

# HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY

## *Chapter 1: Arrivals and Departures*

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Hermione Granger tramped up the stone steps leading to her home, her footfalls heavy and dispirited. Her shoulder sagged under the weight of her bag, full as it was of volumes she was bringing home to read. She was still adjusting to the grueling schedule of her new job as Head Charms Fellow at the Institute of Magical Academics, the premier wizarding research facility in the world. The position was her dream job, in which she could pursue her research interests ad nauseum and practice her casting as much as she wished in an atmosphere of intellectual stimulation and challenges...and yet after only a month on the job she was almost completely exhausted. She had set herself a punishing schedule of seminars, master classes and projects and there didn't seem to be enough hours in the day to accomplish everything. She always ended up reading her journals in bed with a cup of tea...tonight she was tackling her backlog of "The Journal of the International Casting Society" and the newly-arrived "Herbological Letters." The odds were good that she'd wake up the next morning with her face planted in the pages of one of these scholarly publications.

Despite her fatigue the sight of her home brought a smile to her face. It was an imposing stone mansion covered with odd bits of sculpture and full of nooks and crannies...yet the inside was warm and inviting. It always seemed to reach towards her as she approached and welcome her with a sigh of relief that she had returned safely. Its size was impressive: fifteen bedrooms, thirteen baths, two dining rooms, porches, gazebos, indoor glassed-in gardens...one might have wondered how six wizards and witches in their mid-twenties could afford such an edifice. In truth, they'd gotten it for next to nothing. The house had been vacant for years when she and her five housemates had banded together to purchase it...its reputation had been bad. Haunted, it was said...even cursed. They'd performed all the cleansing spells they could think of and so far hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary.

She let her bag fall to the hallway floor and hung her cloak on its peg, pulling off her robes as she walked into the living room to reveal ordinary jeans and a cable-knit sweater. The living room was darkened...Hermione stopped short and gasped, one hand going to her heart at the sight of two glittering points in the dimness. She sighed in relief as she realized it was only Harry Potter, one of the five wizards and witches who shared this mammoth house with her.

"Harry! Goddess, you scared the life out of me!" she exclaimed, flopping into her favorite chair. "What are you doing sitting here alone in the dark?"

"Just listening," Harry replied, one corner of his mouth curling into a half-smile. He was sitting slumped in a deep chair-and-a-half in the corner, his head hunched into his shoulders, nearly buried by his black robes and cloak. Only his head was visible above the tumble of heavy fabric, a pale face topped with an unruly mop of black hair. Green eyes peered at her from over the tops of his rimless glasses, which had slid to the very end of his nose.

Hermione suppressed a shiver. Harry was the most famous wizard in the world and had been hailed as a hero more times than she could count...but there were moments, like now, when he could appear almost sinister. Not that you would have pegged him for the gladiating type just by looking at him. He was tall, slender and unassuming to say the least. He did nothing to call attention to himself, yet attention followed him wherever he went. He was everywhere recognized, if not for his features then for the infamous lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, a souvenir of a long-ago attack by the evil wizard Voldemort. Voldemort had killed Harry's

parents when he was just a baby, and had haunted his life for years...but the dark genius was no more. Harry's most famous deed was vanquishing Voldemort on the eve of his own graduation from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...a deed for which Hermione, among others, owed Harry her life. But she cut him no slack because of it. She'd pulled his butt out of the fire enough times to consider the score settled.

"Hermione? Do you want supper?" came another voice from the kitchen. George Weasley, another of her housemates. He and his twin brother Fred, who was currently living in Russia with their brother Bill, were two years older than she and Harry. George had been a relentless mischief-maker in school but had matured into a surprisingly responsible man who took care of the household since he worked at home, using the house's spacious backyard as his office...he was a freelance test-pilot for broom wizards.

"Yes, please!" Hermione called. "Tell me you've still got more of that soup!"

"I've already got it warmed up for you." Hermione glanced at Harry, who had turned to look out the window. Sometimes being around George was painful for both of them. In school, she and Harry had been two-thirds of an unstoppable triumvirate completed by George's younger brother Ron...but Ron was dead. Murdered by Voldemort in his sixth year at Hogwarts after being tricked into believing his friends were in danger. Harry's enmity towards Voldemort, already potent, had become an all-consuming thirst for revenge after that, to the point that Hermione feared he might lose himself in it. She understood all too well his feelings, for she had been dating Ron for almost a year at the time of his death, but the anger and grief had for a time turned Harry into someone she didn't know. Eventually his quest for retribution had almost cost him his life and the lives of several other students...an event which seemed to wake him from the months-long trance he'd fallen into. It wasn't until the end of their seventh year that he had finally gotten his chance to face Voldemort, and a good thing too. When the time came he went into the confrontation with a clear head and a firm grip on himself.

It had been nearly ten years since she and Harry, clinging helplessly to each other, had cried over Ron's body after receiving a taunting message from Voldemort telling them where they could find him... yet at unexpected times the grief resurfaced, like an unpleasant mess she kept forgetting to clean up. George never talked about it, but the youngest Weasley, Ginny, had once told Hermione that none of her brothers had ever been quite the same after Ron's death. She could well believe it. Their final year at Hogwarts had been a hollow, trying time. Ron's absence coupled with Harry's complete personality transplant had made the fall term a living, breathing hell.

Hermione shook her head to rid it of these unpleasant memories. Things were more stable now. Everyone in the house had good jobs and excellent prospects. Their house was remarkably free of squabbles and conflict...in fact, Hermione often wondered if Harry hadn't slipped in a Congeniality Charm when she wasn't looking, it seemed the only way six such different people could get along so peaceably. Two of their other roommates, Cho Chang and Justin Finch-Fletchley, were also classmates of theirs from Hogwarts. Cho, who had dated Harry for almost two years while they'd been in school, was often absent for long periods...she was a professional Quidditch player, a Chaser for the Stratford Minotaurs, and spent a good deal of time on the road with the team. Justin worked for the Ministry in the Division of Muggle Affairs and usually passed his days ordering the Memory Charm squad to this town or that village to erase Muggle magic sightings, but his hopes for promotion were high and he did his job well. Hermione suspected that he secretly wished he could just join the Memory Charm squad himself. Their sixth roommate, Laura Chant, was an Australian witch who was working as the liaison from the land of Oz to the International Federation of Wizards. Her job often kept her out late too.

As for Harry...Hermione didn't actually know *what* he did, he wouldn't tell anyone. Though it stung that he couldn't trust her with this information, she knew that secrecy must be very important to keep him from telling her. He had very irregular hours; he'd be home for days and then gone for a week...and he often came home injured. She'd had to become familiar with medical magic because he was never willing to go to a doctor...she'd charmed and potioned away more cuts, bruises, black eyes and broken bones than she could count. She made no secret of the fact that she worried, but his lips were sealed even though at times he appeared to be just *bursting* to tell her.

He could have had his pick of jobs. Absolutely *everyone* had tried to hire him. The Ministry had told him he could have any position he wanted, including command of the wizard hit squad. What seemed like every Quidditch franchise in the world had practically begged him to sign on. Hogwarts itself had offered him the Defense Against the Dark Arts professorship, which she privately thought he'd been smart to turn down. Gringott's. Private wizarding societies. Magical think tanks. They'd all wanted nothing more than to have the "boy who lived" in their employ...and yet he didn't seem to have signed on with anyone at all. She knew he didn't *have* to work...he was independently wealthy thanks to wise management of his inheritance...but work he did. She just didn't know what "work" entailed for her best friend in the world.

George handed Hermione a plate bearing a large mug of soup and a sandwich. "Thanks," she said, distracted. He trotted back to the kitchen, where by the smell of things he was fixing some kind of dessert. Hermione watched Harry's profile as he stared blankly out the window. "You okay, Harry?" she said.

"Do you believe in pure evil?" he asked, out of the blue. Hermione's hand stopped halfway to her mouth, startled by the sudden question.

"Of course," she replied without hesitation.

"But why?"

She set down her sandwich and laid the plate across her knees. This wasn't a talk-while-eating conversation. "Because I've seen it," she said. "And because I believe in absolute good. One implies the other." He just nodded slowly. "What's going on? Why so philosophical?"

He paused, then slowly rose to his feet. "I should go try out that new broom," he said, his voice sounding far away.

Hermione watched him leave the room, mystified. With a shrug, she returned to her soup, putting it down to just another act in the endlessly unpredictable surrealist play that was life with Harry Potter.

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George wasn't in the kitchen when she went to rinse her plate, but a heavenly smell was coming from the oven. She sneaked a peek...mm, treacle pudding. Hermione put her dishes in the washer and went out to the back porch, where she found George sitting on the step staring into the backyard.

About ten feet away, Harry was standing over a new broomstick lying on the ground. He'd been trying out a variety of models over the past few weeks ever since he'd lost his beloved Firebolt Mark III. That in itself was something of a story. Hermione had been sitting on the front porch writing in her journal when the gate had swung open and here had come Harry

walking up the steps, looking tired and morose, back from a five-day absence. She'd risen to greet him (and inspect him for damages) but he hadn't been in a very talkative mood. Only when he was standing before her did she notice that he was holding in his hands the tattered, splintered remains of his broomstick. The Firebolt Mark III had been a gift from Sirius on Harry's 21st birthday, it was one of his most prized possessions. He'd had many a chance to upgrade to a newer model and had refused every time George had tried to tempt him with some new hotrod he was testing. Whatever Harry had been up to this time, his broomstick hadn't been as lucky as its owner. Harry was relatively unscathed, but the Firebolt was beyond repair. He had simply handed Hermione the sad remnants and gone into the house without a word.

Since then, he'd been attempting to choose a new one. George had "leaked" to all the broom wizards he worked for that Harry Potter was in the market for a new broom, and now whichever one Harry chose he'd receive gratis...though he drew the line at any kind of endorsement. Harry eschewed the exploitation of his inadvertent fame, by anyone...including himself.

Tonight he was looking at a brand-new one that had just arrived this morning...even broom-dunce Hermione (who was still riding her first broom, a battered ten-year-old Nimbus Two Thousand) could see that it was special. She sat down next to George on the top step of the back verandah. "Cor, that's something," she murmured.

"It's a prototype," George replied. "Made by a brand-new broom guild, it's their first model. They've been developing the charms and the materials for five years and this is the result...the Coriolis Jet Stream Model 1, the world's first all-synthetic broom."

"Synthetic?" she whispered, amazed, watching Harry circle the broom, his head cocked in thought as he examined it. It did look unusual. Most brooms were wood...this one clearly wasn't. The handle was smooth and glossy black, the tail twigs were a strange silvery iridescent material that she didn't immediately recognize. Harry stopped circling and stood at the foot of the broom. He extended a hand over it and opened his mouth to say "Up"...but before he could speak the broom rose smoothly off the ground and rotated to hover vertically before him. He nodded.

"Nice." He reached for it and it moved into his grasp. He straddled the handle and the broom lifted him easily. He floated there a few feet above the ground, his arms crossed over his chest, balancing easily with his knees. The Jet Stream floated slowly forward, turning right and then left again, responding to muscle cues from Harry that were so slight Hermione couldn't even see them.

"Didn't I tell you it was responsive?" George commented.

Harry nodded, smiling. "I might suspect it was reading my mind." He placed one hand on the handle and zoomed skyward, a blur. Hermione clutched her sweater in her hands as he put the broom through its paces, executing the trickiest Seeker moves he knew. After all the mishaps he'd had over the years her chest always tightened whenever he flew like this...how many times had she watched while he fell from the sky? On more than one occasion it had fallen to her to somehow avert certain disaster, and luckily the worst thing that had happened had been an unfortunate de-boning incident. These and other accidents didn't seem to have made him the slightest bit afraid of flying, but any effect he had escaped had been revisited threefold upon Hermione.

He landed after only a few moments, grinning from ear to ear. "What d'you say to that, eh?" George said, jumping up. "What'd I tell you? Amazing, isn't it?"

Harry nodded, holding the broom and glancing at it appreciatively. "It is indeed. Just when you think they can't make brooms any better something new comes along."

"So you're going to go with that one, you think?"

"I think so, yes."

"Then keep it, it's yours."

Harry grinned again. "Great, thanks! Good thing too, I'm leaving tonight and I'll need a good broom."

"Tonight? When?" Hermione asked.

His grin faded a little. "After dark." She nodded, not bothering to ask why he needed to leave after dark, then turned and went back into the house.

She, Harry and George sat down at the kitchen table...though it was more formal than what you might be picturing, their kitchen was the size of a small house and the table could seat twelve easily. The dining room was even more imposing, so the group preferred to take their meals here. George passed out plates and set the steaming treacle pudding before them. "I smell something yummy!" came a cheerful, Aussie-accented voice. The kitchen door opened and Laura and Justin walked in together. "Bloody marvelous, George." They both sat down and eagerly grabbed plates.

Laura was a dark, exotic-looking woman with long, woolly brown hair and a fine olive complexion. She was a talented witch, but her powers were strangely organic, as if she'd grown them inside herself like a cutting from a plant...Hermione had once made this observation to her and she had replied "You know, that's almost exactly what I did." Hermione hadn't had the guts yet to ask her what she'd meant by that. She liked Laura a great deal, and the two had become quite close in the year that they'd shared this home.

"How's the Ministry today, Justin?"

"Oh, bloody fantastic, thanks ever so much. Another thrilling twenty-owl day, at least." He helped himself to a large portion of pudding and made a grab for the pitcher of treacle sauce. "Hermione, can you help me with that Gossip Aversion spell tomorrow night?"

She shook her head, flushing a little. "I can't, sorry. Busy."

A chorus of knowing "ah-ha's" met this statement. "Meeting the studly one, eh?" George crowed.

"That's the third time this week," Harry sing-songed, grinning as he licked a drip of treacle off his thumb. "Sounds serious."

"Well, he's got the energy...young bloke like that." Justin put in. Hermione rolled her eyes and sat, besieged, enduring the usual round of verbal volleys from her roommates.

"Yeah, how old is he again? 20? 19?"

"Is he shaving yet?"

"Starting to get hair in those secret places?"

"Still slipping off his broom, is he?"

"Hoping that one of these days you'll help him *become a man*?" George snirked. Harry dissolved into giggles.

"Knock it off, you lot," Hermione said. "He's not that young. He's...you know, our age."

"Uh-huh," Harry said doubtfully. "Our age when it was...what year?" This set Laura off again.

"Are you all quite finished? Gerald is a wonderful..." That was as far as she got.

"Oh, GER-ald! GER-ald!" crowed George. "Sages, I don't think I knew his name till now! GER-ald!"

"And what's wrong with Gerald?"

"Nothing, if you like getting picked last for football," Justin muttered.

"Seriously, Hermione," Harry said, squelching his mirth. "How young is he, really?"

She twirled her spoon in the remnants of treacle sauce on her plate. "He'll be 22." They waited. "In fifteen months."

Laura shook her head. "Coo coo ca choo, Mrs. Robinson."

Justin stood up and began collecting plates. "You know we're just having you on, Hermione. Hey, if *I* had a 20-year-old lover I'd be shouting it from the housetops."

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Hermione sat propped in bed, a quilt around her shoulders, reading and feeling her eyelids drooping steadily lower. The door snicked quietly open and Harry poked his head in. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," she said, tossing her glasses to the bedside table and closing her book. "I'm only re-reading the same paragraph over and over again anyhow."

He came and sat down on the edge of the bed. "You look all in."

"Just a bit knackered is all."

He paused, examining his fingers. "I'm leaving now."

Hermione nodded. "Do you know when you'll be back?"

He looked at her for a long moment then shook his head. "Probably no more than a week."

"Oh dear, Cho will be upset to miss you. She's due back tomorrow for a few days."

"I daresay we'll both survive the deprivation," he said in an uncharacteristically sarcastic tone. He fell silent and seemed to be waiting for her to say something.

"You're never going to tell me, are you?" she said quietly, looking away. Harry got a rather pained expression on his face but didn't respond. Of course he was never going to tell her what he did. He would have already done so.

"I just didn't want to leave without my good luck hug," he said, an uncertain smile quirking his lips. Hermione chuckled at his little-boy hangdog expression, then reached out and hugged him tightly.

"Good luck."

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The next day was Saturday, but the diminished household was busy as ever. The mansion had been in a state of semi-disrepair when they'd taken up residence and while a good deal of it had been redone, they still had work to do on the parts they weren't using. Today they were stripping old wallpaper from an upstairs parlor. It was hard, dusty work...but a welcome interruption came when they heard the familiar roar of a motorcycle outside. "Cho's home," Justin said, standing to dust the plaster off his hands.

"Good," Hermione grunted. "Maybe now we'll finish this before nightfall."

They heard her quick steps running up the stairs. "I'm back, roommates!" she called, bursting into the room. "Hey, wallpaper stripping! Looks like I'm just in time!" She pulled off her coat and grabbed a putty knife to pitch in.

"Helluva win against Luxembourg," Justin said.

"Wasn't it? I thought my heart would stop beating it was so stressful." Hermione said nothing as they chatted about Quidditch...it had never really been her game, and all Harry's near-death experiences while playing it had put her off it even more. And, as always, she had to swallow her instinctive dislike of Cho. Academically, she liked her. In theory, she liked her. Cho was an energetic, lively, outgoing person who was friendly to everyone...perhaps a little too friendly. Every man who'd ever met her thought she was the greatest thing since chocolate frogs, but Hermione suspected that women had a unique ability to perceive things in each other that men missed. She'd always thought it was just her until she'd moved in here and learned that Laura had the same feeling about Cho. She remembered a conversation they'd had on the porch during one of Cho's road trips.

"You don't like Cho much, do you?" Laura had asked.

"I like her fine. She's a marvelous person, she's always been very nice to me." Laura just gave her a look, until Hermione sighed and gave in. "No, I don't like her much."

"She and Harry used to date, right?"

"Right."

"Is that why?"

Hermione had frowned at that. "No, I don't think so...well, maybe in a way, just because Harry's my best friend and I guess I'm a tad protective. And there was something about the way she looked when they would walk around together..."

Laura had smiled. "Uh-huh. The 'look who I landed' look."

Hermione snapped her fingers, excited. "Yes! That's it, exactly. As if he were less of a relationship partner and more of a..."

"Trophy?"

Hermione sniffed. "It's so demeaning."

"Well, he is Harry Potter, after all. World-famous vanquisher of evil, not to mention yumminess of the first order." She smiled at Hermione. "But I know what you mean. She does seem the type to lord it over everyone. Also, I get the distinct impression that she's confident that she'll have him back one of these days."

Back in the present, this conversation flitted through Hermione's mind in a matter of seconds as Cho set to the wallpaper with gusto. *Did* she expect to have Harry back eventually? Hermione sniffed. Don't hold your breath.

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Later that night Hermione was sitting on the rear verandah reading a book in the light of the setting sun when Cho came out with two glasses of lemonade. "Thanks," she said, taking hers. Cho sat down on the top step.

"Harry's gone, eh?"

"Left last night."

"Too bad I missed him. I'll probably be gone again by the time he gets back."

"He said he might be away for a week."

Cho made an uncertain noise in her throat. "Let's hope he gets back with all his limbs still attached."

"I don't mind patching him up," Hermione said. "I just wish I knew what he does while he's away." Cho turned slowly, looking at Hermione with the strangest expression on her face. "What?"

"You mean...you don't know?" Cho said, her voice subdued.

"Know what?" Hermione's frown deepened.

"What Harry does...who he works for."

A dark suspicion was rising in her throat. "Well, no. He's never told me." Please don't tell me that he's told *you*, Cho. I might just die of embarrassment right here on the porch.

"Hermione...Harry's a spy. For the International Federation of Wizards."

Her mouth fell open...she wasn't sure if she was more shocked by this revelation or by the mere fact that Cho possessed this information. "Wh...what? He's what?"

"A spy! He goes and seeks out the dark forces, and when he finds them he fights them! Why do you think he's beat up so often, and he's gone for days at a time?"

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't. She jumped up and strode quickly into the house and away from Cho, whom she'd never hated so much in her life...for this knowledge she possessed but most of all for that little triumphant smile she'd tried unsuccessfully to hide when she told her.



She escaped into the sanctuary of her room, breathing hard. Well, she had to admit it explained a lot of things. But why didn't you tell me, Harry? she thought. Why did you tell her and not me?

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## HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY

### Chapter 2: Free Delivery

"Dr. Granger?" Out of the air came the voice of Hermione's secretary.

"Yes, Stella?" she replied to the wall.

"Mr. Finch-Fletchley is here to see you."

"Send him in."

A few seconds later her roommate entered, a small brown paper bag in his hand and a smile on his face. "Free delivery," he said, sitting down at her desk. He began withdrawing food from the bag and setting it on her desk. A pitcher of iced tea. A bunch of grapes. A large platter of meticulously arranged cheese slices. A silver soup tureen from which wafted the scent of George's tomato dill soup, her favorite.

Hermione smiled, bemused, as he pulled dishes and silverware from the bag. "What's all this?"

Justin crumpled up the bag. "You're always whingeing about never having time for a bite. Problem solved!"

She grabbed a bowl and the ladle. "Oh, I could kiss you right now."

"No thanks, not my team." He popped a few grapes in his mouth. "You were awful quiet at breakfast."

Hermione shrugged, the delectable scent of the garlic-laced soup wafting up to her nostrils. "Who can get a word in edgewise when Cho's home?"

Justin chuckled. "I thought I caught you looking daggers at her. What's the problem?"

"No problem."

"Oh, come now. As designated house mediator it is my responsibility to listen to and help to resolve any difficulties between roommates."

Hermione thought for a moment, then put down her soup bowl and regarded Justin soberly over her desk. "Do you know what Harry does for a living?"

He looked surprised at what appeared to be an abrupt change of subject. "I stopped wondering years ago. I mean, crikey...the most employable wizard in the hemisphere and all he'll say is that he does 'work.' Bit vague, isn't it?"

"Cho seems to know all the details."

His brow furrowed. "That so?"

"She couldn't \*wait\* to tell me all about it last night."

"And what did she say?"

Hermione considered for a moment whether or not she should tell...but only a moment. Either it was true, in which case his secret was already out, or it was a lie and it didn't matter anyway. "She says he's a spy."

Justin seemed unsurprised. "Well, naturally. What else could he be? It would have to be that, wouldn't it? What other career would be sufficient for the world-famous Potter? Teacher? Spell writer? Drone at the Ministry?" A trace of bitterness crept into his voice for a few seconds. "And it would surely explain a few things."

"That's just what I thought!" she said. "The strange hours, the injuries, his secrecy..."

"So you believe her?"

"Well...I suppose so. In the absence of any information to the contrary."

"That's not what's bothering you."

"No. If it's such a huge secret that he's kept it from us for years, why tell \*her?\*"

Justin hmped. "I find it highly unlikely he'd tell her and not you."

"You think she's making it up?"

"I didn't say that. I just..." He cleared his throat, uncomfortable. "I think Cho has certain objectives in mind where our Harry is concerned, and I think it would serve her ends to make you think that he's confiding in her," he finished, choosing his words with as much diplomacy as he could.

She frowned. "Sounds so...Machiavellian. I can't believe she'd be so catty."

"Sure you can. You've known her...how long? Twelve years? Cho has many wonderful qualities and many features to recommend her, but a sense of fair play in interpersonal relations isn't exactly one of them. Don't you remember when she set her cap for that Hufflepuff prefect...what the devil was his name?"

Hermione smiled. "Kirby Storpington-Goyter."

"That's the bloke. Well, he'd just started dating Syren Sagyramius and it looked like Cho would end up an also-ran..."

"She put a Stultifying Draught in Siren's tooth powder," Hermione remembered, smiling. Poor Syren had been able to talk of nothing but masonry engineering and the history of cauldron metallurgy for days. Near the end, it had seemed as if she were in danger of boring \*herself\* to death.

"After what was probably the longest date of his life, Kirby dumped Syren and Cho got her shot. I could go on and on."

"This isn't the same."

"I'm not saying it is. I'm saying I wouldn't put it past her to make something up. Even if what she said is true, she could have found out one of a thousand ways that don't involve him telling her. Harry guards his secrets jealously. If he wanted anyone to know, he would have

told \*you.\* You're his best friend, Hermione...don't let anyone, Cho for instance, convince you otherwise."

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As two of his roommates discussed his career over a brown-bag lunch several kilometres away, Harry Potter sat in his office reading a scroll from an elf who worked surveillance for him. His lips twisted as he read on...seems he got nothing but bad news these days. A face appeared in his open doorway. "You get that note from Sabian?"

Harry looked up at the visitor over the top rims of his glasses. "What note?"

Remus Lupin strolled in and picked through the papers on Harry's desk until he found a small, tightly rolled scroll. "This note. Read it."

He unrolled it and read, his brow furrowing. He looked up at Remus, eyes wide. "Is this right? This can't be right."

"It's right."

Harry tossed his glasses to the desktop and pinched the bridge of his nose as if he had the beginnings of a headache...which he did. "I thought the tear was contained."

"We all thought so, Harry."

"Well, I can't worry about that right now. If it gets worse I'll send in a team." He looked up at Lupin, who seemed to be holding back a grin. "What? You look like a man with a secret."

"Oh, I'm just enjoying the moment."

Harry, totally confused, sighed. "I'm not biting."

"Guess what I have behind my back."

"Umm...is it bigger than a breadbox? Is it known for its work in the theater?"

"No and no."

"Is it going to make me want to kill you?"

"Probably." He pulled out a magazine and held it up, the grin surfacing. Harry saw that it was "Witch Weekly"...and his eyes widened in horror as he saw that plastered on the cover was his own face.

"No," he said flatly. "Please tell me that's a joke." The photographic Harry was looking furtively around as if hoping for an escape.

"It's the results of the Most Charming Smile contest! I'll give you three guesses who won and the first two don't count."

Harry jumped up and grabbed the magazine out of Lupin's hands, flushing to the roots of his hair as he realized Lupin wasn't kidding. "I don't believe this," he muttered.

"Lockhart's going to be furious," Lupin said, his grin widening. "You've broken his streak."

"I am \*never\* going to hear the end of this," Harry said, tossing the magazine onto his desk, rubbing his eyes. "My housemates are going to have a field day."

"I'm only surprised it's taken this long," Lupin said. "Dashing world-famous hero that you are..."

"Do you like your \*job,\* Remus?" Harry snapped, but his eyes were smiling. Lupin put up his hands in supplication.

"Okay, okay...no need to pull rank. I'm just saying..." He was interrupted by Hedwig, who zoomed urgently past his head and landed on Harry's shoulder, pushing the note she carried into his hand. Harry took it, his joking mood evaporating...he knew the message must be important by the way Hedwig was acting. He read the note, all the color falling out of his face as he did so.

"What?" Lupin asked, crowding closer.

"It's Leland. They found him."

Lupin's mouth fell open in shock. "Is he all right? What..."

Harry cut him off, shaking his head. "It just says they've got him over in Confinement." That wasn't a good sign. Confinement was where you were kept if you were unlucky enough to fall victim to a magical attack that couldn't be reversed. It was a horrifying place. Wizards who kept clawing out their own eyes only to have them grow back again. Witches unable to do anything but sit in a corner and scream until their throats ruptured. Sad, terrifying wrecks of people whose defenses against dark magic had not been equal to the assaults they had endured, and who could now do nothing but wait and hope that the wizard researchers there could find a new charm or potion to help them. The thought of Leland in that place was sobering to say the least...especially to Harry and Lupin, who knew all too well that it could easily be either of them someday. All it took was meeting one dark wizard who was just a little too clever while you were having an off day and you'd spend the rest of your life in a room at Confinement, convinced that bugs were eating you from the inside out.

Lupin's jaw worked. "Let's go." Harry nodded grimly, tossing the note to his desk. He took Lupin's arm and his eyes narrowed in concentration until he felt the familiar tingle and the room began to dissolve away; they vanished from Harry's office and reappeared in a white and sterile hallway. Lupin stepped aside, trembling. As a metamorphic being whose physical structure was unstable, Apparating was very difficult for him; in fact, he couldn't do it by himself at all, which was why Harry'd had to help him. A severe-looking witch with a brutally short platinum-blond haircut was waiting for them.

"Good afternoon, Chief," she said to Harry, her eyes flicking to Lupin.

"I came as soon as I got your owl. How is he?"

"Not so good." She tossed another, more pointed glance at Lupin.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Harry, remembering his manners. "This is Remus Lupin, one of my agents. Remus, this is Elektra Stillwagon, she's head of the facility." The two shook hands. "He was working with Leland at the time of his disappearance."

Elektra began to lead them down the hall. "He's down here. We've had to perform a sedative charm, we were afraid that he might hurt himself."

Harry shook his head, his lips pressed together into a tight line. "Where was he found?"

"An American wizard on sabbatical in Canada got an anonymous owl, she followed the directions she received and found him in the middle of the woods tied to a large rock."

Harry stopped in the middle of the hallway. "What?"

"I know," said Elektra, acknowledging the strangeness of the entire situation. They kept walking.

"He was last seen in Nepal," Lupin said, frustrated, running a hand through his shaggy hair. "How in the world did he get to Canada?" They came to a solid white door with a small window set into the upper portion.

Elektra put up a hand. "Now, I should warn you. He's almost unrecognizable. His mind is mostly...well, wherever he's been and whatever he's been through, it's very nearly destroyed him. He might not know who you are. Be prepared." Harry and Lupin exchanged a worried glance as she opened the door.

They stepped into the small room, furnished with some comfortable chairs and pillows. Lying curled on his side in the corner was Leland Stormare, an intelligence wizard like Harry and Lupin...except Leland had been missing for two months. He had gone to re-interview a witness in the case he and Lupin were working on and had never returned. Despite extensive searches and dozens of Homing Charms his location had eluded them...and now here he was, mysteriously returned.

Harry approached him slowly and crouched down to his level. "Leland? Can you hear me?" It hurt his heart to look at him. Leland had been a tall, strapping and robust wizard with a ruddy complexion and wiry auburn hair who always spoke in a loud, confident voice and had a laugh like great bells chiming. He had always seemed to fill every room he entered...but that jolly wizard bore little resemblance to the shivering heap on the floor before him now. His well-muscled body had wasted to a frail and bony bundle of sticks, his hair was thin, falling out and streaked with gray. Hearing Harry's voice, Leland turned his head slowly up to face him...it was all Harry could do not to recoil. Leland's bright blue eyes were a lifeless gray, and seemed to look through him to some hellish landscape that only he could see.

"Harry?" he croaked. His eyes focused on Harry's face and one hand rose, trembling, to clamp on Harry's forearm.

"It's me, Leland. Remus is here too, see? Do you know where you are?"

"Sorry, Harry. Sorry," Leland sobbed.

"Shh, you don't have to apologize. We're just glad you're back...do you remember what happened?"

"I saw...I saw a forest of thorns...the river ran red with blood..." Harry and Lupin exchanged another worried glance. "Tam Htab...sorry, sorry..."

"He keeps repeating that," Elektra whispered. "He keeps saying he's sorry, and he keeps saying 'tam htab.' Does that mean anything to you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, it doesn't." Leland grasped Harry's other arm and pulled himself to a kneeling position, fixing Harry with a penetrating and haunted stare as if mustering all his concentration.

"Sorry," he said emphatically. Harry nodded, trying to encourage him. Leland began to tremble all over. "It's always winter...tam htab," he managed. Suddenly his eyes rolled back in his head and he pitched forward into Harry's arms. Elektra darted forward, her wand raised, and pulled Leland onto the softly padded floor. Harry backed away, still feeling the ghostly impressions of Leland's bony fingers on his arms. Lupin had turned his back, unable to watch.

"Great divining, Harry," he said hoarsely. "What's been done to him? And by who?"

Harry stood watching as Elektra calmed Leland with a charm. "I don't know, but something tells me we're going to find out soon enough."

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When Hermione got home that night, Cho had already gone. Another road trip with the Minotaurs would keep her away for the next four weeks, and Hermione had to admit she wasn't sorry.

Laura was cutting vegetables in the kitchen as she entered. "George is in Kent for the night on a buying trip," she said without preamble. "So I thought I'd whip something up for you, me and Justin."

Hermione glanced at the pots bubbling over behind her and tried to ignore the stench of something burning. "Can't we just owl out for pizza or something?"

Laura pointed her knife at Hermione. "I'm perfectly capable of basic culinary tasks, thank you very much."

"Basic meaning what? Boiling water?"

Before Laura could retort, a covered pot on the stove exploded in a glut of what looked like tomato sauce, its lid flying across the room like a small metal Frisbee. Laura and Hermione both jumped, then ducked to avoid being decapitated. They stood slowly, eyeing the gaudy splashes of red sauce all over the walls and ceiling. Laura matter-of-factly tore off her apron and tossed it to the countertop. "Pizza it is," she said, turning off the rangetop with decisive twists of her wrists, as if she'd meant for her kitchen forays to turn out that way all along.

They went into the hallway to the alcove where Faust lived. When they'd moved in, only Harry had possessed an owl of his own so they'd gone in together to purchase a house owl...except at the moment he wasn't there. Hermione and Laura looked at each other and shrugged. "Must be out with the post," Laura said.

As if on cue, the owl-door in the transom over the main entrance flipped open and Faust flew in, dropping a beakful of letters into the mail tray and lighting on his perch with a happy squawk. Hermione gave him some water and the note for the pizza shop. "You can wait a few minutes to catch your breath if you want," she told him. Faust seemed to sigh and shake out his feathers, then took off again. Laura was going through the mail.

"One for you," she said, handing Hermione a thick and creamy envelope with the Hogwarts seal on the flap. She recognized Minerva's handwriting immediately. "Drats, no letter from my sweetie. Oh well...I'd best clean up that marinara sauce before it hardens." She went back into the kitchen, leaving Hermione to perch on the window seat and read her letter.

"Dear Hermione," it read. "Don't bother about the derivations on that Mogrification Charm, I found the reference I needed. I appreciate your efforts on my behalf, however.

