast, he climbed out of the tent and collapsed it. It quickly rolled itself back up and he tied it onto his backpack. He then cast a concealment charm on the pack before leaving it to investigate the house.

He followed the path down through the small graveyard and up toward the house that sat on top of the hill, overlooking everything in sight. In its day, it was a magnificent home. Those days were long gone, however.

He stopped near the back of the house and looked around. Nearby lay the caretaker's cottage. It, too, seemed deserted.

The house badly needed painting and the presence of several broken windows was clear testimony to the fact that no one was taking care of it anymore. While Voldemort and his Death Eaters would have killed any Muggle vandals who might have approached when they were here, he was

baffled by its relatively untouched state. Voldemort had been gone for three years now.

A sharp cracking noise from within the house caused him to tense and quickly cast a Disillusionment charm on himself. Someone was inside and, from the sound of it, they were tearing the place apart.

Safely disillusioned, he crept forward and slipped through the open back door. He stood in an old kitchen that looked as if someone had taken an axe to it. The cabinets were broken and there were huge holes in the walls. The stove had been tipped onto its side and someone had tried to pry up the floorboards underneath it.

"Where is it?" shouted a voice from upstairs. Whoever was in the house was clearly angry and frustrated.

Harry moved out of the kitchen and into what used to be a sitting room. It, too, was torn apart. He quickly glanced around and moved toward the open arch entrance to a foyer and staircase. The intruder was tearing the place to shreds looking for something.

A former Death Eater, most likely. Maybe it's Snape. He probably knew about this place. Moony found a Horcrux here. Could they be searching for that? Harry thought. He was ready to fight, his wand in one hand and his ring ready on the other.

He paused cautiously at the bottom of the stairs and looked up. Through the doorway of one room above, he could see a light and hear the muffled sounds of someone saying something. He cast a silencing charm on himself and started to ascend the stairs.

He moved slowly and carefully to the room with the light, pausing to cringe when one of the stairs creaked ominously. He had silenced himself, but his surroundings could still make noise. He watched the doorway and a tinge of fear ran through him. His heart beat rapidly and beads of perspiration formed on his forehead.

One minute, two minutes, nothing. Whoever was upstairs was paying no attention to anything else happening in the house. Cautiously, he resumed his climb and a moment later he was on the landing. The noises coming from the room were more distinct now.

"It has to be here somewhere. He didn't just become immortal and strong overnight. He had to have a grimoire or a journal, something to help him," muttered the voice.

So that's what he's looking for, thought Harry, some sort of book. It must be a Death Eater who's hoping to copy his master and follow in his footsteps. He doesn't realize that Voldemort's power level was natural; his only augmentation came from the Horcruxes! I don't know if such a book or grimoire exists, but I can't let this guy get his hands on it if it does.

Harry moved to the door and peered around the edge.

Walden McNair! He thought and gasped. It wasn't much of a sound, but it was audible.

McNair pivoted, whipping up his wand. "*Avada Kedavra!*" he shouted.

Defense Against the Dark Arts Class, Hogwarts, Sept 4 th 1997...

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, that is why I will push you harder and longer than any Defense class you've ever had," Remus said, pacing slightly in front of the class. "Your N.E.W.T.s are less than a year away and you will need to work..."

He paused and frowned. The mirror in his pocket was thrumming and getting hot, that meant an emergency signal from someone.

"Auror Tonks, take over for a few minutes," he snapped.

Tonks, who had been sitting up near the front watching Remus and trying to make him smile by making faces at him while he lectured, jumped to her feet, surprised.

Remus turned and walked briskly into his office, smirking to himself. He could hear Tonks stand and face the class nervously. "Um... Hi?"

That will teach her to do that to me in class, he mused, then he pulled the mirror out of his pocket. He placed his thumb on the corner to activate it.

"Come on, Remus, pick up the damn mirror," said a voice, then Evan's image formed in the mirror.

"Harry?"

"Remus! Thank Merlin, I was afraid I'd be stuck here until you answered and I didn't want to alert Sirius," he said.

"Harry, you're bleeding!" Remus said in protest.

He was bleeding from a nasty gash in one cheek that extended from his mouth to just short of his ear. Blood dripped from the wound and he had wiped his cheek at least once, smearing blood back along his jaw.

"Tell me something I don't know," Harry replied dryly. "I also think I sprained my knee, but none of that matters right now. Remus, I'm at the Riddle home in Little Hangleton. I figured it would be the smartest place to start. I'm not alone. Right now I'm sitting on one Walden McNair, former Ministry Department head, Wizengamot member, Death Eater and wanted fugitive. I've stopped the really bad bleeding and I think he's still alive, but what do I do with him?"

Remus blinked in surprise, then the wolf in him woke, howling. Harry had caught the man that had hurt his mate!

"Remus, calm down. Merlin, I knew I should have called Sirius," Harry muttered. He could see Remus' eyes turning yellow. "What should I do? I can't slap a Portkey on him and send him to St. Mungo's or the Ministry. They have my magical signature on record! Even without a wand, they'd know who made the portkey and I can't leave him here in the shape he's in."

"Hold on a second, cub. Are you seriously injured anywhere?"

"I'm fine. Like I said, I have a cut on my cheek and a sore knee. I've cast pain numbing charms on both and a charm to help the knee, but the cut is too big for the spells I know."

"All right Harry, you hang tight. I'll be there or send someone we trust as soon as possible. Keep McNair stunned and don't let him out of your sight!"

Harry smirked at him. "Oh, don't worry Moony. He's not going anywhere. Just remember to bring someone who can seal off his wounds... I did, sorta, but it's not right."

Remus looked at the small image in the mirror and nodded uneasily. *What did he mean by that?* He thought. "All right, see you soon."

Remus pressed the edge closing the connection and stuck the mirror back in his pocket, then he fired off a messenger Patronus to Minerva.

Stepping out of his office, he was surprised to find his seventh year class, and his assistant, standing on one foot and hopping up and down.

"Learn balance!" shouted Tonks encouragingly to the class of bewildered, bouncing students.

Balance? Merlin knows I love her, but even I'll admit her balance stinks, Remus thought as he stared at his girlfriend.

He walked over to her and tapped her on the shoulder. She staggered and landed in his arms. A moment later, a bunch of students fell over as they lost their own balance. Shaking his head, Remus placed Tonks back up on her feet.

"Do you mind explaining what that is all about?" he asked her mildly. Around them, the class found their seats and watched the pair. Hermione tried hard not to laugh.

"Well, I thought my exercises for improving my legs and balance would help them too," Tonks admitted sheepishly.

He shook his head and moved a little closer. "I... I... Oh, just forget it," he muttered. "Look, we have a problem. Minerva will be here in a moment, then we're leaving."

The back door opened and the Headmistress walked into the class looking around worriedly.

"Open your textbooks and read pages twenty through sixty. When you're done, I want you to move the desks aside and try out the Imperial Shield technique. Miss Granger, as Head Girl, I'm putting you in charge of this class," Remus called out as he pulled Tonks towards his office.

Minerva followed them, seeing little choice in the matter.

Remus turned and waited for her to shut the door. "Minerva, I remember during Voldemort's first reign of terror you were the Order's backup healer. Do you remember how to seal wounds, at least temporarily?"

She looked at him in surprise. "I suppose, but why don't I just call for Madam Pomfrey? Who's injured? None of your students..."

Remus waved her to silence. "Harry contacted me. He ran into Walden McNair at the old Riddle house. He said he's all right, but he has a nasty gash on his cheek. It's McNair we need to worry about. Harry said he's hurt pretty bad," he told her before turning to Tonks. "We need to figure out how to bring him in without involving Harry."

Minerva frowned. "Do you know where this place is?"

"I can make us a Portkey, but we'll have to walk to the edge of the wards."

"Then let's get going," Tonks said with determination. This was the man who killed several of her mates and nearly killed her. She wasn't going to miss this for anything.

Little Hangleton, Sept 4 th 1997...

He held his mirror in one hand and was probing around the cut on his cheek when he heard someone shout from downstairs.

"Harry!"

"Up here, Remus. First floor."

Barely a minute later, Remus, Tonks and Minerva entered the room with wands drawn. Remus looked around stupidly at the torn up room.

"Harry, where's McNair?"

Harry scowled and winced. His numbing charm was starting to wear off. "I told you I was sitting on him."

That caused all three of them to pause and look at the three legged stool Harry was resting on.

"You transfigured him into a stool?" asked Tonks incredulously.

Harry shrugged. "Why not? He was bleeding to death and stools don't bleed."

The three blinked in shock.

"I never thought of that," Remus muttered.

"It is a novel use of Transfiguration. I wonder why the healers haven't thought of using it?" Minerva said softly. She moved closer to Harry and, with a deft flick of her wand, the cut on his cheek sealed up like new.

"I'm sure there's something morally or ethically wrong with it. I mean, imagine capturing someone like Lucius Malfoy and turning him into a rubber duck just to make sure he doesn't escape," Harry said, then he smiled his thanks to Minerva and hopped off the stool.

Tonks cackled with laughter. "I'll have to try that idea on Mad Eye or Shackbolt next time we're sparring."

Harry pulled a wand from his pocket and held it out to Tonks. "Here's his wand. He only got off two spells, a killing curse and a shield."

"Then how did you hurt yourself?" asked Remus looking up from staring at the stool.

Harry pointed to a hole in the door frame. "He cast a killing curse and missed. It hit the door frame, which splintered. Some of the debris hit me. I hurt my knee diving away from the door. He put up a shield which deflected my wand's Reductor, but my follow-up bone breaker hex was a little too strong, I'm afraid. His kneecap shattered and he's got a bad compound fracture. I think I hit an artery."

Remus stared at him.

Harry stared back. "What?"

"Aren't we getting rather blasé about nearly getting hit with a killing curse?" Remus said through gritted teeth.

Harry shrugged. "He missed, that's all that matters. What are we going to do with him?"

"First we'll slap an emergency healing spell on his leg after I transfigure him back," Minerva said. She flicked her wand in a complex pattern and the stool shimmered and reformed into a man. He lay on the floor deathly pale and quiet. Blood fountained from his leg, splashing the wall.

Minerva moved closer, her wand tip glowing a bright blue. She touched it to the wound and the bleeding stopped instantly. The leg around the area turned a dayglow orange to signify that emergency field medical magic had been performed and would wear off soon.

Tonks stepped up to him and placed a playing card on his chest, then she tapped it with her wand. McNair vanished from sight.

"A Portkey! But they'll trace that!" exclaimed Harry.

"Relax, Harry. That was a Ministry standard Portkey. It has the standard Ministry signature on it," Tonks replied with a grin. "Besides, it was one of the older Portkeys made by Rufus Scrimgeour. I kept it around on a lark. I never thought I'd need to use it. Let the Ministry hacks figure out how a Portkey was made by a dead man."

Harry shook his head in amazement. Shortly after Scrimgeour had been ousted as Minister, he had committed suicide. If anything, McNair's arrival was about to cause a great deal of confusion at the Ministry.

With McNair gone, Harry relaxed for the first time that morning.

"What was he doing?" Remus asked, looking around at the torn up room.

"He was looking for a book or something. I don't know why, but he seemed to think that Voldemort had left a cache of books here on how he got so powerful. I think McNair wanted to find them and follow in his footsteps. Or at least that was what he was muttering as he tore the place apart," Harry said softly.

He lifted his hand and stared at it, surprised to see it shaking.

Seeing his confusion, Tonks moved over and wrapped an arm around him. "It's all right, Harry. It's a natural reaction. Your body is flushing out the adrenalin."

He smiled weakly.

Minerva frowned and conjured a thermos of hot tea on an unbroken table. She poured a cup for Harry and handed it to him.

His hand shook slightly, but he thanked her. Tea sounded wonderful!

"Why here, Harry?" asked Remus.

He sipped his tea for a moment. "It's the starting point. Nagini was here; Riddle was here; it's where it all started. I was going to examine the house in the morning, more out of curiosity than anything else. In the afternoon I was going to look for a snake and see if I could get a sense of direction from it."

He paused and looked at the blood splatter on the wall. "That plan got sidetracked when I realized that I wasn't alone here. I never expected to find McNair though. That was just a bonus, I reckon."

"I'll say. I suspect that the DMLE will be celebrating in a few hours. He's wanted for the murder of two Aurors, plus what he did to me and more," Tonks replied, then she shivered heavily.

Alarmed, Remus stepped over to her side. "Are you all right?"

She smiled and touched his cheek fondly. "I will be, now that our Pacific Boy Wonder has captured the big bad wannabe."

Harry shook his head and moved to stand next to Minerva, giving the other two their privacy.

"That was an excellent Transfiguration. Someday I think you should return to Hogwarts as a Professor. The students would profit from such a capable wizard."

Harry blushed. *A teacher? Me?* he thought. It had never crossed his mind, but it was something to talk to Hermione about. It sounded like fun, actually. "I'll speak to Hermione about it, Professor. It does sound interesting."

She nodded and turned to the others. She would have liked to stay and talk more, but she had a school to run and the quicker they were gone from this place, the better.

"We must leave. You as well, Harry. The DMLE might not be able to tell that you were involved, but they can trace their Portkey back to the starting point," Minerva said.

Harry nodded and he sketched a mock salute at Tonks and Remus, then he teleported out of the run-down home. He needed to pick up his pack before he could begin his trip north.

"How does he do that?" Tonks asked in annoyance.

Remus grinned. "He won't tell us. He taught it to Hermione, but he won't tell us. It's an Auror spell he learned when they made him a reserve."

"I'm an Auror! He can teach me," Tonks whined.

Remus chuckled and shook his head. He had explained this to her before. Harry had permission to teach others, but only under strict conditions, which he interpreted to mean he'd teach Hermione and no one else.

Minerva held out her Hogwarts Portkey and a moment later the room was empty. With exception of the slowly drying blood on the wall, there was nothing to indicate they had been there.

Daily Prophet Headline, September 5th 1997...

Fugitive Walden McNair Captured Under Mysterious Circumstances!

Ministry Spokesman Perky Weatherbee announced that the dangerous fugitive Walden McNair has been captured under unusual circumstances.

"Yesterday, at just past eleven o'clock, the wanted fugitive, Walden McNair, appeared in a DMLE holding cell. Mr. McNair was seriously injured and unconscious upon his arrival. Emergency healing was performed in the holding cell, resulting in the loss of his left leg. McNair is wanted for the death of two Aurors, and injuring three others. McNair is also charged with being one of the leading members of the subversive Cult of Voldemort.

"Our investigation has revealed that he was the principal financial backer for the group and the one directing most of the Cult's activities. Between the raid just over a month ago, and now the arrest of McNair, the Cult of Voldemort has been gutted and is no longer a threat to our way of life."

According to inside sources, the Cult, which never numbered more than thirty members, has less than a handful still at large. Unconfirmed reports put the tally at fourteen arrested, and another eleven killed either by Ministry Aurors or as a result of their activities. The DMLE feels that those remaining members may try to slip back into normal society, burying their past and hiding their crimes.

Weatherbee made it quite clear that the DMLE will continue to investigate the Cult and they hope to get a full list of participants once McNair is well enough to be questioned under Veritaserum.

Details around the apprehension of McNair remain sketchy. According to one anonymous source, McNair appeared in a holding cell, heavily wounded. The Portkey which transported him was registered to Rufus Scrimgeour, former Auror and former Minister of Magic.

Scrimgeour committed suicide after his administration was exposed as being corrupt and secretly pursuing a policy of racial bigotry against non-human species. He left behind his wife and three mistresses.

Fire Sale goes horribly wrong when someone starts a fire. Page 2.
Head Healer at St. Mungo's says Male Pregnancy is a myth! Page 4.
Celestina Warbeck gives birth to Triplets! Ex-Lover claims to be father. Page 9.
Harry Potter Day movement suffers setback with McNair's arrest. Page 16.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Sept. 6 th 1997, Hogwarts...

My love,
I needed to take a day off before writing this. Remus told me about what happened with McNair and my very first impression was to write a scathing note about you being so reckless. And then I realized that you weren't being reckless at all. Remus and Tonks explained what happened and howyou had been slightly hurt when it could have been so much worse.

I understand now. This is what you have spent the last three years of your life training for, and it's something you're very good at. I also understand why this is not something you want to spend the rest of your life doing. To be honest, I'm sitting here worrying about you and driving myself insane. Promise me you will write every day, even if it's just to say you're fine. Please?

As much as you've tried to share your training with me, the simple fact is you have been trained to survive this fight and I have had only a small taste of your training. I can't imagine myself acting so calmly when someone is trying to use a killing curse on me.

I promise I'll try to keep my worrying to a minimum. And I won't yell at you unless I think you really deserve it.

I knowyou'll be careful, for our sake.

Now, here's a newtopic to think about. This year Hogwarts is holding another Yule Ball, and the seventh years are allowed to invite anyone they want to be their date. Therefore, I am requesting that you be my date. As much as I would like to be escorted by Harry James Potter, Evan Black will suffice, for now. The Ball is on the 19 th of December, and I am hoping that I can talk the Headmistress into allowing you to ride in the Head carriage of the train on the way home.

On the trip up, Ron announced that he is officially courting Hannah Abbot! Can you imagine that? I knowit was fairly obvious howthey felt about each other, but I never imagined he'd make an official announcement like that. Thinking back over the past fewyears, it's obvious nowthat Hannah has gently guided Ron to this point. I think she knewexactly what she was doing all along.

Remus is a fantastic teacher and a great Head of House. He and Tonks visit the Common Room every evening for an hour to see how everyone is doing. He's offered tutoring in Defense and Charms, and Tonks has offered tutoring in Transfiguration for anyone who needs it. It's quite a change from Lawson, who basically ignored us, and McGonagall, who was standoffish, but available.

Being Head Girl is different. I don't patrol like I used to, but I have visited all of the Common Rooms and I've had to deal with more than a few homesick first years. Would you believe I think I have a first year Hufflepuff boy crushing on me?

The Head Boy is Anthony Goldstein. He's a Ravenclawand the most pompous person I have met since Malfoy was carted away in a full body bind! I hope you don't mind, but I strongly hinted to him that you and I were arranged. He was making a fewcomments and I wanted to head him off before he became a problem.

Speaking of arrangements, I think you're right. Neville is seriously considering Ginny. I don't think she would be against it, if it happens, but sometimes I think she's still looking around for someone better. He'd be good for her, though. In some ways, she's rather sheltered and opinionated and I can see Neville broadening her horizons.

Neville was telling me that Professor Sprout spends half her summers traveling the world, looking for rare plants. If he takes that apprenticeship, he'd be going with her, and dragging his wife along. I wonder if Ginny is aware of that?

I'm going to close this entry now, my love. But I intend to carry my mirror all the time, in case you want to contact me, and I'll see you in bookspace in two days time.

All my love,
Your Hermione.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Sept. 7 th 1997, Scotland, north of Hawick...

Dear Hermione,
Of course Evan will be there to escort you to the Ball! Do we need to make sure our outfits match? I knowyou wanted that for our ballroom dancing, but I don't knowmuch about formal balls. If we need to meet and buy clothes, let me knowand I'll be there.

The incident with McNair was an accident. I honestly thought I'd walk around an empty house for an hour or two, then move on. I had no idea I was about to encounter a fugitive Death Eater. Believe me when I say the very last thing I want to do is drawattention to myself or what I'm doing.

With that said, I promise I'll be as careful as I possibly can be.

I can't tell you how happy I am for Ron and I do hope once this is done we can find some common ground to reconnect on. I'm not certain that will happen. Remember when we were all together in Diagon Alley this past summer? It took all of my willpower to keep myself from telling them off for being so narrow-minded about the rest of the world!

Maybe Hannah can work on him some more. She's put in a good effort and he's actually turning into a good man, finally.

Tell anyone you want that we're arranged. If you want, I'll be happy to provide a ring to prove the point.

Oh, speaking of rings! Sirius forwarded me my inventory book that he got from Gringotts. It's a handy little book that allows me to know what's in my vault. The book includes photos of the objects and known history. I was surprised at the number of enchanted objects in the vault. Nothing really useful, but there's a lot of strange stuff collected by the Potters over the years.

Now, I'm sure you're wondering why I brought this up, but it's really simple. There are over two hundred rings in the vaults, and at least twenty of which are of a type I'd consider good enough to be used as an engagement ring. If I forwarded you the book, could you look at these and see if there are any you'd like to use as your engagement ring?

If you don't find one you'd like, I'll get you a new one. But you'll need to tell what style you want.

Remus told me that I should try to find out what you'd like. He thought I should hint around it and observe your reactions. That's all right for him and Tonks maybe, but I'm more straightforward than that.

It's daunting. I passing through a Muggle town yesterday and I stopped at a jewelry store. They had so many styles it made my head spin! Ovals, solitaires, pear, marquise; diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, mixed gems; gold, platinum, silver, white gold. Honestly, it gave me a headache just thinking about it. Finally, it dawned on me that I should ask you what you want. I mean, at least in general terms. After all, the ring is going to sit on your hand for a long time. Shouldn't you have a choice?

Your Head Boy sounds a lot like Percy Weasley did when he was Head Boy. I wonder what happened to him, anyway? Or the twins, for that matter. They were a great bunch.

I was right about one thing. Nearly every snake I've spoken to since that first one over the summer has demanded a rat in payment before they would give me any information. You know, it's strange. Snakes have no concept of names, but they have a wonderful sense of time. They were able to tell me exactly how many moons ago it had been. Assuming they are accurate, and I have no reason to assume they aren't, Nagini was very late getting to this area.

I don't know why, but she showed up nearly a year later than I expected. She's still heading north and I'm still on her trail, but the temptation to jump directly to Hogsmeade is enormous.

It is quickly becoming harder to find any snakes and the season is still early! Last night the temperatures dipped below fifty. This morning I found another European viper and he took nearly an hour to rouse. If this keeps up, the snakes will be in hibernation by mid-October and I'll lose them as a source of information.

That will leave me with only one option; jump to Hogsmeade and search the Forbidden Forest. She hasn't crossed the ward that Sirius and McGonagall put up, so if she's by the school, she hasn't entered it yet.

I stopped in Hawick to pick up some warmer clothes. Biking the English/Scottish countryside is nice in the summer, but it's starting to get chilly. I needed a few heavier jumpers. It's funny. I packed winter clothing and summer clothing and had nothing for Autumn. That's where I spotted the jewelry store.

I'm going to close now, as my dinner is nearly ready. I want you to know how much I miss you. As much as I enjoyed making love to you, I think holding you while we slept was even better.

*All my love,
Harry*

Quibbler Headline, September 10 th 1997...

Sydney Snail Stampede Injures Hundreds!

The Australian Ministry denies reports that they ignored the warnings of Harry Potter concerning the oncoming snail stampede. Potter, age 17, provided the government with three weeks advance warning about the stampede and still no action was taken until it was far too late.

"I don't get it!" exclaimed an exasperated Harry Potter. "I could clearly see the millions of snails coming towards the city from my bat perch and when I warned them they didn't believe me!"

At that point our brave hero broke down and wept, describing in vivid detail how the horde of snails overran a campground on the outskirts of the city, starting fires and causing dozens of injuries. Overcome with remorse, Mr. Potter donned his patented bat suit and swooped away, heading east. He told us, off the record, that he wanted to visit Hoboken because he couldn't believe that anyone would name a place that.

"They were everywhere!" said another survivor of the attack. "It was slimy! It was terrifying! They slimed my boy!"

Our research has discovered that the snails in question are closely related to the common house elf and we're worried that such a disaster might happen here. In the role of concerned citizens, we felt obligated to warn our Ministry so that steps could be taken to prevent this from happening to us.

Ministry spokesperson Perky Weatherbee had this to say. "Snails? Snails? SNAILS? B B B B B B B B!" At this point the poor man broke down and wept in despair. He obviously realized just how unprepared we are. This would be almost as bad as the time the Ministry released new Owl post stamps with super glue backing!

We at the Quibbler will do our best to stay on top of this and bring you new information as it becomes available. If any reader knows the meaning of the strange code spoken by the Ministry Spokesperson, please contact us. We're sure it's important.

Coming Next Week:

Great Parisian Mime Disaster blamed on Harry Potter! Ministry Spokesperson Perky Weatherbee committed to St. Mungo's Psyche ward for observation due to rabid Snargle Infestation.

The Granger Home, Sept 11 th 1997, Oxford England...

"I spoke to Harry today," Emma said softly. "He called the office while you were doing that extraction on the Pickerton boy."

Dan looked up from his newspaper. "Oh? How's he doing?"

"He said he's been bouncing all over the Midlands, chasing down snakes to talk to. I think he's feeling considerable pressure with winter coming on. He only has about a month or so before most of the snakes slip into hibernation," she replied.

Dan frowned. That wasn't a lot of time. "Is he going to come here for dinner this Sunday?"

"He begged off. He said he has a lead he's been tracking down. He's taken to stopping and checking the local libraries, looking for clues from old newspapers. He thinks between that and the snakes, he'll find Nagini."

Dan folded the paper and placed it on the table. "Next time you talk to him, try to insist he come for dinner. After all, it doesn't take much effort for him to teleport or Apparate or whatever he does."

Emma looked at her husband with mild amusement.

"What?"

"Why don't you just admit you care about what happens to him?" she teased.

He scowled at her. "I'm just protecting my daughter's interests," he replied haughtily.

"Right. And I'm related to the Royal Family. Is it that hard for you to admit it? He loves her and she loves him and they're good for each other. Someday, he's going to be the father of your grandchildren."

"Oh all right," he conceded with a mock growl. "Besides, she did reasonably well choosing him. I suppose he isn't that ugly."

"Daniel Patrick Granger!"

He winced and opened up his paper again, hiding behind it. Emma stared at the paper for a moment with amusement. *Stubborn old fool, she thought fondly. He likes Harry, but he's so used to fighting against their relationship that he won't admit it.*

The Forbidden Forest, Sept 12 th 1997...

Tom was exhausted. It took most of his energy to maintain enough of a link to Nagini that he could see out of her eyes.

He had a vague memory of an entrance to the castle. It was underground and would allow them to pass beneath that strange ward. Now it was a matter of finding it.

For the past several days he had been slowly coaxing the snake forward and still managing to maintain a safe distance from that strange ward.

Now he was getting worried. They were coming around to the backside of the castle where the wards came closest to the great stone structure and they were perilously close to Acromantula territory.

Tom's time as a trapped spirit was messing with his memory. He remembered there was an entrance, but he couldn't recall where it came out, or if it connected with the series of tunnels that accessed the Chamber of Secrets.

Time was running short for him. The Horcrux was steadily increasing its hold on his spirit, making it increasingly difficult to contact the snake. If he didn't do something soon, he'd be absorbed into the Horcrux and helpless to influence any of the events happening around him. Should the Horcrux succeed in absorbing him, he'd be released only by its destruction.

Nagini tensed. She felt a strange vibration. Spotting a pile of rocks, she quickly slithered toward the pile. She was nearly there when she felt the vibration increase in speed and intensity. She found a hole in the pile and slithered inside, then turned back to look.

She was trapped! Outside the pile were two Acromantula scouts. They were out hunting for food when they spotted her. She was a powerful predator, but her fangs were no match for the large spiders. She knew instinctively that she'd never be able to penetrate their hard exoskeletons.

She was stuck, unable to get out, and the spiders were unable to get in. Stoically, she turned to survey the space she was in. It was only then that she noticed the hole extended deeper and downwards. With the equivalent of a reptilian shrug, she turned away from the entrance and made her way down deeper. She had no choice in the matter. To leave the hole was death. This way might provide an unblocked exit.

Hogwarts, Gryffindor Head Girl's apartment, September 24 th 1997...

Hermione's desk was piled high with books and parchments. Nearby, the fireplace burned merrily, heating the small Common Room, and several wall sconces lit the room with their flickering light.

The door opened and she walked in. She was exhausted, the result of not enough sleep and too much work. With a grimace, she pulled her book bag off her shoulder and placed it on her desk. Sitting down, she opened the bag and started to pull more books out.

“*Watashi wa anata ga suki desu*,” said a voice softly.

She sighed and shook her head. “I love you too, Harry,” she replied absently, then looked up in shock. “Harry?” she whispered, then she whirled around. For a moment she was confused, she couldn't see him, but then he appeared as his invisibility cloak fell to the floor.

“I've missed you,” he replied softly.

Bolting from her seat, she leaped into his arms. They held each other for a long time, saying nothing. Nothing needed to be said.

Finally, Harry pulled on her chin slightly so he could look into her eyes. “Are you getting enough sleep?” he asked worriedly.

She looked down, unable to meet his gaze. “I get enough.”

He glanced over at a wall clock and then back to her, his plans thrown out the window. “No, I don't think so,” he said, then he bent down and lifted her into his arms.

“What are you doing?” she asked in alarm.

“My original thought was to come here and spend a few hours with you. But I've changed my mind. As to what I'm doing, I'm taking you to bed... to sleep.”

“But...”

He gently put her down on the edge of the bed and he started to pull at her clothing, helping her undress.

“We're going to sleep, Hermione. You look like you haven't gotten more than four hours sleep a night,” he said, then he found her nightgown on the back of a chair. He picked it up and handed it to her.

She nodded absently. She was still a little confused by his abrupt arrival. She stood and started undressing, totally unaffected by his presence in the room. Harry stripped down to his boxers, then he walked over to the bed and pulled down the duvet.

He climbed into the bed and with a wave of his hand, the lights dimmed down, leaving just the light from the fireplace.

She slid into bed next to him. “Are you sure you don't want to...”

He placed a finger over her lips. “I do, but not tonight. You're exhausted and need your sleep. I need to hold you and you need to be held. We have a lifetime of making love ahead of us,” he whispered in reply, then he slid his arms around her, pulling her in close.

She smiled to herself and thought that Mr. Potter was going to get very lucky as soon as she could arrange it. His body was warm next to hers and she snuggled a little closer. Before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

Harry relaxed, feeling her breathing deepening and evening out. He hadn't known she was pushing herself this hard until Remus made a comment while he was talking to him via their mirrors. *I've got to get her to slow down a little. If I have to, I'll teleport here every other night just to make sure she sleeps*, he thought. *Not that it'll be much of a hardship on my part.*

He grinned to himself and started to relax. As much as he would like to make love to her, her health and sanity were too important for him to risk it. He'd spend every night just holding her if that was what it took to keep the N.E.W.T.s from driving her over the edge. He sighed and started stroking her hair. It was one of the features he loved about her and it relaxed him to play with her hair. Within minutes he, too, was drifting off to sleep.

Hermione opened one eye and looked at the clock on her nightstand. It was ten in the morning, on a Sunday, so she wasn't missing anything. She stretched, or tried to, until she realized that she had one Harry James Potter draped over half her body.

She turned to see he was still sleeping, but he was already starting to wake up. She ran her hands through his hair and smiled. He had arrived last

night, interrupted her planned night of studying. She had been ready to snap at him, half expecting he had arrived just because he wanted sex. Instead, he took her to bed and made her sleep. She felt a brief shiver of shame wash through her at her first thoughts when he arrived.

Harry opened his eyes and blinked sleepily.

"Good morning," she whispered to him.

He smiled at her. "You look like you slept better."

"I did, thanks to you," she replied, then she chewed on her lip for a moment. "I'm sorry," she blurted.

He grinned at her. "For?"

"Well, when you first arrived last night I thought were interrupting my studying only because you wanted to have sex with me."

He grinned. "Would you be terribly angry if I said that thought had crossed my mind when I decided to visit you? But as soon as I saw you, I knew you needed sleep more than I needed to make love with you."

"So. I was right then?"

He shrugged. "At least partially. I wanted to see you and hold you. It worked out, though. I got to spend the night with you in my arms."

She wanted to scold him, but couldn't. He had put his own desires on hold for her. He watched her thinking, his eyes dancing with amusement and his tousled hair made him look adorable. "So, you think you can just teleport here anytime and drag me into bed?" she asked teasingly.

His expression hardened. "If I find you exhausted again, I will, protests or not," he replied sternly, then he sighed and sat up, turning on the bed to face her.

"Hermione, you can't let your N.E.W.T.s become an obsession. I thought you would be better able to manage your time than this."

She sat up and looked down at her hands laying in her lap. "I don't know what happened. It just seemed that I was spending more and more time studying."

Harry looked at the stack of books sitting on one chair and shook his head slowly. "Sweetie, your N.E.W.T.s are important, but you're approaching this wrong."

She scowled at him. "Oh?" she asked in a dangerous tone.

He scowled back at her. "Look, Remus told me all about them. For the two part exams the written is really only worth forty percent of your score. And the practical is worth sixty percent. They claim it's fifty fifty, but it really isn't."

He paused and looked at her intently. "The Pac Rim was even worse with a twenty-five, seventy-five split. What that means is that it's more important that you can cast the spells, even if you're a little weak on the theory."

"For the past three years we have lived, and learned together. I think it's safe to say I know how well you can do. Trust me when I say if you set yourself a reasonable schedule, like three hours a night, you'll earn full marks on your exams."

She looked at him in surprise. "Do you really think so?"

He nodded. "That's the schedule I used. Three hours a night, plus time for homework. I'm not nearly as smart as you are, either. You're sure to do better with that schedule than I did."

She nodded and looked down while he climbed out of the bed and summoned his clothing to his hands.

"You're not staying?" she asked suddenly.

He turned to her and shook his head. "I can't. But I'll be back, if for no other reason than to make sure you're getting enough sleep. I worry about you," he said softly.

She smiled at him and climbed out of the bed. She walked over to him and stopped him from putting on his shirt. She ran her hands over his chest for a moment.

"Anytime you want to come here to make love would be fine by me," she whispered, suddenly feeling very embarrassed.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I'd like that," he replied, then he kissed her hard, holding her tightly against him.

For a moment, she thought they'd end up in the bed, which sounded rather good to her. Instead, he released her and stepped back to put on his clothes, then his shoes. His invisibility cloak flew in from the other room.

"Why did you bring your cloak?"

He grinned. "I didn't know where your apartment was, so I teleported to the one place I thought you would be, and followed you here."

She giggled. "The library."

"Right in one," he said with a chuckle. "Now that I know where this place is, I can arrive here directly."

He folded the cape and placed it in a side pocket of his cloak. "Remember; three hours. I'll be back in a few days if that's all right with you."

She nodded eagerly. "I'd like that. Maybe we could do this once a week?"

"I wish we could do it every night," he muttered, but he nodded to her idea.

Harry looked around quickly to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything, then he gave her a kiss on the cheek and vanished from sight.

She sighed and looked at the empty room, suddenly feeling lonely. A knock from the entranceway startled her and she reached for her robe, then she went to answer her door.

She was surprised to see the Headmistress standing at her door, especially since she had the ability to enter every room in the castle!

"May I come in?"

Hermione shook herself, thinking how fortunate they were that Harry had left when he did. She stepped back. "Yes, please come in, Headmistress."

Minerva entered the small Common Room and glanced around. "I take it that your guest has left already?"

Hermione stared at the older witch in shock.

Minerva's lips tightened into a slight smile. "I noticed you skipped breakfast this morning, Miss Granger. Perhaps we can have some tea and biscuits to hold you over until lunch."

A small table appeared in front of the couch with a tea setting and a platter of biscuits. Minerva moved to sit on the couch and poured herself a cup of tea.

"You knew Harry was here?" Hermione asked, a bit dumbfounded. She still hadn't budged from the doorway.

Minerva sipped her tea for a moment before turning to face her. "I am the Headmistress of this school, my dear. I know most of what happens here. Perhaps someday you will be able to understand better."

"But Harry... we slept... the rules..."

She stopped and shook her head. This couldn't be happening to her.