But that's not the only reason I'm writing. There's something I've been debating for several weeks whether I should discuss with you, and I've decided I can't keep it to myself any longer. The fact is that I'm very worried about Harry. I don't know how much he tells you about his life or what he does...I myself am not quite sure what his occupation is, in fact. This does not, however, allay the concerns that have been inspired in me by reports that have reached my ears."

Hermione's brow furrowed and she read on.

"The fact is that I've been hearing news of an alarming nature concerning his activities. For example, just last week a close friend of mine, a Hogwarts classmate, told me that he'd run into Harry in Hong Kong in a very dangerous part of town dominated by dark wizards and dark magic. My friend works for the Department of Defense and was there on an assignment, but he said that Harry was very evasive about his own reasons for being in that part of town. Another report came to me that Harry had been seen in a social setting with two known dark wizards somewhere in New York a few months ago. Hermione, I could fill several pages with similar reports. I might also point out that those who've seen him in such circumstances noticed that his scar was not visible. You and I know that Harry is quite a powerful enough wizard to camouflage his own appearance if he chooses...the fact that he is doing so to consort with dark forces is disturbing to say the least.

I am not suggesting that Harry has turned to the dark arts or has any inclination to do so...though others may not be quite so assured of his integrity as you and I are. What concerns me is that he may be taking a fight that has been over for years and extending it to anyone who practices the dark arts. The history books are rife with tales of those whose quests for vengeance consumed their lives, even after the one who wronged them had been destroyed. It wouldn't be the first time. Voldemort may be gone, but I fear that Harry is continuing that battle on his own.

I don't have to tell you what he means to the magical community, nor do I need to paint you a picture of what it might do to us if we were to lose him now. You're the closest person in the world to him, Hermione. If anyone could shed some light upon this situation it would be you...and if anyone were to dissuade him from any dangerous course of action he might choose, it would be you. I would not ask you to betray any confidences he has shared with you, nor do I require a report from you about his comings and goings. I merely wished to alert you to what I am hearing. You know as well as I how fast rumors spread in the wizarding world. I don't believe anyone would really think that he was turning to the dark forces, but with such puzzling reports flying about who knows what might happen. He is still a hero, a legend even, but that only means that people will pay even more attention to what he does than they might have done if he were just another wizard.

I know that Harry's existence is a lonely one. I am grateful that he still has you. I will look forward to seeing you next week at the conference.

Affectionately, Minerva

Hermione slid the letter back into its envelope, thinking. She didn't share Minerva's concern...if Harry was indeed a spy (and she was more convinced with each passing minute that he was) then his associations with dark forces were easily explained. It was his job, after all, and it very nicely accounted for why he might be disguising himself. What did concern her was the fact that his activities didn't seem to be nearly as secret as he thought they were. If he took no action, he could start feeling the repercussions.

Laura came back from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "I'm starved, I hope that pizza doesn't take very long." She stopped, examining Hermione's face. "What's wrong?"

Hermione smiled. "Nothing. Just..." She trailed off, uncertain how to continue.

"Just what?"

"Just more drama of the Potter variety."

"Ah. No shortage of that, is there?" Laura said, flopping down on the window seat next to her. "I can't figure him out."

"What's to figure?"

"He's so mysterious."

Hermione blinked. "Mysterious? Well, if you say so."

"I do say so...but I don't suppose there's much mystery left for you after fifteen years."

"He is more reserved than he used to be, though he was always a little shy. Ron did most of the talking back in the day." She turned to look out the window, the old sadness prickling at her skin. "I wish you could've known him," she said quietly. Laura leaned forward, keenly interested...neither Hermione nor Harry nor anyone else in the house talked much of the infamous Ron. "You remind me of him in a lot of ways."

"Really?"

Hermione nodded, smiling. "We were like three peas in a pod, and so different. I was serious and studious, Harry was focused and courageous, and Ron was outgoing and sarcastic." She trailed off, realizing she was actually on the verge of talking about Ron...something she avoided, even though at times it swelled inside her until she didn't know if she could hold the words back any more. Laura seemed to sense this.

"Tell me about him. It's okay."

Hermione sighed and drew her legs up, hugging her knees to her chest. "Ron and Harry met on the train on their way to Hogwarts our first year...and good thing for Harry, too. The Weaselys are an old wizarding family and Ron was the sixth kid in his household to attend Hogwarts, so he was an expert. Poor Harry didn't have a clue what was going on."

"He grew up with Muggles, right?"

"Right. His aunt and uncle. Horrid people, the both of them. Like me, he didn't know he was a wizard until he got the letter from Hogwarts inviting him to attend. Anyway, when I first met Ron I thought he was insufferably obnoxious. I spent a good deal of our first year disapproving of the things he and Harry were getting themselves into, and getting \*me\* into along the way. The idea of breaking the rules was antithetical to me, but to them it was second nature." She smiled, lost in the reminiscences. "A lot of people only knew Ron as Harry's sidekick, but I don't think he really minded. He was used to playing second banana to his brothers and wouldn't have felt comfortable being a ringleader himself...not to mention the simple fact that he looked up to Harry, we all did."

"But it was \*Ron\* you dated, not Harry."



"I couldn't've dated Harry if I'd wanted to, he was already with Cho by the end of our fourth year. Ron and I spent more and more time together while he was off with her, and I guess one thing led to another." She turned her face away and swiped at her eyes. "After he died, in some ways Harry and I got closer and in other ways we drifted apart. We stuck together because we couldn't help it, but we pushed each other away too, because we knew in the backs of our minds that either one of us could be next...and I knew that \*I\* couldn't go through that grief again. After we graduated and the whole Voldemort thing was over, it got better. The spectre of death lifted some, and getting away from Hogwarts helped. We love the place, but it was hard to be there when around every corner was another memory of Ron."

"Did you love him?" Laura asked, fascinated by this rare peek inside Hermione's heart.

The pause stretched out longer and longer as Hermione stared unblinkingly out the window. "I don't know," she finally said. "I've never really figured that out."

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Harry and Lupin Apparated back to the office, not talking much. Seeing Leland laid so low had done nothing for their optimism and cast a pall of gloom over their moods. It didn't help that as soon as they appeared in the foyer of the Intelligence Division's underground headquarters, they found Argo Pfaffenroth waiting for them. Argo was Harry's boss; she was head of the Intelligence Division, subordinate only to the Chancellor of the International Federation of Wizards...and her presence wasn't a good sign. She didn't usually have much contact with the day-to-day activities under her purview, and if she took an interest in something you were doing it was definitely a sign that you should be paying very close attention.

"Confinement?" she asked. Not one for idle pleasantries was Pfaffenroth.

"Yes. We've seen him." Further comment was unnecessary, Harry knew that Elektra would have given Pfaffenroth a full report. They walked down the corridor towards Harry's office. "Something I can help you with?" Harry said, attempting to keep his tone conversational.

"Now that you mention it, yes. I want to know if and how Leland Stormare's disappearance and recent return fits into the pattern." Her clipped American accent rendered the blunt questions all the more abrupt.

Harry stopped short, his eyebrows furrowing in alarm. "Argo! That's classified!" he exclaimed, glancing at Lupin. Pfaffenroth didn't seem concerned. Lupin looked like he wanted to excuse himself but was just too interested in what was going on to bring himself to do it.

"Answer my question, please."

He sighed. "I'm not sure."

"Don't yank my chain, Chief. You're sure, you just don't want to say it out loud."

"Added mind-reading to your bag of tricks, have you?"

"For the love of Christ, does it fit?"

Harry hesitated. "Yes."

Argo nodded. "As I suspected."

"As we all \*feared.\*"

"Any progress on possible interpretations?"

"Not since I last checked. They're thinking of nothing else down in Research."

"In that case we have no choice but to..." She would have continued, but Harry heard no more. As sudden as a flash of lightning from a clear blue sky, white-hot pain shot through his forehead. He clapped both hands over his scar and doubled over, crying out in agony.

"Harry!" Lupin said, bending over him. Argo did the same.

"Go the infirmary and get help!" she snapped at a passing wizard, who scurried away as fast as his legs could carry him.

Harry's legs buckled and he sank to his knees, his hands still clutching at his head. His jaws were clamped tightly shut over the screams, but still choked cries of pain escaped his throat. He looked up into Lupin's shocked face...then his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed in a boneless heap on the floor.

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## HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY

### Chapter 3: The Paradigm of Uncertainty

In Hermione's dream, she was in the Chamber of Secrets. In reality, she had never set foot in the Chamber...but she'd heard so much of it from Ginny and Harry that at times she felt as if she'd shared that experience with them. She was standing in a corner, unseen, as Harry battled the basilisk; except it wasn't the prepubescent Harry who had actually done so, it was the adult Harry she knew today, and for some reason dream-Harry was still wearing the mustache and goatee that the real Harry had shaven off several years ago (he'd finally grown tired of hearing her joke that it made him look like Mephistopheles). The giant snake wove and lunged and Harry danced out of its reach, brandishing Godric Gryffindor's jeweled sword with his robe flying out behind him. A woman lay on the floor unconscious, but instead of Ginny it was Cho, decked out in her blue-and-orange Quidditch robes. Suddenly the basilisk turned its lampent eyes on Hermione; she cried out in horror, for instead of the yellow slit eyes of the king serpent, the basilisk had friendly-looking blue eyes. As she watched, its long snout contracted and its green skin paled...all at once, she was staring into the face of Ron Weasley there on the head of the snake. She reached out to touch his cheek, but before she could there was swish and a thunk of metal against flesh and the basilisk's head toppled off. Its body crumpled to the floor revealing Harry standing behind it, the dripping sword dangling loosely from one hand. He looked down at the snake that bore Ron's face and screamed, the sword clattering to the stones.

Hermione jerked herself awake, an unpleasant sheen of oily perspiration coating her body all over and her breath sobbing in and out of her mouth. She sat up, shaking all over, clutching the blankets to her chest, her head pounding and pounding...she blinked and looked around. The pounding wasn't just in her head, someone was at the front door and hammering on it with what sounded like a sledgehammer.

Hermione swung her legs out of bed, slipping her robe over her shoulders as she yanked open the door to her bedroom and hurried out into the gallery. Her room was oval-shaped and occupied the second story of one of the mansion's three towers; it opened onto the second-floor living gallery, a long comfortably furnished casual room that was open on one side and

looked down into the glassed-in winter garden room. Laura's room was at the other end of the gallery; her bedroom door was standing open and Hermione could hear her quick footsteps padding down the curving main staircase. The door to the second-floor east wing hallway swung open and a bare-chested Justin stumbled out, rubbing his eyes and hitching up his pyjama bottoms. "Whazzabloodyhell?" he mumbled. They heard Laura opening the front door. Hermione flew down the stairs, her silk dressing gown billowing out behind her.

"What's the meaning of this, pounding on our door in the middle of the night?" Laura demanded stridently. Hermione came up next to her. Standing on the sheltered portico was a tall, bedraggled wizard clutching a broom in one hand, his hat and cloak drenched in the chilly, brackish rain that was half-heartedly falling from the night sky. "What do you want?"

"Is there a Dr. Granger here?" the messenger said.

Hermione stepped forward, clutching her robe tighter around herself. "I'm Dr. Granger." The wizard handed her a damp note, then turned without a word, mounted his broomstick and flew away. Hermione opened the note. Justin had shuffled his way down the stairs and he and Laura watched as Hermione read the message.

"What is it?" Laura asked, her tone hushed. Hermione sighed and crumpled the note with one clench of her fist.

"It's Harry," she said. "He's dead."

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Lupin sat in an exquisitely uncomfortable chair, waiting. He was only holding on to his composure with a very conscious effort, and he wasn't altogether sure that he'd be able to keep control of himself when he saw Hermione. Harry's body was lying in the infirmary covered with a sheet awaiting forensic examination to determine the exact cause of his death...of course it wasn't *their* infirmary. As soon as the death pronouncement had been made the entire dog-and-pony show had been moved to a civilian medical facility with regular wizard doctors, so that when his housemates arrived they wouldn't get an eyeful of top-secret locations and clandestine personnel. Argo had hurried off to meet them, concerned as ever with maintaining the secrecy of Harry's position. Lupin was past caring. Nothing here could tip them off, anyway. Hermione and the others knew that Lupin and Harry sometimes worked together, so his presence wouldn't seem strange. As if anything mattered anymore with Harry gone. Lupin was of half a mind to just blurt out the truth so that at least Harry's friends would have the scant comfort of knowing how he had spent the last few years of his life.

After Harry had lost consciousness in the hallway, Lupin and Argo had levitated him up to the medical wing where the doctors set to work on him at once, whipping out their wands and potions and shouting spells and instructions to each other. Harry had lain there immobile and unresponsive, his skin growing paler and paler. The doctors had begun to panic as his breathing became shallow and finally stopped. They'd at last resorted to Muggle-style artificial respiration but all for nothing...his heart stopped beating and he died, it was as simple as that. Lupin had stood numbly in the corner and watched as they'd drawn the sheet up over Harry's lifeless face. Argo had fled the room to dispatch a messenger to Harry's home, not trusting this news to an interceptible owl. It irked Lupin that in the face of the death of a friend, her first thought was still towards containment, though he understood why she felt that way. When word got out that Harry Potter was dead, it would make the widespread grief that had followed Dumbledore's death look like a picnic in the park.

Raised voices in the hallway drew him from his chair as the door opened and Hermione strode in, cloaked in an aggressive take-charge manner and a stony expression. Trailing behind her were two of Harry's other roommates, looking shocked and grief-stricken. Hermione just looked impatient, nor did she look terribly surprised to see Lupin there. "Remus," she said. "Where is he?"

"Hermione..."

"I need to see him. Now." Her tone brooked no refusals.

"I'm not sure that's such a..." began Pfaffenroth.

"You don't understand," Hermione continued sharply. "Whoever you are and whatever sort of jurisdiction you think you have here, you *\*will\** take me to his body immediately or else 'sorry' doesn't even begin to describe what you will be!"

Argo paused for a moment, then stepped aside to let Hermione pass. She resumed her quick strides, hardly waiting to be shown the way.

The ragtag group arrived at the infirmary, but the weepy and emotional scene Lupin had been dreading never materialized. Instead of breaking down at the sight of the sheet-draped body, Hermione merely paused for a moment then walked right up to it, whipping the sheet back with one swift motion. The others, shocked, hung back in the doorway. Hermione bent over Harry's body, pressing her ear to his forehead, palpating the flesh of his shoulders with her fingertips...Lupin realized she was *\*examining\** him for something. "Hermione...what's all this, then?" he asked, taking a step forward.

She pulled open one of Harry's eyelids and peered inside, not seeming to have heard Lupin at all. Laura came up to the other side of the bed, the tears flowing freely now. "Herm, he's gone. Don't do this to yourself."

"Let her have a look if she needs to," Justin said.

"It can't be healthy," Laura snapped. "We should leave any investigation to experts."

Justin turned to Lupin. "What in the world happened?"

"I don't know. One minute he was fine, the next he was clutching at his forehead in terrible pain, then he just collapsed."

"Any idea what caused it?"

"He's not dead." These three simple words, the first ones Hermione had spoken since entering the infirmary, effectively cut off all other conversation.

Lupin just stared at her. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, you heard me! He's not dead, Remus. I suspected he wasn't, that's why I had to see him. It's designed to fool any observers, even doctors, unless they know what to look for."

"What are you talking about?" Laura said. "Look at him! He's dead!"

"No, Laura. He's in a self-induced necromimetic hypnosomatic stasis." She looked around at their faces, all of them wearing near-identical expression of stunned bewilderment.

"Come again?" Justin said.

"A self-induced necromimetic hypnosomatic stasis. It's a sort of trance. I know because I helped him write the charms that cause it. It's a magical defense against mental attacks. If his mind is exposed to any magic sufficiently powerful to cause damage, the spell automatically goes into action and sends all brain and body function into a sort of holding pattern, protecting him until the danger is past." She bent over him again. "He'll come out of it himself eventually, but I can rouse him now." She pulled up a stool to the bedside and drew her wand out of its holster.

The four observers watched in silence as Hermione laid one hand on Harry's forehead and raised her wand over his chest, moving it in small figure eight patterns. She stared into space at some point on the opposite wall, her eyes narrowing as she concentrated, murmuring words under her breath. Her wand began to leave a trail of warm, yellow light as it traced its pattern in the air; her eyes shifted to watch Harry's face. She lowered her wand to the skin of his torso, etching the figure-eight pattern onto his body; the glowing lines sank into his flesh and spread, illuminating his form with warm luminescence. Small shining points of energy began to appear in the air around them and were pulled down towards Hermione's wand where they flowed into Harry; they increased in number and speed until after a few moments they had become a dazzling flood of light rushing out of the surrounding space and into his body. Hermione seemed winded, she was breathing in quick gasps as the glow dissipated.

Everyone stood motionless, holding their breath and waiting for something to happen. Hermione raised her head and lifted her wand from Harry's chest. "Wake up now, Harry," she said quietly. Obediently, his chest hitched and he drew in a huge breath, the pink color returning to his skin. Hermione sighed in relief. She reholstered her wand and lifted her hand from Harry's forehead. His scar was flushed a deep red, standing out in sharp relief to the pale skin surrounding it. The others drew closer, amazed. A pulse was beating in the hollow of his throat, and as they watched, his lashes fluttered and he opened his eyes.

"Flipping heck," Justin breathed.

"Can you hear me?" Hermione said to Harry, her voice quiet and calm. He nodded slowly, his gaze coming back into focus. "Do you know your name?" she asked.

He swallowed. "Potter..." he croaked. He cleared his throat, and when he spoke again he sounded much more like himself. "Potter, Harold James."

"That's right. Do you know who I am?"

A small smile creased his lips. "Hermione." He turned his head slightly and looked at her. "I guess it worked."

"Of course it did, you daft git."

Laura straightened up and looked at Lupin and Argo. "All right, now I'd like some answers. Who are you people and how in the world did this happen? I mean..." She would have gone on, but Justin took her firmly by the arm. "Justin! This is ridiculous! They're not telling us anything, we should..."

"I'll explain later," he said under his breath. Lupin watched, suspicious, as Justin shot Hermione a significant glance. \*They know,\* he thought. \*They know about Harry's job, but Laura doesn't.\*

"I think we should let the Chief rest," he interjected, trying to send Pfaffenroth telepathic instructions, which had never worked in the past and didn't work now. Fortunately she seemed

to agree, and turned to leave the room...\*she's probably got better things to do,\* he thought, then had to chastise himself for the uncharitable (although probably true) thought.

Hermione sat back down on the stool. "You all go on, I'll catch you up later. I should stay with him," she said. Justin nodded and pulled Laura, protesting all the way, out into the hallway. Lupin brought up the rear; the door snicked shut behind him and he sagged against the wall, relief flooding him from head to toe.

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Hermione helped Harry sit up, propping pillows behind his back, and conjured him some pajamas to wear. These tasks complete, she sat quietly for a few moments, thinking how best to attack this conversation. Harry wasn't looking at her; she got the feeling he was afraid of what he might see on her face if he looked too closely.

"Are you all right?" she finally asked.

He nodded. "I'm well knackered, but otherwise fine. At least we know that charm works."

"I could have lived without finding out the hard way," she said. "I think the spell needs adjusting, though. What if I hadn't been here? You would have been taken for dead and probably buried alive before you came out of it."

"Not something I'm anxious to experience."

"What attacked you?"

He shook his head, looking out the window. "I'm not sure."

"Lupin said the pain started in your scar. That hasn't happened since..." She didn't finish the statement, she didn't need to. They both knew that pain in his scar had been pretty common when minions of Voldemort were nearby.

"Would've had to have been pretty intense evil to prompt that kind of a reaction." He looked like he wanted to say more but couldn't without exposing his secret. Another silence stretched out long and thin before Harry began to shift uncomfortably in bed. She said nothing, not wishing to make this any easier for him. At long last he fetched a deep sigh and met her eyes.

"I imagine you're bursting with questions," he said.

"Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know...such as what is this place? How did I get here? Where do I go when I leave home for days on end? What the devil happened to my old Firebolt?"

She nodded. "Well, I'm just going to skip all those small questions and go right to the ten thousand pound question, all right?" Harry nodded. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. "Harry...are you a spy?"

The hundred-odd times she'd imagined herself asking him this question she'd thought she'd anticipated every possible reaction, but she'd never thought there wouldn't be one. He just sat there, staring calmly at her, her words still hanging in the air like the unpleasant smell of burned popcorn. Finally he turned his head slightly away and she could see the muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching. He looked back at her, a small sardonic smile on his face. "I don't particularly care for that term, actually. We prefer to call ourselves 'intelligence wizards.'"

Although she'd been about ninety-nine percent sure that Cho had been telling her the truth, hearing him say it had an odd effect on Hermione. Her last, stubborn, lingering perceptions of him as the young boy she'd once known were shattered like so much plate glass. Before, she'd been able to observe his increased height, his deeper voice, his stubble if he didn't shave and the increased squareness of his features...but at some level, in her mind, he was still the boy she'd met on the train who had been swimming in Dudley's hand-me-downs and didn't understand his place in the world he was about to enter. The boy who had needed her to scold him for putting off his homework till the last minute, who had ignored her warnings not to sneak out to Hogsmeade, who had bravely waded in where others feared to tread simply because he didn't know how to be a coward.

But that boy was gone...and for the first time, she really knew it. Harry was a grown man, with a man's responsibilities, and he probably didn't even remember what it had been like to be twelve when his greatest worry had been beating Slytherin at Quidditch...but he *\*still\** didn't know how to be a coward.

Now that his secret was revealed, Harry looked both tired and extraordinarily sad, as if he'd lost something very precious to him. "I should have known I couldn't keep it from you," he whispered.

"You did, though," she said. "I had no idea."

He frowned. "How did you..."

"Cho told me," she said, trying and failing to keep the bitterness out of her voice. Its presence was not lost on Harry. He leaned forward and fixed her with a stern look.

"Hermione," he said, his tone scolding. "Please tell me you didn't for one second believe that I'd tell *\*her\** while keeping it from *\*you.\**"

"What else was I to believe?"

"Do you have any idea how many people she knows or has dated at the Ministry? She could have found out on her own...must have, in fact, because I certainly never told her. I never told *\*anyone.\**"

"You told Lupin," she said.

Harry smiled. "Well, he works for me. I couldn't very well hide it."

Hermione's mouth fell open, then she just shook her head with a sigh. "Oh, Harry. There's so much I don't know about your life."

He sat back, nodding in agreement. "I know, and I'm sorry. But that's all over. Now that you know, you should know everything. Anything you want to ask me, I promise I'll tell you the truth."

Hermione thought for a moment. After days of wondering and puzzling, to be suddenly confronted with the answer to every question she'd ever had was a little disconcerting...she wasn't sure where to start. "So...you really are a spy?" she managed, somewhat lamely.

Harry didn't seem to mind the repetition, nor did he correct her terminology a second time. "That's right. I work for the Intelligence Division of the International Federation of Wizards."

"Not for the Ministry?"

"No. They don't do much espionage. They're too busy concealing \*us\* from Muggles to worry about what's going on in secret within the wizarding world."

"Whom do you spy on? Other wizards?"

"In a way. About ninety percent of what we do involves keeping tabs on the dark forces. I spend most of my time looking for dark magic activity and the wizards who've gone to the other side. When I find them, I deal with them."

She felt a shiver building at the base of her spine. "Deal with them? How, exactly?"

He shifted in the bed. "You're asking if I've ever killed anyone." She hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, I have," he said, looking straight at her. "But only when I couldn't avoid it. My main concern is to keep practitioners of dark magic from organizing into a force that might pose a real threat. When I find dark wizards, first I try to scare them away from it. A lot of them are just power-hungry and insecure, it doesn't take much to make them recant...at least temporarily. Otherwise I take them into custody and lock them up where they can't do any harm."

"In Azkaban?"

Harry laughed. "Oh no. Azkaban's for public relations and to frighten children. When I put a dark wizard away, no one will ever find him again. That's why we try to make sure they can't be rehabilitated before we imprison them." He sobered. "But there are times when things don't go as planned. If they fight me, I have no choice but to fight back. If that happens...well, they usually lose." He said this with no trace of hubris, just regret that it ever came to that.

Hermione both did and did not want to pursue this topic further. She opted for "not" at that moment. "How long have you been doing this?" she asked quietly.

He looked away. "I was recruited almost a year after we graduated." Hermione's mouth dropped open. "I know, I know..."

"Eight \*years?\*" she exclaimed. "You've managed to keep this from me for eight \*years?\*"

"It wasn't easy, believe me. Not just because you're too bloody smart for your own good..."

"Don't flatter me, it's cheap!"

"...but because I \*wanted\* to tell you, every day," he continued. "I'd \*never\* kept anything from you before, and there were times when I felt like my career wasn't real. How could it be, if you didn't know about it?" Hermione sighed, somewhat appeased. "You remember our first flat?"

"How could I forget that four-story slog...but it was a nice place. The roof garden made the climb \*almost\* worthwhile."

"That first year I very nearly went mad. I had so many job offers I couldn't sort them out, and I had no idea what I wanted to do. And the rub of it was that not one of those offers had anything to say about \*me\* or my qualifications...they just wanted the name and the bloody scar. Then one day while you were at school, I had a visitor..."

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Harry straightened up and stretched, the back of his neck warm from the sun. He could have used a charm to weed the garden, but that would have been too quick...anything to occupy his



time was welcome these days. He turned to go downstairs and wash his hands, then jumped with a small cry.

Standing directly behind him was a woman. She was of average height with a severe slicked-back hairstyle and a strong, expressionless face. She was just \*looking\* at him. He had no idea how long she'd been standing there. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "You scared the life out of me!"

"Are you Harold J. Potter?" she asked him, calm like they were meeting in a park somewhere.

"Um...yes."

She narrowed her eyes and regarded him a little more closely. "Do you have any identification?" Without a word, Harry lifted his bangs to expose his scar. The woman looked at it, eyebrows raised. "That looks rather nasty. How'd you come by that?"

Harry just blinked, completely stumped, and let his hair fall back down over his forehead. "You don't..." He cleared his throat. "You don't know who I am?"

"Well, if you're Harold J. Potter, then yes, I do. Why, is that scar supposed to mean something to me?"

"It does to most people. I'm..." He hesitated again, not used to having to explain this. "I'm famous after a fashion, among wizards."

"That so? I don't get out much. And I try to have as little contact as possible with regular wizards."

Harry grinned, enjoying this. "I'm so pleased to meet you," he said, meaning it. He tried and failed to remember when he'd ever met a wizard who didn't have a preconceived notion about him. Even Muggle-raised Hermione had read about him in some of her books. "So who might you be, then?"

"My name's Pfaffenroth. I've come to offer you a job."

"What sort of job?" He'd heard nothing about her offer and it was already more intriguing than any of the offers he had downstairs.

The woman cleared her throat and began pacing slowly, hands clasped behind her back, in a professorial fashion. "I work for the International Federation of Wizards. I'm head of the Intelligence Division."

"Intelligence?"

"That's right."

"What, do you mean like 007?" She just looked at him blankly, apparently not understanding the reference. Harry rephrased. "Spies?"

"We prefer to call ourselves 'intelligence wizards.' I have an opening in the Department of Counterintelligence and Covert Operations. Are you interested?"

Harry sat down on the edge of the roof, amazed. "You want me to be a sp...an intelligence wizard, is that right? Well, that's certainly a new one." He looked up at her. "If you didn't know who I was why did you come to me?"

She reached into her pocket and drew out a card, holding it out to him. He took it and observed that it was a Tarot card. The King of Cups, to be precise. He turned it over...written on the back in neat, block printing was his own name. "What's this?"

"It's a card from an enchanted Tarot deck that keeps track of wizards who have a particular aptitude for our line of work. I believe a similar device controls admissions to Hogwarts, a quill that records the name of every magical child born. This deck came from the same divinator who enchanted the quill. Whenever I need to recruit a new operative, I take out the deck and do a reading. One of the cards always has a name printed on it. Yesterday, the deck gave me your name."

"And you just came here, knowing nothing about me?"

"The deck has never steered me wrong before. I myself was chosen by it, years ago."

"So I've no choice in the matter, is that it?"

"Of course you have a choice. This isn't a command directive. You're free to refuse with no consequences. A person has to want to do this work in order to succeed. It's difficult, it's trying, and it's dangerous. I don't want you if you haven't the inclination. I do know you have the talent. Do you have any idea why the deck may have selected you?"

"Well, yes! I defeated Voldemort last year!"

Pfaffenroth nodded. "Oh, that was you, was it? I'm terrible with names. I'm sure I heard yours at some point or another. Well, that's it, then."

He looked up at her. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. If you're interested, come to this address tomorrow morning," she said, handing him a card. "You'll be instated immediately and your training will begin. You may keep your occupation a secret but it's not a requirement. Many of our operatives choose to do so in order to avoid endangering their family and friends." She offered him a small, wan smile. "I'll hope to see you tomorrow." And she was gone, Apparated away in the blink of an eye.

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"So you took the job just because Pfaffenroth hadn't heard of you?"

"Not entirely. I admit it was refreshing to be chosen because I was suited for the job and not because my name is Harry Potter. And I found the possibility intriguing. I did well at Hogwarts, but I always felt as though my only real skills were Quidditch and fighting evil. If I could make a living at one of them I was glad for the chance."

"I can't believe she didn't know who you were. A \*spy\* not knowing who defeated Voldemort?"

"I found out later that Argo is really just an administrator. She hasn't done any field duty in years and years. When I told the guys down in Strategy that she hadn't known, they just about busted a gut laughing. They'd been tracking me for ages. They had a million questions about Voldemort."

"Lupin called you 'Chief'...are you the boss?"

"I'm not \*the\* boss, but I am \*a\* boss. Turns out Argo was right, I'm quite good at this work, good enough that three years ago I was made Chief Wizard of Counterintelligence and Covert

Operations. There are six departments, each with their own chief wizard, but since my department is the largest and most active, I get to use the title 'Chief' by default. And if something happens to Argo, I take over command of the ID. As for Lupin, well...the Deck didn't choose him, I did. A few years ago I was in Romania and I ran into him working as a vampire hunter. He wasn't getting many jobs, no one would hire him. He was just about starving. I couldn't help but remember how good he was as a DODA professor and how much he knew about the dark forces, so I offered him a job in my department. Argo wasn't thrilled, but she cheered up after he saved the lives of two other wizards on his very first assignment. He's damned good. I'm amazed the Deck never picked him on its own."

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad you did that. I always worried so for him...it's not his fault he's a werewolf."

"It's one of the things I'm most proud of."

She looked down at her hands. They'd reached the hardest question of all. "Harry...why didn't you ever tell me?"

He sighed. "I don't know if I can put it into words."

"Try."

He nodded, looking more tired than ever. "All right." He sat up straighter and took both of her hands in his. "The work I do isn't what you're probably imagining, all chases and glamorous locations and glorious victories over evil. I have to get down and wade in amongst the evil and those who serve it. It's disheartening and there are times when I don't feel like myself anymore...times when I don't even feel \*human\* anymore. But when I come home, I remember who I am and what I'm fighting to protect, and I feel human again. I couldn't tell you, because if you knew about my work then that darkness I have to look at every day would touch you, too. You'd be tainted by everything I come home to forget about. I had to be able to have you and all the others look at me with no idea the kind of people I have to be around day in and day out to do my job." He paused and dropped his eyes to the sheet. "The man who did most of my training is a very great and powerful wizard. His name is Eleutherios Mamakos, but we all just call him Lefty. He taught me a lot of things, but the most important thing he taught me was that everyone who does what I do needs a sacred space, untouched by the dark forces." He looked up into her eyes. "You were \*my\* sacred space, Hermione."

She blinked back tears, unable to speak, and held his gaze for a few seconds...just long enough for it to become uncomfortable. They both looked away. "Harry...I don't know what to say..." He was silent, staring down at their clasped hands. "And now that I know, it's ruined!"

That got a reaction. His head jerked up, eyes blazing. "No! Don't ever think that! I'm \*glad\* you know the truth, glad! As much as I needed to keep my home life separate from my work, it was positively horrible having to lie all the time, and not being able to share anything I was doing. As nice it was to come home to an innocent atmosphere, it will be even \*better\* to be able to come home and tell you where I've been and what I've been doing!" Hermione smiled. "If you want the truth, somewhere in the back of my mind I've been half-wishing for you to find out somehow, even if I couldn't bring myself to tell you."

"What about the others?"

"Cho already knows, right?"

"Well...Justin sort of knows too."

"Okay, that's four out of six. I might as well tell George and Laura too. It doesn't make sense to keep only them in the dark."

"And perhaps..." She trailed off, uncertain. Harry peered at her questioningly.

"Perhaps what?"

"Perhaps we can help you," she finished, unable to meet his eyes. Harry smiled.

"What you mean is, perhaps \*you\* can help me."

"That's not what I said."

"No, but that's what you meant."

"Don't tell me what I do and do not mean, Harry!"

He continued, unfazed. "I might have expected this."

"Why?"

"Because! You hate your job, you're disillusioned in your studies, and you feel like you're wasting away in a dusty old office surrounded by dusty old books and even dustier people."

Hermione stared at him, her mouth hanging open. "How...how do you know that? No one knows that!" she croaked. It was \*her\* deepest secret, one she'd hardly been able to admit to herself, let alone anyone else.

"Give me a little credit, secrets are my business. You may be able to fool the others but not me, Hermione. Never me."

She stood up abruptly and went to the window, her arms crossed over her chest. "It's true," she said. "I hate it. I'm bored out of my skull. And this was supposedly my dream job, that career that I always thought I wanted. A life of scholarship and research and intellectual challenges." She chuckled bitterly. "Big joke on me, isn't it? Turns out all that scholarship and all those intellectual challenges aren't that appealing unless there's some use for them." She turned and looked down at him. "You know, I always wondered why the Sorting Hat put me in Gryffindor. I fully expected to be in Ravenclaw."

"With the rest of the brainy types."

"Exactly. Well, now I know. The brainy pursuits aren't enough for me. And it's \*your\* fault, you git!" she said, socking him on the shoulder. "You corrupted me with all your crusades and your midnight missions and your heroics!"

"Maybe that's \*why\* the hat put you in Gryffindor. So you'd be corrupted."

She sighed. "Can you blame me if I find the idea of helping you appealing?"

"No, I don't blame you. I just don't think you really understand what you're proposing."

She flopped back down on the edge of the bed. "Enlighten me."

He tented his fingers under his nose and thought for a moment. "When I started my training, Lefty said to me, 'Here's the deal, Potter. Lesson number one. The first thing you've got to accept out of the gate is that you'll never be sure about anything, ever again. The intelligence world exists in a paradigm of uncertainty. It's the norm around here. Hunches, circumstantial

evidence, a third-hand tipoff from a second-rate source...such as these are the facts we traffic with." He looked at her. "You may crave adventure, but if there's one thing central to your personality it's that you have a need to be \*sure.\* You have to have the right answer. That's not a bad thing, but it's something you'd never have in my business." He threw back the sheet and swung his legs out of bed, rising to fetch his clothes from a pile on a nearby bench. Hermione didn't contradict him...how could she? He was absolutely correct. "And even if that weren't the case, I'd never go along with it."

That, she could challenge. "Oh, really? And how exactly would it be your decision? How would you stop me?"

He looked at her flatly. "I could stop you."

"I believe I'm a grown woman."

"With no experience, no training, and pardon my saying this, no idea what she's talking about. I'll not put you in danger. I put myself in quite enough danger for both of us." He pulled his shirt over his head and ran a hand through his hair.

Hermione said nothing. She wasn't exactly sure how to argue this point, or even if she wanted to. She had a pretty clear notion that Harry's work was one of the thousands of things that sounded a lot more appealing than it actually was. She rose to join him on the other side of the bed. "All right, forget I brought it up. But I do think I'll start looking for a different line of work."

"That, I'm all for." He smiled at her. "I'm glad you found out," he said quietly. "I hate keeping things from you."

"I'll remember that the next time I'm wondering who ate my ice cream." They both laughed, then reached out and embraced tightly. Hermione hooked one arm through Harry's as they left the room. "Good Lord, Laura and Justin must be wondering what on earth took us so long."

"Oh, I'm sure they just thought we were shagging," he said casually. Hermione stopped short, a look of complete and utter shock on her face.

"Excuse me? Why would they \*ever\* think that?"

He looked at her quizzically. "Well...most people have the notion that we have sex on a semi-regular basis. Didn't you know that?"

Her jaw tightened and she put her hands on her hips in what he immediately recognized as her "indignant" pose. "I most certainly know nothing of the kind! The nerve and the presumption! Honestly, can't two people have a close, platonic relationship without people making all sorts of unwarranted insinuations? You'd think people had nothing better to do!"

"Actually, they probably don't. And you must admit it's not \*that\* unwarranted of an assumption. In all fairness, what would \*you\* think of a man and a woman who'd lived together for eight years of their adult life?"

"I certainly wouldn't go making all sorts of rude assumptions about what they did or did not do together! Everyone knows we're friends, that's all! Our cohabitation has always been financially and geographically convenient, and I'd much rather have you as a roommate than some stranger I found off the street! Not to mention the tiny fact that we've both dated a number of other people in those eight years!"

They resumed their progress down the hall to the lounge where their roommates were waiting for them. "You see, this is exactly what I was talking about. You've got to think dirty to be a spy...you wouldn't last two seconds. You always look for the most flattering explanation for everything."

She sighed and began walking again, a chagrined expression on her face. "Yes, I suppose I'm quite the freak for being so trusting."

Harry grinned and slung one arm around her shoulders, his good humor resurfacing like the sunrise. "Freak you may be, but you know I love you just the way you are."

She shot him a withering look. "Now you see, it's comments like \*that\* what make people think we're doing all this clandestine shagging."

"Oh, let 'em talk. Makes us more colorful, don't you think?"

"You don't need any more color, Mr. Chief Wizard Spy Bloke or whatever you're calling yourself these days."

He stopped her in the hall again. "Hermione...do you realize this is the first time we've had any good banter in months?"

She smiled. "Quite so. I hope I'm not out of practice."

"Oh no, it's like riding a broom. You never forget how."

They continued on down the hall, the verbal volleys flying like tennis balls. Hermione felt light as a feather. She'd expected to feel betrayed or out of the loop or otherwise alienated when confronted with the truth of Harry's secret life, but instead she felt liberated...as if she had \*her\* Harry back again. He in turn seemed more at ease than he had in a long time, but what they weren't discussing was still with them. The questions of what exactly had attacked Harry in the first place and what it meant hung over their heads like a gray stormcloud in the midst of a clear blue sky...and for herself, Hermione had already decided that if she were needed she'd dive right in and help him, no matter what he said.

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## HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY

### Chapter 3: The Paradigm of Uncertainty

In Hermione's dream, she was in the Chamber of Secrets. In reality, she had never set foot in the Chamber...but she'd heard so much of it from Ginny and Harry that at times she felt as if she'd shared that experience with them. She was standing in a corner, unseen, as Harry battled the basilisk; except it wasn't the prepubescent Harry who had actually done so, it was the adult Harry she knew today, and for some reason dream-Harry was still wearing the mustache and goatee that the real Harry had shaven off several years ago (he'd finally grown tired of hearing her joke that it made him look like Mephistopheles). The giant snake wove and lunged and Harry danced out of its reach, brandishing Godric Gryffindor's jeweled sword with his robe flying out behind him. A woman lay on the floor unconscious, but instead of Ginny it was Cho, decked out in her blue-and-orange Quidditch robes. Suddenly the basilisk turned its lampent eyes on Hermione; she cried out in horror, for instead of the yellow slit eyes of the king serpent, the basilisk had friendly-looking blue eyes. As she watched, its long snout contracted and its green skin paled...all at once, she was staring into the face of Ron Weasley there on the head of the snake. She reached out to touch his cheek, but before she could there was swish and a thunk of metal against flesh and the basilisk's head toppled off. Its body

crumpled to the floor revealing Harry standing behind it, the dripping sword dangling loosely from one hand. He looked down at the snake that bore Ron's face and screamed, the sword clattering to the stones.

Hermione jerked herself awake, an unpleasant sheen of oily perspiration coating her body all over and her breath sobbing in and out of her mouth. She sat up, shaking all over, clutching the blankets to her chest, her head pounding and pounding...she blinked and looked around. The pounding wasn't just in her head, someone was at the front door and hammering on it with what sounded like a sledgehammer.

Hermione swung her legs out of bed, slipping her robe over her shoulders as she yanked open the door to her bedroom and hurried out into the gallery. Her room was oval-shaped and occupied the second story of one of the mansion's three towers; it opened onto the second-floor living gallery, a long comfortably furnished casual room that was open on one side and looked down into the glassed-in winter garden room. Laura's room was at the other end of the gallery; her bedroom door was standing open and Hermione could hear her quick footsteps padding down the curving main staircase. The door to the second-floor east wing hallway swung open and a bare-chested Justin stumbled out, rubbing his eyes and hitching up his pyjama bottoms. "Whazzabloodyhell?" he mumbled. They heard Laura opening the front door. Hermione flew down the stairs, her silk dressing gown billowing out behind her.

"What's the meaning of this, pounding on our door in the middle of the night?" Laura demanded stridently. Hermione came up next to her. Standing on the sheltered portico was a tall, bedraggled wizard clutching a broom in one hand, his hat and cloak drenched in the chilly, brackish rain that was half-heartedly falling from the night sky. "What do you want?"

"Is there a Dr. Granger here?" the messenger said.

Hermione stepped forward, clutching her robe tighter around herself. "I'm Dr. Granger." The wizard handed her a damp note, then turned without a word, mounted his broomstick and flew away. Hermione opened the note. Justin had shuffled his way down the stairs and he and Laura watched as Hermione read the message.

"What is it?" Laura asked, her tone hushed. Hermione sighed and crumpled the note with one clench of her fist.

"It's Harry," she said. "He's dead."

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Lupin sat in an exquisitely uncomfortable chair, waiting. He was only holding on to his composure with a very conscious effort, and he wasn't altogether sure that he'd be able to keep control of himself when he saw Hermione. Harry's body was lying in the infirmary covered with a sheet awaiting forensic examination to determine the exact cause of his death...of course it wasn't *\*their\** infirmary. As soon as the death pronouncement had been made the entire dog-and-pony show had been moved to a civilian medical facility with regular wizard doctors, so that when his housemates arrived they wouldn't get an eyeful of top-secret locations and clandestine personnel. Argo had hurried off to meet them, concerned as ever with maintaining the secrecy of Harry's position. Lupin was past caring. Nothing here could tip them off, anyway. Hermione and the others knew that Lupin and Harry sometimes worked together, so his presence wouldn't seem strange. As if anything mattered anymore with Harry gone. Lupin was of half a mind to just blurt out the truth so that at least Harry's friends would have the scant comfort of knowing how he had spent the last few years of his life.

After Harry had lost consciousness in the hallway, Lupin and Argo had levitated him up to the medical wing where the doctors set to work on him at once, whipping out their wands and potions and shouting spells and instructions to each other. Harry had lain there immobile and unresponsive, his skin growing paler and paler. The doctors had begun to panic as his breathing became shallow and finally stopped. They'd at last resorted to Muggle-style artificial respiration but all for nothing...his heart stopped beating and he died, it was as simple as that. Lupin had stood numbly in the corner and watched as they'd drawn the sheet up over Harry's lifeless face. Argo had fled the room to dispatch a messenger to Harry's home, not trusting this news to an interceptible owl. It irked Lupin that in the face of the death of a friend, her first thought was still towards containment, though he understood why she felt that way. When word got out that Harry Potter was dead, it would make the widespread grief that had followed Dumbledore's death look like a picnic in the park.

Raised voices in the hallway drew him from his chair as the door opened and Hermione strode in, cloaked in an aggressive take-charge manner and a stony expression. Trailing behind her were two of Harry's other roommates, looking shocked and grief-stricken. Hermione just looked impatient, nor did she look terribly surprised to see Lupin there. "Remus," she said. "Where is he?"

"Hermione..."

"I need to see him. Now." Her tone brooked no refusals.

"I'm not sure that's such a...." began Pfaffenroth.

"You don't understand," Hermione continued sharply. "Whoever you are and whatever sort of jurisdiction you think you have here, you \*will\* take me to his body immediately or else 'sorry' doesn't even begin to describe what you will be!"

Argo paused for a moment, then stepped aside to let Hermione pass. She resumed her quick strides, hardly waiting to be shown the way.

The ragtag group arrived at the infirmary, but the weepy and emotional scene Lupin had been dreading never materialized. Instead of breaking down at the sight of the sheet-draped body, Hermione merely paused for a moment then walked right up to it, whipping the sheet back with one swift motion. The others, shocked, hung back in the doorway. Hermione bent over Harry's body, pressing her ear to his forehead, palpating the flesh of his shoulders with her fingertips...Lupin realized she was \*examining\* him for something. "Hermione...what's all this, then?" he asked, taking a step forward.

She pulled open one of Harry's eyelids and peered inside, not seeming to have heard Lupin at all. Laura came up to the other side of the bed, the tears flowing freely now. "Herm, he's gone. Don't do this to yourself."

"Let her have a look if she needs to," Justin said.

"It can't be healthy," Laura snapped. "We should leave any investigation to experts."

Justin turned to Lupin. "What in the world happened?"

"I don't know. One minute he was fine, the next he was clutching at his forehead in terrible pain, then he just collapsed."

"Any idea what caused it?"



"He's not dead." These three simple words, the first ones Hermione had spoken since entering the infirmary, effectively cut off all other conversation.

Lupin just stared at her. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, you heard me! He's not dead, Remus. I suspected he wasn't, that's why I had to see him. It's designed to fool any observers, even doctors, unless they know what to look for."

"What are you talking about?" Laura said. "Look at him! He's dead!"

"No, Laura. He's in a self-induced necromimetic hypnosomatic stasis." She looked around at their faces, all of them wearing near-identical expression of stunned bewilderment.

"Come again?" Justin said.

"A self-induced necromimetic hypnosomatic stasis. It's a sort of trance. I know because I helped him write the charms that cause it. It's a magical defense against mental attacks. If his mind is exposed to any magic sufficiently powerful to cause damage, the spell automatically goes into action and sends all brain and body function into a sort of holding pattern, protecting him until the danger is past." She bent over him again. "He'll come out of it himself eventually, but I can rouse him now." She pulled up a stool to the bedside and drew her wand out of its holster.

The four observers watched in silence as Hermione laid one hand on Harry's forehead and raised her wand over his chest, moving it in small figure eight patterns. She stared into space at some point on the opposite wall, her eyes narrowing as she concentrated, murmuring words under her breath. Her wand began to leave a trail of warm, yellow light as it traced its pattern in the air; her eyes shifted to watch Harry's face. She lowered her wand to the skin of his torso, etching the figure-eight pattern onto his body; the glowing lines sank into his flesh and spread, illuminating his form with warm luminescence. Small shining points of energy began to appear in the air around them and were pulled down towards Hermione's wand where they flowed into Harry; they increased in number and speed until after a few moments they had become a dazzling flood of light rushing out of the surrounding space and into his body. Hermione seemed winded, she was breathing in quick gasps as the glow dissipated.

Everyone stood motionless, holding their breath and waiting for something to happen. Hermione raised her head and lifted her wand from Harry's chest. "Wake up now, Harry," she said quietly. Obediently, his chest hitched and he drew in a huge breath, the pink color returning to his skin. Hermione sighed in relief. She reholstered her wand and lifted her hand from Harry's forehead. His scar was flushed a deep red, standing out in sharp relief to the pale skin surrounding it. The others drew closer, amazed. A pulse was beating in the hollow of his throat, and as they watched, his lashes fluttered and he opened his eyes.

"Flipping heck," Justin breathed.

"Can you hear me?" Hermione said to Harry, her voice quiet and calm. He nodded slowly, his gaze coming back into focus. "Do you know your name?" she asked.

He swallowed. "Potter..." he croaked. He cleared his throat, and when he spoke again he sounded much more like himself. "Potter, Harold James."

"That's right. Do you know who I am?"

A small smile creased his lips. "Hermione." He turned his head slightly and looked at her. "I guess it worked."

"Of course it did, you daft git."

Laura straightened up and looked at Lupin and Argo. "All right, now I'd like some answers. Who are you people and how in the world did this happen? I mean..." She would have gone on, but Justin took her firmly by the arm. "Justin! This is ridiculous! They're not telling us anything, we should..."

"I'll explain later," he said under his breath. Lupin watched, suspicious, as Justin shot Hermione a significant glance. \*They know,\* he thought. \*They know about Harry's job, but Laura doesn't.\*

"I think we should let the Chief rest," he interjected, trying to send Pfaffenroth telepathic instructions, which had never worked in the past and didn't work now. Fortunately she seemed to agree, and turned to leave the room...\*she's probably got better things to do,\* he thought, then had to chastise himself for the uncharitable (although probably true) thought.

Hermione sat back down on the stool. "You all go on, I'll catch you up later. I should stay with him," she said. Justin nodded and pulled Laura, protesting all the way, out into the hallway. Lupin brought up the rear; the door snicked shut behind him and he sagged against the wall, relief flooding him from head to toe.

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Hermione helped Harry sit up, propping pillows behind his back, and conjured him some pajamas to wear. These tasks complete, she sat quietly for a few moments, thinking how best to attack this conversation. Harry wasn't looking at her; she got the feeling he was afraid of what he might see on her face if he looked too closely.

"Are you all right?" she finally asked.

He nodded. "I'm well knackered, but otherwise fine. At least we know that charm works."

"I could have lived without finding out the hard way," she said. "I think the spell needs adjusting, though. What if I hadn't been here? You would have been taken for dead and probably buried alive before you came out of it."

"Not something I'm anxious to experience."

"What attacked you?"

He shook his head, looking out the window. "I'm not sure."

"Lupin said the pain started in your scar. That hasn't happened since..." She didn't finish the statement, she didn't need to. They both knew that pain in his scar had been pretty common when minions of Voldemort were nearby.

"Would've had to have been pretty intense evil to prompt that kind of a reaction." He looked like he wanted to say more but couldn't without exposing his secret. Another silence stretched out long and thin before Harry began to shift uncomfortably in bed. She said nothing, not wishing to make this any easier for him. At long last he fetched a deep sigh and met her eyes.

"I imagine you're bursting with questions," he said.

"Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know...such as what is this place? How did I get here? Where do I go when I leave home for days on end? What the devil happened to my old Firebolt?"

She nodded. "Well, I'm just going to skip all those small questions and go right to the ten thousand pound question, all right?" Harry nodded. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. "Harry...are you a spy?"

The hundred-odd times she'd imagined herself asking him this question she'd thought she'd anticipated every possible reaction, but she'd never thought there wouldn't be one. He just sat there, staring calmly at her, her words still hanging in the air like the unpleasant smell of burned popcorn. Finally he turned his head slightly away and she could see the muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching. He looked back at her, a small sardonic smile on his face. "I don't particularly care for that term, actually. We prefer to call ourselves 'intelligence wizards.'"

Although she'd been about ninety-nine percent sure that Cho had been telling her the truth, hearing him say it had an odd effect on Hermione. Her last, stubborn, lingering perceptions of him as the young boy she'd once known were shattered like so much plate glass. Before, she'd been able to observe his increased height, his deeper voice, his stubble if he didn't shave and the increased squareness of his features...but at some level, in her mind, he was still the boy she'd met on the train who had been swimming in Dudley's hand-me-downs and didn't understand his place in the world he was about to enter. The boy who had needed her to scold him for putting off his homework till the last minute, who had ignored her warnings not to sneak out to Hogsmeade, who had bravely waded in where others feared to tread simply because he didn't know how to be a coward.

But that boy was gone...and for the first time, she really knew it. Harry was a grown man, with a man's responsibilities, and he probably didn't even remember what it had been like to be twelve when his greatest worry had been beating Slytherin at Quidditch...but he *\*still\** didn't know how to be a coward.

Now that his secret was revealed, Harry looked both tired and extraordinarily sad, as if he'd lost something very precious to him. "I should have known I couldn't keep it from you," he whispered.

"You did, though," she said. "I had no idea."

He frowned. "How did you..."

"Cho told me," she said, trying and failing to keep the bitterness out of her voice. Its presence was not lost on Harry. He leaned forward and fixed her with a stern look.

"Hermione," he said, his tone scolding. "Please tell me you didn't for one second believe that I'd tell *\*her\** while keeping it from *\*you.\**"

"What else was I to believe?"

"Do you have any idea how many people she knows or has dated at the Ministry? She could have found out on her own...must have, in fact, because I certainly never told her. I never told *\*anyone.\**"

"You told Lupin," she said.

Harry smiled. "Well, he works for me. I couldn't very well hide it."

Hermione's mouth fell open, then she just shook her head with a sigh. "Oh, Harry. There's so much I don't know about your life."

He sat back, nodding in agreement. "I know, and I'm sorry. But that's all over. Now that you know, you should know everything. Anything you want to ask me, I promise I'll tell you the truth."

Hermione thought for a moment. After days of wondering and puzzling, to be suddenly confronted with the answer to every question she'd ever had was a little disconcerting...she wasn't sure where to start. "So...you really are a spy?" she managed, somewhat lamely.

Harry didn't seem to mind the repetition, nor did he correct her terminology a second time. "That's right. I work for the Intelligence Division of the International Federation of Wizards."

"Not for the Ministry?"

"No. They don't do much espionage. They're too busy concealing \*us\* from Muggles to worry about what's going on in secret within the wizarding world."

"Whom do you spy on? Other wizards?"

"In a way. About ninety percent of what we do involves keeping tabs on the dark forces. I spend most of my time looking for dark magic activity and the wizards who've gone to the other side. When I find them, I deal with them."

She felt a shiver building at the base of her spine. "Deal with them? How, exactly?"

He shifted in the bed. "You're asking if I've ever killed anyone." She hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, I have," he said, looking straight at her. "But only when I couldn't avoid it. My main concern is to keep practitioners of dark magic from organizing into a force that might pose a real threat. When I find dark wizards, first I try to scare them away from it. A lot of them are just power-hungry and insecure, it doesn't take much to make them recant...at least temporarily. Otherwise I take them into custody and lock them up where they can't do any harm."

"In Azkaban?"

Harry laughed. "Oh no. Azkaban's for public relations and to frighten children. When I put a dark wizard away, no one will ever find him again. That's why we try to make sure they can't be rehabilitated before we imprison them." He sobered. "But there are times when things don't go as planned. If they fight me, I have no choice but to fight back. If that happens...well, they usually lose." He said this with no trace of hubris, just regret that it ever came to that.

Hermione both did and did not want to pursue this topic further. She opted for "not" at that moment. "How long have you been doing this?" she asked quietly.

He looked away. "I was recruited almost a year after we graduated." Hermione's mouth dropped open. "I know, I know..."

"Eight \*years?\*" she exclaimed. "You've managed to keep this from me for eight \*years?\*"

"It wasn't easy, believe me. Not just because you're too bloody smart for your own good..."

"Don't flatter me, it's cheap!"

"...but because I \*wanted\* to tell you, every day," he continued. "I'd \*never\* kept anything from you before, and there were times when I felt like my career wasn't real. How could it be, if you didn't know about it?" Hermione sighed, somewhat appeased. "You remember our first flat?"

"How could I forget that four-story slog...but it was a nice place. The roof garden made the climb \*almost\* worthwhile."

"That first year I very nearly went mad. I had so many job offers I couldn't sort them out, and I had no idea what I wanted to do. And the rub of it was that not one of those offers had anything to say about \*me\* or my qualifications...they just wanted the name and the bloody scar. Then one day while you were at school, I had a visitor..."

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Harry straightened up and stretched, the back of his neck warm from the sun. He could have used a charm to weed the garden, but that would have been too quick...anything to occupy his time was welcome these days. He turned to go downstairs and wash his hands, then jumped with a small cry.

Standing directly behind him was a woman. She was of average height with a severe slicked-back hairstyle and a strong, expressionless face. She was just \*looking\* at him. He had no idea how long she'd been standing there. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "You scared the life out of me!"

"Are you Harold J. Potter?" she asked him, calm like they were meeting in a park somewhere.

"Um...yes."

She narrowed her eyes and regarded him a little more closely. "Do you have any identification?" Without a word, Harry lifted his bangs to expose his scar. The woman looked at it, eyebrows raised. "That looks rather nasty. How'd you come by that?"

Harry just blinked, completely stumped, and let his hair fall back down over his forehead. "You don't..." He cleared his throat. "You don't know who I am?"

"Well, if you're Harold J. Potter, then yes, I do. Why, is that scar supposed to mean something to me?"

"It does to most people. I'm..." He hesitated again, not used to having to explain this. "I'm famous after a fashion, among wizards."

"That so? I don't get out much. And I try to have as little contact as possible with regular wizards."

Harry grinned, enjoying this. "I'm so pleased to meet you," he said, meaning it. He tried and failed to remember when he'd ever met a wizard who didn't have a preconceived notion about him. Even Muggle-raised Hermione had read about him in some of her books. "So who might you be, then?"

"My name's Pfaffenroth. I've come to offer you a job."

"What sort of job?" He'd heard nothing about her offer and it was already more intriguing than any of the offers he had downstairs.

The woman cleared her throat and began pacing slowly, hands clasped behind her back, in a professorial fashion. "I work for the International Federation of Wizards. I'm head of the Intelligence Division."

"Intelligence?"

"That's right."

"What, do you mean like 007?" She just looked at him blankly, apparently not understanding the reference. Harry rephrased. "Spies?"

"We prefer to call ourselves 'intelligence wizards.' I have an opening in the Department of Counterintelligence and Covert Operations. Are you interested?"

Harry sat down on the edge of the roof, amazed. "You want me to be a sp...an intelligence wizard, is that right? Well, that's certainly a new one." He looked up at her. "If you didn't know who I was why did you come to me?"

She reached into her pocket and drew out a card, holding it out to him. He took it and observed that it was a Tarot card. The King of Cups, to be precise. He turned it over...written on the back in neat, block printing was his own name. "What's this?"

"It's a card from an enchanted Tarot deck that keeps track of wizards who have a particular aptitude for our line of work. I believe a similar device controls admissions to Hogwarts, a quill that records the name of every magical child born. This deck came from the same divinator who enchanted the quill. Whenever I need to recruit a new operative, I take out the deck and do a reading. One of the cards always has a name printed on it. Yesterday, the deck gave me your name."

"And you just came here, knowing nothing about me?"

"The deck has never steered me wrong before. I myself was chosen by it, years ago."

"So I've no choice in the matter, is that it?"

"Of course you have a choice. This isn't a command directive. You're free to refuse with no consequences. A person has to want to do this work in order to succeed. It's difficult, it's trying, and it's dangerous. I don't want you if you haven't the inclination. I do know you have the talent. Do you have any idea why the deck may have selected you?"

"Well, yes! I defeated Voldemort last year!"

Pfaffenroth nodded. "Oh, that was you, was it? I'm terrible with names. I'm sure I heard yours at some point or another. Well, that's it, then."

He looked up at her. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. If you're interested, come to this address tomorrow morning," she said, handing him a card. "You'll be instated immediately and your training will begin. You may keep your occupation a secret but it's not a requirement. Many of our operatives choose to do so in order to avoid endangering their family and friends." She offered him a small, wan smile. "I'll hope to see you tomorrow." And she was gone, Apparated away in the blink of an eye.

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"So you took the job just because Pfaffenroth hadn't heard of you?"

"Not entirely. I admit it was refreshing to be chosen because I was suited for the job and not because my name is Harry Potter. And I found the possibility intriguing. I did well at Hogwarts, but I always felt as though my only real skills were Quidditch and fighting evil. If I could make a living at one of them I was glad for the chance."

"I can't believe she didn't know who you were. A \*spy\* not knowing who defeated Voldemort?"

"I found out later that Argo is really just an administrator. She hasn't done any field duty in years and years. When I told the guys down in Strategy that she hadn't known, they just about busted a gut laughing. They'd been tracking me for ages. They had a million questions about Voldemort."

"Lupin called you 'Chief'...are you the boss?"

"I'm not \*the\* boss, but I am \*a\* boss. Turns out Argo was right, I'm quite good at this work, good enough that three years ago I was made Chief Wizard of Counterintelligence and Covert Operations. There are six departments, each with their own chief wizard, but since my department is the largest and most active, I get to use the title 'Chief' by default. And if something happens to Argo, I take over command of the ID. As for Lupin, well...the Deck didn't choose him, I did. A few years ago I was in Romania and I ran into him working as a vampire hunter. He wasn't getting many jobs, no one would hire him. He was just about starving. I couldn't help but remember how good he was as a DODA professor and how much he knew about the dark forces, so I offered him a job in my department. Argo wasn't thrilled, but she cheered up after he saved the lives of two other wizards on his very first assignment. He's damned good. I'm amazed the Deck never picked him on its own."

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad you did that. I always worried so for him...it's not his fault he's a werewolf."

"It's one of the things I'm most proud of."

She looked down at her hands. They'd reached the hardest question of all. "Harry...why didn't you ever tell me?"

He sighed. "I don't know if I can put it into words."

"Try."

He nodded, looking more tired than ever. "All right." He sat up straighter and took both of her hands in his. "The work I do isn't what you're probably imagining, all chases and glamorous locations and glorious victories over evil. I have to get down and wade in amongst the evil and those who serve it. It's disheartening and there are times when I don't feel like myself anymore...times when I don't even feel \*human\* anymore. But when I come home, I remember who I am and what I'm fighting to protect, and I feel human again. I couldn't tell you, because if you knew about my work then that darkness I have to look at every day would touch you, too. You'd be tainted by everything I come home to forget about. I had to be able to have you and all the others look at me with no idea the kind of people I have to be around day in and day out to do my job." He paused and dropped his eyes to the sheet. "The man who did most of my training is a very great and powerful wizard. His name is Eleutherios Mamakos, but we all just call him Lefty. He taught me a lot of things, but the most important thing he taught me was that everyone who does what I do needs a sacred space, untouched by the dark forces." He looked up into her eyes. "You were \*my\* sacred space, Hermione."

She blinked back tears, unable to speak, and held his gaze for a few seconds...just long enough for it to become uncomfortable. They both looked away. "Harry...I don't know what to say..." He was silent, staring down at their clasped hands. "And now that I know, it's ruined!"

That got a reaction. His head jerked up, eyes blazing. "No! Don't ever think that! I'm \*glad\* you know the truth, glad! As much as I needed to keep my home life separate from my work, it was positively horrible having to lie all the time, and not being able to share anything I was doing. As nice it was to come home to an innocent atmosphere, it will be even \*better\* to be able to come home and tell you where I've been and what I've been doing!" Hermione smiled. "If you want the truth, somewhere in the back of my mind I've been half-wishing for you to find out somehow, even if I couldn't bring myself to tell you."

"What about the others?"

"Cho already knows, right?"

"Well...Justin sort of knows too."

"Okay, that's four out of six. I might as well tell George and Laura too. It doesn't make sense to keep only them in the dark."

"And perhaps..." She trailed off, uncertain. Harry peered at her questioningly.

"Perhaps what?"

"Perhaps we can help you," she finished, unable to meet his eyes. Harry smiled.

"What you mean is, perhaps \*you\* can help me."

"That's not what I said."

"No, but that's what you meant."

"Don't tell me what I do and do not mean, Harry!"

He continued, unfazed. "I might have expected this."

"Why?"

"Because! You hate your job, you're disillusioned in your studies, and you feel like you're wasting away in a dusty old office surrounded by dusty old books and even dustier people."

Hermione stared at him, her mouth hanging open. "How...how do you know that? No one knows that!" she croaked. It was \*her\* deepest secret, one she'd hardly been able to admit to herself, let alone anyone else.

"Give me a little credit, secrets are my business. You may be able to fool the others but not me, Hermione. Never me."

She stood up abruptly and went to the window, her arms crossed over her chest. "It's true," she said. "I hate it. I'm bored out of my skull. And this was supposedly my dream job, that career that I always thought I wanted. A life of scholarship and research and intellectual challenges." She chuckled bitterly. "Big joke on me, isn't it? Turns out all that scholarship and all those intellectual challenges aren't that appealing unless there's some use for them." She turned and looked down at him. "You know, I always wondered why the Sorting Hat put me in Gryffindor. I fully expected to be in Ravenclaw."



"With the rest of the brainy types."

"Exactly. Well, now I know. The brainy pursuits aren't enough for me. And it's *\*your\** fault, you git!" she said, socking him on the shoulder. "You corrupted me with all your crusades and your midnight missions and your heroics!"

"Maybe that's *\*why\** the hat put you in Gryffindor. So you'd be corrupted."

She sighed. "Can you blame me if I find the idea of helping you appealing?"

"No, I don't blame you. I just don't think you really understand what you're proposing."

She flopped back down on the edge of the bed. "Enlighten me."

He tented his fingers under his nose and thought for a moment. "When I started my training, Lefty said to me, 'Here's the deal, Potter. Lesson number one. The first thing you've got to accept out of the gate is that you'll never be sure about anything, ever again. The intelligence world exists in a paradigm of uncertainty. It's the norm around here. Hunches, circumstantial evidence, a third-hand tipoff from a second-rate source...such as these are the facts we traffic with.'" He looked at her. "You may crave adventure, but if there's one thing central to your personality it's that you have a need to be *\*sure\**. You have to have the right answer. That's not a bad thing, but it's something you'd never have in my business." He threw back the sheet and swung his legs out of bed, rising to fetch his clothes from a pile on a nearby bench. Hermione didn't contradict him...how could she? He was absolutely correct. "And even if that weren't the case, I'd never go along with it."

That, she could challenge. "Oh, really? And how exactly would it be your decision? How would you stop me?"

He looked at her flatly. "I could stop you."

"I believe I'm a grown woman."

"With no experience, no training, and pardon my saying this, no idea what she's talking about. I'll not put you in danger. I put myself in quite enough danger for both of us." He pulled his shirt over his head and ran a hand through his hair.

Hermione said nothing. She wasn't exactly sure how to argue this point, or even if she wanted to. She had a pretty clear notion that Harry's work was one of the thousands of things that sounded a lot more appealing than it actually was. She rose to join him on the other side of the bed. "All right, forget I brought it up. But I do think I'll start looking for a different line of work."

"That, I'm all for." He smiled at her. "I'm glad you found out," he said quietly. "I hate keeping things from you."

"I'll remember that the next time I'm wondering who ate my ice cream." They both laughed, then reached out and embraced tightly. Hermione hooked one arm through Harry's as they left the room. "Good Lord, Laura and Justin must be wondering what on earth took us so long."

"Oh, I'm sure they just thought we were shagging," he said casually. Hermione stopped short, a look of complete and utter shock on her face.

"Excuse me? Why would they *\*ever\** think that?"

He looked at her quizzically. "Well...most people have the notion that we have sex on a semi-regular basis. Didn't you know that?"

Her jaw tightened and she put her hands on her hips in what he immediately recognized as her "indignant" pose. "I most certainly know nothing of the kind! The nerve and the presumption! Honestly, can't two people have a close, platonic relationship without people making all sorts of unwarranted insinuations? You'd think people had nothing better to do!"

"Actually, they probably don't. And you must admit it's not *that* unwarranted of an assumption. In all fairness, what would *you* think of a man and a woman who'd lived together for eight years of their adult life?"

"I certainly wouldn't go making all sorts of rude assumptions about what they did or did not do together! Everyone knows we're friends, that's all! Our cohabitation has always been financially and geographically convenient, and I'd much rather have you as a roommate than some stranger I found off the street! Not to mention the tiny fact that we've both dated a number of other people in those eight years!"

They resumed their progress down the hall to the lounge where their roommates were waiting for them. "You see, this is exactly what I was talking about. You've got to think dirty to be a spy...you wouldn't last two seconds. You always look for the most flattering explanation for everything."