"Sit."

Hermione bolted for the couch, sure she was about to lose her Head Girl badge.

Minerva watched the girl for a moment before deciding to explain. "Earlier this week I spoke to Professor Lupin and suggested that Harry visit you. You seemed to be working yourself into quite a state and I thought a visit would help soothe your nerves. Tell me, Miss Granger, do you know why we isolate the boys from the girls in this school?"

"Well, the rules say..."

"Yes, there are rules and we try to enforce them. Rules are important, but they are not the reason for living, nor should one consider them to be absolute. Nearly twenty years ago, the Head Boy and the Head Girl occupied this apartment and they used only one bedroom for the last half of the year. Their marriage after graduation gave us the wonderful young man that visited you last night. Nothing was said then and nothing would have been said now if Mr. Potter were Head Boy. The reason for that is that we already know that the Head students are responsible."

She paused and tilted her head slightly in thought. "In the past two hundred years there have been exactly eight witches who have gotten pregnant at this school. And none of them were in their seventh year. By seventh year, we expect our witches and wizards to be responsible for their actions, and to take precautions. Taking precautions is one of the lessons we drum into you everyday when you're taught magic.

"I spoke to Remus because I was worried that you were working too hard. A visit from Harry would be tolerated, so long as you were responsible and discreet, and it would do you a world of good."

Hermione blushed and looked down. "We didn't do anything we shouldn't, Ma'am. Harry took one look at me and made us go to sleep. He made me promise to limit my studying to only three hours a night."

Minerva nodded in satisfaction. Her meddling had a better impact than she had expected, then. Harry might look like his father, but he certainly was more insightful than James was. "Excellent. I always thought he had a head on his shoulders. Miss Granger, you, like all Head students, are a valuable asset to the school. You are just a step shy of being part of the staff and we grant you certain allowances due to the extra work you put in. If it takes Mr. Potter visiting, then it was worth it."

When Hermione looked up at her in surprise, the older witch smiled thinly at her. "Come now, Hermione. You're not the first Head Girl to sneak a

boy into her rooms. I was given the same lecture by Deputy Headmaster Dumbledore in my day.”

Hermione smiled sheepishly at Minerva who returned her smile. “Your friend may visit if he wishes, but he is not to be seen by the regular student body. And if I may ask, just how did he arrive? The school first detected him in the library.”

Hermione bit her lip. The Headmistress had just confirmed something she had suspected for a long time. “He knows a method of travel that bypasses the wards, Ma’am.”

Minerva's expression tightened into a thin line of disapproval. That meant Potter could come and go as he wished. She much preferred he arrive like a normal wizard or witch. “I guess I shouldn't be surprised. He's probably taught you the same technique,” she replied testily. Minerva knew the answer already, but she wanted to know if Hermione would admit it.

Hermione looked down at her feet and said nothing. Her silence was all the reply Minerva needed for confirmation.

“Very well. Remember what I said. No student is to see him. If he is keeping his Evan Black persona, he is to limit his stays to nine hours or less.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Minerva stood. “Enjoy your day, my dear.” Turning, she walked to the door and left the suit.

Once she was gone, Hermione lost her rigid pose and slid down on the couch. Slowly, she started to grin. The Headmistress had given her permission to sleep with her boyfriend! First it was her father, then her Headmistress. If this was a conspiracy, it was a mighty nice one. *All I need now is Mum to give me a Guidebook to Better Shagging and we'll have it made!*

The thought made her laugh out loud.

The Forbidden Forest, Sept 25 th 1997...

For weeks Nagini navigated the twisty narrow passages of caves she had stumbled into. She survived on rats mostly. In this environment, she was an ace predator and not limited to her eyesight in order to catch her prey. In fact, she had only come upon one predator more dangerous than herself and she had managed to escape in time.

She had discovered a large chamber that contained an undiscovered species of subterranean Acromantula. They were much smaller than their above-ground cousins and blind, relying entirely on catching rats and other small creatures using their webs. Nagini encountered them when she entered a chamber which appeared to be a nest full of them. Fortunately for her, she managed to escape into an underground river, which carried her through several adjoining chambers before washing her up on a sandy underground shore. Nagini was able to swim better than her pursuers.

Day after day passed with no light to mark their passage and still Nagini explored, following the taste of fresh air whenever she could find it. Occasionally, fate would tease her and Tom by allowing her to find a chamber in which part of the ceiling had fallen away revealing daylight high above, and always out of reach.

It was in one such chamber that things changed for Nagini.

She lifted her head and stared at the sunlight filtering down through a small hole in the ceiling. This was the source of the fresh air that she tasted. A quick survey of the chamber revealed no route to the hole outside. There was no way to climb the sheer, slick walls.

She was circling around the floor of the chamber, examining the walls when she spotted the opening and more importantly, tasted the scent of humans.

“YES!” shrieked Tom.

The opening was clearly man made, a broken clay pipe, very old and rather brittle. And more importantly, it was probably a conduit straight into the castle. At this depth, they would be beneath the wards, so they could travel safely without activating them.

“Yes,” whispered the voice in the back of her mind. It had been fading for a while now and Nagini wasn't sure if it was real, or something remembered from long ago.

Whatever the reason, the result was clear. She changed directions and slithered into the pipe.

Tom gloated in the silence of his prison. A back door had been found!

Hogsmeade, Oct 1 st 1997...

Severus Snape groaned and pulled the blanket tighter around himself. He wasn't far from Hogsmeade now, but it had taken him over a month of hard walking to get here. He was in better shape than when he escaped. He had helped himself to equipment from a safe house he knew about from his Death Eater days.

He could have apparated the distance, but he was sure the Ministry could track apparitions. In fact, he was sure the Ministry could track nearly everything. His time in prison had given him an unhealthy dose of paranoia.

He was warm and comfortable, hidden in a small tent and well warded to warn him of approaching intruders. He was also certifiably nuts. Three years of Dementors was enough to drive most people insane. And Severus Snape had been a driven man even before prison.

He opened one eye and looked around the tent warily for any signs of intruders, or Dementors or worse, Gryffindors.

"All clear?" he asked himself.

"All clear," he replied with a firm nod, then he pulled his wand from underneath his pillow.

Throwing the blanket off, he sprang to his feet, his wand at the ready and he surveyed everything.

He stood for a moment, then started humming Christmas tunes. After several minutes he glanced over at the calendar on the wall. It wasn't time yet. He had to stay here and wait for the right moment.

"I'll be home for Christmas. But for now I have a Longbottom," Snape said with glee. "That's worse than a lovesick Hufflepuff."

He scowled suddenly. "Damn you, Parkinson! If you're going to be the house slut, at least do it right! Let me show you how it's done. Come here, Draco!"

He cackled for a moment, then shook himself.

Satisfied, Snape walked over to the small kitchen area and began to prepare his breakfast. Every so often, he'd giggle to himself and mutter about revenge against those 'thundering dunderheads'.

Gryffindor's Head Suite, Oct. 3 rd 1997...

"So, what did you want to talk about?" asked Tonks.

Hermione hesitated for a moment.

"Hermione? You're not in some kind of trouble are you?" asked Tonks worriedly.

Hermione blinked and looked at her in shock. "Merlin, no! This isn't about me, it's about another student."

Tonks leaned back in her chair, feeling relieved. She wasn't sure how she would have handled a pregnant Hermione.

"So, what's the problem then?"

"You know the problem I had with Lavender Brown for the past few years?"

Tonks nodded. "Yeah. Harry mentioned how he hated not being able to protect you from her. I had to stop him once from going all white knight on her."

Hermione smiled softly at that. "I think that Lavender is receiving the same treatment at home that Harry received before Sirius rescued him," she said softly. "She's changed drastically this year. I don't know what happened over the summer, but I think her father may have been excessive in his treatment of her."

Tonks looked at her in surprise. "I thought you and she weren't on speaking terms."

Hermione shivered slightly and crossed her arms. It bothered her that Harry was treated that way, and she wasn't about to see anyone treated like that if she could help it. "We're not friends, Tonks. But I keep thinking about how Harry treated his relatives and how he was treated in turn. No one deserves that. Lavender used to be very outgoing and very outspoken. Now she's this timid little thing, afraid of her own shadow. Something happened during the summer. Something bad. I can feel it."

Tonks leaned back on her chair. "All right, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Can't you do something? You're an Auror!"

Tonks shrugged. "You have a *suspicion* of someone being abused. Just that. Unless Lavender comes out and admits it, the DMLE can't get involved. I can try talking to her, but without a complaint from the victim, or eyewitness testimony, my hands are tied."

Hermione shoulders drooped in defeat. She had hoped there would be something that Tonks could do to help her.

"Hermione," Tonks said. "Did you ever think that she might need the same sort of rescue that Harry needed?"

She nodded in reply. "I did think of that, but I'm not sure what can be done if that's the case."

Tonks stood and looked down at her. "I'm not promising anything, but I'll speak with McGonagall and see if she and I can meet with Lavender."

Hermione nodded unhappily. It wasn't what she hoped for, but it was better than nothing.

Remus' Quarters, Hogwarts, Oct 5 th 1997...

Remus looked up when the door opened and Tonks entered the room. He was sitting up in the bed he shared with her. On his lap was a pile of homework from his third and sixth year classes.

"How did your meeting with McGonagall go?" he asked.

"Tense," she replied. "I always feel like I'm still a wet-nosed firstie when talking to her."

He chuckled, though he couldn't disagree. "She does the same thing to me. But what about Miss Brown?"

He watched her avidly as she peeled out of her robe and walked, nearly naked, toward their closet to pick out a nightshirt.

"It was worse than what we thought. Apparently, after she was picked up by her father at the end of last term, he got her home, then burned most of her clothes and beat her. She had a bout of accidental magic, pushing him away from her, then she grabbed what she could and ran."

Remus frowned.

"She's been staying with friends, a few days here, a week there. After she came of age, she slipped back into our world, staying with the Patils and some other girls she knew from school. She was afraid to tell anyone about it, but it was obvious to anyone that something had changed her."

Tonks paused and gave him a rueful smile. "You know Hermione was at the meeting?"

He nodded.

"Well, she pulled a Harry. She forgave Lavender for her past behavior and promised she'd do whatever she could to help her. It was almost like what Harry did with the Dursleys."

"Is there anything anyone can do?" asked Remus.

Tonks shrugged. "You know our Ministry, Remus. If something isn't shoved in their faces, they will do nothing about it. There's no structure in place to help abused teens. Minerva is going to contact the Patils and see if they would be willing to take her in for a few months after school, at least until she is able to get on her feet and afford a place of her own."

Remus shook his head. The Ministry was notorious for being unwilling and unresponsive to help in situations like this. Amelia had been working to change that, but she recognized that she couldn't introduce sweeping changes overnight. It would be a gradual process that could take years to change attitudes.

"I think Hermione wants to talk to Harry about maybe helping Lavender," she said, climbing into bed.

"Helping her? How?"

She shook her head and grabbed half his pile of parchments. "I don't know. She didn't come out and say it, but I could hear her gears clicking. Do you think he'd do anything?"

Remus looked down at his smaller pile of parchments in relief, then looked up at her. "If Hermione asks, he will. He'll do it because she asks, and because it would be the right thing to do. He could easily float her a loan of fifty thousand galleons and not miss it if she failed to pay it back."

She nodded and glanced down at her parchments, reading the essay on top. For several minutes they continued in silence, reading and marking. Then she spoke again. "Remus, is powdered Weedle horn really a curative for a Nundu bite?"

Remus put his quill down and sighed. "Luna Lovegood, right?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

He grinned. "If there is one thing I know, it's that if it's bizarre, Luna knows it. So yes, the powdered Weedle horn probably is a curative for a Nundu bite. However, I don't see how you can get bitten by a Nundu without being exposed to its breath ... wait, don't mark that wrong. If you do, I know she'll find the one case history to prove her point. Mark it right and give her an extra point for creativity."

Tonks snickered at him and the pair fell silent again.

"Tonks, I've been thinking," Remus said after grading a few more assignments.

He put his quill down again and looked at her. She was busy crossing something out on the essay she was reading and was chewing on her lower lip. "Bout what?" she mumbled.

"Us."

She froze and looked at him. "Us?" she asked, a bit afraid. She had heard that sort of conversation opener in the past and it was never good. "What about us?" she asked warily.

"Well, I've talked to Sirius about that school they're building back on Fiji. It won't be ready until late 1999. I contacted the Pacific Rim Ministry and they told me they would be very interested in my teaching Magical Creatures. They even said they would be willing to allow me to earn my Mastery

via correspondence with Mitsumi or the PMU.”

Tonks smiled at him. “That sounds wonderful, Remus. But how does that affect us?”

He looked down at his lap. “One of the Pac Rim’s requirements was that I assume a citizenship there and give up my British citizenship. That isn’t a problem, but that got me thinking. I don’t want to leave you here. I want you to come with me.”

She blinked at him, unsure if she had heard him properly. “You want me to come with you? Be your live-in girlfriend there?” she asked, then she paused for a moment. “I suppose I could see if they have any openings in their DMLE.”

“No, Tonks, you misunderstand me. I want you there, as my wife. We can become engaged here and move there after the next school year. Don’t you see? I’d be away from the British Ministry and their crazy anti-werewolf laws by then. We could marry on the way there,” he said intently.

Tonks stared at him for a moment longer, then she threw the parchments to the floor and lunged at him. Remus squawked in surprise and they both fell off the bed. The parchments that he had been working on sailed upwards in a blizzard of homework that rained down on the couple as they kissed on the floor.

When they finally broke the kiss, Remus winced and rubbed the back of his head. “Kissing you isn’t supposed to hurt,” he mumbled.

She grinned at him. “So, I’m a little clumsy. It’s a small price to pay for being with the most interesting witch in Britain.”

“You are that,” he replied with a chuckle. “But do you think we can do this in the bed? The stone floor is rather cold.”

“Well, if you insist.”

She stood and offered him a hand up. “I’ll marry you, but...”

She paused and her expression changed. She turned to him with a confused look. “Is it possible to have two last names and no first name?”

He sat on the bed and laughed. With all of the problems involved in moving around the world and marrying a werewolf, if all she had to worry about was a name, then everything was all right in his book.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Transmitted Entry), Oct. 10 th 1997, Scotland...

Dear Hermione,

I’ve been giving Lavender’s problem some thought. In fact, a lot of thought. We’re going to be married, that means that you have will have access to all of my money. I trust you with my life, my heart and my bank account. You never need to explain your reasons to me. But even if that hadn’t been the case, helping Lavender is still the right thing to do. I can’t help but wonder howlong this problem has been going on, and if her behavior wasn’t a result of her treatment at home. Honestly, ask yourself, do you think you would have known howI was treated at home had you not found out in the Prophet?

I understand it enough nowto knowthat a lot of my behavior stems from howI was raised. Lavender could have been under similar circumstances. I read the book your Mum gave you about children of abuse and I see myself in some of the instances they describe. I also see that some of that could be Lavender.

I knowyour Mum meant well, but it scares me to think that I... Well, let’s just say I worry that I’ll not be a good parent and a good husband. I don’t knowwhat to do about it, either.

In Lavender’s case, I agree completely. I want to say howproud I am of you. You didn’t have to forgive her and you certainly didn’t have to get involved.

I have contacted Gringotts and they have done as I have asked. They will contact Headmistress McGonagall with the details and allowher to tell Lavender. I did make one small change, however. I doubled the amount from the two thousand you asked for, to four thousand. That’s enough for her to continue her schooling, or to start a business of her own. Gringotts will manage the loan for me, so it will remain anonymous. The important thing is that when she leaves school, she will not have to return to that place.

I teleported back to your parents to ask their opinion, as well as speaking to Sirius via mirror. Your Mum insisted I stay for dinner, then she started piling so much food on my plate I could barely see around it to speak to your father. I think your parents are getting as anxious as I am to finish this hunt.

I’m north of Perth now, about fifty miles south of Hogsmeade. I’ve found ample evidence of Nagini along the way in old newspaper clippings and from the local snakes. The newspapers have reported several unsolved deaths and disappearances, which are probably the result of Nagini. I should reach Birnam in a fewdays and I’ll check the library there.

She’s meandered a bit, but I could drawa line along her route straight to Hogsmeade. If the library, or the snakes around Birnam check out, I’m probably going to jump straight to Hogsmeade and get a room at the Three Broomsticks.

That’s where things will get tricky, since I’ll have to be Evan nearly all the time.

I’m going to close nowas my soup is ready. I’ll see you this Friday night, so make sure you have your homework done. If you want, invite Remus

and Tonks for the evening. If they want, I'll teleport down to London and pick up dinner for all of us.

I'm still waiting for you to tell me if there is a ring from the vaults that will do.

Love,
Harry

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Transmitted Entry), Oct. 11 th 1997, Hogwarts...

Dear Harry,
I received a letter from Mum today. She explained that she had a talk with Dad and he finally admitted that he approved of our relationship. He just didn't want to make things too easy for us. Right. That's what he says. In fact, Mum tells me that he insisted that next time you stopped by, they feed you right. She said that he told her he's watching out for his daughter's investment.

I mean, really! So my father thinks you're an investment? If that's the case, then I am the richest witch in the world. To be honest, I always thought he complained a bit too much about our relationship. I think he didn't want to acknowledge that I was growing up.

And speaking of that, you will be fine as a parent. Of all the things I worry about, that is perhaps the one thing that has never crossed my mind. We've had few arguments and none of them have even involved shouting, let alone any sort of violence. That book talks about generalities, Harry. It's not possible to speak about every case because every case is different.

I saw Lavender earlier. She was coming from the Headmistress's office looking much relieved. It's a good thing you're doing, Harry Potter, and it makes me only love you more. This won't heal her, but it will take a great deal of stress off of her. Parvati told me that her parents have offered to let Lavender stay with them. They were upset to discover that she had been hiding her situation from them.

I have been sticking to my promise of three hours study a night, plus homework time. And while it's not a lot of free time, I do find I have more of it now. So much so that I'm preparing a surprise for you.

I returned the inventory book to Remus, who said he would get it to you. I marked two rings which I liked, but I feel uncomfortable with this. I mean, these are part of your family's history. Some of the items in that book are so valuable and rare that the British Museum would kill to display them!

Tonks had to thumb through the book when I told her why you had sent it to me. Can you believe Remus finally asked her to marry him? She pulled me into a corner of the Defense classroom and spent twenty minutes after class telling me all about it. I'm very happy for both of them. They deserve some happiness.

It's hard to find things to write about when you keep showing up here. But I'd rather have you here at least once a week, than having to go back to using bookspace all the time.

I'm going to turn in now, and dream of you while I sleep. Please keep safe, my Harry.

All my love,
Hermione.

Hogwarts Grounds, Oct 12 th 1997...

She almost missed the exit!

The route into the castle was convoluted and difficult. There were several points where the pipe had broken in an otherwise sealed chamber and getting out of one end of the pipe and back into the other was very difficult. This time the break came and finding the other pipe turned out to be nearly impossible. She couldn't taste it anymore, since the whole chamber was filled with the scent of growing plants.

While searching for the passage she came upon a small ledge that was slick with run off. She followed the ledge until she reached a hole. In better fed days she would not have attempted it, but she had lost weight. The rats were now few and far between in this underground warren of passages and feeding was becoming a desperate search.

Tom watched passively. He had managed to achieve an equilibrium with the Horcrux, but it was a tenuous truce at best. By carefully conserving his strength, he could tap very lightly into what Nagini saw and still maintain enough separation between himself and the Horcrux. The downside was that this reduced his connection to Nagini to the barest minimum. He could see what she saw, and that was about it. He wasn't sure she could hear him at all anymore.

Entering the passage, Nagini paused. If she had been capable of it, she would have grinned. She wasn't outside, but she was on dirt, inside a house with see-through walls! It was wonderfully warm and the air tasted of green things and of a rabbit, not far away. She would hunt and hide here for a while, until she recovered her strength, then she would move on to the large stone place only a short distance away.

Headmistress's office, Hogwarts, Oct 15 th 1997...

Come in!"

The door opened and Remus entered the office, followed a moment later by Tonks.

Minerva waved to the two and motioned for them to take seats.

The pair sat down and looked expectantly at the Headmistress.

Minerva's lips thinned into a straight line. "I called you both here today because of that little exercise you held."

Tonks leaned forward with interest. "Which one? The fifth year stealth and ward-breaking test or the seventh year Vampire field trip?"

Remus reached out and touched Tonk's hand. She looked at him and he shook his head at her.

"I am referring to your fifth year exercise for the moment, but we'll get to your field trip later."

Minerva leaned back in her chair and looked at the pair for a moment. They were undoubtedly the most popular teachers in the school. Their classes had brought a new level of fervor to the students. She was thrilled to see even first years excitedly working on the little projects this pair kept thinking up.

"During your exercise in stealth and ward breaking, you instructed your fifth year classes to locate a room which was guarded by wards and contained a secret treasure. While I have no problem with the task you assigned, you failed to provide sufficient direction."

Minerva paused and let that sink in for a moment. Remus nodded thoughtfully.

"Several fifth year Ravenclaw boys took your directions as approval to break the wards on the stairs to the girl's dorms."

Remus winced. "Ouch! Even James, Sirius and I never tried that."

"Be that as it may, this is a direct result of your students not receiving enough information. Filius is now forced to spend the next week putting the wards back in place."

"They succeeded?" blurted Tonks in shock.

Minerva's expression turned disapproving and she nodded reluctantly.

"Extra credit, Remus," Tonks muttered.

"Indeed. Filius' wards are more complex than what we had up."

"Professors, please," Minerva said in a pained voice. "That was only part of the problem. Your Vampire field trip now has two girls in Slytherin asking for permission to be turned."

"I told you that was a bad idea, Remus," Tonks said smugly.

Remus blinked at her. "Yeah, but it was your bad idea."

"Oh, yeah, it was."

Remus turned back to Minerva. "I'll speak with the girls. I think I can show them that turning is not all that smart an idea."

"Do that," Minerva said frostily. "And from here on, all future field trips and exercises held outside of the classroom are to be approved by myself."

"Oops," Tonks said.

Minerva swung her gaze towards Tonks and pinned her. "Oops?"

"Erm... Well, I might have suggested that the fourth years practice their kinetic shields by banishing food at each other."

Remus, unable to hold back any longer, began to laugh. Several of the Headmaster portraits snickered and the Sorting Hat chortled merrily.

Dumbledore never had these problems, Minerva thought with a sigh, then she looked sternly at Tonks. None of what the young Auror had suggested was actually a bad learning tool, but the unstructured nature was enough to drive her to drink.

Remus placed a hand on Tonks' hand and leaned forward. "Minerva, Tonks and I will make sure the classes know not to banish food at anyone. We'll inform them at tonight's dinner."

Minerva nodded, relieved with Remus' solution.

"Very well. Unless there is something else, I'll let you get back to your duties," Minerva said.

"Actually, there is one thing. We've noted several times that the ward for Nagini has come close to triggering several times in the past month. I can only surmise that Nagini somehow detected the ward and decided not to cross the line," Remus said.

So the snake isn't in the castle?" Minerva asked in a relieved tone.

"That's what we believe," replied Tonks. "The wards came close to triggering a few times and then settled down again."

Minerva leaned back in her chair and smiled. Her students were safe! "Thank Merlin!" she whispered.

Remus stood and Tonks joined him. With a wave, they left her office. It was only after they had left that she started to laugh. She had actually hoped to see the food fight by the fourth years, but she could never admit that to anyone.

12 Grimmauld Place, London, Oct 18 th 1997...

"Sirius Orion Black, just what do you think you're doing?" Cindy demanded crossly. She had just finished arranging the furniture in the sitting room to her satisfaction and here he was, moving things so he could place a large crate on the floor!

Sirius looked up. He was handing Dobby two large books and whispering to him. The little elf was wearing a Santa Claus costume today and his grin gave Cindy a shudder. It was as if she were seeing a rabid Christmas elf on steroids.

"Ummm, payback?"

Sirius nodded to Dobby who winked at him, then vanished with a pop.

"Payback for what?" Cindy asked. She had a really bad feeling about this.

"Do you remember what Harry and Hermione did to us on our honeymoon?"

She glared at him and placed her hands on her hips. "If I recall, the prank was on you, but go on."

"Well, the best revenge is a well planned revenge. Harry's hired a few elves to work on renovating Potter Manor. Since it's open, I asked Dobby to pick up a few things that belonged to me, and a very special book that belonged to Lily."

He explained in detail for a few minutes, then he explained how he had visited Dan and Emma for the second half of his revenge, and that Dobby was now delivering it.

Cindy sighed in resignation and shook her head. "You're evil, Sirius Black. Did you know that?"

Sirius nodded happily and Cindy sighed again. "So what else did you get from Dobby?"

Sirius grinned and gestured to the large crate. "Some of this is just junk; old school books and robes and stuff. But there's some real treasures in here."

He reached in and pulled out a book with a lurid purple cover. "The Marauder's Handbook," he said reverently. He ran a hand over the cover. "In here is a list of every prank and how we did it."

He frowned and looked in the crate again. "Somewhere is another book explaining how Moony and James made the map."

Cindy pulled out a photo of Sirius, James and Remus. James and Sirius wore their Quidditch uniforms and what struck her the most was the happy expression on Sirius' face. She had seen him happy and he was happy most of the time these days. But it was obvious from the picture that prison had stamped its impression on her husband.

Sirius pulled a small box out of the crate and looked at it with confusion. "Hello, what's this?" he asked.

He opened the box and a purple powder flew into his face. He coughed and Cindy backed away in alarm. The powder expanded into a cloud and it swirled around him for a moment before fading away.

Cindy blinked at Sirius in shock. He now had bigger breasts than she did.

"Oh, no," Sirius moaned. "Gender Bender Powder." He clutched his breasts in shocked awe.

Struggling to maintain a straight face, Cindy asked, "How long does it last?"

Sirius shrugged, which caused his breasts to jiggle enticingly. He stared down at them hungrily for a moment, before tearing his eyes away and looking at Cindy. "Only a few minutes, back in 1978, but this stuff gets more potent with age."

She sat down and started to giggle. Sirius started pulling things out of the crate, looking for the counter powder to undo the curse. She chuckled and watched him for a moment, then she spotted something he had tossed behind him. She bent down and picked it up, then grinned maliciously.

I think I need to talk to Dobby, she thought. Two can send embarrassing things to Hermione.

"Don't forget to clean up when you're done making a mess, Sirius. I'll go see about dinner," she said, then she walked to the door, hiding her prize. "Oh, and do find a way of fixing that. I really prefer my men to have smaller breasts than I do."

Sirius tried to glare at her, but she had already left the room.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Oct. 18 th 1997, Hogwarts...

Someone is going to have to talk to Sirius Black. I mean, really. He has such a twisted sense of humor. I have half a mind to send him an owl, thanking him and detailing exactly what his little gift is making me want to do.

I don't think he'd appreciate hearing that right now, but it would be his own fault. I suppose I should back up and explain. This morning, I found a book on top of my dresser. I knew I hadn't put it there and Harry hasn't been here in a few days, so I know it didn't come from him.

No, Sirius sent it and I know it was Sirius because a moment after I found the book, Dobby popped into my room to deposit another “gift”, this time from Cindy.

Dobby admitted that Sirius had sent the book and said it was revenge for the honeymoon prank. I cast several detection charms on it only to discover no hidden traps, jinxes, hexes or curses. The only spell I found was a preservation spell to keep the book safe and dry.

Now you know me. It's a book! Of course I'm going to open it! To my surprise it was a book of Harry's baby photos. I can only surmise that Sirius hoped to embarrass Harry by sending me these photos. I think Harry will be happy to have these. There are a lot of pictures of his Mum and Dad in these. And Merlin he was the most adorable baby!

And that is the temptation. I never thought I was much of the maternal type, but now I find myself looking forward to being able to give Harry a son or daughter. Sirius might have wanted to embarrass Harry, but all he ended up with is igniting my desire to give Harry a child of his own someday. We'll have a family. I'm not ready to have a baby today, and I think the idea would terrify Harry. We both still have a little more growing up to do. But if any child we have is half as cute as Harry was, then Merlin help me because the temptation is strong.

The present from Cindy is going to take some thought. I think I know what to do with it, and Tonks is going to love this. People think I can't prank? Hah! I'll show both Sirius and Remus.

The weather is turning cold. It's early and this morning we had a very early frost. Madam Hooch was complaining about it because it means she has to move her flying lessons into the Great Hall. I'll have to remind Harry to make sure he dresses warmly.

He has been trekking through the Forbidden Forest looking for signs of Nagini. I don't think he'll spend the entire winter in the forest. In his last note, he mentioned he was thinking about going back to Oxford and teleporting here during the day to continue his search. He mentioned that the last snake he found was nearly hibernating. I think the loss of the help from the snakes is depressing him a little.

We are almost certain that Nagini made it to Hogsmeade, but she never came to the school. At least that's what Remus and Tonks think.

On other news, I had an interesting conversation with Lavender yesterday that left me feeling like we've finally put all that unpleasant business behind us.

I was sitting in the Great Hall reviewing my Transfiguration essay when she sat down next to me.

“It's too dry,” she said.

I looked up from my essay. “I'm sorry?”

“Your hair, it's too dry and your shampoo isn't helping any. That's why it's always all over the place. You need a little moisturizer added to your shampoo and it should settle down nicely. Because it's so dry, it cracks and gets all sparky when the air is dry.”

I peered at the girl suspiciously. This sounded more like the old Lavender. She smiled tentatively at me, then she pulled a parchment out of her book bag and passed it over to me.

“What's this?” I asked.

“It's a recipe for a proper shampoo that will help tame your hair. I know it bothers you sometimes and you want to look good for Evan, don't you? This will do it.”

I glanced down at the parchment, then blinked in surprise and read it more closely. It was a recipe for a hair cleanser all right, but it seemed to be very advanced potion making. I glanced back up at her. “Where did you find this?”

She blushed and looked down. “It's what I do,” she whispered. “I'm not a good witch like you, my power is barely average. I'm not good with the fancy potions either, but I know how to make potions like skin cleansers, shampoos, makeup bases, and some other forms of makeup.”

I looked down at her recipe and then looked back up at her. “I think you're selling yourself short, Lavender. This is advanced potions. It might not be a cardiac regeneration potion, or spirit summoning unguent, but it's very advanced. I didn't know you were capable of this kind of work.”

Lavender blushed and looked down. “I just wanted to say thank you. Despite how I treated you, you still forgave me. I know you won't admit it, but I know you had something to do with that loan that came from that foundation.”

I looked down, not wanting my expression to give me away. Sirius and Harry had created a foundation to assist students that had been abused in one way or another. Lavender was the first to benefit from it and she probably wouldn't be the last.

Lavender nodded to herself as if my expression had given it away. To be honest, I was anxious to try her potion out.

Lavender stood with a soft smile on her face. "Thank you," she whispered.

She turned and started to walk away, but I called out to her. "Lavender?"

She stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"Why don't you join our study group on Sundays? It's only a few hours and I think you'll do well with it."

She smiled and nodded, then turned to join Parvati, who had been watching our conversation with intense interest.

I've used her formula and it does work. After one application I could see the difference immediately. I can't wait to see Harry's reaction to it. He thinks I don't know, but I've often woken at night to find him gently caressing my hair. I suppose I shouldn't complain though, I play with his hair almost as much.

I admit I'm surprised. Lavender never struck me as being all that intelligent, but I spoke with Parvati and discovered that, between the two of them, they have invented a whole range of beauty products based on potions and spells of their own invention. They even have a perfume that's based on a very mild lust potion that could be used for those times when you want to get your man in the mood. Parvati showed me the formula and I was very impressed. It could only fuel an existing desire, something which most lust potions lack.

Not that Harry needs it to get into the mood. I'm not complaining, but his desire has done wonders for my ego.

Parvati tells me that thanks to Harry's loan, they are thinking of opening a small shop in Hogsmeade to sell their products to the students. I think it's a wonderful idea for them. I know it's strange for me to admit that. I've never been one to use cosmetics, but there are times when I do want to look my best for Harry.

Harry. That man is the only person capable of tearing me away from my books. I can't believe how he can arrive here and how excited I become. The last time he visited me I realized just how comfortable I had become around him. I was undressing for bed and it took me a full minute to realize that I had stripped down naked and slipped into my nightgown without even a single blush. There is no modesty between us anymore. How can there be when I've heard him call my name in the throes of passion or me the same?

I'm not saying that's all we do. In fact, the last time he showed up, he had teleported down to London, where he bought dinner. I was shocked to find him bearing a large shopping bag of Chinese food. It's funny, he loves the Japanese culture, but he abhors their food. Not that I'm complaining. General Tsao's Chicken is not something you normally get at Hogwarts. And I still have a large plate of egg rolls under a preservation charm. He even brought a large bag of fortune cookies and told me to leave them out for the first years.

The firsties loved the cookies, but I heard a large batch of them found their way up to the Divination classroom, where Professor Trelawney took exception to them. Several students claimed the cookies were more accurate than she was. I suspect Ron and Seamus had a hand in that little affair, but I can't prove it.

Harry usually shows up on Fridays around seven P.M. and stays until around seven the following morning. Most of the time he waits until we're going to bed before changing back into Harry. I wish we knew why the Headmistress insisted that he can only stay for nine hours as Evan.

We talk, and enjoy a dinner. Sometimes we make love right away. And he always tries to do something romantic, like bringing a rose, or some candy. It's rather sweet, really. I never suspected he could be... well, so nice like this. If someone had told me four years ago that my best friend would turn out to be a romantic at heart, I wouldn't have believed them. I would have believed that we became lovers, but never a romantic. I think it's a measure of the good that Sirius and Remus have done in raising him.

It's time to close this for now. There's an early morning staff meeting that the Heads are supposed to attend. I need to be awake for that. Four more days until Harry visits again. I don't know if I can make it without being tempted to call him and ask him to come here. With him so close, the temptation is great.

Defense Against the Dark Arts Office, Oct 19 th 1997, Hogwarts...

Hermione opened the door and grinned, seeing Tonks all alone. Tonks sat at her desk, her head slowly nodding down towards the desktop. She opened the door further and coughed lightly, causing Tonks to start awake.

Tonks looked up sheepishly at the Head Girl. She hadn't meant to doze, but she'd had a physical therapy session with Madam Pomfrey that morning and they always wore her out.

Her injuries were mostly healed now, but she was still working on rebuilding her strength and endurance.

Tonks shook her head and waved Hermione in.

Hermione grinned, noting the small, but very beautiful engagement ring that adorned the young Auror's hand. Tonks had shown the ring to a few people discreetly. It was still against the law to marry a werewolf.

"Come in, Hermione. Remus is in class. Can I help you with something?"

Hermione smiled and pulled up a chair across from Tonks' desk.

“Sirius sent me a present the other day; something which he felt would embarrass Harry. It really didn't cause any embarrassment, but then Cindy sent along something that I know Remus and Sirius would pay money to make sure is never displayed anywhere.”

That immediately sparked Tonks' interest. “Oh?”

Hermione looked around for a moment, then she saw the perfect spot. “You know, this office is really really drab. Don't you think a little decorations might be in order? Maybe a photo or two?”

Hermione held up a large, rolled up poster. It had taken her several hours to locate the necessary spells that would allow her to expand a photograph without distorting the image and still keep the animation.

“A poster? From Cindy? This should be interesting. Go on then. Hang it up, girl,” Tonks replied with a wave toward the wall. She knew Cindy had a wicked sense of humor and couldn't help but grin in anticipation.

Hermione returned the grin and floated the poster over to a wall where it unrolled and stuck.

Tonks stared at the poster for a moment and started to laugh, then she started to roar and slid from her seat with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Remus, hearing the noise, stepped into the office from the classroom door and froze when he spotted the poster.

It was a moving image of Sirius, James and Remus. All three were clustered around an infant Harry and were obviously arguing over who should change the diaper. Sirius finally gave in to James' urgings and he had the nappy off when he noticed someone off camera. Without thinking, he dropped his drawers and lifted the bare bummed infant over his head. James and Remus, sensing an opportunity to moon someone, joined him. There they were, the infamous Marauders, plus the next generation, mooning the camera.

Harry at that point decided it was time to provide sprinkler service and Sirius, in a panic, pointed him at Remus, who shouted something and waved his hands futilely. Laughing, Sirius turned the marauding sprinkler on James. Then the image recycled, having reached the limit of its recording.

“Oh, Merlin,” Remus moaned.

“Nice, tight bum, Remus. That hasn't changed much,” Tonks commented gleefully.

“Gives new meaning to the term 'Moony’,” added Hermione, then she slipped from the room, laughing to herself. Now she had to send another poster sized copy to Cindy, and maybe her parents. *I wonder if the Headmistress would like to see it*, she wondered.

“What's it going to take to remove that?” Remus asked painfully. He was averting his eyes and trying to ignore the photo.

“Why don't we talk about it,” Tonks purred. “Tonight, after dinner, in our rooms. In the meantime, I'll leave it where it is.”

Hogwarts Castle, Oct 25 th 1997...

Nagini curled up, sated and relaxed. She had found an large junction of pipes that emptied out into a room. From the look of it, it hadn't been visited in centuries. She didn't know it, but she was well below the castle and close to her goal.

The chamber wasn't far from the Chamber of Secrets, and it was covered by the wards erected by Salazar Slytherin to keep that chamber secret. That was a good thing for her. She had unwisely decided that a juvenile house elf would make a tasty snack before she entered into hibernation for the winter.

The voice had tried to warn her against eating the elf, but she ignored it. The humans of the castle were all armed and too big for her to consume, but an immature house elf was just perfect.

Warm air from the huge eternal furnace that piped heated air to the classrooms ran through this chamber, making it an ideal spot for her to digest her meal. She was full, and sleepy and had unknowingly picked an area of the castle to winter that House Elves couldn't visit.

She curled up to begin her long sleep, never knowing that her final destination was only twenty meters away, down a large pipe.

Headmistress' office, Oct 26 th 1997...

McGonagall reread the report, then laid it down on her desk in exasperation. *How anyone could read this stuff and not go insane is beyond me*, she grumbled to herself. *Maybe this is what drove Albus crazy, these Ministry reports and recommendations on teaching techniques!*

One of the things she had learned about this job was that if she didn't respond to these reports with some form of written rebuttal, the Ministry would assume she had adopted the technique and come looking a few months later for a progress report. Though it consumed a lot of her time, she now routinely replied to each one, explaining why it was a bad idea, like the suggestion she had received to include a course of dragon handling at a general school with no facilities for keeping dragons.

This latest report was a perfect case in point. It suggested that Spirit Summoning and Necromancy be integrated into the Divination curriculum. The author of the document had apparently forgotten that summoning of spirits and the Necromantic arts had been outlawed in 1847 after the evil witch Wanda attacked Gringotts with a dozen Inferi.

McGonagall was about to reach for her quill and parchment when she heard a small pop. She looked up to see Pappy, the oldest and most respected elf in the castle, standing in front of her.

"Pappy? Is something wrong?" she asked. Normally, elves never show up unless called.

"Professor Mum, one of our younglings is missing," said the ancient elf.

McGonagall frowned. She knew little about the elves in Hogwarts. They lived in a series of rooms under the Potions floor, and that was about it.

"Have you searched the castle?"

"Yes, Professor Mum," replied the elf.

Minerva sighed and suddenly looked older than her seventy-two years. "Which babe was it?"

Pappy's eyes shone with sadness. "Ticky's little one, Micky."

Minerva nodded and opened herself up to the Hogwarts wards. She conversed with the school for a minute while the elf watched respectfully. The school had a limited intelligence that was growing slowly over time. It was speculated that in another five hundred years, the school would be fully awake all the time and actively helping in school functions.

She made an adjustment to the wards so that she would be alerted every time something unusual happened.

"Pappy, please go tell Professor Lupin and his assistant that I require them right away, then return here with them," Minerva said after breaking her connection to the school.

The elf nodded and popped away.

Minerva stood and walked over to a bookshelf and pulled down an old and ragged-looking volume. It was this volume that she was inspecting when Tonks and Remus filed into the room a short while later.

"You sent for us, Minerva?" asked Remus. His wolf senses were screaming a warning at him. Minerva's posture and obvious tension said danger. Something had frightened her and he didn't know what it could be.

She looked up at the pair. "I think we may have made a terrible mistake, Remus. The snake is in the castle and one of the elf children is missing."

"Oh, no," gasped Tonks.

Tonks, like all of Harry's family, had come to value the elves, thanks to their exposure to Dobby. In their minds, elves were treated as family, or at worst, respected hired help, but still people with feelings and worthy of respect and kindness.

Pappy watched carefully, noting the reactions of the humans. Dobby had explained to the Hogwarts elves about Harry Potter Sir's family and how they treated elves, but he hadn't believed it. Now he was seeing it first hand.

"Underground," murmured Remus.

Minerva turned in her chair to look at him. "I'm sorry?"

"Underground. It's the only way Nagini could have done it. The ward is a dome and it only extends a few feet underground before fading to nothingness."

Minerva nodded and pushed the book on her desk over to Remus.

"This is the Book of Hogwarts. It contains a record of all the structural changes that have been made to the castle since it was built in 968," Minerva said. "As you can see, there must be ten miles of pipes under the castle!"

Remus picked up the book carefully and started reading.

"What can we do?" exclaimed Tonks.

"I'm not sure," replied Minerva unhappily. She was wondering if she should alert the Board of Governors and the Ministry.

Remus looked up from the book. "First we protect our students and the elves. Pappy, how many elf children are in the castle?"

Pappy counted on his fingers for a moment. "Sixteen, Professor sir."

Remus leaned back in his chair. "All right then. Minerva, let them move all of the children into an unused classroom on the sixth floor. If there are enough classrooms, all of the elves can move out of the lower levels."

Pappy's eyes widened. Living in classrooms? Those rooms were enormous! It seemed almost sinful!

Minerva turned to the elf. "Move the children right away, Pappy. There are twelve unused classrooms on the sixth floor. Would that be enough for all of the elves?"

Pappy bursted in surprise at the Headmistress. Even Dumbledore hadn't shown this level of concern for the elves, and he had been a kindly Master compared to Master Dippet.

"Then move everyone, today if possible," Minerva said gently, then she turned back to Remus. "What else?"

"Tonks and I will examine the Elf quarters tonight after dinner. But for now, the biggest threat will be to our first and second years, who won't know the spells to defend themselves. And the greatest danger is probably on the lowest levels. I'd suggest either assigning an elf or an older student to escort the first and second years to and from potions, Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures classes. Potions is on the lowest student-accessible level and both Herbology and Magical Creatures are outside."

Minerva nodded thoughtfully at that. "But what about the Slytherins? Their house is on the same level."

"We'll have to ward it somehow, or assign a guard during the nights," Tonks replied.

"I better contact Harry," Remus murmured.

Minerva scowled and shook her head. "No, you can't!"

Remus blinked. "What? Why not?"

"The castle will disable him," Tonks murmured. "I had forgotten about that!"

Remus gave her a baffled look.

"It's simple, Remus. Harry is still school age, and he's a metamorphagus. That means the school will force him back into his base form if he maintains another form for too long. It's a very old anti-cheating enchantment that was placed on the school in the fourteenth century when Metamorphs were more common. I had forgotten about it completely."

Remus shook his head. "How did you discover this?"

Tonks looked down at her feet and mumbled something. Minerva jumped in to answer for her.

"There was an incident in her fourth year. I suggested a change of form to prevent a repeat of the incident, only we discovered that after ten hours, her form started changing and her ability to control it was severely suppressed for a full day. Harry still has a base form to change into, it will turn him back into Harry Potter."

Remus grimaced. He could imagine what kind of incident Minerva was talking about. Tonks had explained how the boys had treated her during her Hogwarts years. Unlike Harry, Tonks had started morphing so early and had lost touch with her base form. For her, the ward set her constantly shifting between forms.

"And it's age-related?"

"Yes. Once she graduated and was outside of the age bracket, the enchantment didn't affect her anymore. We retested it when she was twenty so we could understand it and found she could remain in any form she wanted at that age."

"So he can't come to the castle unless we have the snake cornered then?" asked Remus.

Minerva nodded unhappily. "I know Miss Granger has invited him to escort her to the Yule Ball, and he's visited her at least once a week, but he's not maintaining the Evan form long enough to trigger the ward. There's not enough time for the enchantment to kick in."

"Well, what about during the Yule holiday? We'll have more than two weeks in which to search the castle and find the beast," Tonks said.

"Not this year," Minerva said with a shake of her head. "The Board of Governors is hosting a International Confederation of Wizards Conference on Magical Education here at Hogwarts. All of the students were told with their regular letters that the school would be hosting many delegates this holiday and they needed to go home, or make other holiday plans."

"That leaves the summer," Remus replied heavily.

"Can the elves search for this snake, Mum?" asked Pappy hesitantly.

Remus glanced up at Minerva. "It's worth a try. But it's very dangerous. I'd hate to see anyone else get hurt by it."

"Harry's going to blow a gasket once he discovers the snake is in the castle and he can't hunt it down," Tonks said softly.

"Well, to be honest, we don't know for certain if the snake is here, but I think you're right," Remus added. "I'll need to talk to Harry."

"Use your mirror," Tonks suggested.

Remus glanced at Tonks, then Minerva, who watched him with interest.

"Mirror?"

"It's something James, Sirius and I came up with back in our third year," he admitted sheepishly, then he pulled a small mirror out of his pocket.

Minerva arched an eyebrow and watched with fascination as Remus contacted Harry.

"Harry," he called, pressing the corner of the mirror to activate it.

A minute passed with nothing happening, then the surface of the mirror rippled like water and the image changed.

"Remus?" replied a tinny voice. "What's going on?"

Remus launched into a long explanation of what they thought and what had happened, then he waited.

"So you think she's in the castle then? I don't know, Remus, it's mighty slim. An Acromantula could have taken the elf," Harry replied. "Merlin knows there are enough of them in the forest."

McGonagall looked shocked. "You know, he could be right. Pappy, was the little elf let outside?"

Pappy shrugged. "Once they are old enough, they usually are unattended. They know not to be seen by the students, but that is their only restriction."

"Great!" groaned Tonks, "We're back to where we started. Except now it might be a Saint Bernard sized spider in the castle."

"Remus?"

Remus turned back to the mirror. "Yes, Harry?"

"I think your ideas were valid. Move the elf children and escort the first and second years. But unless Nagini is spotted in the castle, I don't think you can assume it's her. The Acromantulas are all riled up over something. I can't get anywhere near the main lair to talk to Aragog. I don't think even Hagrid could, at this point.

"And the Centaurs seem mighty upset about something, too. I haven't spoken to any, but I have seen them running around in very large armed groups."

"Where are you, Mr. Potter?" Minerva said.

"Headmistress? Merlin, Remus, warn me in the future when you have others listening in. These mirrors really muck up a voice," Harry said. "I'm in the Forbidden Forest, Ma'am, about three miles from the south eastern face of the castle. Up until that frost a few days ago I had been interrogating all the snakes I could find. But they have all entered their hibernation cycle." It was impossible to miss the disappointment in his voice.

"Then what are you still doing out there?" asked Minerva incredulously.

"Exploring, Ma'am. The snakes say she's in the area. If Nagini entered the castle, she had to do it via a tunnel or cave," he replied, then he paused and looked thoughtful. "Remus?"

"Here, Harry."

"Do you think I should sneak in for a look at the Chamber?"

"About that, Harry. It might not be a good idea, at least not with people in the castle. There's an enchantment that will affect your metamorph ability if you stay here too long," Tonk said.

Harry's image in the mirror seemed surprised. "How long is too long?" he asked tensely.

"You haven't stayed long enough in another form for the ward to trigger, Mr. Potter," replied McGonagall.

Harry blushed in reply. He hadn't been aware that McGonagall knew of his visits.

"Oh, ho! Someone's been sneaking in to see the Head Girl?" chortled Tonks, deliberately saying it loud enough for Harry to hear.

"Can we get back on topic?" Harry replied plaintively. "Should I come in and check out the Chamber of Secrets?"

Tonks and Remus looked at Minerva. It was her school and her call.

She sat for a moment, thinking quickly. "No, not yet, Mr. Potter. Considering the fact that no one, not even the elves, know for certain if the snake is in the school, I think it would be premature for you to start rooting around in the dungeons."

Harry's image nodded thoughtfully. "All right, but as soon as it's spotted, let me know and we can finish this thing for good. Now, about this metamorph enchantment. Since it's no secret I've been in the castle since the term started, I'd say it's safe to assume I'll have no problem at the Yule Ball?"

Minerva smiled softly. "You'll have no problem, Mr. Potter. We'll be pleased to see you at such a happy occasion."

Harry nodded again, then he turned away from the mirror for a moment.

"Remus, I better go. There are some centaurs sniffing around in the clearing where I pitched my tent," he called.

"Right Harry, be careful," Remus replied, then he pressed the corner to close the connection.

“We'll go with what we discussed,” Minerva said. “I'll announce the changes at dinner. Pappy, get the children moved today, please.”

The little elf had stood quietly watching the conversation. Startled, he nodded quickly and popped away.

Remus and Tonks left to return to their classes, leaving Minerva to sit and ponder what had transpired. Harry was close by and if they could find that snake, they'd be rid of the threat of Voldemort for good!

With that in mind, she decided it was time to start exploring the castle in her cat form. It had been many years since she had tried that.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Oct. 29 th 1997, Forbidden Forest...

Sweet Merlin, what am I going to do with that girl?!

She sent me a note. No, not a note, a sizzling, steamy letter, via our journals. She sent me a detailed, hold onto your pants, missive, explaining exactly what she wanted to do to me the next time I see her. Someone throw a bucket of ice water on me! I swear that girl is full of surprises. I had thought I knew my little bookworm very well, but since we started making love, I'm seeing a side of her that I never knew about.

Oh, she's still the same sweet girl I feel in love with, but she has a naughty side that she's showing me with an almost gleeful delight. And I wouldn't change her for all the money in the world.

I think that maybe it's because she knows I won't laugh at her. I've thought about this a bit in the last two months and I think that I've learned what real love is. It's all about trust and caring. She's showing me aspects of herself that she's hidden from everyone, even her parents. And she trusts me enough to believe I won't make fun of those aspects. It works both ways, she gave me her love and I gave her mine. We both have the ability to hurt each other incredibly, but we trust that the other person won't, because they care about how we feel.

Confusing, eh? This is what happens when it's after midnight, and thanks to my wonderful girlfriend, I'm horny enough to consider teleporting into the castle and surprising her.

All right, lets change the subject.

Nagini.

Well, there's a cold rag for you. Nagini may be in the castle, but I'm not convinced. The simple fact is, the large sentient creatures in the forest are agitated about something. I just wish the Centaurs were friendly enough to talk with me. Forget about the Acromantulas. I can't get anywhere near Aragog. I've tried twice now and have had to teleport away each time to keep from getting swarmed by the spiders.

Someday I am going to sit Hagrid down and tell him a thing or two about his misunderstood beasties, then I'm going to give him a puppy.

I saw so many spiders today, they were like an anthill that had been kicked! Ron would be gibbering in terror.

The search has slowed down tremendously. For the past week it's been dropping below freezing every night and barely rising above fifty during the day. The snakes have gone into hibernation and I've lost my best source of information. Damn, why couldn't Gryffindor and the others build the freaking castle someplace warmer, like southern Spain?

If Nagini is in the castle, then that means two things. It means she somehow detected the wards *and* found an underground passage into the castle. It is possible to see the wards. Some people can see magic using Mage Sight and there's a spell that does the same thing. That spell gives me a whale of a headache, but I've used it a few times.

More to the point, even if she's in the castle, her natural imperatives must be kicking in. Even if she finds a warm place to hide, she's going to hibernate until late April. Searching for her while she's sleeping will be like looking for a needle in the haystack. She's probably in some corner somewhere and the odds of finding her will be astronomical.

The only thing left for me to do is to look around and see if I can possibly stumble onto some sort of subterranean passageway into the castle. I'll give that another two weeks at the most, then I'll return to London. I don't see any reason for me to stick around and spend the winter in the middle of a forest in Northern Scotland, when I can be warm in London.

Honestly, I think she's gone to ground, either outside or inside, and I'm not going to find her until the spring thaw. Damn, damn, damn! I had hoped to finish this up before Christmas. Now that's seeming less and less likely.

Tomorrow is Halloween and I think it's affecting my mood, at least in part. I am going to see Hermione tomorrow; she's insisting on it. I don't mind, but I swear on my magic, if she sends me another letter like that last one, I am going to call her on our mirrors and let her listen to me relieve the problem she caused BEFORE SHE GOES TO CLASS!

Let her see how she likes it.

I'm off to bed. It's late and I don't need to start thinking about her letter again.

Minister's Office, Ministry of Magic, London, Nov 5 th 1997...

“Minister, Ambassador Black is here, as you requested.”

"Thank you, Shirley. Please send him in, then see we're not disturbed."

Her secretary nodded and opened the door for Sirius, then waited until he was inside before the door glowed with a collopatus spell, locking and sealing the door.

"Sirius, please have a seat."

"Amelia," he replied with a nod, then sat in the plush chair in front of her desk.

Amelia stood and walked over to a tea setting and poured two cups. She handed one to Sirius, then took her own cup over to her desk. Sitting down, she pulled out Merlin's Orb and activated it, letting the privacy spell bathe the room.

"I've been thinking about our last discussion. First, I want to let you know that I've taken steps so that no one in my administration is aware of Mr. Potter assuming control over his family properties."

Sirius nodded in reply. He had expected her to make this move.

Amelia leaned back on her chair, idly stirring her tea for a moment. "I am wondering if there is more we can do to assure the Internationals that we aren't returning to the 'Good Old Days'."

Now we get to the heart of the matter, Sirius thought. I wonder what she has in mind?

"I can't say for certain, Amelia, but they are hoping to see Britain move to a more moderate stance in regard to a number of issues. They recognize that where we go, Europe follows, and they are hoping that some moderation on our part will be picked up by the continent."

Amelia nodded reflectively. She had been pushing for more moderate policies since she took office, but hadn't managed to make much headway.

"It's a tough task, Sirius. You know the conservatives are firmly entrenched in their positions and their power," she replied.

"I know, but you have to start chipping away at their power somewhere. The Americans and the Japanese are pulling away from us economically because of the lack of limits on their people. We hide from the Muggles, while America is entering an era of open cooperation between their Department of Magic and the Muggle government. Magic is still secret, but not like it is here."

"What do you suggest then? It's not like I can repeal the Goblin Suppression Act of 1807," she replied plaintively.

Sirius shook his head. "No, you can't. Not yet. But you can work on things you do have control over. You don't need to go to the Wizengamot to moderate Ministry practices. You don't need to ask for permission to make it Ministry policy to hire based on ability, rather than blood lines."

Amelia sat quietly for a long moment, considering his words. "We could do that. But even without having to go to the Wizengamot, there will be a lot of resistance."

He leaned back on his chair and sighed. "Look, Amelia, the Internationals want change. Right now, we're saying the words, but failing to act on them. When was the last time someone was prosecuted under my Fair Treatment Act? Never, that's when. You have to start somewhere, and no matter where you start, someone is going to object to it."

Amelia nodded. "You're right. My problem is that I'm stuck catering to so many factions just to hold the government together."

"Then show them how it hurts. Do something that lets them earn more money, but only as long as they approve of the changes. For example, remove the ban on Werewolves and Vampires being served in public. The tavern owners will make more money, the government will pull in more revenue from taxes, everyone will profit. And the people against it will be looked on as being overly bigoted."

"That might work," she muttered. She pulled a parchment toward her and scribbled down a few ideas, then looked up at him. "You know, Sirius, one of the things I've always liked about you is that you never seem to want anything from me. You've supported my administration since I took office."

He shrugged. "You and I were on opposite sides of the fence for a long time, but you recognized the mistakes made by previous administrations. Besides that, I've got most everything I need," he replied, smiling.

"Have you heard from your cousin lately?" she asked hesitantly.

Sirius frowned. "There isn't much I can say. He's still out there, still looking. It's looking more and more like what he's after is at Hogwarts."

Amelia sat up straight. "Hogwarts?" she gasped. "Should we close the school?"

He held up a hand. "Relax. Nature is working for us at the moment. Unfortunately, it's not going to go exactly as he had hoped it would. The onset of winter is making conditions difficult."

"The students are safe?"

"We think so."

Amelia nodded. "Very well. You're off to that economic trade conference in Madrid next week?"

Sirius nodded. He and Cindy were looking forward to it. The weather in London had been increasingly dreary.

“You know our position?”

“Yes, but I think you should ease off on the Veela import restriction.”

She reached for a folder and opened it, pulling out a parchment containing the position breakdown. “Oh? Why?”

“Malta is part of the International coalition and their Veela colony has developed some new medicinal potions that could be useful. To restrict something just because it was developed by a non-human seems silly to me,” Sirius replied.

Amelia made a notation on her sheet. “All right, what else?”

Sirius leaned forward to detail the changes he had in mind. It wasn't much, a nudge here, a nudge there. It was something that Harry and Hermione both had problems with. They wanted sweeping changes now, while he knew changes could only come slowly. He was grateful that Amelia had given him a position where he could influence policy, without being tied directly to the Ministry, or his Wizengamot seat.

The Great Hall, Hogwarts, Nov 13 th 1997...

Hermione looked up in surprise to see Ginny and Neville walking into the Great Hall, accompanied by her parents and an old lady wearing a Vulture hat. Ginny's expression seemed torn between surprise and happiness.

Molly smiled, seeing Hermione and she walked over to her.

Hermione stood and hugged the older witch. “It's good to see you, Mrs. Weasley. I hope nothing is wrong for you to come to the school.”

As far as Hermione knew, neither Ron nor Ginny were in trouble.

“Oh, no, dear. Just a bit of family business we had to attend to,” replied Molly smugly.

Ginny sat and Neville took a seat next to her. He looked extremely satisfied with himself.

“Molly, sit. Minerva said we can join them for lunch,” Arthur said with a grin.

Hermione returned to her seat and looked at her friends. “What's going on?”

Neville exchanged a glance with Ginny, who nodded to him. He turned to Hermione. “My Gran is a little old fashioned, but she knew I liked Ginny. We've been dating steadily for nearly two years now. So she approached Mr. and Mrs. Weasley about an arrangement.”

Ginny blushed prettily, but Hermione got the impression she wasn't that happy. Arrangements needed the consent of both parties and Ginny must have approved of the match. *She always gave me the impression that she was going with Neville because he was the best pick left after Harry and Malfoy left*, she thought. *I shouldn't be so mean spirited, but I think I can't wait to see her reaction when she discovers that Evan is Harry.*

“What about you, Miss Granger. Surely by now someone has shown an interest?” asked Mrs. Longbottom.

“Oh, she's got a boyfriend,” Molly said with a smug tone. “A foreigner.”

Mrs. Longbottom sniffed loudly. “A foreigner? Really? I do hope he's trainable. Some of these foreigners have no manners whatsoever.”

Hermione gritted her teeth and was about to say something when another voice broke into the conversation.

“I've met the lad and, quite honestly, I was very impressed. He's finished his schooling a year early and is currently working for the DMLE at the Japanese Embassy. He's a cousin to Sirius Black,” Minerva McGonagall said in a frosty tone.

Mrs. Longbottom looked up with interest. “Sirius Black, you say? Well, then, he's not really a foreigner, is he? Deep down, he's still British.”

Molly's expression changed when she realized that Minerva wasn't going to let her gloat. She had once considered Hermione as a possible match for Ronald, but the girl was simply too tied to her Muggle roots and their dismal moral values.

“Yes, from one of Phineas' younger sons, I believe,” added Minerva.

“Goodness, he must be a bright one to be working at the Embassy. Only the best get diplomatic postings,” Mrs. Longbottom added. She turned to Hermione. “Well done, my dear, well done indeed.”

Hermione blushed and Ginny shot her a look that clearly said “Ha! Now it's your turn!”

Minerva smiled at them, then continued on her way up to the head table. She was glad she had been able to divert Molly from her path. She liked the woman, but she had a petty streak in her that shone through too often for her tastes.

Hogwarts Entrance Hall, Dec 19 th 1997...

Harry stepped into the entrance hall for the first time in over three years. The last time he had been here, he'd left Hogwarts as a student.

He shrugged off his cloak and handed it to a waiting elf. Then he quickly brushed off some of the snow clinging to his robes. He was very glad he had given up his hunt in late November. He had woken up to an early winter storm that had nearly buried his tent.

He'd crawled out into the thigh-deep snow and quickly folded it up. Then he'd teleported straight back to Oxford, since Sirius was in Madrid with Cindy.

Since then, he had spent his time studying more spells and visiting back and forth between Grimmauld Place and the Granger house.

"Name?" asked another elf.

"Evan Black, here to escort Miss Hermione Granger to the Ball," he replied.

"One moment, sir," replied the elf, then bowed and vanished with a pop.

A side door opened and Hermione stepped out. He stared. There was no polite way of saying it. She was stunning, dressed in a long black gown with a side slit that nearly reached her hip. The neckline was modest, showing only a hint of cleavage, and her hair was done up in a French braid.

She approached him tentatively. "Evan?" she said cautiously. His eyes tracked her every movement and she could feel his gaze sweeping her form.

When he didn't reply, she started to worry. She gripped his arm and tugged gently.

He blinked. "You're gorgeous!" he blurted. Then he flushed right up to the tips of his ears.

She smiled and looked down for a second, pleased with his reaction. Looking back up, she grinned at him and his look of awe. "Hey, it's still me," she said softly.

Harry blinked again and shook his head. "Your Mum wouldn't tell me about your dress except to say it was black. I pulled something from the vault that I thought you might like to wear tonight." He offered her a small, long box.

She glanced down at it, then up at him uncertainly. He nudged the box towards her, waiting for her to take it.

She opened up the box and gasped. Inside was a string of pearls with a center pendant that looked like a blue diamond. "Is this real?" she exclaimed.

"The Goblins seem to think so. They offered a tidy sum to buy it. Apparently, the diamond is fairly rare," he replied.

She handed him the box and turned around. "Put it on me please?"

He grinned and kissed the back of her neck before sliding the necklace in place and locking the clasp.

He gently turned her around and looked at her. "Beautiful," he whispered softly. It was obvious he wasn't even looking at the necklace. Then, offering his arm, he smiled. "Shall we join the Ball?"

She grinned and linked her arm in his, then led him up the Entrance Hall to the Great Hall. Inside, she led him over to a table where her friends waited. Ginny sat, holding Neville's hand. On her finger she wore a small engagement ring with a delicate pink colored diamond. Ron sat talking to Hannah. Remus and Tonks, also at the table, smiled in greeting.

"Hermione! Evan!" exclaimed Ginny. Her eyes widened when she saw the large blue diamond around Hermione's neck.

"Hello everyone," Evan said with a grin, then he pulled Hermione's chair out so she could sit.

Remus, Neville and Ron looked down and their dates gave them sour looks. Hermione grinned at their discomfort. Harry's behavior was strictly Dan Granger at work. Over the years, he had coached Harry to open doors and pull out chairs for Hermione.

"So, Evan, how is life working at the Embassy?" asked Ginny.

Evan looked up from the printed menu he had been examining. "It's pretty routine, actually. At points, downright dull."

Ginny made a face, as if dissatisfied with his answer. "I would have thought working at the Embassy would be more interesting than that."

Evan nodded in reply, then he pointed at an item on the menu. A moment later it appeared on his plate. "I'm not saying there aren't any exciting moments, but most of the time it's pretty routine. I imagine you have more exciting times up here than I do."

"The biggest excitement around here is Snape's escape, and the fact that we have to escort the first and second years to class," muttered Ron. "Now, when Harry Potter was here, we had excitement."

"Yeah, like Hermione petrifying me in first year," Neville replied to everyone's laughter.

"I had a good reason for it," she muttered, causing everyone to laugh again.

"I understand that congratulations are in order?" Evan said, then he nodded to Neville and Ginny. Then Evan turned to Remus, who blushed slightly.

"You're the different ones," Hannah said with a laugh. "Hermione mentioned over a year ago that you wanted to marry her."

Evan grinned and reached over to caress the back of Hermione's hand. "I would have told her sooner, but I don't think she was ready to hear it that early."

"Oh? When did you know?" asked Ginny.

Evan smiled. "Not long after I first met her," he replied vaguely.

Hermione looked down and smiled to herself. Remus chuckled. Evan's comments had just confirmed the existence of the Potter curse.

Hermione looked at Evan and decided to turn the conversation away from her. "Evan, you have permission to ride back on the Express with us, if you want."

"Excellent!"

Tonks reached for her glass. "Well, Happy Christmas everyone."

Everyone joined in the toast and Evan sipped his drink thoughtfully. *It isn't exactly how I had hoped to end this year*, he thought. "And here's to a better New Year," he added.

Authors Notes:

Bob says he's making me do the Authors Notes because he likes when we write stories together. While I'm sure that's at least partially true, I know for a fact that he's making me do them because he's in a hurry to post the chapter and doesn't want to take the time himself. Lazy bum...

Er, right. So, on with the freakin' questions.

Hobbings: I've got a full time job "re-educating" my husband. If he's agreed to loan me out, please consider that it's the medication talking and ignore it. As for returning teenagers? I'm pretty sure his/her mother would be rearranging the more sensitive parts of your anatomy if you attempted to put the child back where he/she came from!

Now, having said that, I'd like to offer an alternative. Send your kid to us. We have plenty of snow that needs to be moved from one pile to another. By the time we're done, your child will be the most well behaved, polite child you've ever seen. He/she will also be twitchy, crying and clinging to you in terror, but you can't have everything!

Yes, now you know why Bob and I never had kids!

DarkRoot: Your English is great and so much better than my German!

Sheepstamper: What an unfortunate profession you have. Umm, you're not from Montana, are you? (Smiles innocently) Now, about your question. Hermione's use of the word bollocks shows she's growing up. Mummy dearest didn't comment because her daughter is an adult. If she wants to curse, who is she to complain? I mean, her daughter's having sex with Harry. What's an occasional curse word when compared to that?

TeddyLupin: Flattery will get you no where! Did you honestly think I wouldn't see through that? You're just trying to get us to double our output!

As for your BDSM comment? What makes you think we don't? Hmmm?

(Slaps a ball gag on TeddyLupin, wraps a rope around his wrists and ankles, then hoists him into the air.) I'll get back to you as soon as I finish the notes. Don't go anywhere!

GinnySohma: Hmm...Sohma. Do you read/watch Fruits Basket by any chance? Anyway, thank you ever so much for the industrial sized nuke. It's sitting in the living room, beeping away. Bob was mesmerized by the blinking lights for a few minutes, but I chased him away so I could worship the thing in peace. The few people brave enough to visit us have now fled, swearing to never return. I'm not sure if it was the nuke, or the fact that I was dancing around it naked that chased them away. In any case, I love it!

Eewec: You want us to share the story of the mix up between the personal lubricant and the heating rub? That's a little personal, don't you think? Wait, I've got an idea! (Pulls Eewec's pants out, squirts a bit of heating rub over the genital area, then let's go of the waistband.) Stories have their place, but there's just nothing like experiencing some things for yourself. Oh, and don't use water to try to wash away the burn. It just spreads it around. Air, however, seems to work. Take off your pants and run around naked for a bit. That should help.

Oh, and sending fire ants by international post isn't a good idea. It's has nothing to do with unpressurized holds and everything to do with the fact that the little suckers escape from the envelope. Don't ask me how I know this, just trust me!

Amit Patel: No, they still use bookspace, but not as much. You'll see mention of it, but you probably won't see those sessions.

Jakjakattk: Thank you every so much for sharing with us the fact that you have a very small wand. So, is that erect? Normally, I wouldn't ask such a question, but you usurped my right of picking on Bob. That's my job, buddy.

(Strips Jdc0x61 down and stuffs him into a see-through negligee.) You enjoyed Hermione's so much, I thought you might like one of your own! (Snaps a few pictures and post them on the internet) How lovely! (Smiles sweetly) Now, if you don't want your parents/significant other/pastor/friends/teachers to see this, send me money... or toys.

Geovanni Luciano: Sorry to disappoint, but there's only one more chapter to go. The Weasleys will make an appearance, but not a significant one,

and only at the end.

PerfesserN: I know you cock hammers, not triggers. However, I'm not allowed to edit, or in any way touch, the disclaimers. So I can honestly say (and take great pleasure in doing so) – That mistake was all Bob!

Solicitor and Webdoc: The tobasco sauce enema is an interesting idea. However, I think I'll use an enema of Naga Jolokia (ghost pepper) instead. Tobasco is nice, but just doesn't have the same pucker factor!

Now Manatheron, you have to know that a woman can never have too many toys! I'm not sure I can answer your question, however. Bob still has his X-Men story to finish and post and I may or may not post mine. After that, we have to pull out the plot bunny file and find something we can flesh out and write together. We'll get there eventually, though.

Faith: C4 is always better. I have plenty of restraints!

Crys: You want to be my minion? (Blinks, then squeals with excitement) I get my own minion! (Pounces on Crys and ties him up next to Teddy) Minions must be branded! Imagine that. I didn't even write the story and I've already got my own minion. I'm thrilled! (Stokes up the fire, then tosses in a branding iron that reads PROPERTY OF ALYX- WRITER OF AUTHORS NOTES AND KEEPER OF MINIONS!) Don't struggle too much or you'll smear the brand. Screaming is allowed though. I'm sorry I don't have any burn cream, but I still have some of the heating rub and the juice from the ghost pepper enema left. That should do the job, right?

Kutekess: Is being insane a requirement for an author? (removes her tinfoil hat and scratches her head) If I were insane, would I know? (Looks over at Bob, who's wearing his viking helmet, complete with massive horns, and a fur cape.) What do you think, honey?

Bob replied with a grunt, so there's your answer.

Musings: Your happy place sounds interesting to me. Bob, however, is worried about you. He says "Go into the light!" Don't listen to him. The dark is better. No one can see the blood...no one can hear you scream. (Blinks) You know, maybe I should start taking my meds. :D

For those who asked: The point of the Quibbler articles is basically to make you chuckle, scratch your head and say, "What?" However, if you look at them closely, they actually did get something right. Harry does, in fact, still have his magic! Think of it this way. The Prophet gets everything right...except that one fact. The Quibbler gets everything wrong...except that one fact. Don't over analyze them too much. Either enjoy them or skip them, whichever you prefer.

Kris: Bring back the livestock?! (Trots out a chicken on a leash and glares at Kris) A llama in the disclaimer and a chicken in the AN. (Listens to Bob bark and growl at his computer) And a dog, apparently. Happy now? (Plucks the chicken, then punts it into the cook pot) Well, at least we have something for dinner. As for your comment about Bob and I having children – HELL NO! We won't infect the world with what the blending of our DNA would create!

(Catches Bratling as she tries to escape) Yes, I know Hannah is a blond. I made a mistake. But it's not very polite of you to point that out! You hurt my feelings. No, really, you did! (Drags Bratling over to her new industrial sized meat grinder) And the fact that I just got this little puppy and have been dying to try it out has nothing to do with the fact that I took exception to your correction. Really. Oh, and you spelled my name wrong. But you won't have to worry about that for long.