She sighed and began walking again, a chagrined expression on her face. "Yes, I suppose I'm quite the freak for being so trusting."

Harry grinned and slung one arm around her shoulders, his good humor resurfacing like the sunrise. "Freak you may be, but you know I love you just the way you are."

She shot him a withering look. "Now you see, it's comments like *that* what make people think we're doing all this clandestine shagging."

"Oh, let 'em talk. Makes us more colorful, don't you think?"

"You don't need any more color, Mr. Chief Wizard Spy Bloke or whatever you're calling yourself these days."

He stopped her in the hall again. "Hermione...do you realize this is the first time we've had any good banter in months?"

She smiled. "Quite so. I hope I'm not out of practice."

"Oh no, it's like riding a broom. You never forget how."

They continued on down the hall, the verbal volleys flying like tennis balls. Hermione felt light as a feather. She'd expected to feel betrayed or out of the loop or otherwise alienated when confronted with the truth of Harry's secret life, but instead she felt liberated...as if she had *her* Harry back again. He in turn seemed more at ease than he had in a long time, but what they weren't discussing was still with them. The questions of what exactly had attacked Harry in the first place and what it meant hung over their heads like a gray stormcloud in the midst of a clear blue sky...and for herself, Hermione had already decided that if she were needed she'd dive right in and help him, no matter what he said.

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*I've forgotten to include this note before so I'll do it now: The characters of Laura Chant, Sorry Carlisle and the entire Carlisle family are borrowed from the excellent Margaret Mahy novel "The Changeover."*

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 4: Friends in Low Places*

After the action-packed weekend, several days went by without incident. Harry, who had planned to be gone for at least a week, came home instead after Hermione's insistence that his defenses were low and he needed to rest for a few days. George returned from his buying trip and he and Laura were sat down and told everything...they both professed to have suspected it all along, but they still subjected poor Harry to the third degree for several hours. Harry sent Hedwig with a note for Cho, bringing her up to speed...Hermione suspected that he'd also made reference to a chat he planned to have with her about just how she'd found out, not to mention what had possessed her to reveal classified information.

Hermione went back to work, though her office seemed even smaller and stuffier than it had before. Now that she'd admitted it out loud, her distaste for her own work had reached an all-time high and she developed zero tolerance for anything work-related. She found herself counting the hours until she could leave. By Wednesday she was inventing reasons to knock off early.

The only smile to grace her features all day appeared as she steered past the gate onto the long drive leading to the house...curving over the gateposts was a wrought-iron sign bearing the name the six housemates had given their home: Bailicroft. She parked her Mercedes (a gift to herself when she'd gotten her promotion) in the dooryard between Laura's Volkswagen beetle and Harry's Jeep and happily ran up the stairs to the door.

The first thing she heard upon entering the house was music and the sound of people laughing. She followed her ears to the large ballroom that took up most of the first two floors of the west wing...it was a grand, elegant room they hadn't had time to do much with. The polished parquet floor was bare, the eight French doors that gave on to the west verandah were covered with cloth draperies, and the few furnishings that still remained around the room's perimeter were merely shapeless lumps underneath dusty dropcloths. She stepped through the large double doors to find Justin, Laura and George inside. George was sitting by a CD player and watching as Justin and Laura danced, looking like they were engaging in some sort of strange partnered standing version of a grand mal seizure. Hermione set down her briefcase and grinned. "What's all this, then?"

George jumped up, excited. "Blimey, here's just the person we need!"

Justin dropped Laura's hands. "We're trying to learn to swing dance."

Hermione laughed. "How, by trial and error?"

George flapped his hands at them impatiently. "No need for that anymore, kids. Hermione can show us what's what."

Laura snorted. "Oh, naturally! She's a dancing fool, she is!"

George wagged a finger at her. "Just shows how much *you* know, Miss Smartypants. It so happens that our Hermione was the belle of the swing dance circuit back in the day. She and Harry used to really cut a rug. Where do you think all these discs we're playing came from?" Hermione flushed scarlet as Laura's eyebrows shot up.

"Pull the other one! When was this, then?"

George was in his element, relating dishy stories about his friends to their unsuspecting roommates. "When they were living in London. Times were pr

**HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

*Chapter 5: A Sorry Mess*

Usually, Hermione found the annual meeting of the International Casting Society an interesting and enjoyable day. It was a chance to see old friends from Hogwarts, meet new wizards and witches, and learn a few things along the way...not to mention the food and social atmosphere were a blast. This year, however, she was distracted by thoughts of bloody Sorry and Harry's bloody theories.

"Hermione? Hermione!"

"What?" she said, coming back to the present. Minerva was trying to get her attention. The Hogwarts headmistress gave her a stern look, hands on her hips.

"Your mind is elsewhere, dear. What's distracting you?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry, I'm preoccupied. I've got a lot of things on my mind."

Minerva stepped closer, putting a hand on her arm. "This isn't about that letter I sent you, is it? I'd hate to think I'd been keeping you up nights..."

"Oh! No, it's not that. I can't share the details with you, but Harry keeps no secrets from me any longer."

Minerva took her arm and led her to a bench nearby, sitting her down as if she were still a student about to get a good scolding. She stood over her, a concerned but serious expression on her face. "Hermione Granger, I might suspect that you're not happy in your job."

Hermione looked up at her, surprised at this astute observation. "What makes you say that?"

"Well for one thing, we've been chatting for hours and you've yet to mention it."

Hermione smiled. "I suppose I can't fool you, can I?"

Minerva sat down next to her with a sigh. "I might have known that after the life you've lived you would never be content to sit behind a desk and page through books all day. You need excitement, and a way to use your skills."

Hermione said nothing for a moment. "Oh, this is all Harry's fault!" she finally exclaimed.

"Probably."

She blew air through her lips. "I don't know what to do, Minerva."

"Something will come along. With your resume you won't lack for jobs."

They were silent for a moment, surveying the crowd. Hermione's eye fell on a striking woman talking with Professor Flitwick at the Broom Guild booth. She was tall and strong-looking with smooth black skin and a vertical mane of tightly curled hair. She was smiling with a wide mouthful of blindingly white teeth as she talked. "Who's that with Flitwick?" Hermione asked.

"Oh! That's our current Defense professor."

"I've heard of her! I remember she had an unusual name...Money Penny or some such?"

Minerva laughed. "Quinlan Cashdollar. Appropriate name for an American, isn't it?"

"Is she good?"

"Well, she just finished her second year." Hermione nodded, impressed. "She has a vast and wide field of experience. She used to be an enforcer with the American Association of Wizards."

"Amazing. A Defense Against the Dark Arts professor who's actually practiced what she teaches."

"The students adore her, she's very charismatic." Minerva caught Cashdollar's eye and waved her over. The woman bade goodbye to Flitwick and strode over, smiling.

"Minnie!" she said. "What's up?"

"Quinn, I'd like you to meet Dr. Hermione Granger, one of our most illustrious graduates."

"Ah, the famous Hermione! Your reputation precedes you." Hermione shook the woman's hand as Minerva looked off towards the cauldron display, where Snape seemed to be about to start an argument with the merchant.

"Excuse me," Minerva said, striding off to intervene. Cashdollar turned to Hermione.

"I always enjoy meeting alums. What year did you graduate?"

"Class of 98, Ms. Cashdollar."

"Aw hell, call me Quinn. So you studied DADA with a motley crew of professors."

"Oh my, yes. Quirrell, then Lockhart..."

"Ha! That idiot. He couldn't stake a vampire with a pitchfork."

"Lupin, Gudgeon...they all sort of blend together, except for Remus of course." She cocked her head and met Quinn's eyes. "I must say this is a new experience for me, Quinn. Most people who know who I am immediately ask me about Harry."

"Who, Potter?" she said, laughing. "I don't need to."

"Don't tell me you know him!"

"I do indeed. I worked a case with him when I was with the AAW."

Hermione took her arm and drew her aside. "Then you know about his...*work*."

"Oh, sure." Suddenly her eyes widened and she stopped walking. "Oh geez! I forgot! He said he kept his work a secret from his friends! I haven't spoken out of turn, have I?"

"No, no, I found out about it last week." She paused for a moment, thinking. "But I only know what *he's* told me. Can you tell me anything more?"

Quinn motioned Hermione onto another bench tucked among some large ficus trees that offered a good deal of privacy. "You're concerned about him."

Hermione nodded. "He's my best friend. I need to more about what he does, things he won't tell me."

Quinn nodded and turned slightly to face her. "Well, here's the thing. He was famous before he ever became a spy, but that don't cut no slack in our line of work. You've got to show what you can do and *earn* the respect of your colleagues. There's always a sort of indoctrination period. You want to know about him? I'll give it to you straight. Potter's good...he's smart, and he's tough. Now I don't know much about espionage, I was just an enforcer, but as spies go...your Harry's as slick as they come. He's one of the most powerful wizards I've ever met, I sure as hell wouldn't want to go up against him. I once saw him take out out a guy twice his size without even using magic."

Hermione swallowed hard. "I suppose he must be good to have been promoted so quickly."

"That's right, he's Pfaffenroth's second now, isn't he? He was just an intelligence wizard when I knew him. He deserves it." She smiled. "He used to talk about you a lot, you know."

"Is that right?" Hermione said, feeling her face heat up.

"Heck yeah. It was always Hermione this and Hermione that, Hermione said this and if Hermione were here she could tell us that."

Hermione didn't quite know what to say. She was pondering her response when it occurred to her that there was another question that Quinn might be able to help her with. "Pardon the change of subject, but...do you know of a wizard named Sorenson Carlisle?"

Quinn's smiling face went dead serious. "Sorry? Why do you ask?"

"Oh...it's something I'm working on with Harry."

"Well, you want to leave it to him, I think. He's a professional, don't try this at home. Sorry is a very bad man."

Hermione felt cold all over. "Bad, how?"

Quinn sighed. "He keeps dangerous company. *Dark* company, if you get my drift. You might say he's their new golden boy...or so I hear. You look surprised."

"Worried, mostly. One of our housemates is dating him," she said, her tone bleak.

"If you want to help your friend, then keep her away from him."

"I just can't believe she'd stay with him if he's crossed over."

"Love is blind, you know. And when it's not being blind, it's downright stupid."

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Harry was sitting in his desk chair, lost in thought, when a yellow cricket-ball sized bubble floated into the room and spoke with the voice of the guard at the security checkpoint at the entrance to the I.D.

"Chief Potter, there's someone here to see you. She's not authorized." The guard's voice bore the unmistakable stamp of disapproval.

"Who is it? How did she get here?" Harry asked, though he had a pretty good idea who it was if not how she'd gotten there.

"A Dr. Hermione Granger, she Apparated in. Chief, need I remind you of the consequences of breaching the security of this facility? If you've disclosed our location..."

"I am well aware of the regulations, Agent, I wrote them. You'd do well to remember your place in the chain of command. Please ask her to wait for a moment." The yellow bubble winked out of existence with a slight 'pop' sound.

He bit his lips, thinking. "Bubble," he said. Another bubble, this one glowing a soft blue, appeared floating in midair before his eyes. "Lefty?"

A second later, a deep gravelly voice issued from the bubble. "All right, Harry?" It was the voice of Lefty Mamakos, his I.D. mentor, transmitted from Lefty's office over in Training.

"I need some advice."

"What else am I here for? What's the problem? No, no...let me guess. You've had to tell your roommates about your job."

"How did you..."

"I heard that you'd had some sort of attack and were thought to be dead. Not exactly something you can just explain away with some little white lies. I'm glad you're not dead, by the way."

"Thanks. I'm debating whether to allow a civilian into the I.D."

"Who?"

"Hermione. She's here right now and I have no earthly idea how she found me."

"She helping you a bit, is she? I might have known." "I didn't want her to," he said grimly. He knew he shouldn't have let Hermione look up those "sorry" charms...once she got interested in something there was just no stopping her.

"Do you trust her?"

"Of course. With my life."

"Then it's to your discretion. You're second in command, you can authorize her to be here if you want. What's eating you? No, no...let me guess again. You're reluctant to let her in to this part of your life."

"It's dangerous. I can't expose her to any hazardous situations, I just can't."

"She'll be safe as long as you're with her."

Harry smiled. "Thanks. Nice to know someone has confidence in me."

"Think nothing of it, everyone has confidence in you and you know it. You were the best student I ever had, Potter. You don't need my help."

"I'll talk to you later."

Harry left his office, his blue bubble floating along before him, and walked swiftly through the corridors until he reached the security checkin at the entrance. "Hermione!" he called. She was standing by the guard's desk, holding a few folders and looking uncomfortable. "What the devil are you doing here? How did you find this place? The location is classified!" He reached through the security field, grabbed her hand and pulled her through.

She took a deep breath. "Don't be angry, I brought you some information."

"I'm not angry, just amazed!"

"It wasn't that difficult to find you. I've been working on some charms designed to detect metamorphic beings, so I took one and modified it for werewolves. I used it to find Lupin at the Federation Headquarters, then Apparated there myself. I used a glamour to hide my face and followed him until I got close enough to put a homing talisman on him, then when he Apparated back here I used a locator charm to find the I.D. headquarters." She shrugged. "Simple."

He just stared, his mouth open. Simple, she says. "I think it would have been simpler still just to wait until I got home tonight."

"Well, when do I ever know when you're coming home, or even *if* you're coming home, Harry!" she said, looking annoyed. Harry was immediately sorry, after all she did have a point. It didn't escape his knowledge that on some level she was trying to prove that she was still game to be included once again in his escapades. The idea made him nervous, but at the same time the possibility of having all of her many skills on his side was attractive. Her



vexed expression was fading away and she seemed to have forgiven him.  
"Besides, I enjoy a challenge. It was fun."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "You never cease to amaze me, Hermione. Come on." He took her hand and led her through the labyrinthine corridors. Hermione watched the floor, where the blue bubble was pacing them a few feet ahead of their steps.

"What's that?"

"It's a Baubel bubble. A little charm we use for security and communication. The rooms and corridors in this building rearrange periodically, I never know where my office will be from one minute to the next. Every person who's authorized to be here has their own Baubel bubble that recognizes only them. When I arrive my bubble comes out of its jar and leads me to wherever I'm going. If someone ever got in here without authorization, they'd never find what they were looking for without a bubble, the rooms would keep rearranging and they'd wander forever." Harry's bubble led them around a few more corners until, at length, he saw his office at the end of the hall, a wide, red paneled door with a yellow lightning bolt mounted on it.

"Hmm. Is that the symbol you have on your cape?" she asked, wide-eyed and innocent-faced.

He shot her a withering glance. "I'll thank you not to sneer. Names are too conspicuous." He touched his wand to the doorknob and it opened. "Welcome to my office. Bit of a mess."

"I've seen worse."

Harry sat down behind his desk and busied his hands shuffling papers about. "Now, are you going to tell me what this is all about?"

She plunked herself down in one of his office chairs and set her folders on the desk. "Well, I've been through every spellbook I can find and I haven't come across any spell that begins with 'sorry' that seems relevant at all...unless Leland was interested in the growth rates of Mandrakes or how to straighten one's hair."

He leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled under his nose thoughtfully. "Dead end, then."

"I think you were right about it being a name...and I found out something else. Something disturbing."

"What's that?"

"Well, today was the ICS convention. I ran into an old friend of yours. Quinlan Cashdollar?"

Harry nodded. "Ah yes. Quinn. What was she doing at an ICS convention? Isn't she an enforcer?"

"Not anymore. She just finished her second year teaching DADA at Hogwarts."

"Really? I imagine she's very good at it."

"I asked her about Sorry."

"And?"

Hermione sighed. "She said he was a very bad man. She all but came out and said that he was working for the dark forces. She called him their new golden boy."

Harry just looked at her for a moment, silent. He shut his eyes and shook his head. "Oh my. I didn't really suspect that level of involvement."

"I'm still not convinced. I just can't believe he'd be so evil after all that he's done for Laura, and the environment...why should he turn to the dark forces when he's got so much going for him?"

"I know that's your affection for Laura talking, but we have to remember that we don't *know* the man. People don't always need *reasons* to turn to evil, you know."

"I tried to get some information about him from Laura. Nothing she said about *him* popped out at me, but she did tell me something very interesting."

"What's that?"

"Well...Laura was born a Muggle. Sorry's mother and grandmother made her a witch with a procedure she called a 'changeover,' and Sorry played a part in it as well."

Harry blinked. "Yes, I'd call that interesting. Have you ever heard of this procedure before?"

"No, never. I've heard of ways to amplify or enhance one's powers, but never a way to generate them in someone lacking."

"What does this Changeover involve?"

"It sounded like a lot of symbolic visualization. Laura talked about rivers of blood and forests of thorns, but she was always aware of still physically being in the bathroom where the ritual took place, because she saw the words 'tam htab' in the..."

Harry straightened up, his stomach dropping down to his knees. "'Tam htab?'" he said.

Hermione nodded, puzzled. "Yes. 'Bath mat' backwards. My God, Harry...what is it? You're white as a sheet!"

"Hermione...Leland Stormare will only say two things: 'sorry,' and 'tam htab.'" She shut her eyes, sighing. "Now that I think of it, he also mentioned rivers of blood and forests of thorns." They said nothing for a moment. "I think this removes any doubt of Sorry being involved with what happened to Leland."

"Why would he put Leland through a changeover? He's already a wizard!"

"Then the real question becomes: what effect would the ritual have upon someone already possessing magical powers?"

Her eyes widened. "Do you think it could be used to change in the other direction? Take someone's powers away from them?"

"I don't know, but I think it would behoove us to find out."

Before Hermione could reply, a green Baubel bubble popped out of the air. "Yes, Remus?" said Harry.

"I think you'd better come down to Detention," said Lupin's voice from the bubble.

"Why? What's going on?" he said, exchanging a glance with Hermione.

"We've captured someone I think you'll be interested in."

"I'll be right down." Harry stood up, looking down at Hermione. "Are you coming?" She grinned and followed him out of the office.

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Detention turned out to be a comfortable room that looked like nothing more sinister than a suburban living room. Two wizards in black and silver uniforms were by the door, they saluted Harry as he entered the room. Lupin was already there, along with a thin sallow wizard who appeared to be the jailer. Sitting on the couch was a woman. She was extremely beautiful in a hard and unfeeling way, with finely-shaped motionless features and a long mane of jet-black hair that gleamed in the soft light. Harry nodded when he saw her, unsurprised to see her. "I thought so." He turned to Lupin. "Who brought her in?"

"Two agents from Infiltration and Reconnaissance picked up her trail in Surrey. They nabbed her on the way to some sort of meeting, that's about all we know. She won't talk to anyone but you."

"Not surprising." He turned to Hermione. "This is Allegra Blackburn-Dwyer, one of the most notorious dark witches in this part of the world."

"Shouldn't she be in a cell or something?" Hermione whispered.

"Oh, she is," Lupin said. "Just because you can't see the bars doesn't mean they aren't there."

Allegra stood up. "It's about time you got down here, Harry. I've been waiting." She looked at Hermione. "Well, well. This must be the famous Hermione. She looks just like you described her." Hermione glanced at Harry, looking a little alarmed that this person knew her name.

Harry stepped partially in front of her. "You just need to concern yourself with me. Would you care to tell me where you were going and who you were going to meet?"

"I had an appointment to have my hair done," the woman said sourly, crossing her arms and looking for all the world like an impenetrable fortress.

Harry turned, taking Lupin's arm and pulling him away, motioning Hermione to join them. "She's not talking, Harry," Lupin said.

"Not at the moment, but she will talk to us, of that I'm certain."

"How can you be so sure?" Hermione whispered, glancing at Allegra. "She looks pretty tough to me."

"She is, she's very tough. Tough enough that we've been chasing her for years and we've never caught her once. Then today, out of nowhere, a couple of I&R wizards out on a routine patrol pick her up on her way to a meeting?"

"She wanted to get caught," Lupin said.

"She's got a message for us and she let herself be brought here so she could deliver it." He turned back to Allegra.

"Is the conference over?" she said. Her voice was low and throaty. She stood there with her hands on her shapely hips looking exquisitely bored with the entire situation.

"Allegra, if you have something to tell me I suggest you get on with it so we can all go back to our lives."

Allegra wasn't even looking at him, she was looking at Hermione. "He's hiding so much from you, you know," she said. Hermione swallowed. She didn't particularly want to listen but she couldn't look away. "You think you know him? You think he needs you? You're blind, my sister."

Harry stepped forward, his eyes flashing. "Don't you talk to her," he growled. "Don't you even *look* at her, you hear me?" He turned to Hermione. "Don't listen. Don't listen to a word she says." He looked back at Allegra, his gaze deadly. "She lies," he said, his voice flat.

Allegra took a few steps back. "I knew you'd figure me, Harry...I never could fool you for long. I do have a message for you...from my master."

"Your master?" Lupin said.

"You will meet him soon." All three of them exchanged a worried glance. "He is powerful, my master...his new servants will help him to take what is rightfully his." She held her head up high. "And as long as I serve him, none can hold me." She grinned a wide smile full of sparkingly white teeth framed by ruby-red lips. "Lovely to see you again, Harry. And to meet you, Hermione. You remember what I told you, because it can save you." And with that, she was gone.

Everyone in the room jumped. "Bugger!" Lupin cried.

Hermione stepped forward, putting her hand up to the containment charm that had been in place around Allegra; it was intact. "How did she do that? She shouldn't be able to Apparate out, should she?"

"Absolutely not," Harry said in a low voice, staring grimly at the blank air where Allegra had been mere seconds before. "This room is sealed off with wards. I don't know how she got out."

"I'll get to the bottom of it, Harry," said Lupin.

"Good. Keep me informed." He nodded to Hermione and they left the room, led by Harry's blue Baubel bubble.

"Interesting woman," she said neutrally. Harry put out a hand and stopped her in the middle of the brick hallway.

"Hermione...I hope you don't lend any credence to what she said." She looked away, fidgeting...Harry could see that yes, she had lent at least a little bit of credence to it. "The truth is antithetical to Allegra's personality, she wouldn't know it if it walked up and bit her in the arse."

"She was right about one thing...I don't think I know you as well I thought I did."

Harry just looked at her. "You're the *only* one who knows me," he said, his tone even, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world.

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Later that night, Harry was sitting in the winter garden room reading a book when the doorbell rang. Laura and Justin weren't home from work yet and George was out at the market, so he rose to answer it.

He swung open the large front door and his smile of greeting faded slightly. Standing on the stoop was a young man in a well-tailored, expensive-looking double-breasted suit. He was unnaturally handsome, with chiseled features and thick blond hair. He smiled eagerly. "Oh! Harry! I'm so pleased to meet you at last!" he exclaimed, stepping forward to shake Harry's hand.

Harry maintained his pleasant expression with effort. "Hello, Gerald." In his head Harry could hear George crowing "GER-ald! GER-ald!" He cleared his throat. "Come in." He stepped aside to allow Hermione's paramour entrance, scowling at the man's back. "Hermione's upstairs, I'll get her. Make yourself at home." Gerald went into the living room while Harry trotted halfway up the stairs. "Hermione! Gerald's here!"

Her head poked out of her bedroom door. "I'll be down in a few minutes. Behave yourself."

Grumbling, Harry went back into the living room, where Gerald was perched on the edge of a small gilt divan. Harry flopped down into his favorite chair. "So," he said, resolving to be nice to the man. "Where are you off to tonight?"

Gerald shifted uncomfortably, appearing to be intensely uneasy. "Um...it's just a sort of party given by my employer."

"What line of work are you in again?"

"I'm a Vice President at Spellbound Books, we're the largest publisher of wizarding texts and references. Some of our best-sellers include all grades of 'The Standard Book of Spells,' the collected works of Gilderoy Lockhart and most of the standard texts." Harry nodded politely at what was clearly part of his sales pitch. "I'm in charge of Testing and Quality Control. We surpassed our own sales record this year, the CEO is giving a grand soiree to congratulate the team."

"That sounds...nice," Harry said, trying to remember if he'd ever heard anyone actually use the word 'soiree' before now.

"Well, there'll be a nice dinner and dancing, that sort of thing. It's a bit of a fancy occasion."

"Hermione's an excellent dancer."

"I know. She's very patient with me, I'm afraid I have two left feet." He flashed Harry that megawatt smile again. Harry just nodded some more, the pleasant smile he had plastered on his face beginning to hurt. Gerald drew himself up and seemed to be bolstering his courage. "Harry, I just want you to know that I care a great deal about Hermione, and I always treat her with respect..."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "You don't have to promise to have her in by eleven, you know. She's a grown woman; I'm not her father."

"I know, but you're...you know, you're *Harry Potter*, and...well, she sets a great store by what you think..."

"As I do by what she thinks. She likes you, that's good enough for me. You don't have to audition to be allowed to take her out." They both fell silent. Gerald sat stiffly on the divan, looking around the room at the ceiling and at the furniture and at the floor, anywhere but as his totem-like host. Harry just sat there and glared at him, his ability to feign amicability dwindling down to nothing.

They both looked up at the sound of Hermione's shoes on the staircase. Gerald stood and went into the entrance hall, Harry hung back in the doorway as Hermione came down the stairs. The sight of her did something odd to his stomach, it rather felt as though it had gone on a roller-coaster ride without consulting him. Hermione was normally a casual dresser, with a wardrobe full of wool skirts, khaki slacks, cardigan jumpers and turtlenecks; practicality was the order of the day with her. She usually wore her hair either in a bun or a plait to keep it out of her way and was like as not to be seen with her reading glasses either shoved atop her head or hanging about her neck on their beaded chains. Tonight, however, she was wearing a sleek and elegant strapless gown of royal purple, glittering with a thousand tiny sparkles down to her feet. A ring of enchanted purple stones and beads floated around her neck and her hair was piled in elegant whorls at the crown of her head, a few long curls set loose to fall down onto her shoulders. She smiled at Gerald, one gloved hand trailing along the banister as she came down the stairs. Her eyes flicked past him to Harry; she paused and her smile faltered. Harry realized he must have had a very odd look on his face but he couldn't help it; a shiver zinged through him as they locked eyes for a moment. Hermione looked away and beamed an even

wider smile at Gerald, who reached out to take her hand as she came to the bottom of the stairs. "You look beautiful," he said, kissing her cheek.

"Thanks," she said. "So do you."

Harry blinked, the world snapping back into place around him. *What just happened?* he thought. "Nice to meet you, Harry," Gerald said, opening the door. Hermione paused, looking outside at the rain, then turned back to smile at Harry.

"Have a nice evening," was all Harry could say. He watched as she took Gerald's arm and he held up his wand, murmuring a charm to keep the rain off them; they stepped out onto the portico and closed the door behind them.

Harry sighed and went back to his book. Several hours passed, silent except for the periodic booms of thunder outside, but he found that he kept having to read the same page over and over again because his mind hadn't been engaged the first time. Eventually he heard the back door open; he got up and went to the kitchen, where George was just coming in bearing bags of groceries. "Give us a hand, eh Harry?" he said, handing him a large frozen turkey. Harry put it in the freezer.

"Well, I met the infamous Gerald."

"Yeah? What's he like?" George asked, putting vegetables in the icebox.

"Oh, you know. Handsome, charming, rich, well-dressed...a perfect bloody nightmare."

"Hermione seems to like him well enough. I'm sure she doesn't have much trouble keeping him in line. What did he..." George stopped short, having turned around to unload more grocery bags...Harry's face had gone completely rigid and white as a sheet. "Harry? Are you all right?"

Harry's eyes slowly swiveled to look at George. He could feel it coming, inexorable like a freight train. He gripped the edge of the tabletop, but when it came it knocked him back. The pain, ripping through his scar and digging ruthlessly into the meat of his brain behind his forehead like hot knitting needles bored through his skull. George darted forward to catch him as a wave of blackness slid over his vision and he toppled forward onto the tabletop.

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Harry slowly opened his eyes, half-expecting the pain to stab him in the forehead once again, but nothing happened. He was in the first-floor guest room, snuggled under heavy quilts in the large four-poster bed. For a few moments he just stared directly upwards at the brocade material of the bed's canopy, then he heard a small rustle next to him. He looked over to see Hermione sitting in a chair next to the bed with her elbows planted on the mattress, her face in her hands. She was still wearing the elegant gown he'd seen her leave the house in, but her hair was in disarray. Lighting flashed outside and he could hear rain spitting against the leaded glass of the windowpanes.

He cleared his throat and she dropped her hands, revealing a tearstained face. She smiled at him. "Are you all right?"

He nodded and struggled to prop himself up. Hermione rose and put one arm behind his shoulders, helping him pull himself to a sitting position. "I seem to be. You didn't have to wake me again, did you?"

"No," she said, pouring him a cup of tea. "It wasn't the necromimetic charm this time, you were just unconscious."

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be stepping out with Gerald?"

She flapped an impatient hand at him. "George owed me, I came home immediately."

Harry stared at the teacup in his lap. "You didn't have to do that."

"And what would you rather I have done? Stayed at that insufferably stuffy party while you lay here out cold? I don't think so."

He smiled weakly, more grateful for her presence than he could have said. "It felt different this time."

"Weaker? It didn't trip the charm...perhaps it was further away."

"No. It was closer."

Hermione frowned. "That doesn't make much sense."

"I know. I can't explain it, but I have the feeling that whatever I'm sensing was closer this time...but gentler, as if it didn't want to hit me so hard."

"That's nuts, Harry. If the dark forces are affecting you they wouldn't care if they were hurting you."

"All I know is what I sense."

She picked up an envelope from off the bedside table. "This came for you a few minutes ago."

He took it, examining the handwriting on the envelope. "It's from Sabian."

"Who's Sabian?"

"He's my best agent. If a human being could be a ghost, it'd be him. I asked him to make some discreet inquiries about Sorry and keep his ear to the ground." He opened the envelope and read the note, Hermione watching his face as he did so. Finally he folded it back up again.

"Good news or bad?"

"Well, I can't say it's good. Sabian says that he's been hearing Sorry's name a lot but he's never actually seen him, once he started asking around he found out some troubling things."

"Such as?"



"Word around the campfire is that Sorry is..." He paused, considering. "He's Voldemort's new lieutenant."

Hermione just sat there. "Harry, Voldemort's dead. You killed him. You said that someone was taking his place and using his methods...perhaps Sabian meant that Sorry is *that* person's new lieutenant."

Harry bit his lip, then turned towards her, fixing her with a penetrating stare. "Hermione, I have to tell you something, something that can't leave this room." She nodded. "The fact is that...Voldemort isn't dead."

Her expression froze in place as if she weren't sure how to respond. "Excuse me? He's not dead?"

"Not so much, no." He looked down at the quilt, avoiding her eyes. "It was agreed, after I defeated him that last time, that we would allow people to *think* he was dead...for all intents and purposes, he was as dead as he was ever going to be. You see, Voldemort hadn't been really alive for many years. He'd been existing in a kind of half-death, holding himself in this world by sheer force of will and the power of his own malignancy. That which has no life cannot be killed. It was thought that I had driven him so far back into himself that he'd never have access to his powers again."

Hermione was just shaking her head, disbelieving. "I can't believe this!"

"As long as people knew he still existed, there would always be those willing to help him regain his power. We thought that if everyone believed him dead, his legacy would die as well." He looked up at her. "It seems we underestimated the stubbornness of evil."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Me, Minister Fudge...the Chancellor of the Federation, Professor McGonagall. Except that now...I'm the only one who knows. Fudge and the Chancellor and the few others who knew about it had me perform Memory Charms on them so that they could never give away the secret, because they would no longer remember it. They trusted me to remain vigilant, and if ever he showed signs of returning, they trusted me to take up the fight once more." Hermione watched his face, stunned. "This has been my greatest burden of secrecy, Hermione. Keeping my job secret from you was nothing compared to this...and I've borne it alone, fighting the urge to tell someone every minute of every day."

"But others must know about it now, if they're saying Sorry is his new servant. And when Allegra referred to her new master she must have meant Voldemort as well!"

"I know, that's what's troubling. If he is massing new forces and sending his followers to me with demonstrations of his power, then he's ready to make a new challenge."

Hermione stood up and began to pace. "We've got to tell Laura our suspicions about Sorry."

Harry's head snapped up, a horrified look on his face. "No! Out of the question!"

"She deserves to know! She could be in danger from him!"

"Hermione, he can't know that I'm on to him! If we tell Laura she won't be able to help it, she'll say something to him about it! I can't afford to show my hand this early in the game."

"I'm still not totally convinced he's evil."

Harry's jaw dropped. "What more will it take to convince you? Seeing him blow up a busful of schoolchildren?"

"Everything so far is circumstantial and second hand information..."

"That's the way it *is* in this business. Remember what I told you about the paradigm of uncertainty? I knew you'd never be comfortable with that margin of error."

"We owe Laura the truth, or at least a warning!"

"Why should she need a warning? According to you, Sorry is as innocent as a baby lamb!" They were both nearly shouting now.

"Stop it, Harry! I'm just trying to consider every possibility!"

"Except the possibility that if we tell her a thing it could ruin any chance I have to stop him!" They both stopped, staring angrily at each other...there didn't seem to be anything more to say.

Hermione flopped into the bedside chair, her anger dissipating to be replaced by weariness. "How do you do this?" she said, her voice quiet once more.

"How do you make these impossible decisions when people's lives hang in the balance?"

Harry sighed. "It's my job."

"Does it ever get easier?"

He met her eyes. "I hope not." Hermione sighed and sagged in her chair. Harry rubbed his forehead, frowning absently.

"Does your scar hurt?"

"A little. It aches like a bad bruise."

Hermione stood up slowly and leaned over him. She smoothed his hair back from his forehead with one hand and gently pressed her lips to his scar. Drawing back, she smiled down at him. "Try to get some rest," she said. "Call if you need anything." She turned and left the room, her long skirt swishing about her legs. Harry watched her go, the pain in his forehead forgotten.