Bob, we're having chicken soup and Bratling burgers for supper! Fire up the grill, would ya?

Particle_Accelerator: You could send us your thesis and we'll finish it for you. We can't guarantee it will be any good, but it will be long. And if nothing else, it will give your Professor something to laugh at as he/she fails you. A few more years of school never hurt anyone. You don't really want to enter the real world anyway. They expect results. That's why Bob and I avoid it like the plague!

However, to answer your question, yes, I really do own an 16" LX 200...in my dreams. Sadly, the real world won't let me have one. Thanks for asking and rubbing it in. Although, if you're offering one, we'll take it! We're not picky, either. We'll even take an 8"!

And for those of you with filthy minds, that's an 8" telescope! Yeesh, you people are sick!

(Smacks Musing just for the hell of it)

Now, where was I?

LadyImmortal: Yes, we are very proud of the fact that we've deprived you of your much needed sleep. It means the subliminal messages in our story are working! Now to slip some into a few National Security documents and we'll take over the country when they doze off! (Evil cackle)

As for threatening Bob with a bazooka? All I can say is: You gotta be kidding me! I've two nukes given to me by our lovely readers and an arsenal of other destructive weapons. If you want Bob to write faster, bribing him works best. Threatening him just means he lets me out to play! Hmm... Now that I think about it, threaten him some more, would you? After all, we subscribe to the Peace Through Superior Fire Power theory and he'll let me pull out the big guns and wade through the body parts!

One more small point I'd like to make, Lady I. Threatening Bob tends to arouse him. So unless you're willing to take care of that problem, stick with the bribes, okay?

(Looks around at all the horrified faces) I'm sorry, was that too much information??

Right...where were we again?

Jeff: Filleting Crys implies that we'd cook him. However, as we're not sure what kind of wine would go best with him, we've decided against it. Besides, he's going to become my very first minion, once I get him branded. A meal lasts a few hours...a minion is forever.

Blind-phoenix: You enjoy the authors notes because your wacked in the head? Just what are you implying here? You can't possibly be saying that only crazy people could appreciate them, are you? Now, think carefully about your answer, as you'd be insulting not only me, but one or two other people who actually get a chuckle out of them.

(Smacks Musing around until he screams, and watches Blind-phoenix flinch at the sound) Ah, I thought you'd understand.

Rathvander: No, it's the penguins. It's always the penguins.

Dazza: I'd ask about your wedding, but I'm guessing that's rather personal. As for the donuts, yes, you should send them to Keith and Dorothy now.

(Unwraps a new multimedia keyboard, packs it full of explosives, then mails it off to Chris) You might want to ask someone else to plug that in for ya.

That's it for the notes, folks. And you don't have to look so relieved about it, either! (Glares)

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a busy day ahead of me still. Teddy's been waiting patiently for me and my flogger and I need to get Crys branded before he changes his mind!

The Power of the Press

Chapter 9 - Year Seven Spring (part 1)

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx walked onto the stage and noted Bob walking along the edge, his hands in his pockets and his head down. She walked over to find out what his problem was this week.

“So what's the problem this time?” she asked

He looked up at her. “I had this wonderful disclaimer all planned out involving Steven Speilberg and Tom Cruise. But then our German readers complained about Cruise and Speilberg pulled out because of our involvement in the exploitation of Llamas.

“I couldn't get a license for the fireworks and the health department denied us a permit to shoot a hippopotamus from a cannon. The police refused to allow the three hundred clown parade, complete with a minivan which they all can fit into. The Airforce said we're not NASCAR and don't deserve a fly over even from the Civilian Air Patrol let alone the Air National Guard.

“The popcorn I ordered for everyone arrived and now I have no one to give it to. What are we going to do with twelve tons of popcorn?” Bob shouted in exasperation. “The house is surrounded by thousands of hungry chipmunks now!”

Alyx looked shocked. “Watch a lot of movies?” she asked meekly.

Bob glared at her and she shrank back.

“So you're telling me we have no disclaimer?”

“No, we have a disclaimer, just not a good one,” replied Bob.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, use this,” Bob said, handing her a kazoo.

“What?”

“It's all we can afford, now start humming!” he commanded.

Alyx shrugged her shoulders and started humming “It's a small world” on her kazoo.

Bob turned to the audience. “If you don't know we don't own Harry Potter, then I'm not going to try to talk you out of your insanity. It all belongs to JK Rowlings.”

Bob glanced at Alyx who continued to hum, obviously enjoying the experience. He shook his head in dismay and walked off the stage muttering to himself about “twelve freaking tons of popcorn.”

The Power of the Press

Chapter 9

The Granger Residence, Oxford, England, Dec 23 rd 1997...

Harry stepped into the room and dropped his tie on the night table, then loosened the buttons on his shirt. “I never knew family parties could be so exhausting,” he muttered as he sank tiredly onto the bed.

Hermione smirked at him. “You'll get used to it in a few years, I imagine.”

When he shot her a sour look, her grin broadened. “You're not used to family parties, Harry. They aren't really meant to be fun. It's more of an exercise in which you see people you don't like and haven't seen in the last year and hear all about their illnesses, operations, who died and who's divorcing who.”

“Hermione Jane!” exclaimed Emma from the doorway. “Please tell me you don't think like that?”

Hermione turned to look at her mother. “It's true, isn't it? You said it yourself often enough when we were going to these parties when I was little.”

Emma stiffened for a moment, ready to rail at her daughter, then suddenly seemed to wilt. “Damn, I didn't think you were listening when I complained to your father,” she said softly.

“So, you don't like those parties either?” asked Harry incredulously.

Emma sighed and walked over to sit on the bed next to Harry. “You have a problem with the idea because your family is very small, like mine. My

parents had no brothers or sisters. I have no one but my Mum, Dan and Hermione. Dan comes from a big family with a lot of cousins, aunts and uncles."

Hermione moved to sit next to her mother, watching her.

"I know this confuses you. You think family means people close to you, people who love you. In truth, in the larger families, that won't always be the case. Your friends, the Weasleys, will continue to grow apart until such time as they will be people with a common ancestry, but little else in common."

Harry frowned. "I never thought of it that way. It doesn't seem right."

"No, it probably isn't right. But then, consider Hermione and her cousin, Frances. She's a sweet girl, but she's never liked Hermione and I know Hermione has given up trying to be friendly to her. Just because they're family it doesn't mean they like each other or that they have to."

Harry leaned back against the headboard. "So if you really don't like going to those yearly parties, why do you do it?"

Emma opened and closed her mouth several times, struck by both the simplicity of the question, and complexity of the answer.

Hermione laughed. "He's got you, Mum. Admit it." She turned to Harry. "Sometimes we do things not because we want to, but because we have an obligation to the concept of family."

Harry frowned. "Well, my family isn't going to be like that if I can help it."

"That's an admirable goal, Harry," Emma said. "But it isn't always possible."

He set his jaw defiantly and crossed his arms. He knew he was being stubborn, but he had a particular idea of what a family should be, where everyone was loved and supported. Family, in his mind, was the exact opposite of his life with the Dursleys.

"It's all right, Harry," Hermione added. "Your idea of family is what it should be and you'll be able to make it happen."

Emma looked at her daughter, alarmed. "Hermione?"

"Mum," she replied, "Harry's idea of family is totally opposite from what he had with the Dursleys. He and I have spoken about it before. I recognize that we Grangers have a close family to a point, but when you shove us all together for that annual party, I'm reminded each year that most of those people are strangers to me."

"You, Dan and Hermione are a family. Anyone who sees you together can see it. You might not think it, but in everything you do, you support each other," Harry said softly. "I saw it right away when you first came to Wainuvu. You and Dan flew around the world just so your daughter could reconnect with her friend. Most parents wouldn't have done that, even with the free tickets that Sirius sent you."

Harry reached across bed, touching Hermione, then Emma on the shoulder. "The three of you have something special, but it seems to vanish the moment you join the Christmas party." He shook his head and looked pensive for a moment. "Size isn't the problem. The number of people shouldn't matter. The Weasleys have a close, supportive family and they have a lot of people. I think... I think it's more a case of recognizing the bond you have with the people close to you and actively working to keep that bond alive."

"Hermione's right. Those people are as much family as the Dursleys were. You share common bloodlines, but have little else in common."

Emma frowned and crossed her arms. "You're right. Most of them are strangers."

"Do they have to be?" Harry asked intently.

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Hermione's told me stories about visiting her Grandma, your mother. You don't seem that close anymore. Why is that?"

Emma looked at Hermione, who shrugged. "Well, the whole thing about keeping Hermione's secret is part of it, I guess."

Harry nodded, then turned to Hermione. "You're an adult now, even though you haven't left school. The Ministry recognizes that fact. As such, you're allowed to inform Muggles of our world, as long as you follow the guidelines. If you're capable of deciding who you want to marry, aren't you also capable of telling some of your relatives about magic?"

Hermione stared at him, a bit shocked. "Break the Secrecy Statutes?"

He grinned at her. "No, you know I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that if you were able to share your secret with your Grandmother, you'd be able to bring her back into your life like she once was."

When her mother looked at her, Hermione couldn't deny the appeal she saw in her eyes. Keeping Hermione's secret had affected their family and, in a way, hurt all of them. The need to keep things secret resulted in them growing apart from everyone.

Hermione sat for a moment, thinking hard, then she looked at her Mum. "Do you think Granmum would like to come to Christmas dinner? I know it's short notice..."

Emma's eyes grew moist and she hugged her daughter. "I'll give her a call right now," she replied softly. "Thank you."

Hermione nodded and looked at Harry anxiously while Emma left the room. “How long have you known that Mum was missing Granmum?”

Harry stretched and she laid a hand on his leg, sliding it up under his pant leg for a moment.

“I thought I saw it when we went to last year’s Christmas party, but I wasn’t certain until tonight,” he said, then he looked down at his feet. “I have a family that I sort of made. I realized after we visited my parents’ grave that family, either by blood or by love, is too important to waste.”

He looked up into her brown eyes. “Your Mum needs her Mum, just like you need yours. If she can’t come on Christmas day, we’ll go visit her and I’ll help you tell her about our world. Your Dad didn’t seem that close to any of his family, but I could see your Mum wanting to be with her mum.”

“It was selfish of me to want to keep the secret, wasn’t it?”

Harry smiled gently and she felt her insides melt. “No, just human. Besides, you couldn’t make that decision until this year anyway. The Ministry doesn’t mind seventh years telling their relatives, but doing it in your sixth year would have caused problems.”

Hermione smiled, then turned away from him and lifted her hair. “Unzip me, please?”

He grinned. She knew a spell that would allow her to zip and unzip her fancy cocktail dress, but she preferred Harry’s method. He rolled off the bed and stood behind her. He slowly lowered the zipper, kissing the exposed skin. She leaned back and sighed loudly when he wrapped one arm around her waist.

He leaned away long enough to slip the dress off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Then he started to kiss her bare shoulders. His hands slid upwards to cup her breasts.

“You’re teasing me,” she whimpered.

“Only a little,” he replied with a grin.

She turned in his arms. “Two can play that game, Mr. Potter,” she said huskily.

His eyes widened when her hands went straight for his belt buckle and he leaned in to kiss her. His pants fell to the floor next to her dress and she pushed him backwards onto the bed, then she crawled in next to him. With a casual wave of her hand, she placed silencing and locking charms on the room, then turned to kiss him again.

Christmas is coming early, she thought happily. For both of us.

The Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade, Dec 24 th 1997...

Severus Snape sprinted the last one hundred yards to the building. He had been watching it for months now and he knew that it was occupied once a month. The people of Hogsmeade were starting to avoid the shack again and when they spoke of it, they did so in fearful whispers.

Fools, he thought. It doesn’t take a Merlin to see that the shack is occupied by a werewolf. That slut, McGonagall, must be letting Lupin use it. I know he’s around somewhere.

“Dammit, Goyle, you’re stirring those Ravenclaw guts backwards!” he growled to himself. Then he wrenched the door to the shack open and slipped inside.

“Luuupin,” he crooned. “Here doggy, doggy.”

Nothing moved in the shack.

He wasn’t entirely sure why he felt compelled to come to the school, but he was nearly there. A noise drew him to a window and he was surprised to see the Hogwarts carriages heading towards the train station.

“The students can’t be coming back this early. The dunderheads still haven’t eaten their Christmas pudding yet. Oh, I do hope for some Christmas pudding.”

Snape chuckled, then stopped himself and looked around warily.

“Luuupin. Here doggy, doggy,” he crooned again.

After a thorough search of the shack, he returned to the window in time to see the carriages return to the castle. Occasionally he spoke to himself and muttered about the dangers of teaching dunderheads.

The Granger Residence, Oxford England, Dec 26 th 1997...

Cassandra Kensington sat in the living room of her daughter’s house and sipped her tea. She was a little confused, but would never admit it to anyone. Her husband, Earl, had passed away years ago, leaving her mostly isolated from her daughter, since they lived so far away. When Hermione started going to her school for gifted children, the isolation deepened and it saddened the older woman because she couldn’t understand the reason for it.

Now, unexpectedly, she had been invited to spend the holidays with her daughter. It was a welcome change to spending the holiday with her friends and neighbors, but it puzzled her. Something had changed and the only obvious change she could see was that Hermione was growing into a beautiful woman, and she had a sweetheart named Harry.

When she first met Harry, she had questioned him as best as she could at the family Christmas party. He obviously thought the world of Hermione. He was a fine looking young man with the deepest green eyes and a faint scar on his forehead that was barely noticeable. She learned that Harry had met Hermione at her mysterious school, then he'd had to leave because of troubles with his old guardians. He kept in touch and, despite the distances between them, they started dating. Overall, she approved of him, but she thought there was a strange mysteriousness about the boy.

Christmas turned out to be a wonderful experience with her family. Dinner had been cooked by Hermione and Harry, to her surprise. Hermione cooked many of the standard holiday dishes under Harry's watchful eye; somehow he had managed to include a few exotic tropical dishes, too. She was astonished to find he managed to get fresh fish and fresh tropical fruits. It was one of the best meals she'd had in many years.

She spent a lot of time in the kitchen observing Harry and Hermione, and was pleased to see how well they worked together. Hermione was a decent cook, but it was clear that Harry was the master chef in the kitchen and Hermione the helper. They worked and joked while preparing the meal. And to Cassandra's intense pleasure, Harry stopped every so often to kiss Hermione on the cheek, embarrassing her in front her grandmother.

She had lived a long life and was very happy to be reconnecting with Emma and her family. It was clear to her that her granddaughter was very happy with her boyfriend. And she was observant enough to note that when they retired for the night, she went to the one guest bedroom, while Harry followed Hermione into her room.

That wasn't as much of a surprise to Cassandra as Emma might have thought. She was a product of World War II, where people lived and loved hard. Cassandra wasn't about to complain to her daughter about her granddaughter's behavior, when she herself had had a sweetheart she had spent many a night with at Hermione's age. And she'd never tell her daughter about that Yank Airman she dated for a while. Had he survived the war, it was quite possible that Emma wouldn't have grown up in Britain at all.

She looked up when the young couple stepped into the room. Hermione walked over to the couch and sat down next to her, while Harry took one of the arm chairs across from them.

She looked at Hermione and arched an eyebrow. "So, I guess it's time to get some answers?" she asked.

Harry chuckled and glanced at Hermione, who blushed. "What did I say about the apple not falling far from the tree? I thought she knew something was up five minutes after she arrived."

Emma came into the room carrying a tray with drinks and some pastries. She placed the tray on the table where everyone could reach it, then she sat down on the other armchair. Harry reached forward and grabbed a drink from the tray.

"Mum, there's something we want to tell you," Emma said hesitantly.

Harry leaned back on his chair and looked uncomfortable. Cassandra caught his motion, then looked at Hermione intently. "Child, are you pregnant?"

Hermione blushed to the tips of her ears and Harry started choking on his drink. Emma stood and walked over to him and pounded on his back a few times. After a moment, he nodded thankfully to her, then he remembered why he had been choking and blushed brighter than Hermione.

"What? No, Granmum, I'm not pregnant. Harry made a comment the other day and we've decided to remedy the situation," Hermione said hurriedly.

She paused and looked at her mother, unsure how to proceed. Harry shook his head and sighed, then he leaned forward.

"Mrs. Kensington..." he said.

"I thought I said to call me Granmum, like Hermione."

Harry scowled and nodded. "Yes, Ma'am, you did. But for now..." he sighed and ran a hand through his hair, making it messier than ever. "Well, to cut to the chase, your Granddaughter is a witch. She attends a school that teaches Witchcraft and Wizardry. Your daughter wanted to tell you, but it is against the law for a Muggle to tell another Muggle about the magical world."

Emma and Hermione turned to stare at Harry in astonishment.

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione.

"What ever happened to easing her into it?" demanded Emma.

"It's easier to blurt it out and deal with it, rather than approaching it from the sides and hinting around the edges," Harry said apologetically.

Hermione turned to her Granmum, trying to gage her reaction.

"A witch," Granmum said dryly.

"Yes'm," Hermione replied softly. She raised a hand and used her ring to pour a glass of juice from the tray, then the glass lifted and floated over to her open hand.

Cassandra watched her granddaughter perform magic and one eyebrow slowly inched up her forehead. She turned to her daughter. "And this is the reason why you cut me out of your life for the past six and a half years?" she asked incredulously.

Emma flushed and looked down at her hands. She always had a problem when her mother used that tone of voice.

"It's not entirely her fault, Mrs. Kensington," Harry offered, trying to deflect her anger. "The law is very strict about telling Muggles... er Non-Magical people. Emma couldn't tell you -- had she done so, she would have been punished severely. She could have lost custody of Hermione. It would have been different had you lived here, but since you didn't, the law was against you learning about magic."

Cassandra blinked and stared at the raven haired youth. Harry was a bit intimidated by this formidable woman, but he held his ground under her stare.

"And you're a what? Warlock? Sorcerer?" she asked acidly.

"He's a wizard, Granmum," Hermione said meekly. She hadn't expected this to be easy, but she never dreamed her grandmother would be angry.

Cassandra opened her mouth to say something. Six years of being kept at arms length was about to boil to the surface.

"You're angry and hurt," Harry said, jumping in before anyone else could. "I can understand that. But you need to know that, as much as your daughter wanted to tell you, she couldn't. The punishment would have been extreme. It might have even cost her her life. Her only choice was to keep the secret, and to stay away so that it wasn't accidentally revealed."

Cassandra's head whipped around to stare at him.

Harry shrugged. "I would be hurt, too, if she did it out of spite. But she was protecting you, Hermione and herself. Now the time has come to reveal the truth and try to heal the breach. Emma and Hermione want you back in their lives. That's why they are revealing the secret to you."

Cassandra closed her mouth and stared at him. He had just undercut her anger entirely! The hurt was still there, but it was lessened with understanding. She turned towards her daughter. "Emma?" she said, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

"It's true, Mum," Emma whispered. She couldn't help the fact that her own tears started half way through Harry's explanation.

Harry shot Hermione a glance and she immediately stood and moved away from the couch. A moment later Emma took her spot next to Cassandra and hugged her mother.

Hermione smiled and sniffed a few times, then she took her mother's seat in the armchair near Harry.

Harry grinned at her, then he reached into a pocket and pulled out a form, which he quickly filled out.

"Harry?" Hermione said softly, watching him. She was surprised to see him press his badge against the parchment, causing it to glow for a second. When the light faded, the parchment had shrunk down to a small card, which he passed to her.

"Part of the stuff they made me take. I never thought I'd need any of the Auror forms until today. Your Granmum is now a card-carrying Muggle," he replied softly.

She looked at the card which identified her grandmother as a Muggle who was privy to the secret about the magical world and should not be Obliviated. She grinned at him. "I knew there was a good reason for keeping you around," she teased.

"Hey!" he protested. "I'm sure I'm good for other things too."

She blew him a kiss in reply and turned her attention back to her mother and grandmother, who had finally separated from their embrace. She nodded in satisfaction and conjured a box of tissues, which she passed to her mother.

Emma smiled in thanks and pulled some tissues out of the box before passing it to her mother.

"Mighty handy talent to have," Cassandra said, then she opened her arms to Hermione. "Now come over here, granddaughter."

Hermione bounced out of her chair and rushed to embrace the old woman.

After several intense minutes of mutual hugging between the Granger women, they finally settled down. Granmum had moved to the center of the couch with Hermione and Emma on each side, holding her hands.

Cassandra looked at Harry with a happy smile. "Why do I have this feeling that you're somehow at the heart of this? Oh, I don't mind, but I had thought I was losing my family."

Harry blushed slightly and shrugged, embarrassed to be singled out. He might have said the words for them, but it really was Hermione and Emma who had done the hard work. "Families should be together," he mumbled.

She arched an eyebrow and glanced at her daughter.

"Harry noticed that neither of us seemed very happy at the Christmas party," Emma explained.

Cassandra cackled with laughter. "No one is happy at those parties, my boy. I only go so I can see Emma and Hermione. The rest of the time they're downright boring. Although, I did like it when Frances got smacked down last year by this young buck."

Harry found the carpet especially interesting. He didn't want to be reminded of that particular incident.

“Harry asked some pointed questions and convinced me it was time to tell you,” Hermione rushed to add. She had also enjoyed Harry's response to Frances, but now wasn't the time to gloat. Later maybe, but not now.

Cassandra turned back to Hermione. “So you don't go to a school for the gifted?”

“She does,” Emma replied. “Just not gifted in the usual sense.”

“Hermione could have easily gotten a scholarship to any private school and from there on to Cambridge or even Oxford,” Harry said hotly.

Hermione smiled at him.

Emma nodded in agreement. “That's true, but going to Hogwarts was the best decision for her, considering her talents. An untrained witch is dangerous to herself and others due to accidental magic.”

Cassandra gripped Hermione's hands tightly. “I always knew she was special. Did you know my Grandfather told me his great grandmother claimed to have special powers too? Maybe he wasn't pulling my leg, after all.”

Harry leaned forward with an interested expression. “I knew it! I always thought it came from your mother's side of the family.”

Emma grinned at Harry, then she turned back to her mother. “Mum, you can't tell anyone about Hermione and her abilities. You can tell your bridge club how well she's doing in school and brag all you want, just don't mention magic or the name of her school.”

Cassandra nodded slowly. “It's that dangerous?”

“For us it is, Mrs... Granmum,” Harry said, catching himself.

Cassandra smiled, noting the slip. Had he been closer, she would have patted his knee.

“Witches have been persecuted and burned at the stake,” Hermione said quietly.

“Yeah, but some of them enjoyed it,” Harry added with a grin, thinking back to the witch who had enjoyed being burned at the stake so much she did it five times.

Hermione shot him a quick grin, then turned back to her Grandmother. “There is a whole magical world out there and I can show you some of it. But you mustn't tell a soul.”

Cassandra snorted and eyed her granddaughter with a touch of disdain. “I take it your Mum never told you what I did during the war then?”

Hermione shook her head and even Emma looked perplexed. “You worked for the Ministry of Defense, I thought.”

Cassandra chortled and shook her head. “I did, in a way, since everyone in uniform worked for the Ministry. I was a cypher clerk for the SOE. I coded the messages and typed them up for the radio operators. If I can keep those secrets, even after fifty years, I think I can keep yours.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. He had read the histories of the war and knew that the Special Operations Executive handled only the most secret missions of the war. Some of what they did was only just coming to light, even after fifty years. “I'd say so,” he muttered.

Hermione and Emma shared a surprised look that was tinged with relief.

Cassandra gently poked Hermione in the shoulder. “So? Show me what you can do. I'm sure that you must be a special witch to attract a fine looking sweetheart like Harry.”

Hermione blushed heavily and Emma laughed. “Granmum!”

Harry laughed and sat back to watch Hermione and Emma reconnect with Cassandra.

12 Grimmauld Place, Dec 26 th 1997...

Tonks stumbled from the Floo and was caught by Remus.

He had arrived with just enough time to put down his packages and prepare for her expected arrival.

“I'm going to have to put a permanent cushioning charm on you if you ever become pregnant,” he murmured in her ear and she blushed to the roots of her hair.

“Hey now,” Cindy called from the doorway. “No dirty comments until after dinner, when you can go home to your own bed and do something about them.”

Remus chuckled and Tonks' hair turned bright red to match her skin tone.

“Happy Christmas!” called Sirius, brushing past Cindy in the doorway. He carried a large bottle in his hand and four glasses hovered behind him.

"I thought Harry would be here?" asked Remus who was looking around for him.

Cindy shook her head. "He canceled. He's performing his first official Auror duty today."

Sirius sat and poured four drinks, then motioned for everyone to take one. "Yeah, he's sorry about missing today, but this was important to him."

"What was?" asked Tonks, obviously burning with curiosity.

Nearby, Dobby, wearing a NASA jumpsuit with his name stenciled on it, stoked the fireplace. He had discovered the joys of being the highest paid elf in history and he used his wages, with Cindy's help, to purchase costumes from Muggle retailers.

The jumpsuit had been a compromise between Cindy and Dobby, who, unfortunately, hadn't seemed to grasp the concept of gender-based costumes. Cindy was not going to allow the little elf to wear a Playboy bunny outfit, ever.

Cindy curled up next to Sirius and picked up one glass. "You know how the Grangers attend a family Christmas party every year?" she asked.

Remus and Tonks both nodded.

"Well, Harry noticed that Emma and her mum weren't happy at the party. Under some rather tough questioning by Harry, he discovered that they were estranged, mostly because of Hermione being a witch."

"She doesn't approve of witches?" asked Remus. It was a common issue in many Muggle families.

"No, they never told her. They were so concerned about keeping Hermione's secret that they were losing touch with her and the rest of the family," Cindy replied.

"And what's Harry doing?" asked Tonks.

"He's witnessing them revealing the secret, and issuing her the Official Muggle-In-The-Know card," Sirius replied smugly. "It's the first time he's done anything officially as an Auror. He may be only a reserve Auror, but he can perform the witnessing and issue the card. Granted, the card is standard issue for an Auror stationed in Wellington, New Zealand, but it's still valid."

"He's tickled pink that he can do something like this for Emma," added Cindy.

"Huh," said Tonks. "Harry got off easy. My first official task as an Auror was to break up a party run by Mundungus Fletcher. As you can imagine, everyone was drunk and most were undressed. Let me tell you, there is something really off-putting about having not one, but three drunken witches throw up on your brand new uniform. I think I went home that night and cried."

Sirius and Cindy laughed at Tonks' comment.

"All right, so Harry is missing. What about you two? You've been back from Madrid for less than a week and it doesn't look like you got much in the way of a tan," Remus teased.

Sirius sighed. "I wish. I swear these conferences are better at putting me to sleep than any potion. We met daily from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon. Cindy and I got to see the sights and we managed to enjoy the hotel pool, but we didn't have much free time during the day to lie about in the sun."

"Did you accomplish much at the conference? I always thought they were mostly excuses to hold fancy parties in the evenings," Tonks said.

"Actually, we accomplished quite a lot. You know that potion they wanted to ban here? The Veela modification to your Wolfsbane? Well, we've increased the tariff slightly on it, but they are going to allow it to be imported," Sirius said proudly.

Remus stared at him in surprise. There had been rumors for over a year about a Veela colony that had developed a new version of Wolfsbane that made the transformation much easier. The British Wizengamot had originally been against its import because it was created by Veela, for werewolves. Neither group were much respected in the British Isles.

"Oh, Remus," exclaimed Tonks. She had been horrified by his state following a full moon, and anxious for him to start using the new potion.

"It's one of the things we managed to accomplish," Sirius said, then he sighed. "I haven't convinced Amelia to drop the werewolf restrictions yet, but every little bit is progress. As it stands, it took nearly two weeks to hammer out an agreement. The potion was just one small part of the economic package. That's why I didn't see much of the city."

"It's a beautiful city," Cindy said, jumping in to continue the conversation, "but I did find myself curious, Sirius. Why did we always find ourselves in the same restaurant as the French delegates? And why did embarrassing things always happen to them at dinner?"

"Embarrassing?" echoed Remus, his eyes narrowing speculatively.

"Embarrassing," repeated Cindy. "Like the French Ambassador being attacked by his lobster dinner. Now, I might be bit concerned when a five star restaurant serves up an uncooked lobster that nearly snapped off the Ambassador's fingers. Wouldn't you be suspicious?"

When Sirius looked around innocently, Tonks snickered loudly.

Around Sirius? Being suspicious is a way of life," Remus replied.

Sirius looked at his fingernails for a moment, letting the silence in the room build up. Finally, he looked up. "I don't understand why the French had so many problems, but it wasn't my fault. I didn't hand the man a live lobster. Nor did I cause his elevator to jam for eight hours while he suffered from extreme flatulence. Besides, anyone that stuffy deserves to have a little lesson in humility now and then."

"Does that include you, my husband?" asked Cindy silkily.

Sirius blanched and looked at her nervously. "You wouldn't."

"Uh oh, she must have new dirt on him," Tonks said with a chortle.

"All right, let's be serious here," Sirius said plaintively. "What's going on at Hogwarts?"

Remus sighed and shook his head. "We still don't know for certain if the snake is in the castle or not," he replied unhappily. "Snake or Acromantula, either would be hibernating by now and there hasn't been a single incident since the elf child vanished. The students are jittery, but since they haven't experienced anything directly, they don't understand why the staff is nervous, and we don't dare tell them."

"You think it's bad there? You should hear from Emma. Since Harry returned from Scotland, he's been burning up the air lanes with his owl. Poor Hedwig has been going non-stop. He spends half his days combing through books, and the other half writing letters for Hedwig to deliver," Cindy offered.

"What's he up to?" asked Tonks.

"According to Emma, he's been in touch with a Professor at the University of Melbourne, in Australia, getting advice about what a tropical snake would do in a temperate climate. That particular correspondence has been going out from, and coming back through, the Japanese Embassy in London. He's getting a crash course in Herpetology."

"Herpawhat?" Tonks asked, staring at Cindy.

"Herpetology. It's a Muggle science; the study of snakes and their behavior. Actually, it's really a smart idea for him to learn this stuff. The snake is venomous, after all," Cindy said.

"Why not go to someone local? Surely there are Herpawhosits in Britain," Tonks commented.

"There are," agreed Cindy. "But Australia is home to the most venomous snakes in the world. He went there because he could use the Pac Rim Ministry to help open that particular door, and he needed an expert who worked with venomous snakes a lot."

Tonks nodded thoughtfully.

"So what's he using Hedwig for? He can't be sending love notes to Hermione," asked Remus.

"He's looking for someone to make a cloak that will conceal his face and voice so he can search the castle without revealing his identity," Sirius replied.

Tonks blinked. "Do they make such a thing?"

"They do now," Cindy said with a grin. "Harry had it made special. He even gave the company that made it the charms to disguise his face and voice. And he's commissioned a dragon hide suit that will cover him from his neck to his feet."

Remus leaned forward, placing his drink on the table. "I don't know if I like the idea of Harry rooting around in the castle alone. And the risk of his identity being discovered is huge."

Sirius shrugged. "Talk to him about it, then. He'll be here with Hermione for dessert later."

"I think I will," Remus said thoughtfully. Some of Harry's plans he agreed with, like learning more about snakes. But he didn't think it was wise for Harry to enter the castle.

"Dinner is ready Sirs and Siresses," Dobby said from the doorway.

The Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade, Dec 31 st 1997...

The locals avoided the shack because of its reputation. Until recently, the shack had been silent for several years and the local residents of Hogsmeade were convinced that the ghouls that haunted the place had been sated for a while. Then, suddenly this past August, an awful howl was heard coming from the shack again. The ghouls were back.

That end of town was once again terrified, and a committee of strong, ably trained wizards were dispatched to double check the fence around the building to make sure no one could get in or out. No one wanted to acknowledge the fact that the fence was worthless if there were real ghouls in the shack.

As in so many cases of legends, the tales far outstripped the facts. Local villagers swapped tales about children snatched in the middle of the night, but when asked, none would ever be able to provide proof. The few who knew the actual truth, mostly staff members of Hogwarts, kept quiet. It was

better to keep people afraid and away from the building, than to turn it into a tourist attraction.

In one corner of an upper floor bedroom, a head appeared as if from thin air. A gaunt Severus Snape peered around cautiously and sniffed the air.

Last night was a full moon and Lupin should have come to the shack for the evening. If all had gone according to his plan, right now Lupin was sleeping in one of the bedrooms, recovering from the after effects of the transformation.

Snape crawled out of his tent, which shimmered and become visible when he left it. He stood quietly and smiled to himself. It was a good plan; it was a perfect plan. He'd capture Lupin and force him to assist him in entering the castle. After that point, his plan became a little more fuzzy. He had vague ideas of "showing those dunderheads" and "teaching them not to underestimate the great Severus Snape". And that was about it.

As far as plans go, it left a lot to be desired, but it was the best his twisted mind could come up with.

He crept stealthily from the room, carefully searching for his victim.

Meanwhile, his intended target was sound asleep in the arms of his future wife, recovering from a particularly difficult transformation at Grimmauld Place. Tonks held him and carefully massaged muscles that had been stretched to their limits. Next month he would begin taking the new potion, Harry had prepaid for the coming year for him as a Christmas gift. Both of them were eagerly looking forward to seeing how well it helped.

The townspeople of Hogsmeade scattered in terror when, for the first time in living memory, the ghouls of the Shrieking Shack lit off during the daylight hours. Several of the more logical people wondered why the ghouls were so interested in deducting points from Gryffindor.

The Granger Residence, Oxford, England, Jan 1 st 1998...

"I've been talking to my daughter and granddaughter, and both seem to agree that, without your influence, they might never have told me about Hermione's abilities," a voice said from behind him.

Harry looked up from the textbook he had been studying, he turned in his chair to see Hermione's grandmother standing in the doorway. He motioned for her to come in and sit down.

"I don't know how much Hermione has told you about me."

She smiled. "She's had a lot of good things to say about you, although I admit I haven't seen the wings she thinks are there."

Harry blushed. "I'm not an angel," he mumbled, his cheeks burning with embarrassment.

Cassandra grinned. He was so easy to embarrass! "I'm curious as to why you pushed them."

"Did Hermione tell you I'm an orphan?"

She nodded, her lips pressed tightly together.

"I hardly remember my parents, and the only things I do remember are fragments from the night they were killed. My only living relatives believed that they could force the magic out of me by abusing me. As a result, I have two views of what a family is. On the one hand, I have my relatives and their abuse. On the other, I have my real family; people with no blood relationship to me, but who love and support me just the same."

He looked at her and for a brief instant there was a flash of remembered pain in his expression, then he smiled. "I'd like to think that my parents would have loved me like my family does. The most important lesson I've learned from my Godfather is that family is the most important thing."

He paused and took a breath. "Emma deserves to have her mum in her life and Hermione her grandmother. And you deserve your family back. In a way, I'm partially at fault because Hermione spent so much time with me instead of her family. Reuniting you with your family was the right thing to do."

Cassandra nodded, satisfied with his answer. "All right. Now, tell me how you feel about Hermione."

Harry looked down at his feet for a moment before looking up. Cassandra had an imposing stare that neither Emma or Hermione had.

"I love her. She means everything to me," he said softly. "I've asked Dan and Emma for their permission to marry her when she leaves school."

Cassandra looked at him intently. "Don't you think she's too young? Or you, for that matter?"

Harry's expression hardened. "No, I don't. She'll be eighteen when she leaves school and I'm already out of school. People in the wizarding world pair up earlier than Muggles. My own parents were married right out of school."