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The next morning Harry awoke much later than he usually did, feeling drained. These bouts of unconsciousness must really take it out of me, he thought, swinging his legs out of bed. He stumbled into the kitchen for something to eat and found Hermione and Justin engaged in a vigorous bout of tomato-canning. "Well well, look who's alive!" Justin said. "There's some bubble and squeak in the fridge if you want to heat it up."

Harry made a face. "Bubble and squeak, yecchh. It's one of Dudley's favorites, I've never been able to stand it."

"How is dear old Dudley these days?" Hermione said.

"Last I heard Vernon had made him some sort of production supervisor at the drill plant. He's completely incompetent, of course, but as far as Vernon's concerned he's the next Branson." He rummaged in the fridge and came out with some eggs. "Though I must admit that the last time I saw them, the Dursleys were almost civil to me. I was amazed. I suppose it's a lot less irksome that I'm, you know, such a *deviant* when I'm not living under their roof."

"How are you feeling?" Hermione asked.

"I'm all right. A bit wrung out." He got out a frying pan and set to scrambling the eggs. "Where's George?"

"He's gone. He's got that broom-guild convention in the States, remember? He Apparated out this morning."

"Blast. I was hoping he'd make one of his walnut cakes, I've got a powerful craving for a slice." This statement was met with moans of rapture from the others.

"Oh, that would be sheer heaven," Justin said.

"His recipe box is right there, you could make one yourself," Hermione said, smirking. It was well known that Harry's culinary skills extended about as far as toast-making.

Harry sat down at the table with his plate of eggs and watched Hermione organizing all the jars, seals and lids. "So...thinking of making some spaghetti sauce?" he quipped.

"Ha ha. These will last an entire year, you know." The back door opened and Laura came in, toting a few crates of tomatoes. Harry and Hermione exchanged a pained glance, remembering their argument of the previous night concerning her, then both became extremely interested in what they were doing. Laura set the crates on the table.

"Morning, sleepyhead," she said to Harry. "Here's the last bunch," she said, turning to Hermione. "This should be enough for the whole lot." She glanced from her to Harry and back again, sensing something amiss. "What's going on?"

Harry looked up. "Nothing! Nothing, nothing's wrong. Is there, Hermione?" Hermione shook her head, busy trying to unscrew a stubborn lid from one of

the jars. She finally got out her wand and loosened it with magic. Laura shrugged and sat down to clean the tomatoes.

They'd been going about their respective tasks for a few minutes in silence when there was a knock at the door. "I'll get it," Hermione said, jumping up. They all heard her open the front door..."Fred!" they heard her exclaim. "How nice to...what's wrong?" Quick footsteps approached the kitchen and a few seconds later Fred Weasley, looking flustered and upset, entered with Hermione close behind him.

Everyone stood up, Fred's expression putting them on their guard. "What's wrong?" Harry said.

"It's George." Laura put a hand to her chest, her brow furrowing in concern. "I went to the convention with him just for a kick, and..." He paused to run a hand through his red hair. "He was standing right next to me. I turned to look at him and he...he vanished right in front of my eyes."

"What?" Hermione said, her face white and shocked.

"He's gone. George has disappeared."

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etty tight...all Harry's money was tied up in investments and Hermione was just a grad student. They couldn't even afford a telly. They were far away from most of their friends and didn't have much to do, so they took up swing dancing."

Laura elbowed Hermione, who'd come to join the little group. "Is he having me on?"

"Sadly, no. He's right, there really wasn't anything to do, so we started going to swing clubs...mostly because we both like the music, and those are the only places to get decent mixed drinks that aren't completely populated with middle-aged post-boomers. Anyway, we'd watch the dancers...a lot of them were really good. It looked like fun so we tried it. After a few weeks we decided to take some lessons. I think we both enjoyed having something to do with other people. After the communal living of Hogwarts, a life of urban isolation was a rude awakening. We were spending almost every evening at one of the clubs; it didn't take long before we were quite good."

George jumped in. "'Quite good' is a slight understatement. I was down to visit once and I went to the club with them...I'm telling you it was the damndest thing I ever saw. They walk in the door and everything stops, everyone shouts their names. They step on the dance floor and everyone stops dancing, clears a circle and just watches. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was like something out of a movie. Our Hermione with her skirt twirling and Harry's flipping her all over the place and they're doing all these funky slides and lifts and spins and I just sat there and wished I could jump in and dance like that because it looked like just about the most fun anyone ever had."

Hermione nodded, remembering. "It *was* fun, and it felt wonderful to be good at something again...most of the time it seems as if the whole purpose of graduate school is to make sure you never feel good at anything. We had about eight or nine different clubs we'd visit, and we used to go to a different one every night. We got to be pretty well known. One night a bartender we knew said we should enter a contest. We didn't even know they *had* contests...turns out there's a whole contest circuit. So we thought, why not?"

"Did you ever win?" Laura said.

"Did they win!" George exclaimed. "She's got a whole bloody crate of trophies upstairs, you should see them! They were royalty, it was like Saturday Night Fever without the Bee Gees!"

Hermione just rolled her eyes. "George is just being melodramatic."

"I am not! Some swing band even wanted them to star in their music video!"

Justin burst out laughing. "Cor, that's rich!"

"Well, we turned it down," Hermione mumbled.

Laura was just shaking her head. "I can't believe this is the first I'm hearing of this. Why don't you talk about it? Why did you stop doing it?"

Hermione shrugged. "We stopped when I got my degree and a real job, then we found this place...I dunno, it just seems like something we used to play at, like Exploding Snap. I never talk about *that*, either."

"Enough chatter, let's get down to it. Hermione, are you going to help the woefully rhythm-deficient?"

She backed up a step. "Oh no, I don't think so. Harry was always better at it than I was."

"But you're a much better teacher. Harry has no patience," George said. "He's tried to teach me a few times and he always ends up making me feel like the most uncoordinated person on the face of the earth. Come on then, just the basics."

"It's so long ago, I don't remember."

"Oh, you liar!" came a new voice. They turned to find Harry leaning in the doorway. He came forward to stand next to Hermione. "Of course you remember."

George grinned. "Well, if it isn't Potter...Harry Potter."

Harry shot him a look. Hermione was still protesting the swing-dance question. "No really, it's been *years*..."

"Only a few. It'll come back to you."

"There you are!" Laura said, excited. "Show us some moves! Shake your groove thang!" Hermione tossed a dirty look in her direction.

Harry elbowed her. "C'mon, what do you say? Old times' sake?"

She shook her head. "I haven't got proper shoes," she said, grasping at straws.

"Easily fixed." He leaned over, held out a hand towards her feet, and a second later her Doc Martens were gone and her old Bliers character shoes were on her feet. They felt so comfortable and familiar, like one's favorite pair of jeans.

She looked up at him, a beseeching expression on her face. "I'm going to end up on my arse, you know."

"Not you. Light as a feather, you are." He grinned at George. "Spin us a tune then, G." George sprang for the CD player, glad to oblige.

Laura and Justin drew away to watch. Harry took Hermione's hand, lightly, and as the music started they walked to the center of the dance floor, their steps in time with the beat, looking like they were just out for a stroll...then the song's introduction was over, the music swung into gear and all at once they were dancing, moving in tight circles around each other, gripping one hand alternately with the other. Laura's jaw dropped open. They were so fast they seemed to glide across the floor, their feet scarcely touching the hardwood panels as they executed the steps, quick and light. Hermione was starting to smile, her skirt twirling up around her hips as she spun and swiveled, just as George had described. Their confidence seemed to grow as their feet remembered what to do; the steps increased in speed and complexity. Laura clapped as Harry flipped Hermione over his arm easily, as if she weighed nothing at all. They were both grinning hugely now as they whirled around the room, dipping and twirling and leaping and throwing.

Laura could have watched them for hours, but soon enough the song came to an end and everyone cheered. Harry and Hermione exchanged a high-five, laughing. "I can't believe I remembered how to do that," she said, breathless.

"Smashing!" Harry said, beaming. "I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed it."

"That was amazing! Brilliant!" Laura exclaimed. "Now I *really* want to learn, though I doubt I'll ever be *that* good." She elbowed Justin. "Care to partner me up, roomie?"

"My pleasure. You sure Sorry won't mind you stepping out with another man?"

They all laughed...except Harry. Hermione glanced up at him, the laughter dying in her throat as she saw his face. He was staring fixedly at Laura and looked like he'd just seen a ghost.

"What did you say?" he asked sharply. The group grew quiet quickly.

"What do you mean?" Laura said, puzzled.

"Who? *Who* won't mind?"

She glanced at Hermione. "Um...Sorry. My boyfriend? You know him."

"I thought his name was Sorenson," Harry said, his tone intense as if this were very important.

"It is, but...most people call him Sorry. Friends, family, that sort of thing."

Harry nodded. "And other wizards, no doubt."

Hermione put a hand on his arm. He was so tense it felt like touching marble. "Harry, what is it? What's wrong?"

He looked down at her, the oddest expression on his face, as if he were trying to solve a very difficult math problem in his head. "I gotta go," he said.

"Right *now*? But..."

"No time to explain. I'll be back soon," he said, turning and *\*running\** out of the ballroom. The four roommates were left to stare at each other.

"What the blazes was that all about?" Justin murmured.

Hermione shook her head. "I haven't the foggiest idea."

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It was after hours, so when Harry Apparated to Confinement he arrived in the secured entry area instead of inside the facility. The wizard guarding the entrance stood up. "No visitors, sir," he said.

Harry strode forward, whipping his badge out of his back pocket. The guard scrutinized it with what would have been amusing intensity under different circumstances. "I need to see Dr. Stillwagon at once."

"I'm sorry, it's after hours."

"You're not hearing me. This is an emergency! I need to see Elektra right *now!*"

"No exceptions! Dr. Stillwagon isn't available!"

Harry drew himself up to his full six feet of height and mustered the deadliest glare he could, preparing to do something he'd never done before...play the fame card. "Don't you know who I am? I'm Harry bloody Potter and this can't wait! Now call her up here this minute!"

The guard stammered for a response. Before he could speak, the screening charm behind the door shimmered out of existence to reveal Elektra standing there. "It's all right, Nigel. Let the Chief in." Off the hook, the guard felt safe in glaring at Harry as he passed by and through the entry. The charm dropped back into place behind them and Elektra trotted after Harry, who was hurrying along the corridor without waiting for her. "Harry, what the devil's going on? What's so urgent that it couldn't wait till tomorrow?"

"I need to see Leland."

"I don't think that'll help! He's worse," she said, putting out an arm and forcing him to stop. Harry sighed, letting his urgency lapse for the moment.

"Worse? How?"

"We've tried every counter-curse potion we have and nothing's helping. He's slipped further into catatonia, he's completely non-responsive. I don't know what you can hope to learn from him."

"I have to try," Harry said, taking off again down the hall, continuing as they went. "Do you remember what he kept saying?"

"How could I forget? It's all we could get out of him...he just kept saying he was sorry, and 'tam htab.' We still can't figure out what that means."

"I think I have an idea about the apologies," he said, coming up to Leland's door. Elektra opened it and Harry pushed past her into the darkened room. Leland was lying on a couch against the wall. "Leland!" Harry said, kneeling next to the couch. "Leland, can you hear me?" No response. He looked up at Elektra. "Can't you do something?"

She threw her arms wide. "What did I just say? We've done everything we can!"

Harry bent over Leland again. "Sorry, Leland...was there something about Sorry you wanted to tell me?" Nothing. "Leland!" he said one last time. He stood up, frustration running its sharp fingernails around the inside of his skull. He just felt like grabbing something and ripping it to pieces to get rid of this need to know...the only person who could tell him if he was right wasn't talking.

"What's going on here?" Elektra said, her tone sharper and demanding of a response. Harry turned towards her, raking one hand through his hair.

"Didn't you think it was odd how he just kept saying 'sorry, sorry' without ever saying *I'm* sorry? And for a moment he pulled together all his concentration to say 'sorry' to me, as if it were very important."

"Harry, you can't draw conclusions from the words of a man whose mind is mostly gone. Maybe to him, the apology *\*was\** that important."

"Except I don't think it's an apology at all," Harry said. "I think it's a name. I think he was trying to tell me who attacked him."

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Hermione waved her wand at the pot on the stove and it began to simmer and bubble; she dumped in some cocoa powder and stirred. "So, let me see if I understand this," she said. "You think that Laura's boyfriend is a minion of the dark forces just because a spy who's one small step away from brain-death didn't use the proper subjective pronoun while apologizing to you for letting himself get kidnapped?"

Harry sighed and accepted a cup of cocoa, looking up at her sheepishly. "It doesn't sound nearly as plausible when *you* say it."

She sat down next to him at the mammoth kitchen table. "You must admit it's a tad flimsy."

"You weren't *there*," he said, tapping his fist on the table. "I'm telling you, it sounded strange, stilted. I didn't know what it meant at the time, but it just didn't sound as though he were apologizing to me. He acted like the word 'Sorry' was very significant."

"That doesn't mean it's a name."

"No, but I don't know what else it could be."

"A place? An object or a street name or someone's pet spaniel?"

"I checked the Lexicon of Magical Nominatives and there was nothing under any spelling variation that made any sense."

"It occurs to me that there are a number of spells that begin with a sound like 'sorry.' *Sauriarbus maximacatis*, for example...though I don't know why he'd want to turn you into a giant gila monster. Perhaps he was trying to cast in some way, or tell you what spell had been used on him."

Harry smiled at her. "You're not bad at this, you know."

She shrugged. "I could check for you."

"Thanks. We should at least rule it out. I still think that a name is the most likely scenario. And it just happens to be the name of a wizard that we know? I don't believe in coincidence."

"But we're saying that he's *evil*."

"Do we know that he's not? We've never even met him."

"I don't believe Laura would be involved with someone like that."



"Nor do I, but who's to say she knows? She's only seen him once since she moved here, a lot can change in three years."

Hermione sighed. "I hope you're wrong about this. She really loves him, and it seems mutual judging by what she's told me."

"I don't want to cause Laura pain, but I have to know if Sorry is what he says he is, or if he's someone I need to be babysitting."

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"You wanted to see me, Chief?"

"Yes, Remus, come on in. And you are aware that you're allowed to call me Harry."

Lupin sat down in one of the chairs in front of Harry's desk. "'Chief' sounds better, don't you think?"

"I'm always afraid it just makes me sound like the shift supervisor at the curry take-away shop."

"Only when you ask if I want some tea with that."

Harry sobered. "You can have no illusion about why I've asked you here."

Lupin shook his head. "I imagine it's about what I overheard just before you collapsed."

"Argo spoke out of turn, that information was classified."

"If it makes you feel any better, I have no idea what you were talking about. But if you need to do a Memory Charm on me I understand."

Harry stood up and came around his desk to perch on the edge, examining Lupin's face and deciding how much he trusted him. If I don't trust him by now I never will, he thought. This man has never done anything to make me question his integrity...and he's one of my closest friends. "I'm going to bring you in on this," he said, his decision made. "Because I need your help, and given what happened to Leland I can't justify keeping you out of it."

Lupin straightened up. "I appreciate the confidence."

"You've earned it." He fixed Lupin with a penetrating stare. "Argo asked me about 'the pattern,' and if Leland's disappearance conformed to it."

"Yes. What is that, exactly?"

"Over the last few years, those of us who pay attention to such things have noticed a trend emerging in the activities of the dark forces. Acts of violence that seem to lack motive, but only until you place them in the larger context. Theft of archaic magical artifacts and talismans. Threats, intimidations, blackmail...coercion of wizards in important positions."

"Sounds commonplace enough."

"Not altogether. The fact is that all of this activity is extremely reminiscent of the tactics Voldemort used to gain power. Too much so to be dismissed as coincidence."

Lupin's eyes widened. "That can't be. He's gone...you should know that better than anyone!"

"Gone he may be, but forgotten he most certainly is not. We suspect that someone is using his name, his trademarks, and his strategies to raise a new following for dark magic. Since we first took note of it, the events that fit the pattern have grown more and more frequent, though whomever is orchestrating this has been careful to keep their activities in the shadows. Leland's kidnapping was the most overt act so far, and it makes us think that we should be bracing for an escalation."

"Harry...if someone really is trying to step into Lord Voldemort's shoes, then part of that would involve..."

"A fixation on me, yes, I'm all too aware of that. I've spent a great deal of time since taking this office pondering all the ways that Voldemort tried to eliminate me before I finally got the chance to defeat him."

"It's not just you that might be at risk. He attacked everyone around you, people close to you."

Harry swallowed hard. Lupin had just voiced his deepest fear...that Voldemort's new disciple might come after the people he cared about. His roommates, his friends...and the one best friend that the dark wizard hadn't succeeded in killing the first time. His mind turned away from the thought of harm coming to Hermione, it was simply something he couldn't bear to think about. "I'm aware of that, too. I've been taking some steps to insure the safety of people around me, but I'd rather eliminate the risk by finding this new disciple and demonstrating to him in graphic detail exactly how I dispatched his master."

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Hermione glanced surreptitiously at Laura, whose head was bent over the worktable as she wrapped the stems and placed them in the curing humidior. They were in the potting room, which they'd turned into a workroom for preparing potion ingredients and raising herbs and magical plants. They'd been putting off curing a new batch of dragonwort stems for weeks, it was a tedious and time-consuming process, but tonight Hermione had suggested they set to it. She did have ulterior motives; the task would give her ample time to pick Laura's brain. Hermione was carefully harvesting and stripping the stems for Laura to wrap tightly with Dead Seaweed, after which they were placed in a special curing chest and left to stew in a vapor chamber for a full lunar cycle.

"I saw that you got a letter from Sorry today," Hermione said.

"Yeah. He tries to write at least once a week."

"Where is he these days?"

"Greenland. He's working with a group of native wizards trying to eradicate the infestations of greater kudzu that have been invading all their indiginous magical plants." She glanced up at Hermione, smiling. "In the mood for true confessions?"

"How do you mean?" she asked innocently.

"You've always been curious about my past."

"You never talk about it, naturally I'm curious."

"I don't talk about it because it's so personal...and strange." She hesitated. "I suppose I'm afraid people will think I'm unnatural if they know the truth."

Hermione stopped stripping stems, intrigued. She hadn't suspected anything out of the ordinary in Laura's past, she'd just wanted more information about Sorry. "Laura, you're one of my favorite people. I would never think you were unnatural!"

"Whether you would or not, I guess it's time I told you." She set down her binding wires and swiveled around on her stool to face Hermione, who sat down on the bench facing her. "Herm...I wasn't born a witch."

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean I'm more than just Muggle-born. I was born a Muggle, with no magical ability to speak of."

"I didn't know that was possible."

"It is, I'm living proof. Even so, I wasn't exactly normal by Muggle standards. I was...special. I knew things, I could feel things."

"You must have been a sensitive."

Laura looked puzzled. "A what?"

"A sensitive. Some Muggles have just a touch of magical blood in them, not enough to do magic themselves, but they can sense its presence. They usually call themselves psychics...some of them can see the future, or get impressions from objects or people or places. Some can move things with their minds, that sort of thing."

"Well, if I was a sensitive I was a pretty low-grade sensitive. I used to get warnings. I can't really explain what they were, just that all of a sudden the world would go all funny and everything would be shrieking 'warning!' to my mind. I still get them sometimes. The person who affected me the most by far was Sorry. He's three years older than me, and he was a prefect at my school. I knew he was a wizard the moment I laid eyes on him, and I wasn't wrong."

"You just knew?"

"Yes. And he *knew* that I knew. He could see it in my eyes. It might have all come to nothing except that my little brother Jacko was attacked by an incubus. I went to Sorry and his family for help."

"His family?"

"His mother Miryam and his grandmother Winter are both witches. They told me that only I could help my brother, and to do it I'd have to become a witch myself."

Hermione looked at her with a serious expression. "You know that's not true, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. They had their own reasons for wanting me on their team. Winter and Miryam helped me perform a changeover, and I became a witch."

Hermione was fascinated. "This changeover...what did it entail?"

"I know now that it was a deep state of autohypnosis in which I was able to rewire my own brain to be magically receptive. It all took place in their bathroom, but I felt as though I was on a journey through a strange land...forests of thorns, rivers that ran with my blood. But I was in the bathroom the entire time. I was...I suppose you'd say I was on the other side of the

bathroom; occasionally in the changeover when my concentration would falter, I'd see the words 'tam htab' floating in the air before me."

"Tam htab?"

"Yes. There was a rug with 'bath mat' printed on it in that bathroom, and my eyes were seeing it in reverse. Anyway, when I came out of it Sorry was holding me...he'd had his own role to play in my changeover...and I was a witch."

"Laura, that's astonishing! I never knew such a procedure existed!"

"It does, though one can see how it might be best kept secret. There are those among us who would be horrified at the prospects of Muggles joining our ranks. Some feel it's quite bad enough that wizards are born from Muggle parents."

Hermione thought of the Malfoy family. Lucius had been tried and convicted of aiding and abetting attempts on Harry's life years earlier, but he'd vanished before he could be taken to Azkaban. As for Draco, he had ended his years at Hogwarts on far more amiable terms with Harry than anyone would have expected though no one would have called him a real friend...all the same, it had been disturbing when he'd disappeared from off the Hogwarts Express on his way back to school after Christmas vacation. He'd been in his cabin when the train left King's Cross and when it arrived at Hogsmeade he was nowhere to be found. Hermione changed the subject quickly. "What about your brother?"

"I drove out the incubus and he recovered. *I* never did, though. Sorry and I have been together ever since."

"So you never attended a witchcraft school like Hogwarts?"

"Oh no. What I know of magic I learned on my own, or from Sorry and his family. Miryam is very polite and proper, but Winter is a very powerful witch. She doesn't know that I'm aware of just *how* powerful she is."

Hermione mulled this information over. It was amazing, but so far nothing suspicious. "Tell me about him," she prompted.

Laura grinned, going back to her stem wrapping. "What do you want to know?"

Hermione thought fast. Oh not much...is he by any chance the sort that would go all evil? "What's he like?"

"Such a complicated question. I've been with him ten years and I scarcely know myself." She thought for a moment. "He's quiet and reserved, but he's got a real core of rebelliousness that pops up at the oddest moments."

"Ten years," Hermione mused, impressed. "I can't imagine being able to captivate a man for that long."

"Bollocks. You must have captivated your share of men."

Hermione made a sarcastic raspberry sound. "Well, they haven't exactly been beating a path to my doorstep."

"They should. You're smart and interesting and beautiful..." Hermione couldn't hold back her laughter. "You are! I'd committ murder to have hair like yours!"

"Oh Laura, you're a dear sweet person and I absolutely adore you, but I think you must be blind. I'm the plainest Jane in the realm."

"Well, *I* think you're stunning and you won't convince me otherwise." Hermione bent over the stems again, flushing pink. "And I'm not the only one who thinks so," she sing-songed in a teasing 'I know something you don't know' tone."

"What's that mean?"

"Just after I moved here, Harry and I had one of those silly conversations about rock stars and films and which celebrities we thought were yummy, that sort of thing. I said that I thought Paul McGann was the most gorgeous man in England and that I'd shag his socks off in a minute. When I asked him who he'd pick, he said he didn't know of anyone who was as pretty as you."

Hermione's mouth dropped open. "He did not!"

"As I'm standing here now, he did."

She smiled, embarrassed, and bent over the stems again. "He was probably having you on."

"You think that if it makes you feel better, Herm."

Hermione put down her shears and turned towards Laura, a sudden thought occurring to her. "Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"Have you ever gotten the idea that Harry and I have...well, had sex?"

Laura looked up, surprised. "Are you implying that you haven't?"

Hermione threw her hands in the air. "Unbelievable! Harry told me that this was a commonly held belief but I didn't quite believe him."

Laura fixed her with a penetrating stare. "All right. You look me in the eye and tell me that during all those years in the same castle, the same flat, the same *life*...you never took him out for a test drive?"

Hermione leaned toward her, hands on the table, and matched her stare. "No. Never."

Laura seemed reluctant to believe her. "So you've never slept with him."

"I have on a few occasions shared a *bed* with him when circumstances demanded it, but all we did was sleep and fight over the covers."

Laura shook her head. "You've got more willpower than I, then. I don't think I would have been able to keep my hands to myself in similar circumstances."

The way she said that made Hermione suspicious. "Laura, do you have a *crush* on Harry? I don't think Sorry would appreciate that!"

"I'm not saying *I* want to shag him, I'm saying I'm amazed that *you* don't. He's so dishy. And before you accuse me of being all juvenile and hormonal again, I state that observation objectively and with the utmost clinical detachment."

"He's my best friend, and that's all. We don't have those kinds of feelings for each other," Hermione said, eager to close the subject. She'd started this conversation to find out more about Sorry...how on earth had they ended up talking about her and Harry?

"If you say so," Laura said, picking up a fresh stem. "Though I do believe those are what's called 'famous last words.'"

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## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 6: Road Trips*

Stunned silence met Fred's announcement, but before anyone could do or say a thing, the back door opened and George walked in, his face blank and befuddled.

"George!" Fred exclaimed, bounding across the kitchen to embrace his twin. "What the bloody hell...are you all right? What happened? You vanished right in front of my eyes!"

George shot Justin a significant glance, then looked back at Fred. "Why, that can't be, Fred...you must have turned away for just a second."

"The hell I did!" He didn't notice Justin quietly coming up behind him, his wand raised. "One second you were there and then 'poof' you were gone!" Justin was waving his wand back and forth, murmuring under his breath...a tendril of white fog was emanating from the tip of the wand. Suddenly he whipped it forward, tossing the tendril around Fred's head like a lasso. Fred fell silent as the mist surrounded his face, then blinked in confusion as it dissipated. Everyone watched, holding their breath, as Fred reoriented himself. He looked at George and grinned. "Bloody great convention, George! Thanks for asking me along."

George nodded. "My pleasure. Thanks for coming."

"I must be off, then. Back to the tundra with me."

"Say hello to Charlie for me."

"Will do. Ta, everyone!" He waved cheerfully and left. George sank into one of the kitchen chairs.

"Nice work, Justin. You really ought to be on the Memory Charm Squad."

"That's what I keep telling my boss."

Everyone gathered around him. "But he wasn't seeing things, was he?" Harry said. "You really did vanish."

"I thought it best if he didn't remember...and I had to get rid of him so we could discuss this," George said.

"What happened?" Hermione said, sitting next to him, one hand on his arm.

He looked around at them, his eyes wide and confused. Harry was leaning over him, examining his eyeballs and taking his pulse. "I honestly don't know. One moment I was at the convention with Fred...the next, I was standing in the gazebo. According to this clock on the wall I was gone a full hour."

"Where were you?"

"I have no idea. I don't have any sense of that hour passing, it's as if I hopped right over it. My watch is an hour behind, too."

Hermione looked over at Harry. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

He nodded. "Probably." He sat back down, his face grim. "This was a warning, for me. It's a message from him..." He stopped short and cleared his throat. "I mean, from the dark forces. They're letting me know they can get to my friends anywhere, anytime."

"But what did they do to me?" George said. "I can't remember what happened..."

"Don't fret, George," Hermione said. "For you, nothing happened. It sounds like time travel to me." Harry was nodding.

"That's not possible," Justin said. "Doesn't time travel require a talisman?"

"Yes, it does," Harry said. "And there are very few legitimate talismans in existence."

"The ones that are authentic are closely guarded," Hermione went on. "You can imagine the chaos if time manipulation magic fell into the wrong hands, it's very carefully regulated."

"If they've found a way to perform time travel charms without a talisman it's not good news." Harry stood up. "I'm going to the office. I suddenly find myself with a great deal to do." He turned and walked out. Hermione rose and followed, catching him up in the second-floor living gallery.

"Harry," she hissed. He stopped and turned back. "This is bad, isn't it?"

"An understatement."

"Time travel could also explain how Allegra escaped."

"I know. She could have just jumped into the past by half an hour, before the containment charms were performed and then Apparated out." He crossed his arms over his chest, shaking his head. "I didn't want to say it in front of the others, but this was more than just a warning. It was a threat."

She nodded. "I thought so." She put a hand on his arm. "But there are precautions we can take."

"And I intend to take them. I'm off to see to them now." He started to head to his room but she held him back.

"I'd like to help."

He hesitated, thinking. "All right. Let me get dressed and we'll go together."

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The moment they got to I.D. headquarters they were deluged with Baubel bubbles from other wizards, all talking at once, that flitted around them all the way to Harry's office. He held up his hands. "Quiet, all of you!" he said as Hermione shut his office door behind them. "One at a time!" He pointed to a sunny-orange Bubble. "This is Galino from Surveillance and Information Retrieval," he said to Hermione. "Go ahead, Galino."

"Harry, in the last week there's been an unusual level of activity. People moving, traveling, gathering. I have it on good authority that last night there was an emergency session of the Circle."

"The Circle?" Hermione said.

"Yes, Dr. Granger. A group of several dozen individuals who comprise what little there is of an organized power structure among those who follow the dark arts. The only qualification to be a member is the leverage and the stones to make other dark wizards do what you want."

"Was Sorry there? Or Allegra?" Harry asked.

"I don't think Sorry was there. As for Allegra...I'm not sure. Probably. We haven't been able to reacquire her since she escaped from Detention yesterday, but she's been at a number of Circle gatherings in the past few months."

"Do we know what went on at this emergency meeting?"

"No. Give me a few days, I'll round up some intelligence."

"All right. Dismissed." The orange bubble vanished. Harry pointed to a light mauve bubble. "That's Sabian." Hermione sat up straighter, eager to hear the voice of the famous as-yet-unseen Sabian. "What have you got for me?"

The voice that issued from the bubble was a throaty whisper, barely audible, and eerily uninflected. "Carlisle is now officially the bane of my existence. I've been on his trail for a week and I still haven't been able to catch so much as a glimpse of him. No one has ever eluded me this long." He sounded half embarrassed and half annoyed. "His name is suddenly everywhere, at times it seems as if it's even in the wind. The dark community is buzzing with talk and rumors about him, it's as if he just came out of the woodwork. They're even saying..." The man paused. "They're even saying he's taking Voldemort's place."

Harry glanced at Hermione, his expression dark. "Thanks, Sabian. Listen, you don't need to stay on..."

"I'm staying on his trail, Chief. It's like a vendetta now." The purple bubble winked out.

Harry sighed. "The rest of you...give me your reports, one at a time."

Silver bubble: "Someone tried to steal the Mayzelian Goblet this morning. The charms guarding it held up, but the thief was gone by the time the wizard guardian arrived. He doesn't know how the thief escaped."

"All right, you take a trip on down there and see what you can find out."

Periwinkle blue bubble: "One of our top double agents in the Circle is pretty sure she's being followed; she's afraid someone has broken her cover."

"Tell her to contact Infiltration and arrange to have herself written out immediately. We can't take the chance."

This went on for several minutes until all the bubbles had made their reports and been given their orders. Hermione watched Harry as he took care of this business, impressed. In this setting he exuded command and leadership, and the nameless wizards and witches on the other side of the bubbles accepted his orders without hesitation or question. When all the bubbles were gone he sat down.



"That all sounded pretty grim," she said.

"Welcome to my world," he said. "But you're not wrong." He pulled out a thick, leather-bound journal and began scribbling in it. "Most of those incidents fit the Pattern."

"Which ones don't? They all seemed Voldemort-esque to me."

"He wouldn't bother trying to steal the Mayzelian Goblet. It's an enchanted drinking glass that grants tremendous beauty to whomever drinks from it."

She frowned. "I thought I'd heard of every magical artifact known to man," she said.

"I'm sure you have. The Goblet is one of those items whose existence is kept quiet. But there's no reason Voldemort would want to steal it. The thief was probably hired for the job by Muggles who weren't quite sure what they were buying. It wouldn't be the first time." He sighed and closed the journal. "I'll never understand Muggles. It's not as though they could use the Goblet if they acquired it...how would they explain their appearance changing from one day to the next? Not to mention no one would believe that they were still themselves..." he mused, rubbing his chin. "But I digress."

"Do you have a library here?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, we have an excellent library down in Research." He smiled. "I should have known. The Hermione answer to any problem that comes up...hit the library."

She hmped. "I seem to remember said library work saving our arses more than once. In this case, I want to do some research on time travel."

He nodded. "Good idea. I've got a thousand things to do at any rate. I'm going to put up some wards around the house and see about personal protection for you and the others. Bubble!" His royal blue bubble appeared. "This is Hermione," he said to the bubble. "As of now she is authorized to be here. You should obey her as you do me, understood?" The bubble did a little loop-the-loop, then hovered in front of Hermione's face as if awaiting instructions. "Well, what are you waiting for? Off you go!" he said.

Hermione jumped up. "Um...take me to the library?" she said to the bubble. It zoomed out the door and she followed closely, not wishing to lose sight of it and become lost.

The bubble led her through a seemingly endless series of corridors. Some were sterile and white-tiled, some were dungeon-like and lit with torches, some were industrial corrugated metal. She passed many doors with symbols on them. A death's head, a comedy-tragedy mask, an ouruborous...Hermione wondered about the wizards and witches who worked behind *those* doors. Baubel bubbles flitted here and there and a few times Hermione was almost sure she saw a corridor shift position once she turned the corner.

Finally the bubble led her down a long flight of stone stairs to an archway at the bottom. An elaborate wrought-iron gate stretched across the opening; it swung open as Hermione approached. She hesitated, edging through the gate trying to look everywhere at once.

The arch opened up into a tall, cavernous space that echoed and soared like a cathedral. Comfortable chairs and lounges were scattered about along with desks and reading tables...but no bookshelves or any evidence that this was a library at all. Thinking she'd better make sure she was in the right spot, Hermione turned around and almost walked right into a small person standing directly behind her. It was a young girl, no more than 10, clothed in flowing robes so white they seemed to glow with platinum hair spilling over her shoulders in a silken river. Her

face was angelic yet bore the stamp of wisdom; her crystal-blue eyes were older than the rest of her. "Hello," she said in a low, silken voice.

Hermione smiled down at her. "Are you lost?"

The girl smiled back; Hermione was amazed to find herself on the receiving end of a patronizing smile from a girl less than half her age. "I'm the Librarian, Dr. Granger."