Cassandra leaned forward in her chair. "How do you know she's the one for you?" she asked, stabbing a finger at him.

"I know," he replied defiantly. "I can feel it." He thumped his chest with one fist. "I'd do anything to make her happy."

"And if that meant leaving her?" she asked, watching him like a hawk.

He looked down. "It would kill me, but I'd do it," he whispered.

Granmum! What are you doing?" exclaimed Hermione. She was horrified by what she had heard.

Cassandra looked up at her granddaughter. "I'm testing his commitment. I want to make sure he's good enough for you."

Hermione rushed into the room and scowled at her grandmother. She pushed Harry back slightly and sat down on his lap. He automatically wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair, breathing deeply.

"My mum asked your grandfather the same question," she replied with a soft smile. "And he answered in the same way."

Hermione looked shocked and uncomprehending and Cassandra stood and walked over to the pair. She leaned down and kissed Hermione's forehead. "Be true to each other and you'll do fine."

Cassandra straightened up and walked from the room.

"Old bat," Harry murmured without any rancor.

Hermione looked at him, then laughed. "Maybe," she whispered. "But Granmum is a smart one. When she gives advice, people tend to listen and with good reason." She looked around and noted they were alone. She waved her hand and sealed the door closed, then swiveled in Harry's lap until she was straddling him.

"I want to ask you something, but it's sort of embarrassing," she said.

He looked into her gaze worriedly. "Go ahead."

"You're a Metamorphagus."

"I'm aware of that," he replied dryly.

She frowned at his tone and plunged ahead anyway. "I'm curious. When we're together, do you use it to... umm... enhance things?"

He arched an eyebrow at her and smirked. "Would you like me to?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "You haven't already done so?"

He shook his head. "I haven't felt any need and you never seemed to complain. From what I've read, I'm only a little larger than average." He leaned forward as he spoke, whispering his reply against her ear. She shivered in his lap and a wave of desire rushed through her. He was right, she had no reason to complain.

"I would have thought, with your being able to change things, you would."

He kissed her neck, slowly moving down to her shoulder. "Why change what seems to work so well?"

He paused and leaned back and she moaned slightly when he stopped. "Are you asking me to change?"

"No!" she said immediately. "I just thought that you would take advantage of it."

He grinned and rested his forehead against hers. "Someday, maybe we'll play like that. But I promise you, what you've seen so far when I'm not Evan, is totally me. Even Evan is basically me from the neck down. Tonks has different ideas, but she grew up with the talent. I didn't."

"What do you mean different ideas?" she asked, her curiosity now piqued.

"She was six when she first discovered her talent. Since then she's been changing every day, sometimes multiple times in a day. She really doesn't have a sense of self. She has a few favorite forms, but none that really say, 'This is me, this is who I was born as.' As a matter of fact, if you ask to see the real her, the best she can do is give you an approximation of what she thinks is the real Tonks. Once her ability kicked in and she started using it, she lost touch with her original form. Don't forget, she was only six."

He ran a finger down Hermione's cheek and she watched him intently. "It's hard to explain, but to a metamorph, there is a real risk of losing your base identity. I don't mean that one day I'll wake up and think I'm Sirius, but rather sooner or later you lose touch with the form you were born with.

"Remus understands that Tonks changes shapes the same way most women change outfits. He knows that she no longer has a true shape; it's been long forgotten. Tonks is change. I could fall into the same trap. Are you loving Harry or Evan? Does it matter? Are they the same people?"

He tapped his head lightly. "It gets confusing because I am used to being Harry, but Evan is nearly as comfortable for me. Sometimes I think it would be best for me to stop changing into Evan when this is all done and never change again. And then I remember what Tonks said. Being a metamorph isn't like being an animagus. It's more like a gender. We are born to a gender and that is what we are. Refusing to morph would be like refusing to be me."

"But when you sleep, you always return to Harry," Hermione protested.

He nodded. "That's true, but only because Harry is what I believe is my real form, the real me. Tonks doesn't turn back into something else at night. According to both Remus and Tonks, she either maintains her current form, or randomly changes when she sleeps. Tonks thinks she changes to reflect her dreams and Remus doesn't mind. She's always beautiful to him, no matter what her form is."

"So you're afraid of forgetting who you are?"

He looked at her seriously. "It's a real possibility for metamorphs," he replied.

She pulled him into a hug. "I won't let you forget that you're my Harry," she whispered. She was intrigued by the fact that he resisted the temptation to enhance himself. She didn't think he'd succumb to the same trap that Tonks had fallen into, mainly because he started so late and had a firm sense of self.

She realized she needed to rethink his metamorph talents. There were some intriguing possibilities, but those possibilities weren't totally risk free.

Headmistress's Office, Hogwarts, Jan 5 th 1998...

The conference hadn't gone off like the Ministry had hoped.

With the exception of a small contingent of countries, mostly European and Northern European, the Ministry found itself snubbed and rejected by many of the delegates. The Americans were openly advocating the inclusion of new Muggle topics in their curriculum. And despite the noises coming from the British Ministry, the bulk of the delegates agreed to consider the changes. Then, to add insult to injury, the delegates voted to meet again in a year at the Salem Institute in the United States, despite Hogwarts offering to host it again.

The final result of the conference forced Minerva to write several reports to the Ministry explaining in detail why she felt they should agree with the conference's agreed upon goals. The Wizarding Education Administration had taken a very dim view of her stand on the subject. In their eyes, it looked especially bad when the Headmistress of Hogwarts failed to toe the party line like the rest of the Ministry. And unfortunately for Minerva, she was no Dumbledore; she didn't hold the same level of awe that he once held. Her position on the matter severely jeopardized her job at Hogwarts.

Minerva closed the reports and placed them in the folder, then she stood and took the folder in her arms. Another year past, and another set of reports to be filed in Hogwarts' infinite file cabinet. In previous years the reports were meaningless tripe sent to the Ministry, then filed and forgotten. This year they were read, and approved by Minister Bones herself. Bones had stepped in and put a leash on the WEA, preventing them from sacking Minerva for not following their position.

She stepped in front of a bookcase. A portrait on the wall noticed her and nodded. The bookcase slid into the wall and off to the side, opening a passageway. Sconces flared to life, lighting the way and she walked down the corridor.

After a short walk of about ten feet, she entered a room with several portraits, and the infinite file cabinet.

"I say, it's Minerva!" said one portrait.

"Yes, Oswald, another year has passed," she replied to the portrait. There were six portraits of former Heads of the school in the room. Of the twenty two former Heads in the last one thousand years, six had left the position in disgrace. Those six portraits were in this room.

Oswald Biederhurst had been a headmaster from 1742 to 1778 when he married the Head girl after she became pregnant with his child. That in itself wasn't bad enough, but he made the mistake of insulting King George III by suggesting he should grow up and let the colonies go. That was the last known contact between the magical world and the royal family.

She glanced up at the other portraits, including the one of Dumbledore. The portrait had been shocked to discover that it had been banished to the room with the other disgraced Headmasters.

Dumbledore looked at Minerva, his expression full of hope. "Minerva, I would like to..."

She held up a hand, silencing him.

"No, Albus. Apologies aside, we're still living with the results of your inactions and manipulations. You completely drained the accounts of several orphans and would have drained Potter's accounts had Gringotts not stopped you and alerted the Ministry."

She paused and looked at the painting intently. Dumbledore sat on a chair looking chagrined and contrite. The other portraits looked on and gloated.

"In a way, it's probably a good thing you were caught when you were. Harry has graduated, a full year ahead of schedule and is one of the most powerful wizards I have ever met. Had he discovered your deception, he would have probably killed you."

"Minerva! I assure you, what I did wasn't all that bad. I wouldn't have done it at all if it hadn't been the best for our world,," Dumbledore protested.

Minerva snorted. "And that, ladies and gentlemen of the court, is why the mighty Albus Dumbledore is relegated to the wall of shame, instead of occupying a place of honor in the Headmaster's office."

"Hear, hear!" said several portraits.

Minerva glared at them and they hurriedly hushed, then she turned back to Dumbledore.

"I don't know why I bother. You still think what you did was the right thing. You bankrupted four children to finance your little Order of the Phoenix. You placed Harry Potter into an abusive environment when you knew his parents had other plans for him. I swear, Albus, if I didn't know that the magic would create a new one, I'd order your portrait burned!"

She opened the file cabinet, placed the file inside, then she slammed it shut. She hated coming into this room; she made a mental note to speak to

Pappy about relocating the dishonored Headmasters to a new room. Perhaps Myrtle's bathroom or the broom closets closest to the Slytherin dorms.

Daily Prophet Headline, Jan 6 th 1998...

Hogwarts Receives Failing Grade!

Ministry Officials presided over the close of the one hundred and second International Educational Conference, only to find themselves and most of the European community snubbed by the other Magical Ministries.

The office of the Minister, still high from its success at the European Economic conference, was stung by the harsh reception given to Ministry officials at the conference.

Hosted at Hogwarts, the fifty six delegates met to discuss changes to magical learning and new advances that might be incorporated into the standard coursework. This year, however, there was a problem. Right from the onset of the conference, a large block of Ministries, led by both the North American Department of Magic and the Pacific Rim Ministry, pushed an agenda that any normal wizard would find offensive.

The Americans want to include Muggle learning, mathematics, sciences and their newfield of technomancy into the standard coursework. Such changes are in direct opposition to the Ministry's position. The Ministry and the European community opposed the changes vehemently, with one notable exception. The Headmistress of Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall, refused to denounce the American proposal.

"I feel that the American proposal deserves to be examined, rather than dismissing it out of hand. I have recently come to believe that we are doing a disservice to our students by limiting what we teach. We are educators, first and foremost, and therefore we, of all people, should not be turning a blind eye to new ideas," said McGonagall.

WEA officials were quick to attack McGonagall's position, citing her close working relationship with the disgraced former Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, as a possible source of her tainted thinking. One official said, on condition of anonymity, that, "She's spent too much time under Dumbledore, if you catch my meaning. I bet she knew what was happening to Harry Potter, too!"

Perky Weatherbee, reading a statement from Minister Bones, had this to say. "The Ministry recognizes that the WEA is an autonomous agency. However, we reject the calls for Headmistress McGonagall's resignation. While her comments were perhaps different than current Ministry policy, she is a private citizen, employed by a private organization and therefore not under the auspices of the WEA or the Ministry. Finally, we note that Headmistress McGonagall was asked her personal opinion, which she candidly gave. Yet she has taken no action to institute new classes and will not undertake such actions until approved by the Hogwarts Board of Governors."

(Continued on Page 2)

Several Azkaban Escapees captured. One still at large. Page 2

Drunk German Wizard Disillusions middle third of Eiffel Tower. Page 3

Hogsmeade, Jan 8 th 1998...

Gustav Chesterfield was considered an eccentric even by wizarding standards. Well past a century old, the wizard appeared one day in Hogsmeade and purchased a run-down old home on the outskirts of town. It was one of the places furthest from Hogwarts and the train station that could still be considered part of the town.

Few people went near the Chesterfield home. It was rumored to be heavily warded and dangerous. Its owner was often seen scurrying around town, running mysterious errands that only he knew or understood. Chesterfield had proven to be impossible to come to know.

Gustav wasn't a powerful or imposing wizard; in fact, few could recall him ever doing much magic. He was anti-social to an extreme. He hated people; wizards, Muggles, everyone. Unfortunately, his odd habits would be his undoing.

It was late evening and Gustav had spent his time at the Hogshead Inn, sitting in a corner, drinking and glaring balefully at the other regulars. The new owner had renamed the Inn, but changed the name back when people refused to use the new name. When he left, he failed to notice the black shape that detached itself from the shadows and followed him. Snape caught him just as he was about to enter his house.

"*Imperio*," hissed Snape.

Gustav paused and for the first time in his life, he felt a pleasant sensation and an utter sense of relaxation.

"Let me in," Snape said.

Gustav nodded and opened the door wide. Snape glanced around and then darted inside the run down dwelling.

"Enter and close the door."

Gustav entered the home and closed the door, then he stood silent, waiting for his next command.

Snape looked around the room. He would not have risked this at all, but the little tent he had been living out of had run out of supplies. It had been two days since he'd eaten last and he needed food badly.

The room he was in was incredibly cluttered. Old Daily Prophets were stacked from the floor to the ceiling in several places, along with Muggle newspapers and magazines. One wall was covered in calendars dating back to 1931.

He could see the corridors nearby were cramped with all sorts of junk. The place felt downright creepy and he shivered slightly.

“Take me to your kitchen.”

Gustav nodded happily and Snape followed him into the crowded corridor. He paused next to one door, which vibrated. “Stop!” he commanded. “What is that mysterious ticking noise?”

Snape eyed Gustav warily. He could feel a strong sensation through the soles of his shoes. Gustav turned and opened the door. Suddenly Snape reeled back, assaulted by the sound. The room contained hundreds of clocks, all ticking, gonging and ringing.

“Close the door!” he screamed, pressing up against a stack of rusted cauldrons.

Even under the Imperius curse, Gustav couldn't help but smile. He knew his new friend would be impressed by his attempts to save time. Thanks to his clocks, he had hundreds of years stored in that room.

Snape straightened up and glared at Gustav for a moment, then his foot lashed out, kicking the old man's feet out from under him. He ignored the pained cry as the man hit the floor. “No more funny business or I'll deduct points from you and give you detention!”

The old man gasped and nodded, waiting for the pain to ebb away. Then he slowly climbed to his feet and led Snape into the kitchen.

At a command from Snape, Gustav set about preparing a meal for his new friend.

“The days of Gryffindor's end are nigh,” Snape muttered to himself.

“The badger will kill the snake,” Gustav told him in a low growl. He had not attended Hogwarts, but he knew enough about how the school was structured.

“Yes, but not before the snake delivers the killing bite! And then all will know that I, Severus Snape, am all powerful! All will bow and worship at my feet and Draco will fix my hair.”

“But the Eagle cannot outrace the snail without help,” Gustav replied sagely.

Snape paused and stared at Gustav. He had not thought of that!

“Meh! Then I will let Parkinson worry about my hair. Draco can be in my harem.”

Gustav nodded, pleased that he had helped solve his new friend's problems with his love life. Then the pleasant feeling started to ebb.

Gustav blinked and swayed for a moment. Snape pulled his wand and reapplied his Imperius curse. He didn't need his new servant getting away now. Besides, there were more important things to do, like catching Lupin.

The Granger Residence, Oxford England, Jan 20 th 1998...

“Are you decent?” Dan called from the door.

Harry looked up from his desk. He was packing away several important items he had purchased for himself in the past weeks.

“Yeah, come on in, Dan,” he replied.

Dan stepped into the room and watched Harry packing away the heavy gloves and snake hook. “I take it everything went according to plan?”

Harry grinned. “Even better than I expected. Professor Miller's letter opened doors real quick.”

Recognizing the need to learn how to handle venomous snakes, his contact in Australia had provided him with a letter of introduction to the Curator of Herpetology at the London Zoo and he had spent the day watching and helping the snake handlers there. For the next few weeks, he'd be assisting in caring for all of the reptiles at the zoo while learning how to handle the venomous species.

“I'm not an expert by any means, but give me a few more weeks and I'll be able to handle the worst snakes safely. Today all I did was move fairly safe species, then clean out their enclosures.”

“How'd you manage to convince Professor Miller to help like that?”

Harry walked over to his bed and sat, then he motioned to Dan to sit at his desk.

“The Pacific Rim Ministry approached Professor Miller at the University. They said they needed an expert for a snake problem that had some political difficulties tied to it. As far as Miller is concerned, there is a snake that needs to be caught in a very high profile location and no one can know about it, which explains why none of the usual experts are being called in.

He sent me to the library to read books to read, and has answered a number of questions I've had concerning snakes. Finally, he suggested that I approach the Curator of Herpetology at the Zoo and he provided me with a letter of introduction. They were basically given the same story Miller was given. Only in this case, it's being done as a favor to the Australian government."

Dan motioned to the leather gloves and the plastic noose stick. "Is that going to be much good against Nagini?"

Harry frowned. "No, not really. But I never planned on using it. Tonks has put me in touch with a company that makes armor for Aurors. It's expensive, but I've bought a suit of the stuff. I'll be protected from my neck to my feet. Not even Nagini will be able to bite through dragon hide. The snake hook is just a prop. I'm going to kill the snake, not collect it for a zoo." He shuddered slightly. "I have a bit of a confession," he said softly.

Dan arched an eyebrow. "Oh?" he asked, wondering what Harry was going to say.

"I really don't like snakes. If I had my choice, I'd rather be able to talk to Hedwig or Crookshanks instead of snakes," he said.

Dan shook his head and laughed. A moment later, Harry joined him.

"So, have you learned everything that Emma wanted to know?" Harry asked with a sly grin.

Dan's lips twitched. "She's concerned. Up until now it's all been talk and plans. But now that you're really chasing after Nagini, she's terrified for you and for Hermione. She's had several very bad nightmares. She's worried sick about you."

Harry nodded somberly. "I know. I also worry about what would happen to Hermione should anything happen to me."

He stood and walked over to his trunk and placed a hand on it. "My Will is in the first compartment. Sirius also knows where it is, and Gringotts has a copy on file. Should anything happen, Hermione gets most of what I own."

"She doesn't want what you own, Harry. She wants you," Dan protested.

"I know. This is just a precaution. Besides, I'd rather decide who benefits, rather than seeing it go to the Dursleys. They don't deserve anything."

Dan nodded unhappily. This part of the conversation he would relate to Emma, but he'd never tell Hermione about it. His daughter was a realist, but this was a dose of reality that no one wanted to discuss. He stood and walked to the door. "Dinner will be in about an hour."

Harry looked up from staring at his trunk with that uncomfortable piece of parchment. "I'll be there," he replied.

Dan walked from the room, leaving the door open and Harry moved over to sit back down at his desk. He flipped open the textbook on snakes. *The answers are in here*, he thought sourly, *I just have to find them*.

12 Grimmauld Place, Jan 25 th 1998...

Harry tumbled out of the fireplace and frowned. He was lying on his back and mostly covered in soot.

"I thought you didn't use the Floo anymore?" Cindy asked. She sat on the couch looking at him in amusement.

She had been asked to join a partnership of doctors that consisted mostly of Squibs or wizards passing as Muggles. Until her office was completed, she was working from home, examining cases that she'd be taking over from a retiring doctor.

Harry climbed to his feet and cast a cleaning charm on himself. "I don't use the Floo if I can help it. But Floo is the only way in and out of the office at the Embassy."

"The Embassy? I would have thought you'd be snake handling today."

He shook his head. "No, I had to take the day off to go down to the Embassy to initiate a search for some information."

He looked at her intently. "You do know I'm not really serious about learning to handle snakes? I mean, I'm not going to capture Nagini. If I have my way, I'll find her and set the room on fire to kill her."

Cindy nodded. "I had wondered why you seemed so intent on learning something you weren't going to use."

Harry sat in a chair opposite from her and ran a hand through his hair tiredly. "It's something to do, I suppose. I can't spend any time searching the Forbidden Forest around the school. It's hip deep in snow and she's hibernating. According to what I've learned, she'll hibernate until sometime in April."

He paused and looked down at his hands. "I'm not used to being idle like this. I have a few items still to do, but none of it can be done now."

"So all this running around of yours is just something to keep you busy?"

He looked sheepish and nodded.

Cindy chuckled and closed the folder on the case file she was reading. "You know, you have a lot of people worrying about you."

He nodded. "I know, but keeping busy is the only thing keeping me sane. Otherwise, my only option at this point is to sneak into Hogwarts and

search the school from top to bottom.”

“Let’s say you find the snake. What then?”

“Easy. I kill it and remove the Horcrux,” he replied.

“Can you destroy it? I know Sirius said they were very difficult to destroy.”

He frowned and nodded slowly. “I think I can. We think the object inside the snake might be a gem that once belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw. If that’s the case, then I think I know a way to get the Horcrux out of the gem. If not, I’ll have to seal the Horcrux in a box and take it to a blast furnace to destroy it.”

“Will destroying it banish him or just free up his avatar?”

“No one knows,” he replied with a shrug.

“You want this very much, don’t you?” she asked gently.

He looked at her. “I want what you and Sirius have - what Dan and Emma have. Once this is done, I can really live with Hermione at my side. I just want to be normal, like everyone else.”

“But none of us are really normal, Harry,” she said softly. “Sirius is an animagus, and an ex-convict. Dan and Emma have their own quirks; even I have my foibles. No one is really normal. You’re a metamorph and you’re famous. Hermione is very intelligent and will be famous simply because she’s your girlfriend.”

Harry’s expression darkened and she held up a hand, holding him silent. “Let me try it this way. You’re a metamorph, right?”

“Yes.”

“Can Hermione be one?”

“No. You’re either born to be one or your not.”

Cindy nodded. “True. You were born a wizard. Can you become a Muggle?”

He frowned. “No. I could swear off using magic, but it would always be there.”

She leaned forward on the couch. “So, you’ll always be a wizard and you’ll always be a metamorph. You became famous, but the public is fickle, their memory won’t last. What will last is what you are.”

She paused and drew in a deep breath. “I’m an Internist. When I was studying, I thought about Oncology as a possible field.”

At Harry’s puzzled look she smiled. “An Oncologist treats cancer patients. I didn’t go into the field because there is so much pain and suffering. Too much for me to bear. I’ve had patients die on me before, but not like some who work in that field.”

She pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees. “I always thought I was a failure because I couldn’t hack one of the most difficult fields in medicine.”

He watched her intently. They’d had many conversations in the past, but none like this.

“It wasn’t until a few years ago that I realized that there really wasn’t anything wrong with me. This is who I am. That’s all we can ever be.

“We can’t change our fundamental makeup. You hate that you’re the Boy-Who-Lived, but when you finally kill off Voldemort’s soul, you’ll have earned that title for real. Think about it. Even if no one knows what you did, you will have earned the name they gave you as a toddler.”

Harry stared at her for a long moment, then he sighed heavily. “Just live as best you can because there is no normal?”

She smiled. “Tonks would say normal is boring. Just live, Harry. Take Hermione off to someplace where you won’t be hounded by the press and learn to live a regular day. Stop worrying about what’s normal and what isn’t.”

He nodded. “I can do that. Maybe we should go back to Fiji for a few weeks after she leaves school. Bring her grandmum along...”

He trailed off, thinking hard.

Cindy grinned, then stood and picked up her folders. She patted him on the shoulder before she left the room.

He was so caught up in what he was considering he barely noticed her leaving.

Upstairs, Dobby, dressed as a vampire, including enhanced teeth, smiled happily as he prepared a room for his Harry Potter Sir.

Headmistress's Office , Hogwarts, Feb 5 th 1998...

“Come in!” Minerva called from her desk. She was happy to have visitors. She was in the middle of another report to the Ministry, explaining why

they couldn't give lessons in how to handle a Nundu in Care of Magical Creatures class.

The door opened and Remus and Tonks entered. Tonks was floating a large crate behind her.

Minerva arched an eyebrow at the sight.

Remus sat down in one of the chairs facing her, while Tonks gently lowered the crate, then took the other chair.

Tonks waved her wand a few times, setting up privacy wards, then she nodded to Remus.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Minerva, but Harry had this box delivered and he wants to talk to all three of us," Remus said.

Minerva nodded. "Is he coming here?"

"No. We'll use the mirror to talk to him," he said as he pulled a small mirror out of his pocket. With a wave of his wand, he expanded it so it was nearly as big as a single printed sheet of paper. He propped the mirror against some books, then touched the corner, activating it.

"Harry Potter!" he called.

The surface of the mirror rippled like water and Harry's face appeared in the mirror.

"Remus, do you have Tonks and the Headmistress with you?"

"We're all here and we're burning with curiosity about the box," Tonks said.

Harry grinned. "I've been doing a fair amount of research concerning the behavior of snakes in the last month, and surprisingly some of it paid off. The box contains something we can use to help draw Nagini out."

"So you do think she's in the castle, Mr. Potter?" asked Minerva.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. "Honestly, Headmistress, I don't know. Wherever she is, I do know what she's doing right now and I know what she'll be doing when the winter ends and she wakes up."

Tonks stood and walked over to the crate. She used her wand to lift the top off and place it to one side.

"Normally, she'll hibernate until the ground temperature reaches anywhere from ten to fifteen degrees. If she's indoors, she'll wake sooner because the castle has a warmer temperature than outside.

"She's going to wake and will have one extreme priority. She'll need to eat, and that's where the contents of the crate come in. Has anyone opened it yet?" asked Harry.

"I've got it open," called Tonks. She held up a small white package.

"If you open one packet, you'll find that it contains a Muggle pest trap. It's meant to capture mice and rats. Each trap contains a triggered Portkey that will take the rat or mouse away from the castle. I don't want to be totally cruel, so the Portkeys will remove the rodents from the castle, dumping them in Sherwood forest. The traps themselves will reset after they send off a rat or mouse. My original thought was to dump the pests at Privet Drive, but I decided against it. That would be cruel to the animals," he said with a smirk.

"Starting in mid-March, we need to saturate the lower parts of the castle with those traps. Nagini should wake up around early to mid-April. If we fill all of the lower levels with these traps, we can cut back, maybe even eliminate, her food supply. With a little luck, the lack of lunch will force Nagini to leave the castle to find food.

"Remus, you need to pull that ward in until it covers just the castle itself and none of the grounds."

Remus leaned forward in his chair. "I can do that, Harry, but won't she see the ward? She must have spotted it when she came close to it. That's why she took an underground route."

"I'm hoping she won't see it mixed in with all of the other magic. Right now, the ward is a unique piece of magic and not intermixed with any other magic," Harry replied.

"How do you propose we distribute these things, Mr. Potter?" asked Minerva.

"You still have house elves there. Get them to do it, Ma'am, just make sure they don't do it alone."

"What will you be doing then, Harry?" asked Remus.

Harry's image in the mirror shrugged. "There's not much I can do until she comes out of hiding, Moony. Sometime in April I'll come back and set up camp in the Forbidden Forest. Once it gets warm enough, I may root around the castle some, but not a lot. And I still have some more research to do. This is effectively a double Horcrux. The soul component released will be stronger than usual. That means we can't just throw it into a blast furnace without extra precautions."

Remus took the small package from Tonks and opened it. Inside was a pop up plastic box with bait and a one way door. "We could have used these to catch Wormtail," he murmured.

Harry grinned in the mirror. "He received his justice, Moony. That's all that matters."

Minerva looked up with interest. She had not heard what happened to Pettigrew. "What happened?"

"I found his body in the old Riddle home," Remus replied. "As near as we can figure, he was killed by Nagini sometime around October of 1994."

"Right around the time of the tournament," Minerva said thoughtfully.

Harry nodded.

"So we start laying these traps out in March and hopefully we can drive Nagini out into the open," Tonks said. "I like it. I'd really like to see the end of this."

"You and me both, Tonks," Harry said. "I'd like to get on with my life."

"Speaking of that, Mr. Potter, I just thought I'd let you know Miss Granger is doing well. She's organized several study groups for all four houses. She looked a little tired, but not like earlier in the year."

"Thank you, Headmistress. I can't help but worry about her. I've only been able to visit once since she's returned to school. At least she won't have exams like I did. In the cold weather, my arm aches now thanks to that DADA exam."

"Yes, our exams are little more sedate. We don't expect our students to storm an Auror training camp," Minerva replied with a hint of a grin.

Harry blushed. "It wasn't my fault they didn't explain all of the details of the test."

Minerva glanced at the two grinning Professors in front of her and smiled tightly. "Yes, I'm aware of what happens when Professors fail to provide sufficient instructions."

Remus and Tonks looked away. They knew she wasn't talking about the Girls Dorm ward breaking; that was ancient history. No, she was still annoyed by the sixth years who hid a disillusioned hippogriff in her office. That was another project where they'd taken the lack of instruction and run with it.

"Remus, unless you need me for anything else, I'm going to go. I need to stop by the Japanese Embassy and see if there has been any response from my request for information."

"What are you looking for, Harry?" asked Tonks.

"I had an idea that the North American Indians might have magic that can deal with Voldemort's wraith. The request for information was sent through Embassy contacts. Once the Horcrux is broken, it will release a double fragment. In all of the previous Horcruxes, the soul fragment just dissipated because there was no consciousness associated with it. But this fragment contains a soul fragment and the independent wraith that existed when he was originally cast from his body. Will it just dissipate? I don't know, and unless Remus has changed his mind, he doesn't know what will happen, either."

Remus shook his head. "We just don't know what will happen. If we were destroying a regular Horcrux, the soul fragment would dissipate and that would be that. His wraith would lose its ability to anchor to this world and move onto the next plane. But like Harry pointed out, this isn't a regular Horcrux."

Harry waved and the mirror rippled again before turning a dull gray. The three sat silent, contemplating the possibility that destroying the Horcrux might not be the end of Voldemort.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Feb. 15 th 1998, Hogwarts...

It's been a very hectic month and a half and I haven't had much chance to write any private entries during that time. But I need to record these events.

Harry's been working extraordinarily hard, trying to learn about snakes and about spirit magic from North America. He also devised a rather clever plan to deny Nagini any food when she wakes up. He wants to force her into the open so that he can find her easier.

On the other hand, he nearly got caught here in Hogwarts!

I love Ginny, but she is turning out to be the nosiest girl I know. Ever since the announcement of her arrangement with Neville, she's been hanging out in my apartment a lot. She's been studying, but she also decided to use my little common room as a perfect place to plan her wedding, since she didn't have to deal with all of the Gryffindor girls and the catcalls from some of the less mature boys here.

I didn't mind, since I had agreed to her using the room under some strict rules and, for the most part, she willingly followed those rules. But one day she forgot her planner in the common room and she stopped by to pick it up before she went down for breakfast.

Unfortunately, she discovered Harry's invisibility cloak! She came into my bedroom demanding to know why I had it. I could feel the blanket next to me still settling to the bed because Harry had teleported away barely a second ahead of her entering the room. Naked.

I managed to get her to wait out in the common room until I could get dressed, and while I dressed, I quickly shoved all of Harry's clothes under my bed. I am certain she didn't notice them. I think. I hope.

Out in the common room, she confronted me about the cloak and I told her that Harry had sent it to me, which lead to me admitting that Harry did occasionally contact me through Sirius. She grilled me for nearly twenty minutes before I figured out that I could distract her by asking her a question about her wedding.

The problem is, I'm not sure she bought my story. She's a Weasley; she can smell a lie from a mile away, for Merlin's sake! And here I'm feeding her a tall tale about Harry living on a ranch in Wyoming and dating a Muggle cheerleader named Buffy. All I can do now is hope she didn't watch that Buffy movie like Harry and I did this summer.

All right, I'm smart; everyone says so. But I never said I was good at lying. After all, an eleven year old claiming she can take on a fully grown mountain troll? Honestly! How good of a liar can I be? I mean, I honestly thought blaming spilled milk on the cat would work with Mum. And I'll conveniently forget to mention that I was four at the time and we didn't have a *real* cat, just my imaginary cat named Bubbles.

And all the time I'm making up fairy tales, Harry has teleported someplace naked! I later learned from my Mum that he went to my house. My Mum stumbled on him coming out of my bedroom wearing my bathrobe. He crossed the corridor into the guest room where he kept his trunk.

The end result of this is that now Ginny watches me. I know she has more questions and she's just waiting to pounce.

After that, I changed the password to my door and now Ginny has to knock to enter the Head apartment.

The second time Harry visited was yesterday, on Valentine's Day, and I still smile just thinking about it. It was a night I'll never forget. We've had some pretty great sex before and I have absolutely no complaints about him as a lover. But sometimes he does things that don't involve sex that leave me totally stunned and I end up asking, when did my Harry take lessons in romance? Does he secretly watch romantic comedies when I'm not around or read the romance novels I keep on my night table? Well, I think I know the answer now.

He arrived here and the first thing he did was kiss me in a way that made me want him so badly. Afterwards, he didn't say a word, he just led me into the bed room and pressed his fingers to my lips, telling me to say nothing.

What followed was like nothing I've ever experienced. He conjured a huge wooden tub full of hot scented water, then he undressed me and helped me into it. He bathed me, from my toes to my ears. As he did, the lighting in the room lowered until there was just enough light to see by. From somewhere, I don't know where, music played softly. And he never once said a word!

When he was done, he lifted me from the tub and dried me off with the softest terry towels I've ever felt. He had even managed to remove the ever present chill from my room. For once the stone floor wasn't cold against my bare feet.

I'll admit, I've never been so pampered before and he had me so turned on. I expected him to take me to bed and make love to me, but that wasn't what he had in mind.

He laid me down on the bed on my stomach and started to massage my feet. I was startled for all of twenty seconds and then I relaxed. He slowly worked his way up my legs, massaging me. Every so often he'd stop long enough to apply a small dab of scented oil.

I melted. I became Hermione-the-Puddle. By the time he reached my shoulders, I was nearly asleep and he was showing no signs of stopping.

The next morning I awoke, still naked, from the best sleep I've ever had. There were several blankets covering us and the bed was so warm and toasty. I didn't care that I didn't have a stitch of clothing on.

It took me a long lazy minute contemplating the previous night before I realized that he had reenacted a scene from one of the novels I keep by my bed. He must have known from the way that book falls open to that particular scene that it was a favorite of mine.

When I finally focused on him, I found myself staring into those deep green eyes of his. He was awake and holding me loosely in his arms.

"You didn't stay up all night, did you?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "Not at all. Once I was sure you were asleep, I joined you. You've been working too hard again."

I looked away. He had somehow managed to learn how to look at me and leave me feeling ashamed of myself. It reminded me of the way Daddy can look at me and I know without him saying a word that he's disappointed. Harry rarely uses that look, but when he does, I know he's doing it because he cares what happens to me.

"I know, it just snuck up on me," I replied. Then a thought occurred to me and I smiled at him. "But if I start working too hard, you'll come along and do like you did last night, right?"

He leaned closer and kissed me with a chuckle. "My witch," he whispered.

I snuggled closer with him and kissed him hard. He was going to have to leave soon and after last night I wanted him so bad it hurt. He left an hour later than he had planned and I think he was almost as content as I was.

I'm already deep into a plan to turn the tables on him next time he comes here. He's also agreed to help me with my studying. He told me he wrote up what he remembered from his Transfiguration N.E.W.T. exam. I know his exam will be very different, but the quality of the questions will be a big help in preparing for the tests.

Hogsmeade, Feb 18 th 1998...

Soon now, very soon, thought Snape. He suppressed the urge to cackle and he looked at Gustav, who was busy making dinner for both of them. For more than a month, Snape had been hiding in Gustav's home, which he found fascinating.

Besides the clock room where Gustav saved time, there was the sacred repository of missing socks. Gustav explain that the room contained all the socks that go missing. Snape believed him; the room was full to the ceiling and the walls bulged ominously. Gustav earned extra money by pulling out the socks and selling them to Gladrags.

Another room was filled with balls of all shapes and sizes and which he, appropriately enough, called the Ballroom.

Needless to say, Gustav was playing with a short wand and he turned out to be an excellent playmate for Snape.

Snape had found that Gustav had a potions workshop in the basement, although he spent the majority of his time experimenting with Muggle chemicals. Keeping Gustav under the Imperius was tedious, so he brewed dose of Liquid Imperius, which bound Gustav to him permanently. Unlike the curse, which left the victim performing in an obviously controlled manner, the potion allowed the victim more freedom. An astute Auror or Potions Master might suspect the victim of being controlled, but Gustav's normal behavior was sufficiently strange so that no one noticed as he went about his business in town.

“Gustav,” Snape said from his chair.

The man turned to eye his friend eagerly. “Yes, my wonderful Master?”

Snape winced. No matter how many times he had told him to simply call him sir, the man's insanity was preventing the potion from assuming unwavering control.

“Have you found the key to that room in the basement yet?”

Gustav's expression fell. He hated failing the wonderful and powerful master. “No, Master. The locking spell is the best there is. It is, after all, the Holy room. How could I buy anything less than the best?”

Snape scowled. He had investigated every nook and cranny in this strange house, including the attic, where gravity was reversed, and the second floor bath, with miniature alligators in the bathtub. The only room he hadn't been able to enter was a room in the basement.

Snape blinked and his lucidity waned. “Curses! I'm sure there is something important in there.”

“It is the Holy room, Master. Of course, it's important,” Gustav said in agreement.

“Important enough to decimate those fool Hufflepuffs? I hate badgers.”

Gustav nodded and peered at Snape with watery eyes. “Truly, the Holy room contains a wondrous means for you to bring your enemies low.”

Snape bolted upright. “Like Gryffindors?” he hissed.

“Especially Gryffindors,” Gustav said smoothly. He knew exactly what to say to please his master.

Snape leaned back, relaxing. “Gryffindors,” he murmured. “They sneak into your rooms at night and fill your socks with the pudding you weren't allowed to have at dinner.” His head cocked slightly and his eyes became unfocused. “Oh, hello, Draco. Why are you wearing such a large codpiece?”

“It provides room for his fish, Master,” Gustav said.

Snape nodded understandingly. He should have thought of that.

12 Grimmauld Place, London, Feb 20 th 1998...

Sirius stopped when he passed the open doors to the main sitting room. Harry sat on the floor between the coffee table and the couch. On the table he had several books spread out and a long rolled up parchment.

“Harry? I didn't know you were coming over today.”

He looked up and smiled at seeing Sirius. “Dan and Emma are taking a long weekend, so I figured I'd crash here, if you don't mind. I could go up to the Manor, but no one's there except for a few elves.”

Harry had visited Potter Manor and found it in need of many repairs. Remus had been able to keep the grounds around the cemetery neat and well maintained, but only a Potter could enter the Manor. Because of that, it had been unattended all these years. Harry had hired several friends of Dobby's to fix up the Manor, but it still felt like a large tomb to him. He hoped that someday he and Hermione would be able to call it home, but that wasn't today.

Sirius nodded then walked over to the couch and sat down. “You know you're always welcome here,” he said. Then he leaned forward and eyed all the parchment and books. “What are you working on?”

Harry turned to the parchment on the table and nudged a bit of it. “I got this stuff a few days ago through my contacts at the Embassy. I have no

doubt I can destroy the Horcrux when we find it. Now I'm more concerned about being prepared to destroy the soul fragment."

Sirius leaned back and looked at him. "You don't think it will simply go away like the others did?"

"The other fragments didn't have the consciousness that this one has. That's a big difference."

Sirius looked pensive for a moment before acknowledging Harry's point. "All right, but since we're on the topic, there's something else I think we need to consider."

"What's that?"

"Your reintroduction to the Wizarding world in general. Once the last Horcrux is gone, Evan Black should slip into obscurity and Harry Potter should reenter the world. I'm sure Hermione wants to be Mrs. Potter, not Mrs. Black."

Harry sighed and leaned his back against the couch. "I hate to admit it, but you're right. What do you suggest?"

Sirius grinned. "Well, since you're asking. I used to say to your dad, if you have to do something, do it with flair."

Harry stared at him for a moment then groaned theatrically. "Oh, no. You're thinking of something real showy, aren't you?"

Sirius chuckled. "Well, think about it, Harry. We have to convince the Internationals and the Ministry that you've succeeded. Once they're convinced, they'll handle it from there."

Harry lowered his head to the table and banged it a few times. Then he looked up at Sirius. "You know, sometimes I think life was simpler when it was just me and Moony."

Sirius' face fell and he placed a hand to his chest. "You wound me!" he cried in mock anguish.

"Not mortally, unfortunately. All right, let's hear what the Marauder in your head is saying."

"What we need is a group from our Ministry, someone acceptable to the Internationals, and maybe one or two from the press who we can trust. Are you still sure you can destroy the Horcrux? It would be mighty silly to gather all these people and find you can't do it."

Harry's expression turned grim. "I can do it. Since we're dealing with some kind of gem, I've run a few tests. I'm afraid that I used up some of those loose gems that I found in the vault."

Sirius grinned. "Don't worry about it. Some of that stuff was downright ugly. You didn't break anything important, did you?"

He shook his head. "No, just loose gems, and some common stones I found in a stream while searching the Forbidden Forest. I made sure all my Mum's jewelry was put away before I even started looking."

He paused and looked thoughtful. "How are we going to do this, Sirius? I mean, I'm not happy about having the press there, but I guess it's necessary. But getting everyone together is going to be a problem."

"Let me handle it, Harry. I have the contacts we need. I just need you to create the Portkeys when the time comes."

When Harry nodded, Sirius stood. "I think I'll go see what Cindy is up to and when dinner is."

He walked out whistling a happy tune and Harry shook his head in amusement. He knew that Sirius was a real showman at heart. Whatever he thought up would be a surprise to nearly everyone. That's what frightened him.

From the Journal of Harry Potter (Private Entry), Mar 1 st 1998, London...

I talked with Remus and Tonks today. I teleported up to Hogwarts, after a very nice dinner with Dan and Emma, so I could confer with them. Starting tomorrow, the lower levels of Hogwarts are going to be cleaned like they've never been cleaned before. Then the elves are going to lay out the traps.

I had to remind Remus that the Headmistress should not patrol in her cat form. She'd make a nice Nagini snack, which is what we are trying to avoid.

I don't expect the snake to be awake yet, but the rodents are, especially in the warmer rooms in the castle. By starting early, I hope we'll cut back on the only local food source for that blasted snake. Remus also convinced the Headmistress to allow the juvenile elves to move into the Shrieking Shack. Some of those elves are just the right size for Nagini to take them.

Hermione and I have been talking a lot via our mirrors. She's been studying hard and I've been helping by questioning her using the mirrors. Last night was typical of our conversations.

"Next, it can be used as a stabilizing element in potions requiring erumpent fluid. And finally, it can be used as an oven cleaner..."

I smiled at her image. "Very good. You got the twelve uses of Dragon Blood down pat. Now, what's the incantation for a light spell?"

"*Lumos, Lumos Orbis* for a free floating point."

“And the counter?”

“*Nox* . Come on, Harry, these are first year spells,” she complained.

I grinned at her, then I started snapping questions at her as quickly as I could.

“Fine. The final incantation of the Fidelius ritual?”

“*Securus falsus dissimulo fidelita.*”

“To harden or solidify a liquid, and I don't mean freeze it.”

“*Congelo.*”

“To detect magic?”

“*Deprehensio veneficus.*”

“Name five poisonous plants used in potions.”

“*Digitalis purpurea, Hydrangea macrophylla, Nerium oleander, Onvallaria majalis* and *Wisteria sinensis.*”

“Good. Now, quickly name five reasons why you love me,” I said with a grin.

She stared at me for a moment as if she couldn't understand the question. “Five? I'm not sure I can come with that many,” she replied with a smirk.

“Hey!” I exclaimed.

“Well, stop fishing for compliments,” she replied with a large grin.

“I was just seeing if you were paying attention,” I muttered.

“Uh huh. When am I not paying attention?”

“Well, when I nibble on your earlobe you seem to lose...”

“Harry!”

“Yes?”

“Back to the topic. And trust me, there are a lot more than five reasons. There are too many to name here.”

“All right,” I replied smugly, then went back to reading questions off my list.

I won't say she's becoming obsessive, but I think this is giving me an interesting insight into her. For all the years before Hogwarts, she had few friends except her books. Hogwarts broadened her horizons and our being a couple broadened them even further. But her books and studying is like an emotional safety net for her. I believe that she still thinks of books as her friends and a test isn't really a test of her knowledge, but a test of how well she knows those friends.

It's silly, I know, but it's a very real part of who she is. I wouldn't change it for all the galleons in Gringotts. Emma is pretty much the same way. Dan even told me that when she was pregnant with Hermione, she spent her time reading books on pregnancy and child rearing.

As I see it, I have a couple things I need to do. I need to help her prepare as much as I can, even if that just means quizzing her via our mirrors at night. I also need to help keep her calm, which means she may have another couple baths and massages coming up.

Sirius and Remus didn't give me baths and massages, thank Merlin! But they did the same thing with jokes and humor. N.E.W.T.s are very stressful and having someone who can pull you back and make you breathe is essential.

Speaking of Sirius, he's changed his plans again and he won't share them with me! I swear he should have gone into show business.

I've told him that once I have the snake, he'll get notice from me and I'll wait only so long after that. Then I'm going to destroy the thing, with or without his dog and pony show.

I understand where he's coming from. I do have an obligation to the Internationals, especially the Pacific Rim Ministry and the Yanks. But it's my life we're talking about and I want it back. Since I was eleven, I've had this hanging over my neck like an axe ready to fall.

I want to be Harry again. I *need* to be Harry again. Every time I visit Hermione, I go as Evan and change back into my regular form once I'm sure she's alone. Just once I wish I didn't have to sneak around. I'd like be able to say “Hi, Ron!” and have him reply normally.

Somewhere along the line, Voldemort stole my parents, my friends and my life. And through all that, Hermione hasn't caught on to just how important she is. It's like she's my last link to Harry. Harry, Evan. Harry, Evan. Who am I? I know who I want to be, and once I catch that blasted snake, I'll be Harry again. I'll be *me* . The rest of the world can go hang, for all I care.

And here I go again, depressing myself and it's way too late to call up Hermione and talk to her. I think I'll go over that banishing ritual again.

Defense Against the Dark Arts Office, Hogwarts, Mar 25 th 1998...

Remus looked up when Tonks walked in and smiled. "Back so soon?"

She nodded unhappily. "Yeah. The Department Healer says if I come back I'll be on desk duty until I can re-certify the fitness exam."

"I thought you were doing all right with that?" Remus asked worriedly.

"I thought I was, too," she replied. "But my leg went lame five kilometers into the ten kilometer run."

"But all that exercise you've been doing?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I have an appointment with a specialist at St. Mungo's this weekend. I was warned this might happen and that I may never recover completely."

Remus frowned. "You have healed, unless you've been hiding it from me."

"I'm not hiding anything, Remy. The Healer told me if I go back I'll be stuck at a desk until I can pass that exam. Then she told me it was likely that I'd never pass it. You know how difficult that exam can be."

"A desk job," he murmured and she grimaced at him. "I know what that will do to you," he said softly.

She pulled her chair away from her desk and sat facing him. "What am I to do? All my life, all I wanted to be was an Auror." Her hair changed to a dull flat brown and she looked at him with watery eyes.

He stood and walked over to her, then knelt down and took her into his arms. "I know, but we'll find something. There are a lot of things you can do, it's just a matter of finding something you like." He cradled her in his arms and she sniffled against his shoulder. This was a far cry from the normally spunky ebullient young woman he knew. This was the Tonks who hid behind the metamorphagus.

"You sure?"

"I'm positive," he replied. "In fact, I know the school on Fiji still has positions unfilled. They sent me a notice about them, asking if I knew anyone capable of filling any of them. I was going to ask Sirius about the Transfiguration position, but maybe I should ask you, instead."

Tonks pulled her head off his shoulder and looked at him uncertainly. "Really?"

He grinned. "I have the note on my desk. As I said, I was thinking about talking to Sirius about it, but frankly he's enjoying his political games too much, and Cindy is now involved in that practice in London. Besides, I just happen to know an Auror who will be moving to Fiji with a certain Magical Creatures Professor. She might want something to do with her time that would allow her to be close to her husband."

Tonks wiped her eyes on her sleeve and smiled at him. "You always know how to cheer me up."

He chuckled. "I think I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen you really upset like this."

She pulled away and stood up. Stepping up to his desk, she rooted around the papers, looking for the note he was talking about.

"Help yourself," he said.

"Thanks, I will," she replied with a grin.

He shook his head, climbed to his feet and moved back to his desk. He pulled out one of the drawers, reached in and drew out the parchment she was looking for, and handed it to her.

She gave him a pouting look. "You said on your desk."

"I wasn't being literal."

Tonks smirked at him and walked back over to her desk to sit down and read the note from the Pacific Rim Ministry about the new Fijian School of Magic. Her eyes widened, seeing the large number of job openings they were trying to fill. *Surely there's something in here that would interest me*, she thought.

"Have you noticed anything?" Remus asked.

She tore her eyes from the parchment. "Huh?"

He motioned to a wall parchment that he'd tied to a ward. He had explained to her a few days earlier that it tracked the number of times Harry's traps triggered. Big block numbers read four hundred and seventy two.

"In just three days?" Tonks exclaimed.

"That was my thought, too. Although the number is slightly incorrect."

"Incorrect? How so?"

Remus grinned. "Four hundred and seventy one rodents have been Portkeyed out of the school, and one feline."

Tonks' expression broke into a huge grin. "Mrs. Norris?"

"Near as Minerva and I can determine, she chased a rat into a trap and reached in with a paw to grab it when the Portkey triggered," he replied, grinning back at her.

"Oh, boy," muttered Tonks, shaking her head.

"I'll say. Argus is most upset about it. I didn't want to tell him, but Minerva insisted on it. According to her, Argus has refused to leave his office. She even went so far as offering to find a kitten to replace Mrs. Norris. He refused, rather rudely, so she reminded him that he'd been warned to keep her locked up while the traps were in use and that the staff was too busy to be bothered to retrieve her."

Tonks snickered. "The castle is going to become snog city now. That blasted cat caught more students than he did." She paused and looked at the parchment on the wall again. "Still, that is a lot of rats. That snake is going to be without any morning snacks when it wakes up."

"Hopefully Harry's plan will work, but I'm not keen about other parts of it."

"Why not?"

"He's still talking about coming to the school to check the Chamber sometime in mid-April. I'm not happy with the idea of him exposing himself like that."

"He'll be here as Evan, and it can't take ten hours to check the Chamber. He'll be fine. Besides, he can always do that Auror teleport. While we're on the subject of Harry's ideas, have you moved in the ward?"

"Sirius and I pulled in the ward this morning, while you were at the Ministry."

Tonks smiled and stood up, then she walked over to him, swiveling him in his chair so she could straddle him. "You were never this lively two days after a change. That new potion seems to be working well."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. "It's great," he said huskily, then he leaned in and sniffed along her neck.

Tonks smiled to herself. She knew he couldn't help it. It was the wolf in him. She thought it was kinky and rather enjoyed it.

Hogsmeade, April 1 st 1998...

Severus Snape groaned and refrained from going downstairs to kick Gustav's body again. His leg had been badly broken and he had resorted to field medicine, which fixed the break without setting the bone properly, all because Gustav had forgotten the key to the locking spell on the Holy Room.

Snape gritted his teeth and bit back a snarl. He might be insane, but he wasn't stupid. He had misunderstood Gustav when he told Snape about the Holy room. He should have suspected it, considering the fact that he had a room that saved time, and the great sock repository.

The Holy room contained a hole. A thirty foot deep, rock lined shaft, to be precise. Obviously someone had tried to build a well and had come up dry. Or perhaps it was intended to be a cistern.

Snape didn't know and he didn't care. He just knew that after days of working to break the locking spell, he had accomplished it. He threw open the door, stepped into the darkened room, and promptly fell to the bottom of the shaft.

It took Snape nearly four excruciating hours to climb out of the hole once he found his wand and managed to heal the broken bone. When he got to the top he found Gustav waiting calmly, hoping his friend would be proud of his excellent holey room.

He lay panting and shivering on the cold basement floor while Gustav waxed poetic over the majesty of his glorious holey room and, in a snit, Snape uttered the one set of words one should never say to someone controlled by Liquid Imperius.

"Merlin, I wish you would drop dead already and be quiet!" he snapped.

Gustav, ever obedient, nodded happily and did just that, keeling over on top of Snape's injured leg, causing him to scream in pain and pass out. When he awoke, many hours later, Gustav still lay atop his injured leg, dead as a doornail.

That had been exactly five days ago and Snape was starting to worry. Gustav was making the house smell, despite the preservation charm and an air freshening charm. He had been tempted to burn the body, but the smoke might have attracted unwanted attention.

As far as his leg was concerned, the bone had healed, but at a strange angle, giving him a rather difficult limp and he ached continuously because of it.

"Stupid Gustav! He must have been a Gryffindor," muttered Snape as he rummaged through the larder. Finally, he stepped back and grunted. The

cupboard was bare!

That thought made him giggle. "No bones for the doggie. Oh, Lupin, I'm coming for you."

His head snapped up and he turned to glare into one corner of the kitchen.

"Dammit, Longbottom! I said counter-clockwise, you dunderhead! Don't you know which way the clock goes? Follow the tick tock!"

He turned away and limped to the cold box. He opened it and saw it was still empty. It had been empty the last five times he had checked it, too!

"Blast and damnation! I must have food," he grumbled. A foul odor wafted up from the basement and his nose crinkled. That source of food was no longer an option.

He glance out the window and remembered the road leading out of the small village and up to the castle. There would be food at the castle, and dunderheads who needed punishing, and Lupin.

He hobbled out of the empty kitchen, muttering to himself. He would need to make plans and quickly.

The Great Hall, Hogwarts, April 2 nd 1998...

Hermione stepped sleepily into the hall. She had been up late last night revising for her N.E.W.T.s, despite her promise to Harry. She had made a mental note to talk to him about it. She just couldn't help herself and she was worried that she was starting to obsess over the exams.

She skidded to a halt and blinked in surprise. The hall wasn't very full, perhaps twenty students in all, but they, and the one teacher were crammed into a corner. Professor Vector glared at someone behind Hermione.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Miss Know-It-All," sneered a voice she thought she'd never hear again.

Slowly she turned around.

Severus Snape stepped out from behind the door. He held a first year Hufflepuff by one arm. The boy's other arm flopped uselessly at his side and he whimpered in pain. Snape held his wand to the boy's temple and the boy gave Hermione an appealing look that tore at her.

"So, they made the bushy haired rabbit Head Girl?" Snape asked.

"What do you want?" she spat. *Time! I must delay him*, she thought frantically. *Harry! Oh, Merlin, what would Harry do in a situation like this? Help isn't far away. Keep him talking.*

The Power of the Press

Chapter 9 - Year Seven Spring (part 2)

Snape tightened his grip on the Hufflepuff and the boy whined in pain.

"Now, now, Miss Granger, that is no way to talk to your betters. Mudblood bitch! You're just like the others. You want my supply of boomslang skin!"

"I wouldn't do that to you, sir," she said in a meek tone.

He glared at her. "Ten thousand points from Gryffindor, you slut! And tonight in detention I will teach you to spank Longbottom's bottom until he glows."

He's nuts! she thought frantically, though she nodded as submissively as she could.

Her hand shifted and his eyes narrowed. "Your wand, bitch. Toss it behind me."

She reached for her wand, then froze when he snarled, "Your other hand. Use your other hand to draw your wand."

She reached for the wand with her left hand. Someone behind her coughed and his eyes darted to a point over her shoulder. She snapped her hand outwards and as soon as the wand left her fingers, at the same time she cast a stunner at Snape using her ring.

Snape's eyes jerked back to her. He had enough time to shove the student away violently and then the beam made contact. He went down in a heap. Hermione leapt over him and snatched her wand up in her hand, then she spun on one heel to face him.

"Stupefy! Incarcerous!" she shouted, stunning him again and binding him tightly with ropes. *"Levicorpus!"*

Snape's bound body rose and she moved him away from the pile of wands.

Professor Vector ran over to get her wand and assist, if she could. She pressed a hand against a wall and a two tone alarm began to ring through out the castle. Heavy gears began to grind and the mammoth doors in the entrance hall slowly swung shut.

Vector looked at Hermione, who was staring at her. "It's an emergency lock down. The Headmistress will be here any minute, along with all of the other teachers. Those students still in their houses are being locked in."

The sound of running feet prevented Hermione from responding to Vector's comment. Remus and Tonks ran into the Great Hall, wands drawn. A moment later, Minerva appeared in her cat form, which she quickly discarded.

Tonks knelt over the injured Hufflepuff, who was cradling his arm and sniffing, while Remus restunned Snape, just to be on the safe side. Tonks waved her wand, stabilizing the injury, then she conjured a stretcher and gently lifted the boy onto it. Just then, Professors Sprout and Flitwick arrived.

Minerva signaled to Sprout, who gasped, seeing one of her students injured and visibly distraught.

"Pomona, take Mr. Winters up to Poppy. Filius, go to my office and use the Floo to contact the DMLE. Tell them that Hogwarts is in lock down and we've captured their missing prisoner," Minerva ordered.

Hermione walked over to a table and sat down heavily on the bench. The morning's events were taking their toll on her.

Tonks sat down next to her and conjured a steaming cup of hot chocolate. "Are you all right?"

Hermione wrapped both hands around the cup, but her hands were shaking too much to lift it. "I'm not sure," she said softly. She looked at her shaking hands with a touch of disgust.

"You know, when Evan captured that Death Eater, his hands shook afterwards, too. It's because your body is washing out the adrenalin," Tonks said softly.

Hermione looked up. "He never told me that," she replied quietly.

Tonks grinned. "Well, you know men. They don't want to admit they have the jitters from time to time."

"I'll have to ask him about it."

Tonks laughed. "Just be prepared when you see him next. If he's like Remus, he'll be trying to hug the stuffings out of you."

Hermione smiled, then cautiously lifted the cup to her lips. Her jitters were noticeably decreased. "I can live with that," she murmured. A hug from Harry would have been very welcomed right then.

"Miss Granger?" Minerva said. "Professor Vector says you are responsible for capturing Mr. Snape and releasing Mr. Winters."

"Yes, Headmistress. I stunned him. I didn't know what else to do," Hermione said warily.

Minerva stepped closer. "She also seemed to think you managed to cast a stupefy from a wand that had already left your fingers?"

Tonks nudged Hermione under the table with her foot. Her focus ring was still hidden and no one knew about it. “No, Ma'am. I had my wand, but I was so nervous I actually threw it after casting the spell.”

Minerva's lips tightened and she leaned in closer. “Then that will be the story you'll tell the Aurors when they arrive,” she said, then her voice dropped to a whisper. “I won't press, Miss Granger, but you're still a terrible liar.”

Hermione looked down at the table and blushed heavily. It didn't help that Tonks was busy chortling next her.

Minerva straightened and closed her eyes as she connected to the wards of the school. Her wand glowed a soft pink while she worked the magic. Around the school, shutters screeched and banged open. The massive locking bolts on the main doors swung back into their rest position and the doors opened again.

When she opened her eyes, she turned to Hermione. “Miss Granger, you and Professor Vector will join me in my office. I will let the Aurors interview you there. Miss Tonks, Professor Lupin, once the Aurors arrive, please pass the word that all scheduled morning classes are canceled. Students should confine themselves to either their Common Rooms, the library or the Great Hall.”

Tonks nodded and walked over to join Remus, who was guarding Snape.

Deep inside Hogwarts, April 2 nd 1998...

Nagini raised her head and tasted the air. She was hungry and a little grumpy. There had been a loud grating noise and her hiding place trembled several times. Something was happening above her and she could feel it in the stones she lay upon.

It was early, but not by much. Besides, the warm air from the eternal furnaces heated the room nicely, making it difficult for her to stay asleep much longer.

Inside her, Tom roused from his strange dreams. He had nightmares of green eyes burning with an internal light and glowing hands that threatened him. He could feel anger from the one with the green eyes, but it wasn't anger fueled by hatred. No, this was anger fueled by righteous indignation and a desire for justice.

Tom tried to put those dreams out of his mind and concentrate on the task at hand. His connection to the snake had improved during the long hibernation. He had made no demands on the snake and used the long sleep to rest and let his strength accumulate.

Nagini looked around and tasted the air again. Her belly was empty and she had a burning need to put something in it. The air tasted of the furry food that scampered along on little feet, but the taste was old, as if it had been here and had gone away. That worried her. She wanted something to eat.

She slithered off her perch and examined the room again. There were three passages into the room that she could reach. One of them, she knew, would take her outside. Of the other two, one went up and the other went down.

“Down! Down! Take the downward heading passage!” shouted Tom.

“Down! Down! Take the downward heading passage!” whispered the voice in the back of her head.

Nagini examined the downward passage for a moment, but she could taste nothing from the hole. Either there was nothing to eat down there, or some kind of two legged magic prevented the tastes from coming up the passage.

With that in mind, she slithered up the other passage. She decided she would nest in the warm room, so she left her scent, which she could use to find her way back. Another time she'd listen to the voice in her head. Right now, she needed food.

Hogwarts, Gryffindor Head Girl's apartment, Apr 2 nd 1998...

Hermione stepped into the small Common Room and trudged over to her desk. The day had been exhausting. She had been interviewed, multiple times, by different Aurors. Then the Aurors compared stories and come back for clarification on points. And everyone that had been in the Great Hall with Snape had to see a mind healer to make sure that Snape hadn't Confunded them, or used something darker.

By the time they finally released her, it was after the dinner hour and she was emotionally and physically drained and very hungry. Minerva had sent for some food for the people being interviewed, but she hadn't had much chance to eat anything.

She barely had a moment to place her book bag on her desk when a pair of arms engulfed her. She turned in the embrace, a smile pulling at her lips. It slipped when she saw the look of intense worry on his face. His eyes swept over her face, then up and down her body as if he were looking for something.

“Harry?”

“I nearly lost you,” he said, then he pulled her close, burying his face against the nape of her neck.

She tightened her grip on him. “Hey, I'm fine. The training you helped teach me did the trick.” She felt him shiver in her arms. “Harry, look at me.”

He reluctantly lifted his head away and looked into her eyes. The worry and fear were clearly written in his expression. She reached up with one hand and touched his cheek. "I'm fine. You're fine. We're fine. Snape is heading back to prison and everything is going to be all right. How did you find out?"

"Your Mum called me on my mobile from the surgery. I was in London, at the library. She apparently heard from Sirius, via an owl, and was very upset. She said you dueled with Snape and a student had been injured."

Hermione blanched and let go of Harry. "My Mum? Oh, Merlin, what did Sirius tell her? I wasn't injured, a first year Hufflepuff was. And I didn't duel with him, I surprised him with a ring based stunner."

Harry blinked and for the first time in over an hour relaxed and smiled a bit. "Sirius must have heard it from Remus and got the story mixed up."

"Maybe," she said dubiously. "But my Mum is probably worried sick by now if you're any example of what she thinks."

She turned and paced in front of him for a moment before turning back to him. "I'm going to pop down to my parents and let them know I'm fine. Do you want to come with me?"

Harry frowned for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I think I'll meet you there. First I'm going to stop by Grimmauld and talk with Sirius. I hope he just got things mixed up and this isn't a joke of his. Do you want me to follow you to Oxford first? This will be your first long distance teleport."

She grinned saucily at him. "There's a first time for everything."

He grinned back, knowing full well she wasn't talking about teleporting.

"Let Remus know where I'm going, so he can tell the Headmistress?" she asked.

He nodded and pulled out his mirror. He also made a mental note to see about adding the charms to her mirror so that she'd be able to talk to more than just him. Creating the mirrors was a complex process and very time consuming, which was why her mirror was one of the simpler ones. "I'll take care of that now."

She nodded and teleported away.

An hour later, Harry appeared in the shadows in front of the Granger's home in Oxford. It was full dark and only a small sliver of a waning moon and only the streetlights lit the street. He walked up to the door and rang the bell. He didn't want to barge in if Hermione was still dealing with Emma.

The door opened and Dan grinned at him. "Well, I was wondering when you'd show up. What took you so long?"

Harry slipped in through the open door. "I had to talk to Sirius. I wanted to find out why Emma had the story so wrong."

Dan frowned. "He wasn't pulling a fast one, was he?"

Harry shook his head. "No, but let me explain this in front of everyone. It'll save me having to repeat it."

Dan nodded and led him into the living room where Hermione and Emma sat. Emma's face showed that she had been crying, but she was calm now. Hermione smiled broadly, seeing him enter.

"Look what the cat dragged in!" Dan quipped from the doorway.

Harry walked in and sat next to Hermione. He closed his eyes for a moment, shaking his head, then he turned and split his attention between Hermione and Emma. "All right, I spoke with Sirius. It wasn't a prank of any sort. He had been speaking to Remus about what happened and Remus was talking to several people at the same time, Tonks, the Headmistress and an Auror named Shacklebolt. Between all of them, Sirius got confused, but he could see he wasn't going to get anything out of Remus. So he decided to go with what he knew; Hermione fought Snape and a student was injured. He wanted your parents to know that something had happened. He never meant to scare anyone."

Harry paused and he grinned slightly. "I think Cindy was planning on talking to him rather sternly about scaring your parents. But he was sorry. Sirius is too much of a practical joker to resort to something subtle like this."

His grin became a smirk. "On the other hand, I couldn't leave him without some form of revenge. When I left him, his hair was growing as the rate of about a foot a minute. It was really disturbing to see the hair sliding out from under his short sleeves."

Harry watched Emma and Hermione laugh. He was relieved to see that the tension was almost entirely gone.

Dan winked at him. He knew exactly what Harry was doing by telling about Sirius' hairy little problem.

Hermione turned back to Emma. "So are you all right now, Mum?"

Emma nodded and sniffed a little. "I'll be fine, dear. It's just that..."

"It's been a difficult year," Dan said, finishing for his wife. "Between Harry off on his snake hunt and you in a school that might be housing that snake, we've been dreadfully worried."

Harry leaned back on the couch and he gently rubbed Hermione's back. "I can understand that. But I think things would have been so much direr if Dumbledore were still around."

That's not really it, Harry," Dan replied. He walked over to stand behind Emma and placed a hand on her shoulder for support. "I won't say we've grown used to the idea of you being in danger. But I think we've come to accept it. No matter how much we hate it, we know you hate it even more. The only consolation was that, for the most part, Hermione was safe.

"I think that, today, a lot of illusions were shattered. I know she's fine and wasn't injured, but she had to fight an escaped prisoner, and a child was injured. It's a jarring wake up call, no matter how you try to explain it.

"It was only a short while ago that the two of you were shyly holding hands and walking barefoot down the beach on Fiji. Now you're a trained wizard and Hermione will be one in a matter of months. Emma and I sit back and wonder where the time went. Where did the kids go?"

"We grew up, Daddy," Hermione replied softly.

Dan smiled a bit wistfully. "I know, pumpkin, and I couldn't be more proud of either of you. But your Mum and I wish it hadn't happened so soon. It's a scary thing for a parent to realize that he or she can't shield their child from the world anymore."

Hermione's eyes glistened and she gripped Harry's hand tightly.

"We'll be careful," Harry promised. The emotions from the elder Grangers was deeply moving to him. Sirius and Remus loved him and he knew that, but both would gleefully run into the burning building with him. Dan and Emma were asking for something more difficult; caution.

Emma smiled at him. "I know you will, Harry. Everything you've done for Hermione since you were forced from that school has been designed to keep her safe and in your life. We owe you for our daughter's life. She fought and won today, because she had you showing her how."

Harry flushed looked down and Hermione shot him a warm glance. Her mother's words were true. She wouldn't have been able to beat Snape with just her Hogwarts training. She sighed and looked over at her parents. "It's all over. I did what I had to and Timothy, the student who was injured, will probably be released from hospital by tomorrow. There are no more escaped prisoners to worry about, so I think I can safely go back to worrying about my exams."

She glanced at her watch. "I should be getting back to school."

She stood and smiled at her parents, then she turned to Harry and gave him a grin before vanishing again.

Harry stood uncertainly. He knew he couldn't go back to Grimmauld tonight. "Maybe I'll go up to the manor. The elves had the bedrooms fixed up now."

"Go to her, Harry. She'll need you tonight," Dan urged quietly.

Harry nodded and another thought occurred to him, then he too vanished from sight.

Thirty minutes later, he reappeared in Hermione's rooms. She looked up from her desk, startled by his appearance. "I didn't think you were coming back."

She looked at him, puzzled, when he held up a shopping bag. Then the smell hit her. "You brought dinner!"

"That Indian curry you like," he replied.

"I just may have to keep you."

"I hope so. I was going to head up to the Manor, since I doubt Sirius is going to want me around tonight, but your Dad told me to go after you, and I wasn't sure if you ate or not today."

"No, Sirius would not appreciate you showing up now. Not unless you know a nice depilatory spell," she replied, taking the bag from his hands. She pulled out several warm containers, then looked at him. "Stay. I mean, stay the night. I know it's not our regular meeting time, but I think I'd like to be held, especially tonight."

He grinned and reached for a container. "I'd like that."

Daily Prophet Headline, Apr 3 rd 1998...

Escaped Prisoner Severus Snape captured at Hogwarts!

Severus Snape, the last of the at large prisoners who escaped from their parole hearings last August, was captured yesterday in desperate combat with the Head Girl of Hogwarts.

Hermione Jane Granger, a Muggle-born , engaged the wanted criminal after he had forced his way into the school and was holding students hostages. Miss Granger, of Oxford, England, encountered the deadly criminal on her way to breakfast. Snape was said to be torturing a first year student named Timothy Winters. Mr. Winters was injured, but was treated at the school and did not require further hospitalization.

Snape escaped from a parole board hearing along with four other dangerous inmates. Investigation and questioning under Veritaserum has revealed that while on the run, Snape committed a number of additional crimes, including casting Unforgivables and murder.

Escaping automatically added ten years to his prison sentence. However, Ministry spokesman Perky Weatherbee told the Prophet that the added charges would result in the DMLE seeking the Kiss for Snape.

In an unusual twist of fate, Miss Granger is one of the students, along with Harry Potter and others from Gryffindor house, that Snape was sent to prison for abusing. Miss Granger is said to be engaged to a cousin of Sirius Black. Black was a childhood friend and schoolmate of Mr. Snape.

Hogwarts suffered no damage during the incident and Headmistress McGonagall praised the quick thinking and actions of Miss Granger. "Her actions resulted in a timely end to what could have been a dire situation. Hogwarts owes a debt of gratitude to Miss Granger and, with the approval of the Board of Governors, she will receive an award for special services to the school," McGonagall said.

The Office of the Minister agreed with the Headmistress's comments, adding that, "Miss Granger will receive the reward for capturing the wanted felon and the Minister herself will petition the Wizengamot to award Miss Granger an Order of Merlin, Third Class."

Sources close to Miss Granger told the Prophet that she was a close friend of Harry Potter and was helpful when he received his award for special services in his second year. Rumors persist to this day that the young student is in contact with Harry Potter. Miss Granger will neither confirm nor deny those rumors.

The trial of Severus Snape is scheduled to be held on April 25th in Courtroom 10...

Snape, a complete list of the charges, page 2.
Wand mishap injures 4, St Mungo's stymied by magical butt ock removal, page 3.
Veela-made products improve Wolfsbane potion, page 5.
Minister eases hiring restrictions, page 5.

Quibbler Headline, Apr 3rd 1998...

Ministry in Cahoots with Muggles!

In an exclusive report, the Quibbler has discovered that Ministries all around the world are participating in a conspiracy to allow the enslavement of magical creatures. We first became aware of the problem during a field expedition to America and something called a super market. And we'll freely admit we never did find out why its super, but there's no understanding those strange Americans.

In the super market we discovered that a company called Keebler has enslaved a race of elves and forced them to live in trees, baking biscuits for Muggles! Shocked by this discovery, we searched deeper and discovered that Leprechauns are being forced to make enchanted marshmallows for a Muggle breakfast food. A marshmallow is a sweet made from unripened peat bogs, or so we've been told.