She didn't bother asking how this girl knew her name any more than she bothered wondering how she'd gotten behind her without being seen. "I see. I wasn't quite sure this room *was* the library. Where are all the books?"

The Librarian glided past her and slipped behind a large mahogany desk at the center of the room. "Ask for what you want and it will come to you," she said.

Hermione stepped to the desk. "You don't have a catalog?"

That patronizing, humoring-the-newcomer smile again. "We don't need one. You may request any book ever written." The Librarian reached under her desk and drew out a large leather-bound ledger. "Write your name on the first blank page, then write down the names of the books you'd like. I will assign you a reading room and the books will come to you." She held out a long peacock-feather quill.

Hermione flipped through the book...she paused along the way at the page with "Harry Potter" written at the top. Below the name was a long list of books in Harry's slanted, spiky handwriting; books on a wide variety of subjects from defensive charms to wand materials...and, to her amusement, swing dancing. She found a blank page and wrote her name at the top, wondering if anything would ever seem odd to her again.

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When George Weasley decided to make soup stock, he didn't mess around. All six burners of his large gas range were occupied with huge soup kettles merrily bubbling away: two beef, two chicken, one vegetable and one mushroom. He dipped a small piece of bread into one of the kettles of beef stock, tasted it, and added more salt. He looked up at the sound of footsteps in the hallway; a few seconds later Laura walked into the kitchen, grinning.

"Behold the glory that is me," she said, bowing and blowing kisses at an imaginary audience.

"And what gloriousness have you accomplished today, Your Highness?" George said, rummaging in the closet for ice cube trays to freeze the stock when it was finished.

Laura sat down at the kitchen table, shrugging out of her jacket. "I managed to get Marian Zapata-Rossa, the President of the Southern Pacific Magical Congress, to take a meeting with Fudge, something she swore she'd be dead before she'd ever do."

"Congratulations. Why do we care?"

"Until the SPMG drastically improves its relations with the Ministry, we won't have any power as members of the Federation. If Fudge and Marian can improve their relationship, and really there's nowhere to go but up, it will be good for us."

George sat down, opening his briefcase. "This is all fascinating, but shouldn't you be at work?" He began to sort an untidy pile of business cards into a small file box.

"I came home for a celebratory lunch. What's in the fridge?" She got up to see for herself.

"Uh...nothing very celebratory. I think there's some sandwich fixings."

Laura fished out lunchmeat and pickles, grabbing a loaf of bread and some mustard from the pantry and coming back to the table. "What are you up to, besides making enough soup stock for the House of Commons?"

"I'm trying to organize all my contact information. Hopeless, really, but I've at least got to make the attempt."

They fell silent for a few moments. "What's Hermione been on about lately?" she finally asked.

George looked up. "How do you mean?"

"She's been acting...I don't know, strange."

"Things have been a tad strange for everyone lately, wouldn't you say? Let's not forget that it was *me* who lost an entire hour yesterday."

"An experience I don't envy, but you don't seem any the worse for it."

"Not so far. How am I to know what long-term detrimental effects I might suffer? Suppose I die an hour early to make up for it!"

Laura thought a moment. "If you had to make up for it, wouldn't that mean you'd die an hour *late*?"

"Hardly the point. It's not right for dark wizards to go about tossing people back and forth in time."

"We're getting a little off the subject here. I'm concerned about Hermione. You know her better than I do."

"I seriously doubt that."

Laura thought for a moment, her face screwed up in thought. "Can I ask you...about Ron?"

George looked up from his business cards, his usual jovial expression falling from his face to leave it strangely naked. "What do you want to know?" he said quietly.

"Do you think Hermione loved him?"

He bit his lip. "I don't know. Why don't you ask her?"

"I have. She gave me a typically cryptic answer."

George picked up the cards again. "You want to know what I think? I don't think Hermione is too well acquainted with the workings of her own emotions, nor is she terribly inclined to pay attention to where they're leading her."

Laura peered at him through narrowed eyes for a moment. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably, but where are we going to find hip-waders in the middle of the countryside?"

"Be serious."

He sighed. "It's really none of our business."

"This Gerald bloke is all wrong for her."

"Something she's entitled to decide for herself, I believe."

"Just imagine it, George. Imagine her marrying Gerald, McGonagall performing the ceremony, his fluffy puppy dog Spot as the best man, Harry standing there as the person of honor when all of a sudden he just bursts into flame and disintegrates into ashes out of sheer misery."

"You know, until you said that I really didn't think there was much to that theory about the damage done to people who eat beef raised with bovine growth hormone."

"You like to make jokes when the conversation turns serious, don't you?"

"It passes the time. And you clearly have too much time on *your* hands in which to think wild and crazy thoughts about our roommates that have no basis in reality."

"No, George. 'Doctor Who' has no basis in reality. This is different."

"*What's* different? I don't even have any idea what you're on about!"

"No one does. I'm the wind, baby." She sighed and took a big bite of her sandwich.

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Hermione sat in her little reading room in the library with stacks of books all around her and a notebook full of scribbled bits and pieces of research. The room wasn't what she'd been expecting, she'd been in her share of libraries and study rooms were always spare tiny walled sensory deprivation chambers with one table and a few chairs. This was a comfortable solarium-style room, though she was damned if she knew where the sunlight was coming from given that they were underground. It was exquisitely decorated in sunny Southern California style with greenery and comfortable rattan furniture. Half of her brain was engaged in her task to learn more about time manipulation magic, but the other half was thinking about Sorry. Could he really be evil? she thought. I don't believe it. But Harry's right, I don't know him from anyone, for all I know he *could* be evil. But Laura's smart, I have to think she'd at least have an inkling that his loyalties were shifting so dramatically.

"There's only one thing to do," she finally whispered. She folded up her notes and looked around, wondering if she were supposed to return these books. "Umm...bubble?" she said, hesitant, but Harry's blue bubble appeared at once. "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I'm done down here, I'm going to head back to the Institute."

"Oh. All right. I uh...I guess I'll see you at home."

"Can I Apparate out from here?"

"No, the building is protected with wards. Just have the bubble lead you back to the main entrance, once you're past the security field you can Apparate back to your office."

"All right. See you later." She did as he suggested and within fifteen minutes she was in her office at the Institute. "Stella?" she said to the air.

'Yes?' came her secretary's voice in return.

"I'm going to the Ministry, I'll be back in an hour or so."

"All right."

Hermione grabbed her broom out of its corner and opened the glass door that gave on to her small balcony. She swung one leg over the railing, positioned her broom and was off. She flew for ten minutes or so, swerving carefully behind stands of trees and around hills so as not to be spied by Muggles, and finally arrived at the Ministry headquarters. Settled in the foothills just outside London, it was invisible to Muggle eyes but to any wizard or witch it appeared as it was, a large white marble building in the design of a modern castle.

Broomsticks flitted here and there, and owls came and went from the Ministry's many windows. Hermione landed in the busy courtyard, waving to a few people who greeted her. Leaving her broom in the public shed, she walked quickly through the main gates into the spacious marble-and-silver entrance hall. She'd been here many times and knew her way around; she trotted up a nearby staircase, smiling at the wizard tourists visiting from out of town.

At the top of the stairs she went down the corridor until she came to a large set of double doors labeled "Enforcement Squad, 12th Precinct." The wizarding world was far less populous than the Muggle world, here, the 12th Precinct covered most of Western Europe and Scandinavia. She pushed open the doors and entered the squadroom.

Hermione had been in Muggle police stations before and she always marveled at how the corresponding wizarding facility was both identical and completely different. The same groupings of desks bearing wizard's names on small plaques, the same enforcers hurrying hither and yon as if every second counted, the same enclosed office where the superior officer held court...and yet the differences were numerous. Instead of constantly ringing phones, owls came and went in a steady stream. Instead of guns and badges, the enforcers wore their wands in hip holsters and anti-curse Enforcer's bands around their wrists.

"Can I help you?" said the duty officer, a young wizard in a dark purple cloak.

"Oh, yes. I need to see Detective Longbottom."

"Name?"

"Dr. Hermione Granger."

"Do you have an appointment? Detective Longbottom is very busy."

"I don't, but...I'm an old school friend, from Hogwarts."

"I see. Well...all right, go on back. Do you know the way? It's straight down the hall, you'll see the door."

Hermione thanked the young man and followed his directions to the door in question, it was labeled "E.S. Detectives." She went through cautiously, but on the other side was just a hallway with doors set every ten feet or so. She started down the hall, reading the names on the placards on the doors, until she came to one labeled "N. Longbottom." She rapped on the frosted glass panel. "Come in!" came a voice.

She opened the door, smiling. Her old friend, Neville Longbottom, was sitting behind a desk in shirtsleeves, tie and vest. He beamed a wide smile when he saw her. "Hermione!" he

exclaimed, standing up. He came around the desk, a dapper little man with a round pink face and a rapidly receding hairline. "This is a pleasant surprise!" He clasped her hand and stood on tiptoe to kiss her cheek.

"Hello, Neville. Nice to see you again. It's been quite a few months, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has!" He motioned her into a chair in front of his desk, returning to his own seat. "How's Harry?"

"Oh, he's fine," she said, keeping her tone even. "And George and Justin and Cho, all fine. They say hello." She smiled, motioning to the office and all its trappings. "I must say, Neville, you've certainly done well for yourself. I'm still amazed you became an *Enforcer*."

He flushed. "Believe me, I couldn't make Detective fast enough. I was never much good at magic, and I wasn't any better at attack magic, though over the years I did at least acquire competency. I *am* good at detective work. Quite good, as it turns out. My superiors knew this and they cut me a lot of slack as an Enforcer so I could work my way up to this level as quickly as possible. Here, I depend less on magic and more on this," he said, tapping his forehead. "And despite what my grandmother might say, there's nothing wrong with my brain."

Hermione grinned. "I'm glad for you. Anything exciting to report from the world of law and order?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. I'm currently working a homicide that occurred a few days ago in Bonn and a string of attempted thieveries in the south of France along with various other matters that land on my desk. It keeps me busy." He folded his hands on his desk and regarded her across its three feet of mahogany. "But I don't suppose you came here to discuss my workday activities. What can I do for you?"

She sighed. "I need a favor, and I need you to keep it between us. Can you do that?"

He nodded. "Yes, I think I can just about manage that. Sounds very mysterious."

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 7: The Good, the Bad, and the Innocent*

Hermione sat at a corner table in the Three Broomsticks with an untouched mug of butterbeer in front of her, bouncing her foot nervously and trying not to look too much like she was watching the door. She had the hood of her cloak pulled up around her face; there were a lot of people in town who knew her and she didn't feel like being trapped into casual conversation by an oblivious if well-meaning acquaintance.

The crowd wasn't too heavy, just heavy enough that she didn't feel conspicuous sitting alone. Her mind was whirling with a thousand questions and doubts. She was certain that when Harry found out what she'd done he'd have some choice comments to make, and she still wasn't too sure that she wasn't placing herself in mortal danger. What if Sorry *was* Voldemort's servant? Killing her would be an excellent start to a brilliant career as the right hand of the dark master.

She looked up at the door, and all at once he was there. He was standing just inside the doorway, looking at her calmly. She wasn't sure how she knew that it was him, but it was achingly clear that it couldn't be anyone else. Hermione blinked, unable to keep the amazement from her expression...whatever she'd been expecting, he wasn't it.

He looked like an angel, come right down from heaven just to make the mortals feel inadequate. He was tall, strong and blindingly handsome, with chiseled Greek-god features, a head of thick golden hair that shone like the sun and blue eyes like the curve of a July sky. He was wearing a wine-colored sweater that set off his fair skin, black leather gloves and a long forest green cloak. He walked directly to her table and sat down next to her, casually, as if they were old friends. "Hello, Hermione," he said.

She looked at him, trying in vain to assess his loyalties just by looking at his face. "Sorry?"

He smiled a smile that could have melted any woman's heart right down to Vegemite, exposing perfectly straight and white teeth. "We shouldn't talk here. There's a garden around the back where there won't be nearly as many listening ears," he said, casting a glance around at the dozen-odd patrons sitting in small groups all around them.

One of her eyebrows shot up. "If you think I'm going anywhere alone with you then you haven't the sense God gave the common rodent."

"I understand your caution, but you're in no danger...not from me, that is to say."

"I'm sure the citizens of Troy had the same assurance from the horse."

He turned and looked her in the eye. "You asked me here to find out if I'm a dark wizard. I came, in spite of my own better judgment, to tell you that I'm not. It's enough of a risk to my cover just being seen with you...I can't further risk being overheard talking with you."

Even though she knew that he could very easily be lying, Hermione's heart loosened a bit at the sincerity of his words. "How do I know you're telling me the truth?"

"You don't."

She looked into his eyes for a long moment. "All right, let's go."

They rose and left through the front door. Hermione followed Sorry around the side to the backyard. He walked through the garden and into a shaded glen with a circle of stone benches. He sat down facing her and crossed his legs. For a few moments they said nothing. "How's Laura?" he said finally.

Hermione couldn't think of a suitable answer for a moment, thrown for a loop by the off-topic question. "She's fine." Something more seemed required. Hermione thought about the sad and lonely expression that sometimes came over Laura's face when she thought no one could see her. "She misses you."

He nodded, an equally wistful expression coming over his own face. "As I do her."

"I didn't ask you here to talk about Laura."

"No, but you can't begrudge me taking the opportunity to broach the subject." He bit his lip and looked away. "You *did* ask me here to see if I'm something that you couldn't even bring yourself to say on paper. Can you bring yourself to say it to my face?"

"I can," said a voice from out of thin air to Hermione's right. They both jumped up, her hand flying to her throat. They stared as Harry's head appeared out of thin air, then his shoulders and the rest of his body as he flung off his invisibility cloak. "She asked you here to find out if you're Voldemort's new lapdog."

"Harry!" Hermione cried. Harry stood up and crossed his arms over his chest, looking like the personification of stern authority. "I know what you're going to say..."

He looked at her for the first time. "We'll discuss it later," he said, a promise of tense exchanges to come in his voice. Hermione fell silent, bristling at being reprimanded like a recalcitrant schoolgirl. He turned back to Sorry. "For now, I'm fascinated to hear what Sorry has to say."

"Well, well, well...if it isn't Harry Potter himself," Sorry said, in the sort of smug I-expected-this tone usually reserved for Bond villains. "This is turning into quite a day." He resumed his seat on the stone bench; Hermione and Harry followed suit. She could feel the anger towards her radiating off Harry in waves; she only hoped he could feel *her* annoyance at his interference. "How shall we do this?" Sorry asked. "Would you like to interrogate me or shall I just tell you the story of my life?"

"Start at the beginning," Harry said. "I know Hermione thinks I've pre-judged you, and perhaps she's right, but I'll try to keep an open mind."

Sorry nodded, took a deep breath, and began to speak:

"I never wanted any of this. I'm just a naturalist, all I ever wanted was to do my little work and lead my uneventful life. Unfortunately for me, I have intimate knowledge of an arcane and little-known ritual called a changeover. I see by your expressions that Laura's told you of it. It's a powerful ritual, capable of bringing forth magical abilities in those that have none. My mother's family is descended from the wizards who created the ritual, and it's stayed within our line, passed from mother to daughter, for centuries...what I didn't know was that the Circle had, not too long ago, unearthed some ancient texts that described the ritual. You see, not only can the changeover affect the non-magical, but if it is used properly against someone who is already a wizard or a witch it becomes a powerful weapon. Not only is the wizard killed by the ritual, but every spell or charm he's ever cast in his life is undone, and the consequences of all the magic he's ever performed are reversed. You can see how devastating this could be in the wrong hands. If it were used on you, Harry, just as an example...Voldemort would immediately return to his full power because the original effect you had on him when he attacked you as a baby would be undone." Harry and Hermione exchanged an alarmed glance. "What the Circle fails to realize is that these consequences, all of which cannot possibly be predicted, could be just as deleterious to them as to us...if there's one thing that dark wizards as a group lack it's foresight. They want it all now, praise Voldemort and pass the ammunition."

"And so, without knowing it, I had become a wanted man. The Circle had some details of the ritual, but what they didn't have was anyone who had ever actually participated in one, and they knew that it would be too easy for the ritual to go very badly wrong. They discovered my identity and sent one of their members to capture me. I was in Greenland working on that pesky greater kudzu problem, just minding my own business, when one night about four months ago I was attacked in my tent. Now, I wasn't skilled in defensive magic but I managed to hold off my attacker for a short time, mostly by using my fists. I would most certainly have been overcome had it not been for a wizard named Jack Liu."



"Jack?" Harry said.

"You know him?"

"Yes. He's what we call a regulator...a wizard who fights evil freelance, so to speak. He's quite possibly the most insane man I've ever met."

"Correct in all respects. Jack had been following the wizard who attacked me, and he arrived quite literally in the nick of time. Before my wondering eyes he killed my attacker and then uttered the words that *almost* convinced me I was trapped in some sort of weekly serial: 'Come with me or you'll be dead within an hour.' It sounded so canned, but in my situation it didn't take much to convince me. He told me that my attacker hadn't been alone and that others would soon arrive, so I went with him."

"But they weren't trying to kill you," Hermione said.

"He didn't know that, and at that moment neither did I. Seemed reasonable enough to me. We ran, and after a few days it was clear, even to me, that these people were serious. We couldn't stay in one place for more than a few hours before they were on us. I'm still not quite sure how they kept finding us so quickly. It couldn't keep going that way forever, and it didn't. One night they caught us off guard, and Jack was mortally wounded. But here's the rub: before he died...and I'll never forgive him for this...he transferred his memories and knowledge into my head."

"I didn't know that was possible!" Hermione said.

"It is," Harry said. "But it's a very dangerous spell only attempted by those who've grown up practicing it. A lot of the Eastern wizarding cultures pass down this ability though it's rarely put to use. I'm not surprised that Jack was able to pull it off...in his line of work he'd probably been preparing himself for just such an eventuality as he faced with you."

"After that, I couldn't go back. I had no choice to but to assume his quest. I may have had the sum of his experiences but I didn't have his biceps or the coordination to use all the strange martial arts he knew. I knew I was in no shape to challenge them directly as he had, so..."

"You decided to join them," Hermione said, smiling, beginning to get the picture. Harry still looked skeptical.

"Exactly. I decided I had to get into the Circle and find out the extent of their knowledge of the changeover. It's my family's legacy and I'll be damned if I'll let the Circle use it for their own purposes. I planned to destroy the texts they found and, if necessary, wipe the memories of the members who knew about it. I'm no good with memory charms but Jack certainly was, and with his help I knew I stood a chance. The first job was to shake my pursuers, and I knew if I played it right I could start formulating a persona for myself as someone the Circle would want to recruit."

"They already wanted to recruit you," Harry said.

"No. They wanted to *capture* me and force me to use my knowledge of the changeover. I wouldn't be able to accomplish very much as their prisoner. I wanted them to seek me out as a member in equal standing, and with the changeover as my trump card I knew it wouldn't be too difficult."

"So you began building a reputation as a dark wizard," Hermione said, fascinated.

"I turned the tables and began chasing my own pursuers. I caught up to them and imprisoned them with a charm-locked body bind to give me time to escape, knowing that when they finally got free they'd begin unknowingly assisting me by telling others about their experience."

"Your reputation does seem to have spread," Hermione said. "Quinlan Cashdollar is convinced you're Voldemort's successor."

Sorry smiled. "Quinn Cashdollar is in on it. She's one of a few wizards in prominent positions that I've enlisted to help me by talking me up, so to speak. For a few months, and with Jack's help, I managed to stay out sight and away from my Circle pursuers while my helpers continued to plant rumors. I'd pop up now and again to stage attacks that I could then take credit for."

"And this worked?" Harry said.

"A bit too well, actually. My reputation grew faster than I could have predicted. No one knew who I was, no one had ever caught more than a fleeting glimpse of me, I was this omnipresent nebulous phantasm and people would believe anything that anyone said I'd done. Before too long, almost any activity by the dark forces was being attributed to me. I shouldn't have been surprised...the greater the lie, the more people will believe it."

"Is that Oscar Wilde?" Hermione said.

Sorry shook his head, smiling. "Adolf Hitler. Anyway, the Circle and their followers didn't mind my getting all their press, it took the heat off them for awhile...they're like cockroaches, you know, they don't like the spotlight. I began to worry about attracting attention from the Enforcer community."

"You haven't," Hermione said. "An Enforcer friend of mine has never heard of you."

"Nor had I, until a week ago," Harry said. "That's a credit to you, my intelligence is usually excellent," he said in a mortified tone. Hermione wondered if his intelligence wizards would soon have to provide a reasonable explanation as to why it wasn't quite so excellent on this subject.

"It's not my doing, it's Jack's. He knew everything about staying underground and out of sight. The trick was to make sure the Circle knew just enough about my activities to pique their interest while making equally sure I didn't get Enforcers after me. Quinn has performed more than her share of Memory Charms on my behalf, I can tell you." He sighed. "I held them off as long as I could, when about two weeks ago the time seemed right. I contacted the Circle and told them I was willing to help them with the changeover if they'd make me an equal member of what is laughingly called their "organization." They agreed, as I knew they would, and told me that some time before they'd kidnapped a wizard to practice on."

Harry straightened up. "Leland."

Sorry looked at him sheepishly. "Correct. The ritual had gone wrong, of course. He wasn't dead, but his brain was well nigh mush. I tried to help him. The best I could do was to bring him out of the near-vegetative state he was in when I first saw him. I tried to let him know I didn't mean to hurt him but I'm not sure he understood me."

"It was *you* who took him to that rock in Canada," Harry said.

Sorry nodded. "If I couldn't help him I had to at least get him away from the Circle. I told them he'd escaped and sent a note to a witch who lived nearby describing where she could find him."

Hermione watched Harry's face. She was convinced, but she couldn't tell if he was. He was looking at Sorry with a poker face that revealed very little. "I imagine that when you gained access to their little club you learned some things you'd rather not have known," he said.

Sorry's eyebrows twitched. "You mean, such as the fact that Voldemort isn't as dead as most people think? It was quite a shock, believe me." His face turned serious. "After that, I knew I couldn't turn back. It was no longer about me, or the changeover. It was about the safety and future existence of every witch and wizard in the world, including my Laura."

"I can't believe you've risen to be Voldemort's lieutenant in so short a time," Harry said.

"I haven't. That's another rumor that's been flying about...though not one that I started myself. I admit I find it rather amusing. I occupy a position of a certain prestige because of my knowledge of the changeover and all the horrible things they think I've done, but I'm hardly a member of the inner sanctum."

"If it's not you, then who is it?"

Sorry looked at him flatly. "You already know the answer to that question."

Harry nodded. "Allegra."

"Yes. I know you've had a lot of dealings with her, Harry, and you probably think you know her. I'm here to tell you that you don't. She's very dangerous, and she's personally committed to returning Voldemort to his full power. She has a black hole where her heart used to be. You have no idea what she's capable of."

"I'm well aware of her capabilities," Harry said. "She's always been my most...*frustrating* adversary." He stood up then, moving to stand over Sorry. "Why didn't you ever come to me for help? The sort of operation you've mounted alone is what I do for a living, you know."

Sorry nodded. "I know, and don't think I didn't consider it. But I couldn't risk it. You're just too...you're too Harry Potter. I couldn't risk contacting you, the chances of someone finding out about it were too high. I'd spent months building a reputation and insinuating myself into the Circle, and I couldn't justify jeopardizing it by being seen with you...and the longer I waited the harder it became. Would you have taken my word given the reputation I've acquired? As it is, you probably don't believe me."

Harry stood there silently for a few moments. "I do believe you, Sorry. Perhaps that isn't smart of me, but I can't get past the fact that if you were really a member of the Circle you would be endangering your position by not killing at least one of us." He smiled. "Then there's this," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a pointed crystal. Hermione's eyes widened...it was the Pocket Sneakoscope that Ron had gotten for him in Egypt. "A friend gave me this for my thirteenth birthday. He thought it was a tourist's novelty...you never know where you're going to find a real talisman. If you were untrustworthy I'd know about it." He sighed, slipping the Sneakoscope back into his pocket. "But there's something you're not telling us."

"What makes you say that?"

"About a week ago I asked my best agent to gather information on you, and he found a lot of it. He heard your name everywhere, and he was very embarrassed that he hadn't heard it before. He shouldn't be embarrassed, should he? There was nothing to hear. One week no one's heard of you, the next week everyone's heard of you. Why might that be?"

Sorry just stared at Harry for a few moments, his face carefully expressionless. Harry matched his gaze, waiting. Finally Sorry exhaled and let his head drop. "A week ago I found out that the Circle has time manipulation magic...magic that does not require a talisman. You can imagine my horror. With that kind of power a lot of things are possible that wouldn't ordinarily be so. I realized at that moment that I was in over my head. I needed help, and fast. I intentionally allowed a few key people in the intelligence community to learn of my activities, and I released Leland knowing he'd tell you about me if he could. I was hoping to attract some attention from people like you, Harry, knowing that once you began poking around you'd find out what has been going on." He smiled at them. "I can't tell you how relieved I was to receive Hermione's note. Even with Jack's memories, when all is said and done I'm still just a naturalist. This isn't my game. I..." He sighed. "I suppose I wanted to hand over some of the responsibility to the professionals."

"Well, you should have done that at the outset, but I understand how this sort of thing can quickly spiral out of control. Before you know it you're neck-deep in something you've no business being involved in at all," Harry said.

"What happens now?" Sorry said.

"I don't know. You've asked me for help and now I find I can't offer much of it. I just lost my closest source in the Circle, and I can't get another agent to infiltrate fast enough to be of any use. That kind of operation takes a long time, as you've learned firsthand. You can't just have an agent show up at the door and expect them to trust her." He walked a few steps away, looking off into the distance. "They're planning to escalate, is that right?"

"I heard that they sent you a warning."

"I received it."

Sorry ran a hand through his hair. "You're not wrong about the escalation. They've got me examining the changeover texts so that I can guide them through the ritual...once they have someone to use it on. I don't know who they're planning to changeover, but it's a fair bet you're their leading candidate. I can only put them off for so long."

"What about the time manipulation magic?"

"I don't know exactly how it works, but I know it's only good for short hops. I don't think they can use it very often, either. I once saw Allegra right after she'd performed the spells and she was damned near unconscious. She stayed in her room for almost a full day."

"Do you have any insight as to what I might expect from them?"

"I hate to keep saying it, but I don't know. I do know that Allegra has been spending a lot of time with her astrometrics consultant. I don't how she communicates with Voldemort, none of us has ever seen him, but she's been coming back with a lot of orders she says come directly from him. He's planning something, that much is certain, and I have the feeling it won't be long before we know what."

Harry nodded. "I suspected as much."

"It sounds to me as though his best course of action would be to capture Harry," Hermione said, "once he's satisfied that the changeover ritual will work as it's intended to."

"We couldn't have planned this better," Harry said. "If the only thing holding him back is the Circle's imperfect knowledge of the changeover, then you can stall until I can find a way to stop them."

"That doesn't help us figure when they might come after you," Sorry said.

"They already have. Voldemort blames me for his fall from power, as well he should. He won't be satisfied just to capture me. He'd rather torture me and then have me give myself up of my own free will. He knows that to spare the lives of innocents I'd gladly sacrifice myself, and so he threatens the people I care about. It's already started." Harry's expression was bleak. "If I don't stop him first he'll kill someone. I won't allow that to happen...not again." He looked away. Hermione bit her lip, a lump rising in her throat. "Perhaps I should just give myself up right now."

Hermione jumped up. "Don't you dare! He'll use the changeover on you and he'll be restored to full power! That helps no one, and without you I don't know who can defeat him!"

Harry rubbed his forehead absently, his teeth clenched so hard the muscles in his jaw stood out like walnuts. "Dammit, I can't think straight. I need to sit down, consult my colleagues and formulate some sort of strategy."

Sorry stood up. "I must get back, I'll be missed."

"All right, but I need a way to contact you covertly. The I.D. is in possession of a few enchanted owls who appear invisible during flight, I'll send one to you daily and you can send her back with any new information. Agreed?"

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 8: Crossing the Line*

Hermione was sitting in the second-floor living gallery, her elbows resting on her knees and her head cradled in her hands, trying to determine at what point things had spiralled so hopelessly out of control. She could hear George rattling around in the kitchen downstairs, cooking food that no one would eat. Laura's injuries would keep her at the hospital for awhile yet; Justin would bring her home. Lupin, imprisoned within his own wolf body, was in a cage in Confinement where he was being watched carefully to see if he would throw off the effects of the poisoned wolfsbane. It would likely be at least a day before they knew for sure. She'd just come home, physically and emotionally drained, to find the following note from Harry taped to her bedroom door:

"H -- Gone to ID. Lefty Mamakos injured in attack on ID trainees. Stay here!!!"

Unable to think of anything else to do or anywhere else to go, she had obeyed. Allegra had taken another pawn in her coldly calculated game, and her choice of victim was significant. She could only imagine Harry's reaction at hearing that his beloved mentor had fallen victim to her schemes. He had represented the best of what Harry had joined the I.D. for and if he could be laid low, anyone could. It was all happening again. Voldemort was systematically dismantling Harry's world by attacking everyone and everything around him. If this kept up he'd soon have nothing left...and it didn't escape her notice that she herself was probably a prime target, though Allegra would likely save her for last.

She straightened as she heard the front door slam, then running footsteps coming through the hallway. She watched as Harry bounded up the stairs two at a time to the gallery, then ran across to the archway beyond which were the stairs that led to his room; he didn't seem to see her. His face was grimly determined. She got up to follow him.

Harry's room was on the third floor of the central wing of the house. It was the largest and most interesting of any of their bedchambers; George had insisted Harry take it. "I think having saved the world entitles a person to dibs on the really naff bedroom," he'd said. Harry had been embarrassed but hadn't objected to the arrangement; it was indeed the best room, and the only one in the house with a name: The Cloister. It was long and wide, ringed with bay windows and two fireplaces. There was no ceiling per se, where one would be were instead tempered panes of glass in a vaulted ironwork frame. The glass was charmed to prevent breakage and keep away birds and outdoor detritus.

Hermione followed him up the stairs and pushed open the door to his room to find him tossing clothes into his trunk, along with various items from his room that he seemed to be grabbing at random. He glanced at her, registering her presence, but said nothing, just went back to whatever he was doing. Whatever he'd seen at the I.D., it had been the last straw. The composure he'd had at the hospital was gone...he was just reacting now, she could see it in his face.

"Harry...I'm so sorry about Lefty," she said quietly. "Is he all right?"

He shook his head. "Depends on your definition of the term. He'll live, but he'll have to do so without his left leg and his right hand." Hermione shut her eyes. "She attacked *trainees*, Hermione. They couldn't defend themselves and Lefty lost body parts saving them, just as she knew he would. This will end, right now." He kept stuffing belongings into his trunk.

"What's all this?" she said, afraid she knew the answer.

"I'm leaving," he said, his tone clipped and controlled.

"For how long?" she asked, keeping her own tone as casual as possible.

At that, he stopped and looked up at her. "I'm not coming back. I'm leaving for good."

She took two long strides towards him. "What are you talking about? This is your home!"

"Not anymore. I'll still cover my portion of the mortgage if that's what's worrying you."

Hermione could hardly believe her ears. "What the bloody hell's the matter with you?" she shouted. "You think I care one jot about money at a time like this? You can't just leave!"

He straightened, his eyes blazing. "I can, and I will!" he shouted back. "As long as I stay here and do nothing I'm endangering the entire household!" He brushed past her to scoop up some books. She turned in circles where she stood, following his fevered progress around the room.

"Have you taken leave of your senses? It's an exercise in futility! As long as you still care about us he can still use us against you, no matter how far away you run! You might as well stay here where at least you can see it coming!"

"No! He's doing all this for a reason and it has nothing to do with you. He wants me, he's going to get me. Once I come after him he'll leave you alone." Hermione was starting to wonder if he meant "you" as in "all of you" or if he just meant her.

She shook her head, tears threatening. "I can't believe you'd do this to me."

He wheeled on her, his eyes blazing. "For someone as smart as you are, you're awfully thick sometimes! Don't you see? I'm doing this *for* you! Voldemort has taken from me everyone I've ever really cared for in my life...my parents, Sirius, Hagrid, Dumbledore...and then he took Ron too, and we both know neither of us ever really got over that. I thought I dealt with him for good but I should have known better; he's come back and he *will* make me pay! I can't stand by and do nothing while he sets about finishing the job! If I have to pay for challenging him then I'll pay with my *own* life, not yours!" Hermione shrank away from his fury. He held up his right hand, palm towards her. In the center was a small comma-shaped scar that he'd had for years. "You see this scar?"

She nodded numbly. "You...you cut yourself on a piece of a broken crystal ball..."

"No. That's what I told you. The cut that left this scar was made by my own hand. The night after..." He paused and gathered himself together. "The night after Ron died, I snuck out of Hogwarts and went to his gravesite. I took out a knife and cut my own hand, and I made a promise to him. I *swore*, in my own blood over his grave, that I'd never let what happened to him happen to you. I wanted to leave a scar just so I'd never forget, as if I ever could." He reached out and laid his hand on her cheek; she could almost feel the scar burning against her skin. "Don't you understand a thing? *You* are all that I have left in the world! He's not going to get you, not ever, not while I live. That's why I have to get as far away as possible, I don't care how much it hurts!"

She shook her head, equal parts touched and furious. "We're not children anymore, Harry. I'm not some swooning medieval damsel. I don't need *you* to defend me, and I don't want your misguided chivalry! If you want to play the martyr then you'd better play it to the hedgerows because I won't be a very appreciative audience! You want to protect me? Fine! Let us protect *each other!*"

He stepped away, dismissing her words with a quick shake of his head. "It's not that simple."

"I don't care!" He turned away, apparently deciding she was a lost cause, and slammed his trunk closed. He hauled it off the bed and with a wave of his hand it floated after him as he strode out of the room and down the stairs. Hermione followed close behind. When they reached the second-floor gallery she murmured a few words of her own and his trunk thumped unceremoniously to the ground. He spun around, his face angry.