Another Muggle company has enslaved a fairy and forces her to fly around their castle anytime they want.

This cannot be allowed to continue. We contacted the American Department of Magic to ask them about it, but they suggested that since we're a British publication, we should contact the British Ministry, who refused to return our Floo calls.

So we waited outside of the Ministry building until we could find our good friend, Mr. Weatherbee. After he got over his anger for our stunning and tying him up, he turned out to be rather cooperative. Perky reported that the Ministries worldwide don't care what the Muggles do, as long as it doesn't affect them. He then noted that the elves and fairies were being fed regularly and were as happy as our house elves.

To insure that Perky didn't get in trouble for telling us this, we did as he requested and Obliviated him, multiple times. Get Well cards, flowers and candy can be sent to Perky Weatherbee, c/o St. Mungo's long term spell damage ward.

Coming next week.
Harry Potter hired as Seeker for Holyhead Harpies. Says Polyjuice is wonderful stuff!
Ministry Spokesman attacks Newspaper publisher. Ministry Covers it up!

Hogwarts, Apr 10th 1998...

Nagini was not a happy snake. She had managed to avoid being spotted several times by the elves working in the castle. Unfortunately, the room in which she found the elfling was empty and tasted of misuse. Obviously, the children had been moved into areas of the castle that she couldn't risk entering.

And if that wasn't bad enough, the lower levels no longer smelled of food. She had caught some tantalizing tastes near some strange boxes, but nothing else. She had almost caught a small tasty creature, but it had run into one of those strange boxes and vanished from sight.

She sat patiently in front of the box for three days waiting for the food to come out, but it never did. Desperate, she made her way through the drain pipes until she found herself at an opening that led outside.

Tom looked at the opening through the snake's eyes and could see all sorts of magic covering it. He screamed at the snake to be cautious, but it was too late. Nagini had the scent of a rabbit that had been eating grass near the drainage opening.

Driven by hunger, Nagini slithered out of the pipe, practically on top of the rabbit, and struck with lightening speed.

Up in the Defense Against the Dark Arts office, a parchment with a map of the castle turned red and started emitting a soft bell tone. Unfortunately, the office was empty. The map stayed red until Nagini recrossed the boundary an hour later. A small notation was made to the map to mark the time of the crossings and the map color reset. The ringing stopped.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Apr 10 th 1998, Hogwarts...

The Headmistress told me today that I will be receiving an award for special services to the school at the leaving feast. Honestly, I never gave much thought about it, but then she told me that she'll make sure my award sits next to Harry's in the award case. That made me smile.

Of course, Harry's award means more. I mean, he saved the whole school from the basilisk in the Chamber. I just saved one student from a deranged ex-professor. Snape's quite mad, but there is no insanity plea in the Wizarding world. I wouldn't wish it on anyone, but they say he's going to be Kissed for killing that poor man in Hogsmeade.

The Headmistress said that there is a lot of support for giving me an Order of Merlin. Frankly, I don't care about that. I didn't do what I did for awards or rewards. I won't even admit this to Harry, but I did it because I was scared out of my wits. I knew Snape was insane and I didn't know what he'd do. For a brief moment, I even forgot I was wearing my focus ring!

Note to self: In the future, when faced with deranged ex-professors, remember I'm wearing an extra spell focus.

The Headmistress also gave me a Gringotts draft that the Ministry sent over. It's a thousand galleons; the reward for capturing Snape. The money will help. There's this bridal robe I like that will cost nearly two hundred galleons. I had been saving up money for it, but now I can buy it outright. I haven't told Harry this, but I think I'd like to enroll in Mitsumi in the fall as Mrs. Potter.

Harry was so sweet that night. He brought dinner, which was fabulous. I was starving!

And afterwards, I think he stayed up most of the night watching me to make sure I didn't have nightmares. And I haven't had any, when he's here. It's when I'm alone that the nightmares begin.

Sirius sent me a note, apologizing for scaring Mum and Dad. And he sent them a rare bottle of Napoleon Brandy, which I know they will appreciate. He also offered to let Harry and me use the house on Fiji for a week, without supervision. When I told Harry that, he nearly exploded. Then he rather bluntly told me that he owns that house, not Sirius.

Sometimes I think Sirius and Ron must be brothers. They both have an amazing ability to get themselves in trouble by opening their mouths.

The morning after Snape's capture, Ron asked me why I risked my neck over a Hufflepuff. Hannah, who was sitting next to him, dropped her fork and turned to stare at him. She is rather proud to be a 'Puff, and she's been making her displeasure at that comment known ever since.

I never thought I'd say this, but she's got Ron groveling for forgiveness and he grovels rather well. I'd take lessons from her except that, for the most part, Harry rarely does anything that makes me mad enough to make him grovel.

That isn't to say he's perfect. The same curry that I love so much apparently gives him gas, much to his embarrassment. And he'll occasionally blurt something out, but usually nothing as bad as what Ron seems to do on a routine basis.

Hmmmm... Could it be an act? Could Ron be doing it deliberately? He's not that stupid; he can't be. But Hannah seems to enjoy pushing him around. Maybe he enjoys it. Just who wears the pants in that couple? Considering Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, it is possible that Ron likes an assertive woman.

I wonder if I can ask Ginny? Maybe not. Ginny seems to be channeling Mrs. Weasley a lot, too.

The Chamber of Secrets, Hogwarts April 11 th 1998...

Nagini slithered out of the hole and immediately knew something was wrong. The air tasted of death. Big death.

She reared up in an instinctive reaction and looked around.

Tom crowed. Finally, they would get the help they so badly needed. With the Basilisk to aid them, they would take the school and chase out the wizards. Then, he could spend the time researching what needed to be done to fix his problem. He'd transfer the Horcrux to the Basilisk and use its magic to give himself a new body!

Tom pushed his connection to Nagini with all his power. *"Lights!"* the snake hissed in response to his command.

Torches flared and Nagini raised her head higher, looking around warily.

Then her eyes fell upon the body of the Basilisk. It lay in a pool of stagnant water, barely affected by the death that claimed it years ago. The poisons within the body and the cold environment of the Chamber had slowed the natural process of decomposition.

Nagini slithered forward through the stagnant pool. It was foul with mud and the accumulated muck of the centuries. She stopped inches away from the great snake and took in its injuries; its eyes were destroyed, a fang lay on the ground nearby and blood had spilled from its mouth.

She backed away, leaving grooves in the mud, and turned, heading straight for the exit. Whatever killed the great one was a powerful force, and

one that she did not wish to encounter.

"Nooooooooo!!!!!" Tom howled in the silence of his prison. In his despair, he lost his tenuous grip on the snake and slipped into the Horcrux.

Nagini paused just in front of the exit. The voice in the back of her head suddenly cut off and it puzzled her. The torches flared and went out as what little that remained of Tom's magic collapsed back into the Horcrux with his consciousness. To Nagini, that was an ominous signal. She dived straight into the hole.

It wasn't far to her nest, where she could rest for a while before she hunted again. This was a good place to live.

Defense Against the Dark Arts Office, April 13th 1998...

Tonks opened the door to the knock and Harry slipped inside. "I got your message to come immediately."

He wore a hooded cloak that concealed his face, and was dressed in soft blue dragon hide from head to toe. Even the gloves he wore were dragon hide. It was the closest thing he could come up with to a bite proof suit.

"Harry, come in," Remus said quietly.

Harry stepped into the room and pushed back his hood. Tonks closed the door and leaned against it. Remus sent off a messenger Patronus to inform the Headmistress that Harry had arrived, then he passed a parchment across the desk to Harry.

He took the parchment and examined it. "This looks like a map of Hogwarts, like the Marauder map, but not as detailed. And what's this in the corner? A date and time?"

Remus scowled. "I'm sorry, Harry. I screwed up big time. I brought the ward in like you suggested, then Sirius had an idea of tying it to a map. I took the idea and hooked the ward into this map, but I didn't take into account the snake recrossing the ward. The time and date indicates when the ward was triggered."

Harry looked down at the map and grimaced. "That was three days ago! Why are we finding out about it now?"

Remus wiped his face tiredly. "The map is charmed to turn red and make noise when the ward triggers. I wasn't careful enough, I'm afraid. I made a mistake when I made the map. It reset once the snake recrossed the ward."

Harry paced back and forth for a moment. A knock came from the door and Tonks opened it a crack, then opened it all the way to let Minerva into the room.

"Good evening, Headmistress," Harry said, halting his pacing long enough to acknowledge her.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter. I take it from wear and tear you're inflicting on my castle that they've told you about the snake?"

Harry stopped pacing and looked sheepishly at her for a moment. *Why does she always make me feel like I'm a first year?* he thought. *I haven't been her student for four years!*

"I think we need to check the Chamber of Secrets," he said. He raised a hand to gesture to the map. Before he could do so, the sword of Gryffindor appeared in it. He stared at it, unsure about what had just happened.

Tonks stared at the sword and Remus began to laugh.

"What the hell?" Harry muttered.

Minerva smiled. "It should be obvious, Mr. Potter. You are the last remaining heir of Gryffindor. The sword knows you may need it, and you are its rightful owner."

He shook his head, then turned to Remus. "Well? Are you up for a trip to the Chamber?"

"Now?" Tonks asked incredulously.

He grinned at her. "Why not? At best, there's a live snake down there. At worst, a big, stinking dead one."

Remus stood. This was a chance he wasn't about to pass up. "I'm going."

Tonks looked at him as if he was nuts, then she shrugged. "Why not? I'm sure it's more fun than spending my evening with my fiancé."

"Hey!" Remus protested.

Tonks stuck her tongue out at Remus.

Harry grinned, then turned to Minerva. "Headmistress?"

"The cat in me is curious. It's an area of the Castle I've never seen."

He smiled and reached into his bag. He pulled out a tight fitting hood, which he slipped on, then he put a pair of fingerless gloves on.

"Dragon hide?" asked Minerva.

Harry nodded as he went about checking the fitting of the suit. "Yes. If you spot the snake, don't approach it. Let me deal with it."

When the others nodded, he pulled the hood on his cloak up and walked out of the room.

"I guess we follow him," Tonks muttered.

Remus was already heading for the door.

The trip down to the cavern was smoother than the last time Harry had taken it. Once the sinks had moved away, he tried calling for stairs in Parseltongue. The stairs appeared smoothly and Harry shook his head.

"Last time, Ron and I jumped into the hole and fell down a long chute. This time, we'll walk. I didn't think Slytherin would jump down a slide every time he went to his chamber."

Myrtle watched silently as they vanished down the hole. The presence of the Headmistress was enough to keep her silent. She pouted a little about it, though. She would have liked to have asked that boy to stay and talk to her for a while. He reminded her of someone she once knew.

The group stopped at the cave-in. Harry frowned for a moment, then he lifted his hand, concentrating hard. The rock shimmered and flowed into a series of buttresses, holding up the ceiling.

Minerva nodded approvingly. "Excellent work, Mr. Potter, I couldn't have done better."

Harry smiled and led them deeper into the tunnel.

"You came here when you were twelve?" Tonks said in a whisper.

"Yeah. Voldemort had taken Ginny Weasley. I didn't want her parents to lose her," Harry replied as if the answer really was just that simple.

Tonks shook her head and followed along, looking around nervously.

He stopped them in front of a large iron door. "You might want to use a Bubble-Head Charm. The Basilisk is still inside and has been lying there all these years."

They nodded and cast the spell on themselves.

When they were ready, Harry turned and faced the door. "*Open!*" he hissed.

The door swung open silently and he led them inside.

"There are wards on this chamber," Remus commented.

"I felt them, as well," replied Minerva. "But they aren't part of the main castle wards."

"Could they be from Slytherin? They feel old," Remus asked.

Minerva frowned and stopped. Remus stopped and turned to look at her. "I can't access these wards at all. I think we might want to consider breaking these down, instead of trying to hook them into the castle. They don't feel the same."

"Could they be cast in that hissy language Harry's been speaking?" asked Tonks. She stayed close to Remus. There was an eerie atmosphere in the chamber and it was obvious that Tonks was nervous being there. The torches had lit automatically when the door opened. From their vantage point, just inside the door, they could hear the echoing drip of water. The torchlight danced and cast strange shadows among the snake statues.

Harry had moved deeper into the chamber, not waiting for the others.

Remus sniffed loudly and looked up from the doorway they had been examining. "Do you smell it? Even with the bubble charm, it comes through."

"Yes. Let's catch up with Harry," Minerva said distastefully. The quicker they could leave, the better.

The three hurried down the central avenue between the statues until they came upon Harry. He was kneeling on the floor, his knees in the stagnant water, peering at some grooved markings in the mud.

All three adults stopped next to him, but he only looked up when he heard Remus gulp audibly.

"What's wrong?"

Remus tore his gaze from the body of the Basilisk. "You killed that thing?"

"Well, actually, we killed each other. Or we would have, if Fawkes hadn't stepped in and saved my life," Harry said, standing up. He pointed to a broken off tooth on the ground. "That fang was embedded in my arm as I stabbed it. I used it to destroy the diary."

He glanced over his shoulder at the beast. Truthfully, he didn't like looking at it. "Maybe we should just burn it."

"No," Minerva said. "I didn't realize it was this big. My word, what a boon! I'll make a Portkey to allow us to return here. The staff and I will salvage what we can for potions ingredients. With the proceeds from the sales of the ingredients we'll be able to fund so many programs."

Harry nodded and turned his attention back to the tracks in the mud, crouching down next to them. "She's been here and gone. See, this set of tracks shows her moving away from the body of the Basilisk."

"How can you tell?" asked Tonks.

He looked up and smiled. "You can tell the direction she went by the way the tracks are formed. The ridges are higher in the direction she came from because she's pushing against the ground in that direction. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy to tell ordinarily, but this is mud and she's a large snake. It would be impossible to say if it were sand. Besides, there are two distinct sets of tracks."

Minerva blinked in surprise and looked at Harry with a new sense of respect. Remus had mentioned in passing that he had been learning about snakes from Muggle specialists, but she didn't know he was that knowledgeable.

Harry pointed his wand and a bright beam of light arced out across the puddle. He trained the light against the wall, looking for something.

"There, see the hole in the wall?"

Everyone turned to look at it.

"Notice how it seems cleaner than the surrounding pipes? She must have used it to enter the Chamber," he said softly.

"So, what now?" asked Tonks.

Harry shrugged. "There's nothing to be done here. I'll set up my tent just inside the tree line by the castle. Remus, I'll need a copy of your map. That, or you need to carry it with you so you can see when the ward is breached and call me on the mirror."

Remus nodded and Minerva pulled out a Knut from her pocket and quickly cast a Portkey.

"Won't the ward prevent that from working?" Tonks asked.

"Maybe, but I'm guessing that there's no Portkey ward on this place. Portkeys are new inventions. Salazar Slytherin would have never known them," Minerva replied.

"Makes sense," agreed Remus.

Tonks walked over to Harry, who was staring at the pipe Nagini had used, and she put her arm around his shoulders. "Come on, then. There's nothing more we can do tonight. Besides, this won't be the last time as an Auror that you'll come up empty handed. Mad-Eye used to say any shift you can walk away from in one piece is a good shift."

He smiled briefly, then turned to walk to the exit.

The Forbidden Forest, Apr 23 th 1998...

Harry reached into the oven and pulled out the large roast. He placed it on a platter and took it over to the table where Tonks, Remus and Hermione sat. Behind him, several dishes slowly levitated from the little cooking area of the tent to the small table that barely fit the four of them.

Harry handed Remus a bottle of wine and summoned two butterbeers for Hermione and himself.

"I don't understand it, Harry," Tonks said. "Shouldn't that snake have come out yet? I mean, it's been ten days!"

Remus poured the wine into two cups, then handed one to Tonks. Harry didn't drink, except on very rare occasions, and Hermione didn't want to touch any wine tonight. She still had three hours of studying to do when they were done.

Harry looked down at the meal he had cooked for his friends, then back up to Tonks. "Snakes don't eat like we do. In fact, it's not unusual for a snake in the wild to go days or even weeks between meals. Depending on the prey she took down, it could be as little as a week, or as much as a month. Personally, I think we won't have to wait that long. If she took a rat, she'll be hunting by now. We know she slipped out of the castle not far from the Greenhouses, and we know that Professor Sprout has a fondness for rabbits. She probably got one of them. If that's the case, she'll start hunting any day now."

Hermione smiled, the pride evident in her expression. When he realized that he couldn't search the forest in the winter, he had taken the opportunity to learn all he could about snakes. He had joked that it was just something to keep him occupied, but it was turning out to be time well spent. It reminded her of his third year, when he worked so hard to learn the Patronus spell.

"So, you think we should see her any day?" asked Remus.

Harry nodded. "I think she took down a fair sized rabbit, but it's got to be digested by now. She'll be poking around, looking for something to eat."

"Speaking of eating, Harry this is the best!" gushed Tonks. She was rapidly eating her meal and grinning at him.

He smirked. “Are you sure you're not part Werewolf? You seem to be wolfing that down.”

“Oi!” she exclaimed to everyone's laughter.

Harry leaned back and grinned. He had cooked many a meal for the Dursleys and he hated it. When Sirius and Remus rescued him, he learned that it meant something for him to be able to cook for his family and friends. It meant something when the people eating appreciated the effort he put into cooking.

Hermione loved his cooking. She was only a fair cook and she had told him that cooking would be his job after they were married. When he protested, she commented that until he could figure out how he could nurse a baby, it was only fair for him to cook.

“All right, so Harry has the snake all tied up, or he will when it shows. What I want to know now is how often you two are doing the hugga chugga in Hermione's private rooms.”

“Tonks!” both Harry and Hermione exclaimed.

“Merlin, Tonks, what a question,” Remus said, dabbing the wine he had spilled on his robe with a napkin.

“Hermione and I have spent a fair amount of time together,” Harry admitted candidly. “But I've been helping her study for her N.E.W.T.s.”

Tonks hooted loudly. “Is that what they are calling it these days?”

Harry blushed and looked down at the table.

“Seriously, Tonks, Harry and I spend at least two hours a night talking via our mirrors. He hasn't come up to the castle since he set up his tent here ten days ago,” Hermione said defensively.

Tonks stopped laughing and stared at her for a moment, then looked at Harry, who nodded.

“I don't want to be caught unprepared if Nagini shows up,” He explained. “As much as I want to be with her, I know I would be a distraction, so we limited ourselves.” He reached across the small table and gripped Hermione's hands. “We have years ahead of us. A few sacrifices now won't kill us.”

“What will you do when you catch the snake?” asked Tonks.

“I've prepared a place in the forest where I can perform a ritual to remove and dispel the spirit. The steps are fairly simple until the end. Kill the snake, remove the gem and confirm it's a Horcrux. Then I'll destroy it in the location I've prepared. That should confine the spirit long enough for me to send it on.”

He scowled then. “Unfortunately, Sirius managed to convince me to destroy the Horcrux in front of witnesses and he won't tell me who he's going to invite. He spoke about the Internationals, and the British Ministry, as well as some reporters he trusts.”

Remus nodded. “Yes, he sent us our Portkeys, and I understand Minerva got one, as well.”

Hermione's expression soured. “I didn't get one,” she said softly and Harry blanched.

“I can get you one,” he stammered. “But if you're in your N.E.W.T.s...”

“He has a valid point, Hermione,” Remus said. “Your first N.E.W.T. exam is in just fifteen days. Besides, your presence would require explanations that the Ministry might not want to deal with. I know you've been involved in this since the beginning, but this is one time where it would be better if you weren't there.”

“*I'm sorry,*” Harry mouthed silently to Hermione.

She smiled at him, letting him know she wasn't mad.

Harry levitated the mostly empty platters towards the small sink. Nearby, a pot of coffee turned on and his radio started to play a music broadcast from Italy that he had come to enjoy.

“I hope everyone has room for chocolate cake,” he said with a large grin.

“That's it!” Tonks said, slapping the table and making everyone jump. “Hermione, you can have Remus. I want Harry. Remus can't make cake!”

“I tried!” Remus protested. “I can't help it if it came out flat.”

“Yeah? Explain why it tasted more like Pizza,” countered Tonks.

Harry leaned back and smiled, just listening to them. *This is what life should be like. Friends and family and just living well,* he thought.

Hogwarts Grounds Apr 25 th 1998...

Madam Sprout smiled at her class. They were second years and they were helping her prepare next year's crop of Mandrakes. She glanced away

from the class when something caught her eye. Frowning, she walked to the glass wall and peered through. What she saw made her blood run cold.

All of the teachers had been warned about the possibility, but she never thought it would actually happen. There, outside the greenhouse, was the largest snake she'd ever seen!

She waved her wand in a complex pattern and a bell started clanging, then she turned back to her class.

"Children! Put the pots down and listen to me. Come closer. That's it, everyone gather around," she called. Help would soon arrive, but for now it was her job to protect her children. "In a few minutes we are all going to back into the castle. There will be several teachers and some elves helping. I want everyone to stay in a line and do not stray for any reason. We're going to walk straight to the Great Hall. Does everyone understand?"

"Yes, Professor," echoed the confused class. It wasn't time for class to end yet!

Sprout waited worriedly by the door to the greenhouse. Meanwhile, house elves started popping in from the castle. Pomona could see a cloaked figure race out of the tree line of the forest, a wand at the ready.

A shout from the side of the greenhouse drew the attention of the class and they rushed to look out the side windows.

"Children! Come back here," Sprout shouted worriedly.

"An elf is fighting a snake, Professor!" shouted one of the students excitedly.

"Here comes a man and he's got a sword!" added another.

Sprout moved to join her class. She reached the window in time to see the snake lash out and bite an elf. The elf staggered back and fell. The snake coiled and turned to face the cloaked figure, who raised his sword.

Nagini stuck, making firm contact against his thigh, and bounced off. Harry swung the sword of Gryffindor, cleaving her head from the rest of her body. He stepped back as Nagini's body thrashed around, spewing blood. The head rolled a few feet, coming to rest not far from where Harry stood.

"Children!" Sprout said shuddering slightly. She clapped her hands to get their attention. "Everyone is to follow me, right now!"

With that, she moved as quickly as she could to the exit. Once outside, she stopped by the door and urged the students to run for the castle. She turned and looked through the greenhouse, but rather than the cloaked figure, all she saw was a group of elves clustered around something.

She tore her eyes away from the group and noted the greenhouse was empty and her class was almost to the school. She gasped her robe, lifting the hem, and ran to catch up. The class was already entering the castle when Remus and Tonks came running out.

Minerva stood by the door, calming the students and instructing them to go to the Great Hall. Sprout eventually made it to the entrance, huffing and puffing all the way.

"Are you alright, Pomona?" asked Minerva.

Pomona nodded, still too winded to talk. "What... No, who was that person? He killed that snake you told us about!" she gasped.

Minerva's expression worried expression eased into a bright smile. "A friend, Pomona, a good friend to us all. Now, go to see to your students. If you need, cancel the rest of your classes for today."

Pomona nodded and slowly walked up the stairs to the Great Hall. Minerva watched her for a moment, then turned and purposefully strode out of the castle.

She quickly came upon an unusual sight. Remus and Tonks stood nearby, while Harry had pulled off his trousers.

Minerva arched an eyebrow.

Harry looked up, spotted her and blushed furiously. "I'm sorry, Headmistress. The snake bit me and I wanted to make sure her teeth didn't penetrate the dragon hide armor."

She nodded, noting he was dressed in a form fitting armor under his clothing. "A wise precaution, Mr. Potter," she said softly.

Harry looked up and grinned. There were two slight indents on the armor, but no holes. Remus placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him while he put his trousers back on.

Once he was dressed, he conjured a basket and levitated the snake pieces into the basket.

Remus ran a quick spell on the remains and smiled. "It's here."

Harry nodded and returned the grin. "I'll contact Sirius and let him get his show ready. I'll probably see you later tonight or tomorrow. It all depends on Sirius now, I guess."

Tonks walked over and hugged him, then Minerva did the same. "Well done, Harry," she whispered. "I see the Gryffindor in you is still alive."

He smiled at her, then picked up the basket and teleported away.

Minerva turned and her expression fell, seeing the dead elf. “Oh, no,” she said in a horrified tone.

“He fought with the snake, Minerva,” Remus said quietly. “From what I've heard, it sounds like he was trying to delay Nagini so the students could get away. Whether that was necessary, we'll never know. Obviously, he thought it was.”

“Then he'll be honored for his sacrifice and his bravery,” she replied, before levitating the body to bring back inside.

From the Journal of Hermione Jane Granger (Private Entry), Apr 25 th 1998, Hogwarts...

He did it!

The whole castle is in an uproar today. Apparently, there was some kind of attack outside of Greenhouse Four and an elf was killed. That's basically what the teachers have told anyone, including me! As a result, the rumors are flying fast and furious and the teachers had to press all of the Prefects into service tonight just to keep the students calm.

I know the story, or I know most of it, now. A few hours ago I didn't. Apparently, the Headmistress is waiting until she has more information, but I think she's making a mistake. The rumors spread by some of the second years are scaring the firsties.

Harry called me around midnight. He's been trying to reach me all evening, but I've been helping the Prefects and only got back to my rooms around midnight.

He killed the snake!

I can't believe it. It's almost over! He says Remus verified that the snake contains a Horcrux. That was one of Harry's biggest fears; that he'd find the snake and discover they had been chasing down the wrong lead.

Tomorrow he's going to destroy the Horcrux in front of witnesses. He hates the idea, but even I can see Sirius' point of view. This needs to be done in such a way that people can believe it's finally over once and for all.

I also found Harry to be downright funny tonight. I think he inadvertently showed me what he could have been like had he not grown up with the Dursleys. Honestly, for a moment I thought he had been drinking!

He was pacing and talking to me a mile a minute. I sat on my bed, astounded and barely managing a grunt or nod where appropriate. He babbled, barely letting me get a word in edgewise. I was hard pressed to keep from giggling.

Now, don't get me wrong. I've seen Harry happy before, but this was different. He even reenacted the fight with the snake twice before I managed to drag him away from the topic by reminding him to contact my parents and tell them the news.

Now I'm sitting here and, for the first time in years, I feel like jumping on the bed and shouting for joy. Voldemort will be gone forever in a matter of hours and the British Wizarding world has no clue what is going behind its back.

The only bit of sour news is that Sirius has asked him to remain in his Evan persona for now. Harry is hoping he won't have to be Evan much longer.

I too wish he could go back to being Harry. I want the whole world to know just who my future husband is.

Soon.

The Forbidden Forest, Apr 26 th 1998...

He had spent most of the night talking to Hermione via their mirrors. He was still excited about killing Nagini. She wept with joy hearing the news. There had been many rumors running around the school and no one had thought to tell the students any more than that the danger had passed and an elf had been killed while protecting the school.

She wanted to teleport to him, but the teachers were making heavy use of the Prefects last night and she couldn't get away until she was exhausted.

Before Harry spoke with Hermione, he had contacted Sirius, who told him to hold off doing anything until the following morning. Harry reluctantly agreed, then broke off the contact so he could talk with Hermione.

That morning he walked into the clearing. He wore most of his dragon hide armor under his clothing, but his primary disguise was the fact that he was morphed into Evan Black. He surveyed the clearing and checked the wards he had put in place.

Off to one side was a long stone tablet lying on the ground. Along its rim Harry had etched a deep groove. Just inside the rim were carvings of animals and a set of runes. He had been meticulous in reproducing this tablet and had sent several photographs to America so it could be examined by an expert, who approved of his work.

He sat on a log and wished that expert had been able to travel to Scotland to help him. But the man was too old, he was pushing two hundred years old and probably couldn't survive the trip.

At Harry's feet lay a small bag containing several leather pouches of sacred powders and sands; items he needed to contain the spirit long enough to send it on. Next to that bag lay the basket containing the body and head of Nagini, Voldemort's familiar.

At precisely nine in the morning, several groups of people Portkeyed into the clearing, looking around curiously. Harry stood up, then picked up his bag and the basket and took them over to stone tablet.

Several of the people looked at him curiously, but he ignored them. He set the basket down and removed the pouches from his bag.

Sirius nodded to Tonks and Remus, who started conjuring chairs for everyone.

"May I have everyone's attention, please?" Sirius called. His wand shot sparks, causing most to turn to face him.

Everyone scrambled to find chairs and Harry watched, smirking to himself. Sirius seemed to be enjoying this immensely.

"You've been invited here to witness something that will probably never be repeated in the history of the wizarding world. But before we begin, I need to provide some background information so you understand the significance of what I'm about to show you."

"Four years ago at the opening of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, a small group of people decided that Harry Potter's life was in danger if he continued to stay at the school. So we gambled. We took a chance, and we discovered we were right.

"Harry lived under the onus of a prophecy; he was Fate's chosen instrument. So when he refused to participate in the Tournament, he lost all of his magic. That much is true. Every bit of magic in Harry died that day... for about two seconds."

Sirius paused and grinned at the dumbfounded expressions among the British wizards and the two people from the press. Harry recognized several people from the Pacific Rim Ministry, as well as his former Defense professor, Julius Caesar Murphy, who nodded to him.

"Two seconds after the Goblet of Fire exploded, Harry's magic returned to his body, minus the tracking charms, bindings and other spells that were placed on him without his permission or knowledge. Harry withdrew from Hogwarts at that point, vanishing from sight. The simple fact, ladies and gentlemen, is that the man-made magic of the Goblet could not hope to compete against the will of Fate.

"Now, the members of the press who are present may print this story, but only when your respective Ministries allow you to. And I believe Minister Bones has something to say to you before I continue with the explanation."

Amelia stood up and faced everyone. "Part of what you will hear today is covered under the Official Secrets Act. You will never speak of the methods used by Voldemort to keep his spirit bound to this world. If I hear so much as a whisper, I will send you to Azkaban for the rest of your natural lives."

The representative from the Daily Prophet gulped and looked nervously about. His companion, representing the New York Global Cauldron, looked at him smugly, until Murphy stood up and looked at him.

"The American Department of Magic is classifying this information as Top Secret. Divulging any of this information will result in an extensive stay at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas," Murphy said coldly.

Murphy turned and nodded to Amelia, who smiled sweetly at the two reporters. "We will set a date upon which you can publish this information, and you will have an exclusive story for the first twenty four to forty eight hours, since you'll be publishing ahead of everyone else. Gentlemen, cooperate with us and wait until we say so, and you'll have a story of a lifetime. Or, you can choose to be Obliviated and leave now."

"I'll stay," croaked the man from the Prophet.

The other reporter nodded his head in agreement. He was an old news reporter and he smelled that this story had Golden Cauldron written all over it. He'd cooperate. After all, it didn't do well to annoy the government. Hell, he'd sit on this story for years if it meant he'd be able to break it to the wizarding world. He discounted the man from the Prophet, since that was strictly a British tabloid these days.

Amelia smiled and nodded to Sirius.

"Good," Sirius said. "Now that we have that unpleasantness out of the way, I want to tell you what we discovered and what we did."

Sirius grinned broadly. "We pulled the hoax of the century on the British wizarding world. Oh, I'll admit, when I thought of the idea it wasn't my intention to do so. But the simple fact is that a couple of people, who had no clue what they were talking about, spoke about matters they didn't understand and the British press ran with it."

Remus started to laugh and shake his head and Tonks started to snicker. Minerva shook her head ruefully and wished, not for the first time, that Sirius Black had never been one of her Lions.

"To be blunt, ladies and gents, Harry Potter is a wizard, and has always been a wizard. And that means that Voldemort still had his power. However, you gentlemen," he said, pointing to the reporters, "continued to harp on the idea that Harry was less than a Squib and, therefore, Voldemort was powerless as well. You pulled all his support away from him and gave us the opportunity to train Harry to face Voldemort, as well as track down and destroy all the items that made him immortal."

The man from the Global Cauldron glanced over at his compatriot and started to chuckle. The Prophet's reporter was staring at Sirius, his mouth opening and closing over and over.

Amelia stood and faced the crowd. She looked rather sheepishly at them. "I confess that I discovered this hoax just a few months ago and I looked carefully at what happened. It would have been different if the Blacks and Potters owned the media, but they did nothing to perpetuate the hoax. It was all done, innocently enough, by our media and our own smug attitudes.

"When Sirius finally told me the whole story a few days ago, when he handed me the Portkeys to this place, I was at first outraged. But that soon turned to shame. We let the welfare of our nation rest on the shoulders of one boy who had been ill treated most of his life."

Sirius nodded. "I gathered you here today because it's time to witness the final destruction of Voldemort. It's time to banish him forever from this world."

"You-Know-Who is here?" shrieked the reporter from the Prophet. The man stood and promptly fainted.

That was all it took. Remus and Tonks both began to laugh. Minerva sat next to the pair, her lips twitching wildly as she tried to control her own laughter. The American reporter pulled his wand and woke his fellow journalist, while every chuckled.

Harry, standing off to the side, waited for Sirius to give him the signal. *He's having way too much fun with this*, he thought fondly.

When the Prophet reporter returned to his seat, Sirius looked at him sadly. "No, Voldemort," he said stressing the word, "isn't here in a form that can hurt you. He's trapped at the moment as a spirit. We're going to free that spirit, then banish it to the next world."

Remus coughed and Sirius looked at him for a moment in confusion, then he remembered. "Oh, right! Um, Amelia, Mr. Murphy, would you like your experts to come up here and assist us?"

Murphy turned to "Mr. Smith", the Head of the Pacific Rim DMLE and Smith nodded. A nondescript Asian man next to Smith stood and walked up to stand next to Harry.

Amelia nodded to a very old man who was sitting next to her. He stood and walked over to Harry.

Sirius beamed at him. He was reported to be the Head of the Department of Mysteries. "I see we have Mr. Croaker, from the Department of Mysteries, but I don't recognize this other gentleman. Mr. Smith, would you provide the introduction?" Sirius called out.

Smith stood. "Mr. Yamada Taro is a member of our Department of Mysteries and an expert in the field of spirit magics. I've briefed him personally on what he will be doing today."

Sirius nodded and signaled to Harry.

Harry conjured a small table. "Last night I removed this object from the body of this snake," he said, then he carefully levitated a fist sized crystal onto the table next. The crystal was cloudy and seemed to pulsate, getting darker, then lighter.

"The crystal is a smoky quartz of rather pure quality and highly charged with very black magic. I strongly suggest no one touch it with their bare skin."

"Mr. Black!" shouted the reporter from Global.

Sirius turned around. "Yes?"

"Where is Harry Potter?"

Sirius smiled. "I daresay if things progress as planned, he'll be here in due time."

Amelia smiled to herself. She had no doubt who Evan was.

"Now, while our experts run their tests on the object, let me explain some of what was entailed in reaching this point," Sirius said.

Harry tuned Sirius out, listening instead to the two experts as they ran multiple tests on the crystal.

Croaker ran a test and then turned to Harry. "You really think you can destroy this, young man? This is no ordinary crystal. In fact, if my readings are right, my Department will want this to examine and study."

"That is not an option, Mr. Croaker," Harry replied. "I intend to destroy this today."

"But the research possibilities..."

"Are not worth the potential of you accidentally releasing Voldemort on the public again," Harry snapped. This delay was getting on his nerves and he didn't like the idea of this old man wanting to take away the Horcrux for study.

Croaker reached with one hand to grasp the crystal and Harry's hand shot out, catching him by the wrist and stopping him.

Taro stepped back and watched the two men intently for a moment. "I think perhaps we should leave this young man to perform his duty, my friend," he said softly.

Harry became aware of the utter silence as he stared down Croaker. Sirius had stopped talking and it seemed everyone was aware that something was going on.

"What's this?" demanded a voice sounding suspiciously like the Minister.