"Let me *go*, Hermione!"

"No! You're mad if you think I'm just going to stand at the window and stoically wave my hanky while you ride gallantly away! You think you're giving me the hard truth? How's this for hard truth: You *\*can't\** just walk out that door and cut yourself out of my life, because it's *never* going to be over between us, do you hear me, Harold James Potter? Never!" she yelled at him. Some distant part of her mind was aware that they were both crossing The Line, that boundary between friendship and something unspoken that they'd drawn for themselves so many years ago. They never spoke of it but were always conscious of its existence; whatever lay beyond The Line, Hermione was eyeball to eyeball with it at this moment.

His hands rose to clutch at his own hair. "It's the only thing I can do!" he cried. "I can't fight him, he's everywhere and nowhere! How can I fight what I can't see? I have to get away and find him!" She saw that he was just barely keeping his emotions in check.

"You'll have to go through me first!" she screamed. The tears were very close now.

He suddenly dropped his hands and closed the distance between them in two long strides. He reached out and grasped her roughly by the upper arms. She stared up into his face, made strange by near-panic and raw emotion. He was hanging on by a very thin thread. "You listen to me," he said, his hoarse voice intense and near cracking. "It's the only way, understand? I have to go!" His fingers gripped her arms like vises, transmitting his trembling through her shoulders to shiver through her entire body. His green eyes were brimming with tears which began to run down his cheeks as she watched; she was only marginally aware of the tears streaming down her own face. "I'm going and you can't stop me!" His breath was coming in huge, ragged gasps now. Hermione couldn't speak, she just stood there helplessly while he shook her by the arms as punctuation. "You can't stop me...you can't...you...you..." His voice gave out and his face crumbled; he stared into her eyes for a few agonizing seconds, shaking his head. His gaze was filled with speechless disbelief, as if he'd never known himself until that moment.

An ancient and decaying wall inside Hermione's heart collapsed with a mighty crash and she threw her arms around his neck with a cry, swallowing past the hoarse sobs that rose in her throat. He clutched her to his chest with panicky tightness, burying his face in her hair. Her fingers dug into the flesh of his back but no matter how she tried she couldn't hold him any tighter. "Harry, I don't..." she began, then all at once found that she could not continue because his lips were in the way, pressing urgently against her own. For a shocked second Hermione wasn't sure what was happening, then she opened her eyes to find Harry just staring at her with a dumbfounded expression on his face; her mouth was tingling from what had *not* been an imaginary kiss. Did that just happen? she thought. Her mind was racing; We're crossing The Line! it yammered. This will change everything! Your life will never be the same! She ignored its warnings; what else could she do? She slid her hands around to the back of his neck and stood on tiptoe to bring her lips to his, hesitantly; his arms encircled her with light pressure to draw her closer. Once the contact was made, however, all restraint vanished as if a switch had been thrown. He plunged his fingers into her hair and she melted against him, tightening her arms around his shoulders as they kissed, caught up in a tidal wave of passion so intense Hermione had to wonder where it had come from...or perhaps it had been there all along, just biding its time.

Harry had kissed her before. Friendly peck on the cheek. Smacking and exaggerated (but innocuous) kiss hello. Chaste, closed-mouth smooch on New Year's Eve. She had hugged him as freely as she would a close female friend or a brother. He had changed clothes in front of her. She had cut his hair for him. He had seen her in nothing but a towel with her hair dripping water onto her shoulders. They had carried on conversations while in the same bathroom, he in the shower and she brushing her teeth at the sink. There was no mystery left there, no idiosyncracies left to be uncovered. At no time had there been any tension, because they'd had The Line and woe be to anyone who crossed it. They had certainly never kissed like *this*. The truth was that she'd never kissed *anyone* like this, and that included every boyfriend or lover she'd ever had. Her mind was spinning and spinning and her bones felt like they were liquefying inside her skin, his body heat warming her all over. Her neck arched, her head falling back so that she stared wonderingly at the ceiling of the gallery as his mouth moved down the pale column of her neck, her hands tangled restlessly in his unruly mop of hair. He took a breath and seemed about to speak; she dragged his lips back to hers, cutting off his words. She angled her head towards him, both of them bound up by a strange urgency that made her pull him closer, small sounds escaping her throat, and made him kiss her harder so she could scarcely breathe. Their positions shifted as Harry bent quickly, slipped his arm behind her knees and picked her up. She turned her head without breaking the kiss, holding onto him with one arm around his shoulders, as he carried her back to the archway through which they'd just come.



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Three hours later, Hermione sat in one of the huge cushioned window seats in the Cloister with her knees drawn up to her chest, looking out at the moon-drenched backyard. It was a full moon tonight and it looked almost bright enough out there to read without a lamp. She was wrapped in Harry's robe; it was too large for her, but it was soft and it smelled like him. She turned her head to look at him, asleep on his side in the huge bed, one arm curled around a pillow. A slight smile was on his face, which looked strangely naked as it always did without his glasses. Hermione sighed, wondering if she was going to wake up soon and find that this was all a dream. I've just slept with Harry? That's a load of rubbish, he and I have never been involved in that way. It couldn't be real, it was too strange to be real. Maybe I imagined it, she thought. I sleepwalked up here and hallucinated the whole thing...but she knew that wasn't true. There was ample evidence to the contrary. The room was strewn with articles of their clothing that lay wherever they'd landed, and her whole body was tingling pleasantly in memory of an all too physical experience. Her chest hitched once and her vision blurred through the prism of unshed tears. Hermione pressed her fist to her mouth as the teardrops fell from her eyelids and trickled down her cheeks.

"Hermione?" came a soft, sleep-muddled voice. She looked around; he was just turning over, still mostly asleep, but he'd noticed her absence. He blinked and propped himself up on his elbows, squinting at her myopically. "What are you doing?" he murmured, rubbing at his eyes. Sleepy disorientation made him seem much younger than his 26 years, and for a moment Hermione saw the young boy she'd befriended so long ago instead of the man that she knew today. She shivered at the powerfully discordant image, then he sat all the way up and the grogginess left his face, shattering the impression.

She smiled. "Just thinking."

He slid to the edge of the bed and rose, wrapping a sheet around his hips as he came over and sat on the edge of the window seat next to her. She turned her face away so he wouldn't see the wetness there, but she wasn't fast enough. He peered at her, his brow furrowing, then reached out and cupped her cheek in one hand, wiping away the tears with his thumb. He smiled gently at her. "What are you thinking about that's making you cry?"

She sighed, lowering her eyes. "I think...I need to grieve for a bit."

He nodded. "I know."

She looked up, surprised. "You do?" She had expected to have to explain this to him.

"I feel it too. Our friendship is over, Hermione. No matter where we go from here, what we had before is gone forever. It's perfectly natural to feel the loss."

She smiled and covered his hand with her own. "And to think there was a time when I thought you were an insensitive git."

He chuckled. "I *am* an insensitive git, but not about this." He took his hand away and stretched his legs out into the room, staring off into space. Hermione watched his profile, the pale moonlight slanting off his skin so it shone like marble. They sat in silence for a few moments. Harry fidgeted slightly and seemed afraid to look at her all of a sudden. Hermione could see the muscles in his jaw working. "Do you..." he began, then cleared his throat, keeping his face averted. "Are you sorry?" he said, his voice quiet. Only after speaking did he dare to raise his eyes, looking at her from under his lowered brow.

Hermione shook her head slowly, touched by the anxious expression on his face. "No," she said. "I'm not sorry." He let out a relieved breath and beamed a wide smile; it lit up his entire face. She smiled back and leaned in to kiss him. "Come up here with me, let's talk," she said. He slid around behind her so she could snuggle against his chest, his arms encircling her. Despite her invitation, for a long while they said nothing, content just to hold each other, accustoming themselves to this new intimacy. Hermione sighed and let her eyes fall closed, the rhythm of his breathing lulling her into a comfortable lethargy, one of his hands slowly stroking her hair.

"I can't believe this is real," he said at last.

"I know. Just a few minutes ago, while you were still asleep, I almost had myself convinced I'd dreamt the whole thing." She raised her head from his shoulder and looked up into his face. "Harry...what changed?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well...it's been fifteen years for us, and now this, out of nowhere. What changed? Why now?"

"I don't know," he said quietly. "A lot of things have happened in the last few weeks. I think perhaps...all this upheaval just weakened our defenses. I can't speak for you, but as for me...I never really knew it on a conscious level, but I've been fighting this for a long time."

"Me too," she said.

"Because of..."

"...Ron," she finished.

"Yes. But there more to it than that. I think we had a lot invested in the whole idea of a platonic friendship...as if we had something to prove by staying away from each other." He kissed her forehead. "Then there was The Line."

Hermione smiled, amused that he'd thought of it in the same way she had. "Yes, that pesky Line. I think this time we've really crossed it, don't you?"

He chuckled. "And how."

She fell silent, nestling her head in the hollow of his shoulder. Half of her was just waiting, waiting for all the death and pain of the last six hours to come roaring back and destroy this oasis of tranquility. "Are we going to talk about it?" she whispered.

He hesitated so long before answering that she began to wonder if he'd heard her. "We should."

"Are we safe here?"

"Safer here than anywhere else."

"Then let's not talk about it...not yet."

"There's nothing I can do that I haven't already done, not right now."

"It occurs to me that for *most* people, this would be the time that they'd have that obligatory conversation where they discuss their lovers past."

"Sort of redundant for us, isn't it? I can probably name all of yours myself."

She raised her head and smirked at him. "Really? You were paying that much attention?"

"I always pay attention to you."

"Ha! All right, Potter, you're on. And don't leave anyone out."

He took a deep breath and drew himself up. Hermione sat up straighter and watched, bemused. "All right, here goes; in chronological order. The honor of being first would have to go to Horace, the sensitive and intelligent graduate-school TA."

"Sensitive and intelligent and completely self-centered. But he did have lovely eyes."

"Next there was Rufus the herbologist...I didn't like him."

"I know. He was terrified of you. Every time he came to pick me up he'd skulk about on the doorstep afraid you'd singe his hair off with a lightning bolt."

"Then your grand and torrid affair," he said dramatically, "with Dr. Kilroy the suave and dashing writer."

She covered her eyes with her hand, groaning. "Could I ever have been that young?"

"You were 22!"

"Yes! Going on 16 whenever he was around!"

He looked away. "You know, there were times when it was all I could do to hold my tongue when you were with him. He wasn't good for you at all...and he was far too attached to hair-care products."

"You're right, it was very unhealthy. And he didn't approve of you or the fact that I lived with you. He kept pressuring me to leave and move in with him. It finally got to be too much and I broke it off."

He brushed her hair back from her face. "I remember the night you did that. You came home and you were beside yourself. I was so relieved you'd gotten up the stones to do it."

"I cried for hours. I knew it was the right thing but it was still...painful." She slipped her arms around his waist. "You came into my room with tea and my favorite scones and you held me and told me everything would be all right. I was so glad you were there."

"I may have seemed calm and comforting but I was secretly plotting all the ways I might inflict serious pain on that bastard without ending up in jail. No one hurts my Hermione."

"My hero," she chuckled.

"And then after Pomade Boy, just...Gerald," he said, his tone darkening over the name of her current paramour, "and now me. My, what esteemed company I'm in."

Hermione sat straight up, her eyes wide. "Oh my heavens...Gerald! How am I going to tell him?"

"Well if you'd rather not, I'd be only too delighted to tell him that you've traded up..."

"I bet you would. No, I'll owl him tomorrow and just tell him it's over." Her expression softened; she reached out and stroked his cheek with the backs of her fingers. "Honestly, I don't think he'll be all that surprised. And it'll free him up to get a more fashionable girlfriend."

"That finishes you up, then. Your turn."

She shrugged. "Oh, you're easy."

"Easy like Sunday morning," he joked in a horrible American accent that sounded like Elvis if he'd been from Manchester.

She laughed. "No, I mean you've only had two. You waited a long time, till you were 21...not that there's anything wrong with that, mind you. First Ginny, and then Ronin the scary Goth-witch. I wasn't sorry to see the back of *her*, I don't mind telling you. I always suspected she was trying to hex me when my back was turned."

He nodded, pursing his lips. "I've led a remarkably uneventful love life. Too busy, I guess." He looked at her for a moment, then sighed. "Except...you missed one."

She frowned. "No, I didn't."

"There was someone you didn't know about, before Ginny."

"Ah," she said, biting her lower lip. "Well...if you want the truth, I had someone you didn't know about, too." They just looked at each other for a moment. "You first...and if you say it was Cho I *will* have to kill you."

He snorted short laughter. "Oh no, I never slept with Cho. I think she wanted to..."

"She *still* wants to."

"...but I wasn't ready for that. No, this was someone else." He stared at his hands, his fingers laced tightly together in his lap. "I met her while I was in training at ID. She was one of my teachers."

Hermione could sense that this was a painful subject for him. She reached out and took one of his hands in both of her own. "Tell me about her."

He turned to look out the window as he spoke. "She was an expert in attack magic, the sort of thing one needs to learn in my line of work. The moment we met, there was a kind of...*animal* attraction between us, it was very potent. We couldn't stay away from each other. It wasn't long before we were spending every available minute together."

"I remember you being very distracted around that time, and not home very much. I thought it was just your new job, whatever it was."

"It was partly the job, but it was mostly her. It was the kind of all-consuming passionate affair that blots out the rest of the world and makes everything else seem irrelevant. It was something like your relationship with Dr. Kilroy...unhealthy, but so irresistible that you can't help yourself." She nodded, fighting down jealousy. This woman was in his past, she reminded herself. "*She* was my first, and she made me feel like there was nothing else in the world."

"You loved her," she said, trying to keep her tone even.

"No, that's just it. I don't think it *was* love. It was some kind of mutual addiction."

"What happened?" She put a hand over her mouth, realizing he'd been using past tense all this time. "Oh no...did she die?"

He shook his head. "No. Worse." He met her eyes and grasped her hands, tightly. "She betrayed me, Hermione. She betrayed all of the I.D.. She crossed over and became a dark wizard. She used me to set up an ambush for some of our agents...four of them died. I was lucky to escape alive, and the last I saw of her she was running away with her new colleagues, laughing at me."

Dark suspicion was growing within Hermione's heart. "Harry...are you talking about Allegra?"

He nodded, slowly. "Yes. Allegra was my lover, years ago. At one time she was good, or at least she had me believing that she was. I knew, even back then, that I hadn't seen the last of her. I never thought it would come to *this*...though I can't ever bring myself to hate her as much as she seems to hate me."

"I'm so sorry, Harry. How horrible it must be for you to know what she's become."

"It's no trip to the fair, I don't mind telling you. It took me a long time to get over her." He forced a smile. "So now you know my secret lover...what about yours?"

She took a deep breath. "Can't you guess?"

He looked away. "Ron."

Hermione nodded, a lump rising in her throat. "He was the first."

"I never knew that."

"It's hard to think about it. You see...we were only together once, on the day he died." Harry stared at her, a stricken expression on her face. "We'd talked about it...we'd been dating for over a year and we'd moved fairly slowly, but we were ready to take that last step. We were up in the winter garden room at Hogwarts, and all at once it just seemed like the right time. Ron locked the door with his wand, and..." She swiped at her eyes. "I haven't ever talked about this, it's difficult."

"You and I went to practice dueling that night...that's when Ron got the note," Harry said hoarsely. "When we got back to the castle..." He didn't need to finish, they both remembered that horrible night all too well. Hermione met his eyes and saw the same pain there that lived in her heart; she buried herself in his arms, her tears wetting the skin of his bare chest. "That was the last straw for me," he said quietly, his chin resting on top of her head. "I vowed that I'd destroy Voldemort...and I will."

"Let's not talk about it," she said, not holding out much hope that they could avoid it.

"We *have* to talk about it," he said, tightening his arms around her. "I was ready to leave forever a few hours ago, and it still makes sense for me to do so."

"No!" she said, pulling out of his arms and sitting up. "It makes *no* sense! I can't believe you'd still try and leave after what's just happened between us!"

"What's between us makes it even more important for me to take action! If he thought he could use you against me before, imagine how much more tempting it would be for him

now!" He lowered his eyes and his voice. "I only began to live when I came to Hogwarts, you know. My childhood with the Dursleys...it's hardly even part of my existence, at least no part that matters. You've been with me my entire life, Hermione. I've grown up with you by my side." He reached out and gripped her forearms, his eyes intense. "I wouldn't know how to live if you weren't with me. I don't know how to be Harry Potter without you!" Hermione stifled a sob and leaned forward, pressing her forehead against his. "I have to defeat him before he takes you from me," Harry said hoarsely.

"What if he takes *you* from *me*?" she said, drawing back. "I'm sure it would be fine for you, out there pursuing him and taking revenge and making the world safe for democracy, but what about me? I couldn't stand it, Harry...just to be here day after day not knowing where you were or whether you were alive or dead!" She shook her head, fixing him with her most persuasive stare. "We used to face trouble together. Why is that suddenly wrong?"

"It's impossible, you'd be in danger..."

"All right, I'd be in danger. Maybe that's my choice, Harry! If I want to risk danger for you then how dare you tell me that I can't!" He slid off the window seat and began to pace, his arms crossed over his chest. Hermione watched his agitation growing as she spoke. "Whatever's going to happen will happen, but if we can't stand together against it...well then, what have we got?"

He was shaking his head rapidly back and forth, as if trying to deny something to himself. He stopped pacing and came to stand before her; suddenly he dropped to his knees and buried his head in her lap. "I don't know what to do," he said, his voice trembling. "You've got to help me, Hermione."

She sighed. "Trouble comes to us all, and if you don't share it then you don't give the one who cares for you the chance to care enough."

He straightened up and took her face between his hands. "Just tell me what you want. Whatever you want, I'll do."

She smiled, her heart aching...she felt like she was being torn in five directions at once. On one hand she was intensely happy, on the other hand she was nervous about what it meant. On one hand she felt safe here with him, on the other hand it seemed like the entire world was trying to tear them away from each other. But at that instant, she was only sure of one thing. "I just want you," she whispered, tracing one fingernail down his cheek. "I want you to make love to me...like we're the only two people in the world."

"Aren't we?" he whispered back. Hermione felt herself falling forward into his eyes as he leaned towards her and further conversation became irrelevant; she wrapped her arms and legs around him as he stood up, carrying her with him back to the bed.

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"Now, take it easy..."

"I can walk down *stairs*, George, thanks ever so much!" Laura slapped his hand away as he tried to help her down the porch stairs into the yard. "I'm *fine*, they fixed me right up!"

"The doctor said that you should rest," Justin scolded, following anxiously behind them.

"Great honk, I'm not planning to swim the Channel, I just want to go out to the observatory which I've done every single night of my adult life. At times like this it's even more important

for us to be in touch with what the heavens are telling us." Her nervous escorts hovering around her, Laura walked briskly across the wide backyard to the gazebo...but this was no ordinary gazebo. It was larger than many houses, a spectacularly carved two-story octagon twenty meters across and open to the air. They used the second story as an observatory; astronomy was a particular interest of Laura's and of Cho's as well. Laura trotted up the circular wrought-iron staircase to the upper floor, eliciting concerned mutterings from George.

"Say, where's Hermione?" she asked, stepping out onto the observation balcony. "She was pretty upset when she left the hospital."

"I think she's up in her room," George said. "I heard her run up to the gallery when she got back. I went out for some groceries a bit after that. I haven't seen Harry since he left...somehow I don't expect he'll be back tonight. He told me we'd be safe here but I wonder."

Laura shook her head. "He must be out of his head. The attack in Hogsmeade, then his friends at I.D., then the bombing..." She trailed off, plucking her astronomy journal out of its cubbyhole.

"What are we looking at tonight, Chant?" Justin asked, looking skyward as Laura bent to her telescopes.

"Well, the moon is awfully bright so we won't be seeing much in that part of the sky. I thought I'd try and..." She broke off, straightening up and cocking her head. "Do you hear something?"

"Hear what?"

"I don't know...I just thought I heard something." She started to turn back to the scopes when the sound came again; this time they all heard it.

"What the devil is that?" Justin murmured. They stood there listening. "Sounds like..."

"A kind of moaning...there it is again! Is that an animal? Where's it coming from?"

"It's coming from the house," George said darkly. They all turned to stare at Bailicraft's blank windows. "It sounds like someone's hurt." They strained to listen in the darkness. Laura smiled slowly.

"Um, no, George. I don't think they're *hurt* in the sense that you mean." As if to drive home the point, the low, quiet sound was suddenly punctuated by a brief cry that could not be mistaken for anything other than what it was...a woman in the midst of fulfilling a basic human drive, and enjoying it intensely. Justin's mouth dropped open.

"Blimey! That's coming from *Harry's* room! Look, the windows are open!"

"Is he up there?"

"If he is, it doesn't sound like he's alone. I can't *believe* he'd have someone up there at a time like this," Justin said, shaking his head and tsk-ing disapprovingly. "He should be out plotting revenge and massing the troops, not up in his room shagging some floozy he picked up!"

"Oh Justin, Harry's not one to shag floozies," Laura said. "But it is very odd."

George made for the stairs. "Let's go up and burst in unexpectedly and claim we didn't know he was there!"

Laura grabbed his arm. "Oh no you don't, you incorrigible hooligan. It's none of our business."

"So why are we standing here listening?" Justin muttered.

"Because we're terrible, horrible people and we're hopelessly nosy," Laura said, making no move to excuse herself. As if on cue, the utterings of the unnamed woman in Harry's room suddenly intensified, and as the three eavesdroppers winced, she cried out his name. Laura, Justin and George froze, their mouths hanging open in astonishment, for there was no mistaking the voice of their roommate.

"Ohh, my brain is leaking out my ears," Justin moaned, clapping his hands to the sides of his head.

"If I didn't know better I'd say that was Hermione," George said.

"Oh, *sod* knowing better, that *was* Hermione," Laura said.

Justin turned to his two roommates. "I think they're having *sex!*" he exclaimed. George just laughed as Laura shook her head at Justin's naivete.

"It must be nice to live in your world, Justin," she said. "Listen to them, of *course* they're having sex! And to think she *just* got through telling me they'd never shagged."

"I don't think they have," George said, crossing his arms. "I think this must be the first time."

"Well then this is *huge!*" Laura exclaimed. "This is monumentally important!" Before she could stop him George turned and bolted down the stairs.

"It was inevitable," Justin said. "I just knew they couldn't stay platonic forever."

"Oh, you just *knew*, is that it? I didn't think they'd ever cross that line. I mean really, after all this time?" All at once, George appeared on the other side of the railing, floating in midair. Laura and Justin jumped back as he held out two brooms in one hand.

"C'mon, let's go peek!" he said, grinning.

"That's sick!" Justin cried.

Laura had her hands on her hips. "George, I am shocked. I am truly dismayed and disappointed." He cocked an eyebrow. "That I didn't think of it first," she finished, grabbing her broom and jumping over the railing. Justin rolled his eyes heavenward and took up his own broom with a resigned expression.

They flew slowly up the side of the north tower to where the glass ceiling over the Cloister met the stone wall, sidling right up and peering over the edge. Directly below them, illuminated in a slanting beam of moonlight, was Harry's bed. Their two roommates were lying spooned snugly together, her back to his chest, the dark green sheets covering them to the waist. She was smiling with her eyes closed; Harry was kissing her fingers. He wrapped his arms around her waist and settled his head behind hers on the pillows and they both seemed to relax and begin to drift off to sleep.

"We shouldn't be watching this," Justin whispered.

"But it's so sweet..." Laura said, smiling.



"I need a shower."

"We're awful people, just awful. We're spying on our friends in what looks like a moment of deep intimacy and contentment."

"Let's get out of here," Laura whispered, turning her broom away from the window. "We'll let them be for now...we can have our fun in the morning."

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Hermione could feel the daylight shining on her face, the sun's rays turning the insides of her eyelids red as she lay there awake with her eyes closed. She could feel that the bed was empty next to her, but she could also hear Harry moving about in the room so she didn't wonder what had become of him...or worry that he'd decided to leave after all. She opened her eyes just a slit, keeping the rest of her body relaxed as if she were still asleep. Harry was standing by the window pulling clothes out of his dresser. She just watched, enjoying the view as he drew on a pair of bicycle shorts and a t-shirt. Harry wasn't a large man, but at some point since they'd moved out of their little flat in Shepherd's Bush he had gone from just plain skinny to slender and well-toned. After the demonstration of physical prowess he'd been forced to give in Hogsmeade she wasn't surprised.

He sat on the edge of the bed and bent over his feet, probably tying his shoelaces. When he finished, he turned around and leaned over her; she shut her eyes quickly. He reached out and ran a finger down her neck. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "Bon giorno, principessa," he whispered.

"Morning," she said. "You're up early."

"I'm going running, do you want to come?"

"Um, clearly you've mistaken me for someone in good shape."

He grinned, his eyes twinkling. "Well, you seemed in pretty good shape last night."

She laughed, turning on her side and propping her head up on one elbow. "You go ahead. I'll just languish here in bed like Cleopatra." He said nothing for a few moments, just looked at her with the oddest expression on his face. "What is it?"

"Nothing. Just..." He trailed off.

"Just what?"

"You're...so beautiful," he said softly, smiling. Hermione felt herself go all warm and slushy...she tried to smile back but all she could manage was what probably looked like a ridiculously dreamy expression. It's amazing, she thought. Who could have guessed, twenty-four hours ago, that three words from him could make me collapse into a big quivering pile of shivery goo.

"You're not so bad yourself," she managed. He leaned forward and kissed her, then got up off the bed. She reached up and grasped his arm. "Harry...we do have a lot to talk about."

He sobered. "I know."

"We'll think of a way to deal with Allegra and anything else that happens...just please don't do anything ill-advised."

"Such as leaving on a solo crusade? I won't." But he didn't quite meet her eyes when he said this. She pretended not to notice.

"Good. Go take your run."

"See you at breakfast." He trotted out of the room.

Hermione sat up, pulling the sheets up around her like a squaw, and heaved a mighty sigh. She stretched and slid off the bed, enjoying the feeling of the morning sun warm on her bare skin. She stood up and let the sheet fall away, picking up Harry's robe again and wrapping it around herself. She went to the window that looked out onto the backyard; it was a gorgeous, picture-perfect May morning. Light breeze, clear blue sky...she opened the window and stuck her head out, inhaling the scent of the lilac trees that grew all around the base of the north wing.

She turned and began moving about the room, collecting her scattered clothing, smiling as she thought back to how each piece had been shed. She stopped, clutching her jeans and bra to her chest, a wave of unreality washing over her. The full awareness of what had transpired last night hadn't really sunk in until now, and now that it was doing so she began to think of all the ways it would change her life. She looked around the room as if searching for a touchstone...her eyes happened upon the top of Harry's dresser. She dropped her clothes and walked over to it, reaching out to pick up the framed photo there. It was a picture of herself, Harry and Ron on the lawn at Hogwarts during the 150th Anniversary of Hogwarts celebration that had been held in the spring of their sixth year...just weeks before Ron had died. In the photo Hermione was in the middle, one arm through Ron's and the other through Harry's. All three of them were smiling and laughing, nudging each other and mugging for the Colin's camera. She stared down at the image of Ron's face, a lump rising in her throat. She closed her eyes and in an instant she saw it all again...

She and Harry had just come back to the castle from dueling practice on the lawn and they'd expected to find Ron waiting for them in the common room, but he hadn't been there. He hadn't been in the dormitory...finally Harry had gotten out the Marauder's Map and they'd seen that he wasn't in the castle. They'd been about to go alert McGonagall when she saw it. A small folded note on Harry's bed, with the names "Potter and Granger" in script on the front. He'd opened it with shaking hands...inside were only the words "You will find what's left of him in the glen past the forbidden forest."

She remembered how her blood had turned to ice and how pale Harry had looked as they ran to the tower and took off to find him, no thought entering their minds of any rules they were breaking. The trip on Harry's broom was a blur...all she could do was hold tight to his waist with her face pressed into his back, silently praying that Ron was all right. They'd landed in the glen...the moon was so bright it had almost looked like daytime. Harry had scarcely bothered to land the broom before jumping off, calling Ron's name in a voice choked with tears, already aware of what had happened. She had stumbled about, a horrible pain ripping through her stomach, remembering how it had felt to hold him just earlier that same day. She'd heard Harry scream, a wrenching, heartbroken sound. She'd run to see for herself but he had met her partway, grabbing her and holding her fast...how she had struggled against him and tried to get past him to see, she had to *see* what had been done to him. Harry had been sobbing, clutching her with a strength not his own to prevent her from getting by him and seeing, and she'd finally given up fighting him. The rest of the night was a blur. She remembered spending most of it sitting on the grass as people had come after them, then people came to take his body away. She'd never even seen it, and for that she was eternally grateful. She could remember Ginny crying and Professor McGonagall trying to comfort her,

she could remember people trying to talk to her and to Harry and both of them just sitting there staring into space. Ron's brothers had shown up one at a time...she vaguely remembered Fred lifting her bodily off the grass and carrying her away.

She put the picture down and looked away, one hand to her mouth. What if you were still with us, Ron? she thought. Would we still be together, you and I? The thought was both wonderful and terrible. She knew in her heart that if Ron had lived, she would still feel about Harry as she did now, and yet Ron had meant so much to her. A very clear picture came to her mind, a picture of herself sitting at the kitchen table at Bailicroft with Ron on one side of her and Harry on the other, loving one but unable to stop herself from falling for the other. She could see herself torn in two, she could see it making them turn against each other and transforming their friendship into hatred. She pressed her hands to her eyes to shut out this disturbing image. Maybe it's a good thing he's gone, her mind whispered...Hermione cried out loud and shook her head as if to banish that terrible thought, even though she knew that it could never really be banished.

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## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 9: The Day After*

When Hermione came into the kitchen, dressed and freshly showered, she found her three roommates already there, passing a plate of waffles around the table. Laura looked up and smiled sunnily at her. Hermione rushed over and hugged her. "Are you all right?" she exclaimed, guilt suffusing her that in her distraction the night before she'd completely forgotten about Laura's injuries. "I'm so sorry I didn't see you when you came home..."

"I'm absolutely fine, think nothing of it. These two were more than concerned enough for the whole household. Coffee?"

"Please," Hermione said, taking a seat next to Justin and accepting a cup from George.

"Me too," said Harry as he came into the kitchen, his face and t-shirt damp with sweat.

"Maximum strength." He sat down on Hermione's left. Neither of them noticed the knowing glance the other three shared at his entrance.

"Could you pass the butter?" Hermione asked.

Laura picked it up and held it out to her. "There you go, hon. Would you like some marmalade? Or maybe a little sex with Harry?" she said, casually as if she were offering the maple syrup.

Hermione and Harry both jerked as if they had electrodes in the seats of their chairs. Justin and George collapsed into loud brays of laughter, but Laura merely smiled sweetly at their flustered expressions.

"Wha...what...what was that?" Hermione spluttered. Harry just sat there, one hand over his mouth, looking like he was barely holding back laughter himself.

"Oh, come off it, luv. You shouldn't leave the windows open if you want to have a secret tryst...we heard everything. It sounded like you two were ready to audition for Wild Kingdom."

"What are you talking about?" Hermione persisted, her ears turning red.

Laura cleared her throat and sat up straighter, adopting a high-pitched voice to do a very accurate imitation of the earful she and the others had gotten the night before. Hermione flushed purple and tossed a roll at her roommate to shut her up. Harry was shaking all over with suppressed laughter.

"Well," Hermione stammered. "I can explain. You see...I was, uh...I was..."

Harry shook his head at her, smiling. "Honey, I don't think you can talk your way out of this one."

"No, no, let her finish!" Laura said. "If she can manage to come up with a completely innocent explanation as to why she was in your room last night moaning and screaming in the throes of ecstasy then I for one can't wait to hear it."

Hermione groaned in frustration. "Oh, sod it," she sighed. Harry slipped one arm around her and kissed her temple as the others cheered. Hermione looked around at them shyly, daring to smile.

"Oh, how romantic," Laura sighed. "A nearly perfect moment."

"Not completely perfect?" Harry said.

"I only wish Cho were here to see it." Everyone laughed again, thoughts of Allegra and the dark forces far away. "Now," Laura continued. "How would you like to handle this? Announcements? We could just owl everyone..."

"No!" Harry and Hermione said simultaneously. Hermione glanced up at Harry, surprised...*she* didn't want to tell anyone but she'd assumed that he would want to. She could see by his expression that he was thinking exactly the same thing. Laura's eyes were flicking back and forth between their faces. "Let's just keep this within the house for now," Hermione went on, forcing a smile. She could sense Harry shifting uncomfortably next to her. Laura, perceiving their uneasiness, dropped the subject and began talking about the star patterns she's seen last night. Hermione stared at her waffles, pretending she was too busy eating to look at anyone. The good humour of just thirty seconds ago was gone as quickly as it had come...Justin and George ate in tense silence while Laura rambled on.

They all jumped when the front door slammed. "I'm home!" called a cheerful voice. Cho walked into the kitchen. "Hey, waffles!"

"What are you doing here?" George said, amazed.

"Got a few days off and I missed my roommates." She grabbed the chair next to Justin. "I'm dying for some decent coffee." She looked around at their blank faces. "What's going on? You all look like you don't know which way is up! What's been happening?"

Laura leaned towards Hermione. "Please, I'm begging you...can *I* tell her?"

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Hermione was at her desk ostensibly working on a paper she was co-authoring, but she couldn't concentrate. She hadn't seen Harry since breakfast and she couldn't stop thinking about him. Half of her wanted to grab him and shake him until he told her what was on his mind...the other half just wanted to grab him and rip his clothes off.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, the door opened and he entered. "Busy?"

"Not really." She set down her quill as he sat down in a chair in front of the desk. For a moment they said nothing.

"I got an owl from Sorry this morning. He's fine, his cover is intact. As for the timing of last night's attack, I suspect Allegra has a pair of eyes in Hogsmeade who spotted us and told her where we were."