"Madam Minister, I must protest!" exclaimed Croaker. "They are talking about destroying a priceless magical artifact. It must be studied. We have a standing order that all objects of this nature are to be turned over to the Department of Mysteries. I will not allow the destruction of this object!"

Amelia stood, her expression furious. “Mr. Croaker, you will step away from that table and return to your seat, or I will have you stunned and placed into custody! You are interfering with sanctioned Ministry business.”

Croaker glanced over to Amelia, his own expression turning angry. “You can't fire me, Amelia. I have as much support in the Wizengamot as you do,” he retorted.

Harry, who was still holding Croaker's wrist, sighed. His hand flashed and Croaker crumpled to the ground.

Taro's mouth twitched slightly and he nodded to Harry. It was obvious to him that the young man had a hidden magical focus on him, probably a ring.

When Amelia gasped, Harry looked up. “Don't worry. He's not dead, just stunned. But I guess we'll have to Oblivate him.”

Amelia nodded and stepped forward. Harry pulled his wand and Amelia reached out and stopped him with a hand. “Have you ever Oblivated anyone before?”

Harry swallowed nervously. “Ummm... just Sirius one time.”

“What?” shouted Sirius.

Remus, Tonks and Minerva started to laugh.

Harry looked at the ground and shuffled his feet. “Yeah, he burst into my room when Hermione was naked.”

Sirius stopped and looked crestfallen. “I saw her naked? I thought that was just a dream. And you took that memory away?”

“You thought it was a dream?” Harry asked, astonished. “You shouldn't be able to remember any of it, even in a dream!”

“Gotcha!” Sirius gloated. “That'll teach you to fool with the memories of your elders!”

Amelia shot him a look, then turned back to Harry. “Let me do it. I've more experience.”

With one last glare at Sirius, Harry finally nodded and backed away from Amelia and Croaker.

It was over quickly. Amelia Oblivated Croaker, then wrote a quick note, attaching it to his jacket along with a Portkey. A second later, he was gone.

“I've sent him on to the Obliviation squad,” she explained quietly. “They'll build him a new memory.”

“I'm sorry that had to happen,” Harry said softly.

Amelia smiled warmly. “It wasn't really your fault. I should have known better. Croaker has been at that job for fifty years and he's become a bit obsessive.” She wouldn't ask, but she was extremely curious how Harry had managed to stun Croaker without a wand. She was of the opinion that wandless magic was hard to do and few could master more than a few simple spells.

“Mr. Taro, might we have your opinion on the object?” asked Amelia.

Everyone settled and waited to his Mr. Taro's views.

“The object in question does, in fact, contain a piece of a soul. I do not wish to speculate on how that piece got there, but the object exudes black magic of the vilest form. There are several curses and a heavy compulsion charm laid on the object. I daresay it is dangerous to the touch. I recommend that we proceed with its destruction immediately,” Taro said in a softly accented voice.

Amelia looked to Mr. Smith. She knew he would be reporting back to his government, just as Murphy would report to the Americans. Between them, they represented the Internationals. When each man nodded, she in turn faced Harry again. “Please, proceed then.”

Harry stepped forward, then levitated the crystal to the center of the prepared tablet. He knelt by the tablet and pulled out a black leather pouch from his bag. Opening it, he carefully poured out the powder so that it was spread around the edges, contained within the notched groove.

“What you are seeing is a mix of Muggle and magical methods designed to destroy the object and contain the spirit long enough for it to be banished,” Sirius said, while everyone watched intently.

Harry sprinkled a silvery powder over crystal until it sat in nearly an inch of the stuff, then he carefully placed several red leather pouches around the crystal.

“The powder is a metal called Magnesium,” he said softly. His audience strained and leaned forward to hear him. “It will burn very quickly and very hotly for a brief moment, but it will be sufficient to ignite the Australian Brimstone pebbles in the red pouches. That will take the temperature up to nearly eight thousand degrees.”

“Fahrenheit?” Murphy asked incredulously.

“Centigrade,” Harry replied. “The stone tablet is protected so the stone won't be touched, but it will crystallize the Bison and Sasquatch blood powder around the edges. Before that happens, Sirius will hit the powder with a simple spell that will energize it. That will provide a shield to trap the spirit.”

Harry stood and stepped away from the tablet. As he did, he drew his wand.

“Sirius, if you would?”

Sirius nodded and stepped forward with Remus on his heels. Sirius touched his wand to the powder in the groove and muttered something. The dark red powder turned a fluorescent blue. He backed away and Remus cast a shield in front of the tablet to protect the watchers. Harry was in front of the shield, holding his wand out. He was aiming for the silvery powder at the base of the crystal.

He stood with his wand aiming and those present could see him concentrating on his spell. The air around him began to hum and crackle, then his body was engulfed in a golden aura. His wand flashed with a bright light and a tight beam lanced out, hitting the powder. There was an enormous flash of blindingly white light and then the brimstone pebbles caught fire.

A deafening crack filled the clearing and Harry was sent spinning away from the stone. He hit the ground about ten feet away and didn't move. Everyone ducked.

When the light and smoke cleared, everyone looked around warily. Remus lay on Sirius' legs. Tonks was next to Minerva on the grass.

Sirius lifted his head and looked at Remus. “I haven't been that drunk since seventh year,” he muttered.

Harry blinked and wondered why he was looking at the sky.

He painfully pushed himself up onto his feet and looked at the tablet. The crystal was gone, vaporized by the intense heat, and the rock itself was scorched and blackened.

A transparent wall of blue light extended from the stone and came to a dome at a height of about six feet above the surface of the stone. Within the shielded area of the tablet, a black cloud hovered. Its surface roiled and bubbled like some boiling cauldron, then it slowly formed a face.

“Who dares?”

Harry walked shakily over to the tablet. Behind him he could hear the murmur of the people watching, and the terrified gibbering of the Daily Prophet reporter.

“I do,” he said quietly to the wraith of Voldemort.

“Foolish child, you cannot kill me! You have set me free!” snarled the wraith. “I will enjoy watching you beg for a quick death.”

“No, Tom, I have killed you. You just don't know it yet.”

The wraith rushed Harry and bounced off of the shield. “What is this? What magic is this?” it cried, looking around wildly. There was no escape.

The Wraith bounced off the shield several more times, including one attempt straight down. Then it came to rest hovering at eye level with Harry.

“Release me and I will give you power and wealth,” it said.

Harry shook his head sadly. “You have neither to give. You could have been great, you could have been the hope of your generation, instead you became a monster. It's your time, Tom. It's time to pass over,” he said, raising his wand.

“WAIT! You can't! Who are you? I cannot be killed by you!” wailed the Wraith.

Harry closed his eyes and, releasing the hold on his form, changed back into Harry.

The Wraith recoiled and its smoky eyes bulging in horror. “Potter!” he hissed. “You can't do this.”

Both reporters gasped, seeing Evan change into Harry.

“Oh, but I can, Tom. In fact, I'm the only one who can. Hopefully, in time, history will forget you,” Harry replied, then he raised his wand again. “*Ay chee ee who he ah ah doe nuh doe*,” he chanted.

Murphy's eyes widened and he grinned, hearing the Native American chant. “So mote it be,” he whispered.

The Wraith recoiled from Harry's glowing wand and started to wail. It was a pitiful sound, as if it had glimpsed an eternity in Hell and was protesting the injustice of the judgment. The shield flared and began to shrink. As it did, the wailing grew louder and more tormented, then it changed, as if it were being pushed away. The sound shrank as if receding in the distance. The shield flared one more time, then it vanished, leaving nothing behind of its presence.

The Wraith of Voldemort was gone.

Harry stood, pale and trembling, weakened by the use of so much magic and by what he had seen. The price of the magic was to catch a glimpse of the punishment. It took all of his resolve to hold his wand on the tablet and not vomit up his breakfast.

He turned to Amelia, who was looking at him with something akin to awe. “It had to be done. I just wish I wasn't the one that had to do it.”

Mr. Taro ran up to the stone tablet and quickly cast a Necromantic spell. Harry stared at the man, who watched his wand and the results. Then the

little man grinned. "Voldemort is gone! His soul is finally summonable!"

"Thank Merlin Necromancy can't summon his soul back permanently," muttered Amelia.

Harry nodded tiredly, then he walked over to sit next to Tonks and Minerva. He ached from his fall, and from what he had been forced to do.

"All right there, Harry?" asked Tonks quietly.

Minerva sat silent, watching the pair. Around them, the others were milling about, talking in hushed tones. Everyone seemed to be heavily affected by what they had witnessed.

Harry ran a hand through his hair tiredly. "Suddenly I feel tired all the way to my bones," he said. "I've spent the last four years training to do this and now when it's done, I almost feel sorry for him." He looked up at Tonks. "He could have been great. He had both the power and the intellect. He could have been as famous as Dumbledore, or maybe even Merlin. It just seems like a terrible waste now."

"You used a lot of magic today," Tonks said. "I don't think I could have done those spells and still be awake."

"Mr. Potter! May I ask you some questions?" said the Daily Prophet reporter.

Harry flinched back and Tonks steadied him. Minerva glared at the man.

The report backed away. "Maybe I'll talk to Mr. Black, then," he muttered.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked up to see Amelia Bones standing close by.

"Minister?"

"Mr. Potter... Harry, I'm going to impose on you one last time and ask that you do not reveal yourself to our world just yet. With the final destruction of Voldemort, there are legal functions that we must perform and they could be performed more easily if no one knew you were still a wizard."

Harry nodded. "I wasn't too keen on letting anyone know I'm still around, anyway."

Amelia frowned slightly and adjusted her monocle. "That will happen soon enough, Harry. There is no way to avoid it, I'm afraid. But with the last heir to the Slytherin line now dead for good, we can maneuver to close the seat in the Wizengamot and close any outstanding Gringotts accounts. I imagine no more than four to six weeks would be necessary, assuming the Wizengamot doesn't leak the information sooner."

He nodded tiredly.

"Harry, go home and get some sleep," Tonks said gently.

"Yes, do so, Mr. Potter," Minerva added softly. "You did wonderfully today. A truer Gryffindor never existed and your parents would be so proud of you."

"It's good advice, Harry," Amelia offered. "Go rest. You've done your part; now let us do ours."

Harry nodded again. "Tonks, tell Siri and Remus I'm going home to Oxford."

Tonks grinned and gave him a wink, then she hugged him. He smiled back, then stood and faded from view.

Amelia stared at where he once stood. "That wasn't apparition."

"No, it wasn't," Tonks said. "It's something Aurors outside of this country learn. Because it was invented by a Muggle-born, it's been largely ignored here."

Amelia sighed heavily. "So much to do, but things look brighter now." She turned and walked over to Remus, who was talking with Murphy and Smith.

The Granger Residence, Oxford England, Apr 26 th 1998...

Hermione appeared in her parents dining room, scaring Emma and making her drop her cup of tea.

"Good Lord! What is it with you wizards?" Emma exclaimed. "Can't you ring a bell and enter through the front door like everyone else?"

"Sorry, Mum," Hermione replied. She waved her hand, cleaning up the mess and repairing the tea cup. "Is he here?"

Emma nodded. "Yes. He said it was over and he was going to lie down for a bit. That was a couple of hours ago. He's still upstairs, unless he's popped away somewhere."

Hermione nodded and looked relieved. "Did he tell you anything?"

"Only that it was finally over. I didn't press him. He looked so tired."

“The Headmistress told me to come check on him. She said he had used a lot of high powered magic, which explains why he's tired. But she also said he seemed depressed about it now that it was done. I don't have all the details, though. I left as soon as I received permission.”

Emma made a shooing motion with her hands. “Well, go check on him. I'll call your father and let him know you'll be joining us for dinner.”

Hermione smiled and tried to resist the urge to dash out of the kitchen. That resistance lasted long enough for her to close the kitchen door behind her. At the soft click of the door latch, she bolted for the stairs.

Emma poured herself another cup of tea and shook her head as she heard Hermione running up the stairs. *Some things never change*, she thought with a grin.

Hermione carefully opened the door to her room and peeked in. On the bed lay Harry, sleeping. He had stripped down to his boxers and she frowned, seeing the large bruise that ran from one shoulder to the other.

She walked over to the bed and quickly kicked off her shoes before climbing in next to him.

He cracked one eye open when he felt the bed shift.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Hi,” he replied. “I did it. It's all over.”

“I know. McGonagall suggested I come home to check on you. I wish I had known about that bruise. I would have brought a salve for it.”

He tried to shrug and ended up wincing. “It's not that bad.”

She frowned at him for a moment, then snuggled a little closer. “What's wrong? Isn't this everything we wanted to happen?”

Harry sighed and his expression looked haunted. “I used an old form of Native American magic to banish him. They told me that this kind of magic enacts a price, but it was the only magic I could find that was assured of doing the job. There is always a price of some kind they said, but they never really explained what they meant.”

“What kind of price?” she asked, suddenly worried.

“I saw where he was sent,” he whispered. “I got a glimpse of his punishment. What right do I have to condemn someone to an eternity of that? It was horrible.”

She reached out and smoothed the hair over his brow. “Shh. You had a right given to you by Fate. You weren't condemning anyone to anything, Harry. He should have gone there after he tried to kill you the first time. He created his punishment, not you. You didn't murder him. You brought him to justice.”

He eyed her, his expression clouded with doubt. “It just seems like so much of a waste now.”

“It is,” she said, agreeing with him. “He wasted his abilities and powers, and in doing so, killed many good people who wanted nothing more than to live their own lives. Molly Weasley's brothers, your parents, Sirius' brother Regulus, Susan Bones' parents; so many people. It was a waste. But it's over now. Your parents have been given the justice they deserve, along with all those others.”

He nodded sleepily and she smiled. Normally, she could feel the magic just pouring off him, but today she could barely feel it. “You used a lot of magic today. Rest and sleep, it will do you good.”

He closed his eyes and his breathing slowly evened out. She waited and watched for a while before getting up and going back downstairs.

Emma looked up from the dining room table. “Is he all right?”

“He's tired and he's got a really nasty bruise on his back. I'll get some cream that can fix that. I think mostly he's sickened by what he did and what he saw.”

“What did he see?”

“Some magics cannot be performed without paying some kind of price. In this case, he was given a glimpse into Riddle's punishment. He saw Hell, or rather, what Riddle envisioned it to be.”

Emma shivered and Hermione smiled weakly. “He'll be fine. He knew there would be a price, he just didn't expect it to be that.”

Emma nodded weakly and went to get her daughter a cup of tea.

The Great Hall, Hogwarts, June 8 th 1998...

Hermione sat next to Evan, her hand creeping back to the beautiful ring that now adorned her finger. Harry had shown up early that morning, well before any of the regular guests arrived, and proposed to her.

She suppressed the urge to giggle. His proposal had been sweet and stumbling. His hands had been shaking when he offered her the box with the ring. She thought he was more terrified of asking her to marry him than he was facing Voldemort.

She looked down at her ring and grinned to herself. Then she reached for Harry's hand, gripping it tightly. He smiled at her knowingly.

She was amazed that the last month seemed to fly by, despite her taking the N.E.W.T.s. She spoke with Harry via mirror nearly every night, but he refrained from coming up to the castle. Amelia had requested that he keep a low profile and he was very willing to comply with that request. He was worried that the Wizarding World would go nuts when the story finally broke.

After he gave her the ring, Dobby appeared with breakfast and they shared an intimate meal together before he left again. He was going to escort her parents to the school, helping them past the Muggle avoidance charms. Both Sirius and Amelia requested that he wear his uniform today. That meant a scramble for him to get one via the Embassy last week.

Now they sat together with her parents in the Great Hall and she couldn't help but break into a smile. The girls of Gryffindor had gone insane, seeing the ring she was wearing. Parvati and Ginny both told her she was lucky to be marrying into the House of Black. She'd bit her lip to avoid laughing. If only they knew.

The story about Harry and Voldemort broke today with a noon time special edition of the Daily Prophet, and it set the whole castle aflame with rumor. According to the story, Harry Potter had fought with, and destroyed, Voldemort at Hogwarts barely a month ago! He had been here and he was a powerful wizard who was unattached.

A number of the unattached witches all flocked together, trying to figure out how to contact Harry and offer an arrangement. Hermione nearly snorted with mirth, seeing them running all over the place trying to find out how to get in contact with him. Several remembered that Hermione was once been his best friend and asked her, but she said she couldn't pass that information along.

She recalled seeing a rather disappointed looking Ginny Weasley sitting in the Common Room. She had been looking at the ring that signified her own arrangement and Hermione couldn't help but wonder if she was regretting it now. Hermione didn't want to agitate Ginny, who was already obviously upset. There was also the fact that Ginny knew that Hermione had been in recent contact with Harry to think about. Fortunately for Hermione, her Head Girl duties had kept her busy most of the day, and out of Ginny's sight.

Harry was out of the castle when the story broke and he had called Hermione, telling her that he had seen the paper. He was coming to the castle as Evan and, unless something happened, that's who he'd be for tonight.

A motion at the front of the Hall caught her attention and she turned to watch.

Minerva stood and the Hall fell silent. The farewell feast had been held earlier for the first through sixth year students and now Minerva was presiding over the farewell feast for the seventh years. As the meal itself was over, it was time for the festivities to begin.

Minerva smiled at the packed Hall full of students, family and well wishers.

Hermione had been told that she would be singled out, along with several other students, for outstanding academic performance. She looked around, spotting Ron and the entire Weasley clan. Nearby was Hannah and her parents, as well as Neville and his Gran. Lavender sat next to Parvati; the Patils were going out of their way to make sure Lavender didn't feel left out. Her family had not shown up for this dinner.

She sat with Harry, her parents, Sirius and Cindy. Remus and Tonks sat up at the staff table. She smiled and thought that, despite his decision not to pursue a career as an Auror, Evan looked downright dashing in the Pacific Rim Auror uniform. Harry was interested in pursuing a career in law enforcement, he just didn't want to be an Auror. Between them, they were eagerly exploring other options in that field.

Minerva smiled broadly at the assembled parents and students. "Each year we hold a special end of term feast for our departing seventh years. And each year we issue awards and watch tearfully as you leave us. In the past seven years, you have become part of the greater Hogwarts family. The students left behind are only a part of your legacy, as they try to emulate your successes."

She paused and took in the crowded Great Hall.

"This is a special class, one that has been touched by several unique individuals. And because of that, we have several special awards to hand out tonight. First, for the first time since 1978, we are awarding Ravenclaw Fellowships. This award is granted to individuals who obtain perfect scores on their N.E.W.T. exams.

"Last time this award was granted, it was given to Lily Evans, soon to be Mrs. Lily Potter. This year we are especially proud to grant the award to not one, but two students. Miss Padma Patil and Miss Hermione Granger, would you please stand up?"

Both girls stood and Filius Flitwick climbed down from his chair. He picked up two golden books, and scurried down the aisle to Hermione and then Padma, handing them out.

"You girls join the ranks of some of the brightest students ever to grace the halls of this school," Minerva said, smiling warmly. "Academically, your accomplishments have set new standards for educational excellence."

Hermione blushed and sat back down while everyone applauded.

"Well done," Emma murmured to her.

Minerva waited until the applause had finished. "Miss Granger also receives a special award for bravery in the face of danger. It was her effort that resulted in the capture of a wanted fugitive and the rescue of one of our students, who had been injured."

Again she was forced to wait for the applause to end. Remus presented her with a golden plaque; a copy of it would also be placed in the Hogwarts trophy room.

“While not technically an award, I would like to announce that three of our students, Mr. Ronald Weasley of Gryffindor, Mr. Terry Boot of Ravenclaw and Mr. Blaise Zabini of Slytherin have been signed on by professional Quidditch teams. Gentlemen, please stand up.”

Ron stood along with the others. Harry applauded happy for his friend. As the applause continued, the doors opened and the rest of the school filed into the room. They were accompanied by the Minister and a number of people from the press.

Harry saw the Minister and the crowd behind her and groaned.

“Harry?” Hermione whispered in alarm.

He nudged her and pointed to the back of the room. She saw the crowd and gasped. *She wouldn't*, she thought. *Would she?*

Amelia was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Minerva smiled, seeing the Minister and the others standing there. “Now, normally at the end of this feast we conclude simply by wishing each of you well and hoping you'll come back and visit us sometime. But this time we have something else planned. If I may introduce the Minister of Magic, Madam Amelia Bones.”

Amelia walked up the aisle and several cameras flashed. When she got to the top of the aisle, she turned and pulled a scroll from her pocket and began to read aloud. “By order of the Wizengamot, granted on this day of April 8th Nineteen hundred and ninety eight, Miss Hermione Granger is awarded the Order of Merlin, Third Class, for her bravery in the face of danger. For Miss Granger did encounter and subdue a wanted and dangerous felon who had already injured another student and killed a civilian.”

She looked up at everyone present. “Let everyone know that Miss Hermione Jane Granger is inducted into the Order of Merlin for her outstanding actions. So mote it be!”

Harry grabbed Hermione and kissed her soundly, then gave her a gentle shove in the direction of Amelia. She stumbled slightly and walked up the aisle, her cheeks burning. She stopped in front of the Minister, who took out a small case and handed it to her.

“Well done, Miss Granger,” Amelia said.

“Thank you, Minister,” she said in a loud voice. She turned to face the assembly and smiled when she saw her father pointing to her and telling everyone in a loud voice that she was his girl.

Hermione started to move, but Amelia stopped her. “Wait,” she commanded.

Confused, Hermione stood next to Amelia, while the crowd stopped applauding. When the room fell silent again, Amelia began to speak.

“We have one other award to give out today; one that should have been given long ago. No doubt you have all seen the newspaper reports and have heard the news over the wireless. Harry Potter is still a wizard. He left this school four years ago because of the danger he was placed in by an unscrupulous man. With the help of two men who are closer than family, he began a training regime that allowed him to graduate a full year early.

“I witnessed him destroy the last vestiges of the Dark Lord, once and for all time, just over a month ago, ending that threat to our lives. And when it was done, and Dark Lord was gone, instead of being triumphant and proud, he was saddened. What he said then is true today. We are what our choices make us. The criminal known as Lord Voldemort could have been a great man and a shining example of what all wizards should strive for. Thankfully, we stand at the beginning of a new age and we have such a wizard to be that example.”

Amelia paused and her gaze zeroed in on Harry. “Mr. Potter, would you please join me up here?”

The crowd broke into hushed whispers and Harry felt like climbing under the table. Emma whispered something in his ear and he nodded, then sighed heavily. People were standing and looking around wildly for Harry.

“Potter?” someone shouted.

Where?” shouted another. “I don't see him!”

Harry stood and let his hold on Evan relax, changing back into his true form. His Auror uniform gleamed in the bright lights from the cameras; on his chest hung a medal given to him by the Americans. The Pacific Rim had told him that any time he wanted to become a full time Auror, they would allow it, but he had other plans.

Gasps came from around the hall. Hermione, from her vantage, saw both Molly and Ginny Weasley turn very pale. Ginny looked as if she was about to faint.

He walked up the aisle, trying to ignore the cameras that were flashing like fireflies. Neville's face lit up and he shot Harry a thumbs up that warmed him considerably. If no one else welcomed him back, at least Neville did.

Ron looked at him, confused. He was clearly undecided and Hannah was whispering furiously in his ear.

Harry turned his attention back to Hermione, who smiled shyly at him. He moved to stand in the space she made between her and Amelia, then she

grabbed his hand.

Amelia pulled another parchment from her robe. "By order of the Wizengamot, granted on this day, April 8th Nineteen hundred and ninety eight, Mister Harry James Potter is awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, for his unparalleled bravery in the face of a ruthless Dark Lord. By his actions he has saved not only Britain, but the whole of the wizarding world, for the Dark Lord's stain would have surely spread."

Amelia paused and pulled out a case. She withdrew an ornate medallion attached to a large ribbon. "By custom, the Order of Merlin, First Class, is always presented by a close family member to the recipient. In this case, I'll ask Miss Granger, his fiancée and Order holder, to present the medallion," she announced to the crowd.

Another gasp ran through the crowd as it finally hit home. Hermione's mysterious Evan from the south Pacific was really Harry Potter, and they were engaged! More cameras flashed, catching the scenes and reporters scribbled their notes or used dicta-quills. Sirius, Emma and Dan grinned broadly at the pair next to Amelia.

Ginny fainted and slid out of her chair.

Amelia handed the medallion to Hermione, who turned to Harry.

"Let everyone know that Mister Harry James Potter is inducted into the Order of Merlin for his outstanding actions. So mote it be!" cried Amelia.

Harry blushed and bowed his head, making it easier for Hermione to slip the ribbon around his neck. As she reached around his head, she leaned closer.

"Don't let this go to your head, hero," she whispered with a sly grin.

"You know it won't," he replied tensely.

"Good, but you've always been my hero," she said, then she kissed his cheek and pulled away from him, leaving him blushing more than he thought he possibly could.

Amelia stepped up next to Harry. "Smile for the cameras," she said without moving her lips.

Harry blinked and wondered if that was a spell or just a talent that all politicians develop, then he smiled tightly for the cameras and waited until he could make his escape. Thankfully, the reporters had been briefed that Amelia would answer their questions, but Harry Potter would not be available for the press conference.

Minerva moved around to the front of the table, next to Amelia, and raised her arms. Slowly the noise in the hall died down.

"Thank you," she said with a smile. "All seventh years who haven't picked up their grades and certificates should visit my office before you leave the castle. I want to thank all the guests for coming tonight. I am certain you join me in wishing our leaving students only the best of luck as they move into their adult lives."

When everyone stood and clapped Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her towards her parents and his family. "Come on! If we hurry..."

He skidded to a halt and Hermione bumped into his back, nearly knocking him down. In his path stood Ron, Neville and the Weasley twins, who seemed to think Harry's return was some cosmic joke. Ginny sat nearby, watching Harry and Hermione with narrowed eyes.

Ron stepped forward. "At first I wasn't sure if I should hit you or hug you. But someone made me see the light. I don't like the fact that you up and left us without so much as a word, but I can see the sense of it," he said, then he blushed and Hannah smiled knowingly to herself. Then Ron stepped forward offering his hand.

"Once upon a time I had a friend named Harry Potter. I would be very happy to have him back."

Harry's eyes misted and he smiled, then took the offered hand. Hermione gripped his arm painfully tight and choked back a sob. He shook Ron's hand and that broke the spell on the others. They swarmed over him, welcoming him back.

Hermione watched, smiling at him, while his former classmates came up to shake his hand.

"Well done, Hermione," said a voice over her shoulder. She turned to see Mr. Weasley smiling gently at her.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," she replied.

"Had us all fooled, I think," he commented, watching Harry.

She shook her head. "No, that's the problem, sir. He didn't fool anyone. You fooled yourselves. No one had faith in the man that Harry is. He's unique. I knew it from the first day I met him."

Arthur Weasley glanced at his wife and daughter, who sat waiting for the crowd to break up. "I suppose you're right," he said with a sigh. "So, what now for you two? Some career with the Ministry? An Order of Merlin goes a long way on a CV."

"Harry and I are enrolling in school overseas. He already has a job as an Auror for the Pacific Rim Ministry. We'll come back to Britain in a couple years, but I think, for now, we want to just live without the pressures of being a Potter in Britain."

Arthur nodded. "I suppose that's for the best. Good luck to you and to Harry. I certainly missed that boy."

"He missed you, too, Mr. Weasley," she told him. When he smiled warmly, she turned away and joined Harry, who seemed a bit stunned at the reaction of the people. "Are you ready?"

He grinned at her. "I've been ready for this since fourth year. I think it's time to just live."

"Me too," she replied as she grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the Great Hall. Her parents and Sirius could catch up with them later. For now, there was a beach house in Fiji with their name on it!

School, marriage and the rest of the world could wait for the end of summer.

FINI

Author's Notes:

Bob's making me do the last AN as a way of speeding up the posting time. He says that, while he writes the disclaimer and gives the chapter a final read, I can be answering your questions. It sounds good, of course, but as it's 4:30am (pacific), I really don't think there's a rush on posting this. Personally, I think he's just being lazy.

Yes, the chapter is late. There are several reasons for it, but I'm not going to bother going into them. The chapter's been posted, so who cares, right? Yeah, I thought you'd agree with me.

Now, as this is the final chapter, do I REALLY have to answer your questions? ~Looks at all the eager faces staring back at her and sighs~

Fine, on with the freakin' Notes, then.

You hope we shot our beta? My, but that is rude. Beta's aren't machines, ya know. They have lives, families and, in the case of our betas, stories of their own to write and post. They're helping us, and you, free of charge. So sit down, shut up and enjoy the read, already!

Patrick: Yes, we check reviews from old stories, but we generally don't reply to them. If you do want a reply to a review you've left on an older story, post to our Yahoo group or send us an email and we'll get back to ya.

James Porter: There's no reason to be afraid of me. I'm actually a very sweet lady. ~Smiles serenely while oiling her whip~

Heathw: The answer to your Gringotts question is really very simple: Because Bob wanted it that way. As the author of the story, he's allowed to do pretty much whatever he wants to do. This is, after all, a non-canon story.

As for your complaint about Hermione, you're certainly welcome to your opinion. As I didn't write this story, I looked at her as having plenty of time to grow and mature. Most eighteen year olds I know are suicidally stupid in many respects. I wasn't much different at that age. Most kids aren't interested in improving their character. That comes with time and new environments/situations. If the story were to continue on through Harry and Hermione's college education abroad, you'd begin to see a different young woman emerge.

Oh, and yes, there is a difference between a mignon and a minion. A mignon, while delicious, lasts a few hours. A minion is for life! Besides, Crys is a bit too old and stringy to make a decent mignon. ~Snickers!

If you want more specific answers, email Bob. I'm just the AN author for this puppy.

~Straps Wyes to one of her nukes and arms it~ You dare? You complain about Bob's update time, yet haven't updated your own story in 6 MONTHS? You just lay there and think about that, buddy! If you behave, and UPDATE YOUR OWN FREAKIN' STORY, I'll think about disarming the thing.

Crys: No branding irons? You know, you're taking all the fun out of having minions in the first place. Let's see. Oh, I know! How about matching bikini waxings for all minions? This way, I still get to hear you scream, but don't have to deal with the smell of burning flesh! Oh, I like this idea. ~Straps Crys down on the table and smiles~ The technician will be with you in a few minutes. I'd do it myself, but there are some things that I really don't want to know about my minions. Oh, and when she's ready to rip out the hair, tense up real tight. It makes the pain even worse!

I know you're probably cringing inside right now, but really, be glad I hired a professional to do this. If I had to do it, I'd be plucking out the hair and swabbing the area with alcohol.

And just to prove that I am not nearly as sadistic as many people think, I'll point out Bob's suggestion for marking minions. He suggested I douse the area being waxed, then igniting it.

See? I'm much nicer!

Solicitor: Anti-matter? For me? Oh, thank you! I'd squeal like a fan girl, but that would be rather undignified, wouldn't it? I've had a star ship sitting in the back yard for years and it's been useless to me without anti-matter! Now I can finally blow this Popsicle stand!

Ranchbs: We've toyed around with the idea of writing original stuff, but keep getting bitten by HP bunnies. We may get there eventually. The lovely Abraxan has just published her own original work, which is available on Amazon. Join her Yahoo group for more details.

Kyle: The Quibbler's hounding of Percy was just something that happened. They didn't set out to drive the guy nuts. They were just looking for

stories and inadvertently created one by torturing poor Mr. Weatherbee into the St. Mungo's long term spell damage ward.

As for Snape, the answer should be obvious now.

Eewec: The Quibbler stories are all Bob's. The only thing I've written for Power of the Press is the last few AN's. I won't say Bob's a nut case, but he's not all there, either. I was a perfectly sane 22 year old...then I met Bob. It was a slow progression, at first. But being with him, day in and day out, for fifteen years has taken its toll. Besides, sanity is so overrated...

The Resident: Nukes, anti-matter, guns and guillotines all have their place and function. However, a well balanced knife is also a thing of beauty if the person who possess it knows what their doing. Besides, it's difficult to cut a steak with a nuke. And a guillotine isn't much better. I went through four waiters before I figured that out.

GinnySohma: You want me to upload a video my nuke's blinking lights to YouTube? Okay, but that's kinda boring, don't you think?! Oh, wait. You meant....Er, right.

BDH008: No, we would not consider the shoveling of snow as a bribe for updating faster. It's not that we don't appreciate the offer, it's just that a great deal of the snow is gone and we're now gearing up for mud season. Sorry, but you missed the boat on that one. However, if you want to shovel mud, be our guest. It won't cause us to update faster, but it would be amusing.

TW: I don't know. Ask Bob. Why do you all expect me to have the answers to your questions? I didn't write this story! I just do the AN's! STOP PRESSURING ME, DAMNIT!

~Blinks~ Oh, I see Bob already answered you. Never mind then.

Vanishingact: No, Dan and Emma's relationship is nothing like ours. Dan and Emma are sane, you see. That makes all the difference.

Mrs. Tiffany Potter: Don't think I'm going to let you get away with that! I see what you're doing. ~Tosses the bunny back at Tiffany~ Yes, I agree. Snape would make a great villain for a sequel. Do let us know when you start writing it. You have our permission!

FallingMonkey3: For a sequel to this story, see Mrs. Tiffany Potter!

Lilredwitch: I'm always accepting applications from would-be minions. One can never have too many. The interview process can be painful, but I enjoy it. Submit your application, let me inspect your A-bombs and we'll get you an appointment with the bikini waxing technician. Crys will be glad for the company...and maybe someone to hold his hand. ~Snickers~

Tarkas: Join the rest of the world? Why the hell would we want to do that? You spell funny. You put the letter U in strange places (colour), you mix up were the R should go (theatre) and you measure things in metric! I mean, anti-clockwise? ~Shakes head~ When will you folks learn decent English?!

LadyImmortal: Bob's easy to bribe. Simply offer him porn. Vintage or not, he'll take it. Wine? Not so much. Strawberries are good, but the chocolate they're dipped in should be sugar free. The partridge and pear tree didn't survive transit.

Morriganscrow: The branding iron is out. Crys squirmed around too much...and the weeping was terrible. Screaming is good; tears are messy.

Particle_Accelerator: See, you should send us your scope! We'd get to use it much more than you. Northern Idaho has great night skies, we're self-employed and set our own hours (which explains why we're always up at night!). Come on, you know you want us to have it! No? Fine, okay, keep it.

Oh, and we do have a scope. It's even a Meade. It's just much smaller than we'd like. We've spent many a freezing night outside staring at the stars and planets.

~Slips into a kilt and picks up a 3 iron~ Oh, Wavelink? You did request wanting to see me use this lovely little toy in my next violet rampage, correct? I'm so glad you volunteered to be the victim. It's much more enjoyable when they THINK they want it. You'll change your mind soon enough, but there's no escape. Feel free to try, however.

That's it folks. If I didn't get to your question and you really want it answered, email Bob. It's his story after all. If he tries to get me to do the notes for another story he writes, I'm going to change their name. No longer will I write AN's. No, I'll write WN's; Wife Notes. I won't answer any of your questions, I'll simply torture, maim, splice, dice and fricassee everyone who reviews. Unless you offer bribes... Bribes are always good.

That's it for Power of the Press. I want to thank everyone for reading, Bob for writing and Keith and Dorothy for their beta work. I'd also like to thank the Academy... Er, never mind.

It will be at least a few weeks before the next story begins. That will be the X-Men crossover for all of you who haven't been paying attention.

Now, I'm off to pummel Wavelink with the lovely 3 iron he gave me, then join Bob in Wow. We hope you've enjoyed the story. We'll see you all in a few weeks.