She nodded. "That makes sense. I'm glad Sorry's all right."

Harry examined his fingers. "Are we going to talk about what happened at breakfast, or are we just going to pretend it doesn't matter?"

She shrugged, picking up her quill. "You don't want to tell anyone, that's fine with me."

"You didn't want to tell anyone, either!"

"No, but I thought *you* would!"

"And I thought *you* would!"

"This is getting ridiculous."

"Very." He looked up at her. "Are you ashamed?"

"Of course not! It's just...I want to keep it in the house, all right? Don't read too much into it."

He bit his lip. "Is this about Ron?" he said carefully.

Hermione stood up, nodding as if she'd been expecting this. "I knew that was eating away at you."

He stood up too, beginning to pace. "Hermione...do you think there'll ever be a time when it's just the two of us? Without Ron's ghost pacing us every step?" He stopped and looked her in the eyes. "What if he were still alive?"

Her throat worked. "I don't know."

He sagged a little. "I think you're afraid to tell anyone because they'll think we're betraying Ron!"

"I didn't have a problem telling George!"

"You didn't have a choice, he lives here! At least I have a good reason for keeping it secret!"

"And what would that be?"

"You know the answer to that. If word got out that we're involved we might as well paint a target on your forehead."

She shook her head, amazed. "That is the worst load of codswallop I've ever heard. You're every bit as confused as I am, that's just a convenient excuse! And how can I challenge it? You're just trying to protect me, right? Nothing wrong with that!"

"Then if that's not the reason, what is?" Their voices had been steadily rising throughout this conversation and they were now almost yelling.

"I don't know, you tell me! Maybe *you* think we're betraying Ron!"

"You're the one that dated him!"

"Maybe you just resent me."

He gaped at her. "Why on earth would I resent you?"

"Because you'd rather be out doing the hero-act, hunting down Allegra and Voldemort, and I'm keeping you from doing it!"

Harry didn't get a chance to respond to this, because at that moment the door to the study slammed shut. They both turned, their mouths dropping open in surprise.

"What the hell is going on here?" Ginny said, her hands on her hips and a severe expression on her face.

Hermione just stared. "Ginny!" She was surprised, but glad, to see her old friend...but she wondered why she was there.

Ginny Weasley was a close friend of the entire household, and of Harry and Hermione in particular. She had almost gone in with them in the purchase of Bailicroft but had found a lovely flat for herself in London. She was the founder and editor-in-chief of "Circe" magazine, a journal for the modern witch that featured thoughtful articles about feminism, the role of witchcraft in society, the challenges facing today's witch, women's health and behavior and a wide variety of other topics including more girly-stuff like fashion tips and relationship advice. In its four years of existence the magazine had reached a circulation of 50,000 subscribers globally, quite a large number in the wizarding world. Ginny was a thoroughly sophisticated individual...smart, tough, and independent. From the awkward little girl she'd once been had sprung a tall, glamorous and heart-stoppingly gorgeous woman who took no nonsense from anyone...and boy could she accessorize.

When she and Harry had finally gotten around to dating, they'd already been friends for many years. They'd gotten together almost out of a sense of obligation, figuring that they'd have to have a romantic relationship sooner or later and they'd might as well get it over with. They had lasted almost a year, to Hermione's surprise...they were really better friends than anything else.

And now here she was, smartly dressed in a tailored suit with a short skirt and pumps, looking ready to administer a good talking-to. "What are you doing here, Ginny?" Harry said.

"George owled me. He told me about you two and said he was worried you were 'thinking too much' as he put it, and he figured I was the best person to set you straight." Harry and Hermione exchanged a sheepish glance. "Sit down, both of you." They sat side by side on one of the leather couches. "Now, hold hands." They both frowned at her, puzzled. "Come now, do as you're told. Hold hands!" Harry shrugged and took Hermione's hand. Hermione thought she knew what Ginny was up to. She already felt less belligerent just by having her fingers intertwined with his. "Good. Now. What were you arguing about?"

"Well," Hermione said, "Neither of us wants to tell anyone about our new relationship."

Ginny nodded. "And this is a problem because you're both wondering what nefarious motives the other one has for wanting to keep it a secret, right? I thought so." She looked at Harry. "All right, Harry. I want you to tell me how you felt after what happened last night."

Harry glanced at Hermione, then looked back at Ginny. "I felt...well, I was very happy." He turned and faced Hermione. "I'd found a part of myself I'd been missing since birth. I felt whole." Hermione smiled.

"And you, Hermione?"

She thought for a moment. "It was just...completion. The completion of something that was started years and years ago. It was like..." She felt a lump rising in her throat. "Like being let out of a prison I hadn't realized I was in." Harry squeezed her fingers.

"All right. And you're both feeling guilty about betraying Ron. No, don't look surprised, it's all over your faces. If you don't settle this it'll hold you back." She leaned forward and fixed them with a stern gaze. "Now, you can't go to Ron and ask his permission, but I'm his sister and I will have to do. You know what Ron would say if he were here right now?"

"What?" Hermione said.

"He'd say that it's about damned time." She gave a curt nod, the gesture eerily reminiscent of Ron. "He would hug you and wish you luck and tell you that he'd wondered how long it would take."

"But if he were still alive...what if I were still with him?" Hermione said.

"Do you think that's how things would have happened?"

Hermione stared down at their interlaced fingers. "No," she said softly, after a long pause. "I don't know."

"Well, that's something you might want to think about. But you both seem happy. Don't let worries about what a dead man would think stop you. He loved you both and he would want you to be happy. He wouldn't want you to mourn forever, and he'd be very upset if he thought his memory was coming between you." Hermione nodded, feeling a great deal better. Ginny smiled. "Now...kiss and make up."

Harry put one finger on Hermione's chin and tilted her face up. She leaned forward and kissed him, letting her hand rest on his leg. Ginny stood up, looking pleased with herself. Neither of them really noticed, they were far too taken up with each other. "I think my work here is done," Ginny said, and let herself out.

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The rest of the afternoon passed without incident. After Ginny had left, Harry and Hermione had vanished into the Cloister for an hour or so (with the windows closed this time) and had emerged only to endure good-natured taunts and nudges from their roommates. Hermione watched Cho carefully for signs of malice but she saw none. She had appeared surprised when she learned of the new developments, but so far she'd refrained from any of the cutting comments that were her speciality.

Harry had seemed quiet for most of the early evening, content to sit on the porch and watch the conversation of his roommates. At dinner he announced that he'd have to go to the I.D. that evening.

"Is that wise?" George asked.

"I'll be in no danger. I need to check on Lupin and send some owls," he said, giving Hermione a significant glance. They had decided through some mutual agreement not to apprise Laura of Sorry's Circle-related activities. Any knowledge she had might endanger her further, and it did no good to worry her when there wasn't much she could do about it. Hermione felt uneasy about Harry leaving the house but he was right, there were things that needed doing. "And I have about ten thousand things to do in the way of tracking Allegra and deploying my agents."

So after the dishes were done she had walked him to the door...he'd have to hike down to the bottom of the drive before he could Apparate out because of the wards that were guarding the house. They went out to the portico and shut the door behind him. "When will you be back?" she asked.

"Oh, later tonight, I should think. Don't wait up." He didn't look at her as he said this.

"I won't, but...come and wake me when you get home."

"All right." He fell silent. Hermione shoved her hands in her pockets and shrugged.

"Nothing horrible has happened all day, that seems encouraging."

"That was just Round One, unfortunately. I'd like to avoid Round Two if I can." He turned to her then and took both her hands in his. "Be careful. Watch your back."

"I will." She dropped his hands and embraced him, glad to feel his arms go around her at once and squeeze her tightly. They stood there for a few moments, holding each other, then Harry drew back and cupped her face in his hands.

"Goodbye," he said. She nodded, wondering if he knew that he wasn't fooling her. He kissed her. "I'll see you soon."

She nodded as he stepped away and headed off down the driveway. She watched him until he rounded a curve and vanished from sight, then went into the house and started looking.

She found the note just where she'd expected to, on the pillow of her bed. She picked it up and slit the seal with one fingernail, unfolding the sheet of heavy stationary.

*Hermione,*

*By the time you read this, I'll be gone...and not just to I.D. headquarters. I couldn't tell you I was leaving because I knew I wouldn't be able to keep my resolve, and it's very important that I do. I must find Allegra and Voldemort before they strike again, and before they figure out that the fastest way to destroy me would be to harm you. The moment they realize your importance to me, your life would be forfeit. I can't allow that to happen. They're only harming others to draw me out...I suppose it's worked.*

*I will return when I have defeated them, but it may be a very long time...and there is a chance that I may never return. If I have to die fighting him, then it will have been worth it as long as I know that you're safe.*

*It's been a strange few days for us, Hermione. We could spend the rest of our lives exploring what it means, and I hope we get that chance. After all we've been through I have to believe that it won't end now just as we have a chance at real happiness. If I can only return to you after all this is over than I will ask for nothing else my whole life. Please believe that it's very*



*hard for me to leave you...I know you'll be angry. I hope you will have forgiven me by the time I return.*

*I just want to say that I am yours...but then, you already know that.*

*Harry*

Laura, Cho, Justin and George stared at her in disbelief as she gave them the highlights of this letter around the kitchen table. "So that's it?" Laura exclaimed. "He's just gone?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, he's just gone."

Cho arched an eyebrow. "I can't believe how calm you are. It's almost as if you don't care!" She would have said more, but the death-glare Hermione was firing at her silenced her in a hurry.

"I assure you that I care a great deal. You're right, though, I am calm. Probably because I expected this."

"You did?" George said.

"Harry may think he fooled me, but he underestimates just how well I know him. He can't possibly sit here and do nothing while he thinks the people in this house are in danger. The recent change in my relationship with him only serves to intensify his tendencies towards heroic martyrdom. This fugue is no surprise to me. You might say I was waiting for it."

"Surprise or not, I'd think you'd still be upset at not knowing where he is."

"And you'd be right, Justin. Except that I know something our Mr. Potter doesn't know."

"What's that?"

"That when I bid him goodbye just now I put a wee homing talisman on him. No matter where he's gone, I will find him. If he thinks I'll be content to sit here in this house and pine for him, he's sorely mistaken." She gave a decisive nod, tossed Harry's note to the kitchen table, and walked purposefully out of the kitchen into the front hall. Laura followed her.

"You'll have a job pinpointing his location," she said, hurrying to keep up with Hermione's long strides as she headed for the study.

"I know that."

"The further away he gets the more difficult it'll be to read the signs."

"I know that, too."

"If he finds the talisman he can counteract it in about five seconds."

"Do you have any *helpful* suggestions, Laura?" Hermione snapped, settling behind one of the large desks in the study and opening an astronometrics book.

Laura stood in front of the desk, hands on her hips. "Just that two heads are better than one."

"Four heads," said Justin, he and George coming up next to Laura. Hermione grinned.

"Five." They all stared as Cho walked in, going straight to her desk. "Let's get started."

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Later that night the entire household had set up camp on the second story of the gazebo with Laura's telescopes. Cho was gazing through one of them and reciting alignment patterns for Justin to scribble down. George had a stack of books next to him and was paging through them searching for alternative ways to detect a homing talisman. Hermione stood at the railing with her wand in her hand. Every few moments she raised it and sent off a streak of light...Laura watched the streak through binoculars hoping for a deflection that would indicate the direction of the talisman. So far, nothing.

Cho stepped away from the telescope. "That's all until the moon rises." She sat down on the bench that ran around the upper deck. Everyone was silent. No one wanted to admit it but their hopes were dwindling. With each minute that passed it would become more and more difficult to locate Harry. "Maybe you should just let him do what he must, on his own," Cho said quietly.

Hermione didn't even bother to turn around. "Out of the question."

"Why?" Cho said, standing up. "What can you possibly do to help? He's a professional! You're...sorry, but you're a bookworm, Hermione. All you'll do is get yourself killed and probably him too!"

At that, Hermione lowered her wand and faced Cho. "What else can I do? Just stay here and go mad?"

"Better mad than dead!"

"I can take care of myself."

"Not you, him! You know he'd die to protect you, and if you go after him he's going to end up having to do just that!" she cried.

Hermione stared at her. "And you can't stand it, can you? That he'd die to protect me? It's just killing you that it's not *you* he's out there saving!"

"Well, who says it isn't? He'd try to safeguard any innocent life and you well know it. I wouldn't read too much into this if I were you."

Hermione gaped. "What are you talking about?"

Cho stepped closer to her, her eyes flashing. "There's no reason for you to run after him and get the both of you killed just because you finally got him to screw you!"

Laura gasped and turned her face away. Justin just stared, open-mouthed, while George shook his head, one hand over his eyes. Hermione appeared to be so furious that she had gone full circle into icy calm. She took one step forward and slapped Cho across the face, hard. She said nothing more, just walked calmly down the stairs and into the house. Cho started to leave too, but Laura grabbed her arm and held her back. "Oh no, you don't," she said. "You're going to sit your ass down and help us find him for her. And if you say another word so help me God I'll make that slap look like a friendly peck on the cheek."

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Hermione sat at her desk in the study staring at a book, but she wasn't reading it. Cho's words echoed in her brain like a broken record...finally got him to screw you, finally got him to

screw you. Is that what Cho thought she'd been doing all these years? Trying to get him to...well, screw her? It was insulting and quite untrue.

There was a knock at the study door. Expecting Laura, Hermione called "Come in!" But it wasn't Laura. Hermione's gaze hardened. "I'm really not interested in anything you have to say, Cho," she said, looking back down at her book.

Cho walked forward to stand before Hermione's desk. She looked actually sorry. "Can't I apologize?"

"I don't know, can you?"

"I was out of line." Hermione slowly raised her head and looked at her. "All right, I was *very* out of line." She sighed and flopped into a chair in front of the desk. "The fact of the matter is...*you* weren't chasing after him, *I* was. And yet you're the one he's screwing."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Must you call it that?"

"Sorry. I suppose I'm a bitter, twisted individual."

Hermione snorted laughter, surprised to hear it coming out of her own mouth. "Oh yes, you're a bitter, bitter woman."

Cho chuckled, shaking her head. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this, you see. The men fall for *me*, they always do."

"Not always, apparently." She couldn't resist.

Cho nodded. "And I was *just* about to thank you for not rubbing it in." She bit her lip and looked away. "I really thought that someday..." She trailed off. "I still love him."

Hermione suddenly felt very sad for her as she realized that she really believed that. "No, Cho. You don't. You love the *idea* of him, that's all. It was never him."

She expected an angry denial, but instead Cho just looked at her thoughtfully. "I suppose you're right. All the same it smarts a bit." She stood up and pulled something out of her pocket...it was a compass.

"What's that?"

"I found him," she said simply. Hermione jumped up.

"What?!"

"I found the right talisman detection charm. I've used it to enchant this compass, it should lead you right to him."

Hermione hurried around the desk and took the compass. "Oh, I could *kiss* you," she said. "But I won't," she added quickly.

Cho smiled. "Go. Go find him, and then don't let him out of your sight again."

"I don't intend to." She rushed to the door, but Cho's voice stopped her.

"Hermione?"

She turned back. "Yes?"

"Um...when you get back, do you think we..." She cleared her throat. "Could we just sit and talk for awhile?"

Hermione smiled. "I'd like that."

Cho jerked her head towards the door. "Then go on, get out of here. Better hurry."

Hermione left the study and ran down the hall, slipping the compass' chain around her neck. I never though I'd say this, she thought, but God bless Cho.

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## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 10: Off to See the Wizard*

Hermione got out a knapsack and began throwing clothes into it: jeans, t-shirts, some knickers and socks, a jumper. She added her smallest spell compendium and the magnifying glass she'd need to read it, some owl post paper and a quill, and a bag of galleons and sickles.

The door opened and Laura burst in, out of breath. "Oh, she told you." Hermione nodded at her and continued her packing. "What are you going to do?"

"I have no idea," she said tightly. "I thought that just leaving here was a good enough start, I was going to figure out the rest when I got on the road."

"This is insane."

"Well, I can't help that. I'll follow the compass and hope Cho's enchantment holds up."

"I think you..." She was cut off by a loud hooting. The two women looked up in time to see Hedwig zoom into the room and land on Hermione's shoulder. She had a note tied to her leg.

"Harry's not here, Hedwig." The snowy owl hooted again and pecked Hermione's ear.

"I think it's for you," Laura said. Hedwig flapped her wings excitedly. Hermione took the note from her leg and opened it, frowning. "Is it from Harry?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's not his handwriting. It just says 'Spellbound Books.'"

"Spell*who* Books?"

"That's the publishing company where Gerald works." She rubbed her chin with one hand.

"What does it mean?"

"I have no idea." She shrugged and slipped the note into her knapsack. "But whoever sent it did so for a reason...Hedwig wouldn't have brought it to me if it was from an enemy. I can stop there before I leave; it's not like there's a huge amount of time pressure, or maybe there is, I mean I have no idea where he is or what he's up to and for all I know Allegra's captured him already or else he could be on his way home by now though that's not too likely and..."

Laura watched Hermione walk back and forth, putting things in her bag, words falling out of her mouth on top of each other like clowns out of a car until she finally stopped and took a deep breath. She put her hands on her desk and leaned forward, letting her head drop down. Laura stepped forward and put a hand on her arm. "Take it easy, all right?"

Hermione looked at her, a naked expression of uncertainty and fear on her face. "It's just...he's...I..."

"I know."

"He's everything to me." She sniffed and drummed her fingers on the desktop. "Hmph. When did that happen?"

Laura smiled gently at her. "You tell me."

Hermione straightened up and took a deep breath, letting her eyes fall shut. "The other night? Fifteen years ago? It's all the same thing." She turned and tied her knapsack shut, then spoke with her back to Laura. "Since I was eleven years old, he's been there. Before I went to Hogwarts I always thought I'd live my life for myself and according to what I thought was best...but it didn't turn out that way. He's been with me so long I can hardly remember what it was like to be alone. My life is so intertwined with his that I couldn't untangle it if I tried."

"What about Ron?" Laura said softly. Hermione's hands busied themselves rearranging the pillows on her bed.

"Ron was my friend. He was very important to me." She sighed. "And I did love him, I know that now." She turned around to face Laura, her eyes overbright. "But it wouldn't have lasted. We helped each other take those first steps towards adulthood, but once we got there it would have been time to face the world as actual grownups. I wasn't in love with him. He deserved better, and so do I. I don't know if it would have taken Harry and I this long if Ron were still alive, but I think...I *know*...that we would have ended up here sooner or later. I don't believe in destiny, but I believe some things are unavoidable." She swiped at her eyes and picked up her knapsack. "Enough True Confessions. If I'm going to leave I'd best go now." She stepped forward and hugged Laura. "Take care. I'll be in touch."

"You better be."

Hermione trotted down the main staircase to find Justin and George in the foyer. They both hugged her and wished her luck, George handing her a sack lunch to take along. As she opened the door she glanced back and saw Cho lurking in the doorway into the study. Hermione smiled at her, stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

She hesitated at her car, the keys in her hand. In the window she could see the reflection of Harry's Army-green jeep behind her. She turned around and put a hand on it, thinking. Abruptly, she went around to the driver's side door and got in, starting it up with the keys she found behind the visor. She pushed the top down and roared away, smiling at the feeling of the wind running through her hair, glad just to be doing *something*.

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Harry lay on his back in the youth hostel, staring at the cracks in the ceiling. That one looks like Tony Blair, he thought. That one looks a little like the coast of Sweden.

He was grabbing a few desperately needed hours of downtime; he'd been running nonstop since he left Bailicroft. First stop had been I.D. headquarters to see Lefty.

Lefty had been sitting up in bed reading a book when he came in; as always, Harry was reminded powerfully of Hagrid. Lefty was a large man with bushy hair and a wiry beard, rosy cheeks that spoke of a few too many ales down at the pub, a big barrel chest and arms like flying buttresses. Hand-to-hand combat training with this man had been a challenge for Harry,

who was about half his size; the day he'd been able to take him without any help had been a real cause for celebration.

"Harry!" Lefty had said as he entered. "Good to see you, lad. Come sit a spell." It didn't seem as though the loss of a leg and a hand had dimmed his spirits much. Harry had taken a seat next to Lefty's bed.

"How are you, Lefty?"

A flicker of pain had crossed his expression then, so quickly Harry had to wonder if it had been his imagination. "I'll be all right, you'll see. Don't you go wasting no tears of sympathy on me now, you hear? I'll get meself a nice wooden leg, just like a pirate...and I'll tell you, I always did sort of fancy having a nice dangerous hook for a hand!" He slapped his remaining thigh with his remaining hand and roared laughter to the high ceiling of the infirmary. Harry felt like crying. "Now, don't look like that."

"This is all my fault."

"My, aren't we the raging egomaniac?"

"Allegra is doing this to get to me."

"And if it weren't you it'd be someone else. Besides, I wouldn't set too much store by what Allegra does. That woman is a raving lunatic."

"I \*wish\* she were a raving lunatic. It'd make things so much easier."

"We'll get her. We've got the whole bloody I.D. on her trail, don't we? Don't you go off half-cocked, you hear me, laddie? This isn't the time for heroics."

Harry had sat with him for half an hour or so and then taken his leave, saying nothing about his plans to smoke out Allegra on his own. He'd stopped in to see Lupin, mostly recovered from the poisoned wolfsbane, and had said as little as possible to him; it wasn't that he didn't trust him but the less Lupin knew the less likely he'd be to let it slip to people Harry would rather have remain ignorant. In his head he knew Lefty was right. The entire division was mobilized...but they didn't know her like Harry knew her, and it wasn't *their* friends and loved ones who were being targeted. This is my fight, Harry thought, lying there on the lumpy cot in the room he'd been given. He let his eyes fall closed and began to drift off.

"Harry!"

Harry jumped several feet in the air and was off the cot before he was aware his back had left the bed, trying to look everywhere at once. Hanging in the air above the cot was a green Baubel bubble. "Remus?"

"What the devil do you think you're doing?"

"How did you get your bubble out of the I.D.?"

"Never mind that! Do you realize I've been looking for you since yesterday?"

"I'm sorry, I..." He cleared his throat, still waiting for his heart rate to climb down out of the rafters. "I've got to take care of this myself."

"Are you sure that's wise? It is advisable to make these decisions rationally, not emotionally."

Harry straightened up. "Lupin, you should remember that I'm your superior officer."

"Bollocks! Not when you're acting like a sixteen year old!"

"I'm trying to save lives here! If I give Allegra what she wants then the rest of you will be safe!" Harry fought down guilt. He hadn't told anyone at the I.D. about the changeover though he knew he should have. He just couldn't shake the feeling that the fewer people knew about it, the better.

"*You* won't be very safe! I don't like that tradeoff."

"What does it matter, Remus? If she wants to kill me, torture me, rip my balls off and make them into bloody Christmas tree ornaments what the hell does it matter?"

Lupin said nothing for a moment. "Who are you protecting, Harry? Who is so important that you're willing to give yourself up, in spite of the consequences to you and the rest of the world, just to keep Allegra away from them?" Harry sat down heavily but didn't reply. "Is it Hermione?" Harry looked away, lacing his fingers tightly together. "Are you in love with her?" Lupin asked, quietly.

Harry shut his eyes, the question bouncing around in his head like a pinball...but at least he knew the answer. "Yes."

"I see." Harry could practically hear the gears in Lupin's mind spinning. "I should tell Argo where you are, you know. She's spitting thumbtacks she's so cross with you. 'Adolescent dragonslayer John Wayne delusions,' I think she called them...though I'm not sure who John Wayne is. Some American, no doubt."

Harry barely heard him, hope rising in his chest. "You mean...you *haven't* told her where I am?"

"I wanted to talk to you first. I know a little about secrecy as a necessary evil." He sighed. "I can't believe I'm about to do this."

"I need your help, Remus. Can I count on you?"

"Yes."

"All right. I need you to send me Persephone, she's the most reliable. I have a source within the Circle and I need her to contact him. And I need you to send me copies of the hourly intelligence reports."

"Why?"

"If my source can't tell me where to find Allegra, I may have to follow her backtrail instead."

"She may come after *you*, spare you the trouble."

"No. She still thinks I'm biding my time and waiting for her next move. If there's one thing Allegra has in abundance it's patience. The longer and more drawn-out my torments become, the better. She'll wait for me to come to her."

"All right, you know her better than I do." He paused. "Harry...I'm happy for you."

"Why?"

"Well...you know..."

"Oh! Thanks."

"It's been a long time coming, I think."

"I think so too. And Remus? Don't write my epitaph just yet. I'm not the nineteen-year-old kid that Allegra knew when she worked at the I.D. I don't plan to lie right down and surrender."

"Glad to hear it. I'll send Persephone right away." The green bubble winked out of existence with a faint 'pop.' Harry flopped back onto his cot, feeling encouraged.

He lay there as the sun slowly slipped lower in the sky, thinking convoluted and troubling thoughts. He was worried about Allegra and what she might do next. He was concerned that when this was all over he might not have a job any longer. He thought endlessly about all the dire consequences that would come about if Voldemort were to gain more power again. And he missed Hermione with a sharp ache that tugged at the center of his chest. He let his eyes fall closed and pictured her face, her eyes, her smile. I'm sorry, Hermione, he thought. I wish you were here with me.

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Hermione parked the Jeep in the lot in front of Spellbound Books, Inc. She'd never been here before though she'd heard Gerald describe it. The company headquarters was in a neatly maintained farmhouse in the country surrounded by swaying elm trees and manicured gardens. The advantage of being a wizarding publisher was that you didn't need a lot of bulky machinery and printing presses...the text was transferred magically onto the pages and sent directly to the merchants without the need for a warehouse.

She walked into the lobby, keeping an eye out for anyone she'd recognize from the company party she'd attended with Gerald. She'd only been there a short time before being called away by Harry's second collapse but she had met a few of his coworkers. She didn't recognize the witch at the reception desk. "May I help you?" the woman asked.

"Is Gerald here?" She didn't know who else to ask for. Perhaps she'd get the chance to break it to him personally that she was no longer his girlfriend.

"Gerald?" the receptionist said. "I don't think I know a Gerald."

"Oh, but you must. He's Vice President in charge of Testing and Quality Control."

The witch was looking at her strangely. "Our VP of Testing and Quality Control is named Elsa McFarland, ma'am. I don't know of anyone named Gerald who works here."

Hermione was beginning to get a very bad feeling. "But...I've been dating a man named Gerald for four months, and he told me he worked here...I don't understand..."

"Just a moment, please." The young woman got up and left the room; she returned a few moments later with an older, kind-faced wizard. "Ma'am, this is Gideon Mallory, our public relations director. Perhaps he can help you." He shook Hermione's hand.

"I understand you're asking about an employee?"

"Yes," Hermione said, making an effort to keep her voice calm and even. "For the last four months, I've been seeing a man named Gerald, who told me he was VP of Testing and Quality Control at this company."



Mallory frowned. "Gerald Van Haven?"

"Yes! Do you know him?"

Mallory cleared his throat and appeared very uncomfortable. "Yes, I do. Gerald Van Haven was our VP of Testing and Quality Control, we hired him right out of Hogwarts. But..." He glanced at the receptionist.

"What?"

"He was killed in a car crash almost a year ago."

Hermione's legs went numb. She felt behind her for the chair she knew was there; Gideon reached forward and helped her sit down. "That's...that's not possible..." She looked up at him. "Do you have a photo of him?"

"I think so...yes, he played on the company Quidditch team. Just a moment." He hurried into another room and soon returned with a photo of wizards and witches wearing silver and blue Quidditch robes and holding brooms. He pointed to the wizard on the far right. "That's Gerald."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, that's the same man I know. You're sure...he's really dead?"

"Unquestionably. I saw his body, I attended his funeral. He is dead."

Her mind spinning, Hermione stood up, willing her knees to stop shaking. "Thank you very much." She turned and left as quickly as she could, racing to the car and leaping into the driver's seat where she could let herself quake and tremble as much as she liked. Dead. Dead. Gerald died a year ago. Then who was it I was seeing? He certainly *looked* like the man in the photo.

She did have an idea how this could be, and it was very troubling. If someone...Allegra, perhaps...wished to spy on her, an excellent way to do so would be to send someone to infiltrate the household in some innocuous manner. And why invent an entire persona when you could borrow one from a dead man? The verisimilitude would be far greater, and a glamour could even make him look like the person he was supposed to be. It would have to have been an excellent glamour to fool Hermione, who had been, well, *\*intimate\** with Gerald on more than one occasion. She shuddered, wondering who exactly it was that she'd been intimate with. It certainly hadn't been Gerald.

Whoever did this went to an awful lot of trouble, she thought. They set up that entire party with phony co-workers just for my benefit. But why? Seems like more fuss than it's worth.

She tried to put it out of her mind...no doubt the explanation would present itself sooner or later. She affixed the compass to the Jeep's dashboard and set off again.

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Harry walked carefully through the wreckage, taking care not to disturb anything as he walked...an invisibility cloak did you little good if you went about knocking things out of place with your appendages. Lupin had done as he'd asked with admirably efficiency, and Harry felt as though he had an advantage for the first time. Persephone, one of the I.D.'s stealth owls, had arrived this morning bearing the first of many intelligence reports...every hour she reappeared bearing more breaking news. Muggings, assaults, petty theft, other

various small crimes committed by ordinary people...none of it had smacked of Allegra's handiwork until this fire.

When he arrived the scene was still swarming with Muggle police and eyewitnesses who had no idea that this wasn't an ordinary accidental fire. They'd find no evidence of arson, either...a wizard arsonist left no telltale traces of gasoline or accelerants. Harry knew better, though. He scanned the crowd, looking for the face of a wizard and wondering if he'd recognize it when he saw it.

The proprietor of this establishment, until recently a tobacconist's shop, was one of many wizards that Harry kept under semi-regular observation for his own safety. He had steadfastly refused Circle recruitment for years, and they weren't too happy about it. He had been one of the best rune-casters in the western hemisphere and his services had been highly prized. Recently he'd been lending his skills to some I.D. investigations, and now he had paid for it with his life. His body would be found amidst the wreckage, dead...of course he had been dead before the fire began, killed as a warning to other wizards who might be so impertinent as to refuse to offer their services to the Circle.

Harry could almost smell Allegra's presence here, even if she'd never set foot within ten miles of this shop. A picture formed in his mind: the rune wizard, peacefully conducting his business, was paid a visit by a cloaked and mysterious Circle minion, who made yet another round of offers and incentives which were refused. He then moved on to thinly veiled threats which fell on deaf ears. Finally, as ordered, he had killed him and started the fire, leaving the smoking building as stealthily as he had come.

Harry walked back around to the front of the building, being careful to keep the invisibility cloak around him. The scene was calming down as the Muggle police completed their reports and the eyewitnesses left. Harry walked across the front of the site and was just thinking of leaving when something caught his eyes...a bright flash of golden hair. He stopped and peered across the street; Sorry was standing on the opposite sidewalk, watching the scene. He was dressed in Muggle-style clothing and appeared to be nothing more than a bystander. Harry had sent him an owl that very morning asking if he could offer any guidance about where he might find Allegra but hadn't heard back.

He hurried across the street and stood next to him. "Don't look around," he said. Sorry jumped a little but kept his eyes fixed on the burned building. "I'm standing right next to you."

"I was going to write you when I left here," Sorry said.

"What are you doing here?"

"Just wondering what the hell I've gotten myself into."

"Well, it'll be over soon."

"Harry, I can't tell you where Allegra is."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know. It changes from one day to the next. The Circle has some sort of secret bolthole but I don't know where it is, I've never been there."

"Where do you do your work, then?"

"Wherever I'm told. I usually receive an owl telling me where to report for the day's festivities. Someone's house, the workplace of a friendly wizard, or just out in the middle of the woods somewhere."

"Then I'll have to find her the old-fashioned way...try to anticipate her next move."

"Well, something's up. Allegra left for the States yesterday, I don't know why but it was very sudden."

"What prompted her to leave?"

"I don't know, but it must have been important. One of the other Circle members showed up unexpectedly and after he left she started making plans for this trip."

"Who was the member?"

"A man names Lucius Malfoy. First time I'd seen him in a few months."

"Bloody hell," Harry whispered.

"What?"

"I know Lucius rather better than I'd like. I was at Hogwarts with his son, and Lucius tried to have me killed. He vanished just before he was to be sent to Azkaban. I've tried many times to discover his whereabouts with little success."

"I'm not surprised, he's one of the inner sanctum. Very well protected. In fact, he was the first Circle member who approached me about working with them."

"Do you know anything of his son, Draco?"

"I think he's dead."

Harry felt unexpectedly sad at this news. "Really?"

"I'm fairly certain of it. Was he an only child?"

"Yes."

"I know that Lucius lost a son years ago, some sort of accident...I got the impression that the son's incompetence led to his death and that there was much hand-wringing over the damage to Lucius' reputation."

Harry sighed. "I wouldn't have wished that on Draco. We had more than our share of differences but he improved with age."

"Whatever you're going to do, I suggest you pick up the pace. I can stall them for perhaps another week, but no longer. Whatever Allegra's currently up to I suspect it has something to do with the changeover, she told me that she might have some new information for me soon." He hesitated. "Harry...they know you've gone rogue. They can have no illusions about your plans."

"No doubt. Their actions were designed to draw me out, they can hardly be surprised that it worked."

"If you come after them, they'll be ready."

"Thanks for the warning."

"But you don't intend to heed it."

"Sorry, I appreciate your concern but I do this for a living. I know what I'm doing."

"Do you?"

"What are you implying?"

"Just that you're reacting emotionally, not rationally. It's Hermione, isn't it?"

Harry rolled his eyes, though the gesture was lost on Sorry being that he couldn't see it. "I may as well tattoo 'I'm sleeping with Hermione Granger' on my bloody forehead. And it's not just her. She'll keep pushing buttons until she gets a response. Better sooner than later."

"If you say so."

"Thanks for the heads up."

"Think nothing of it." Sorry paused, thinking. "You know, I'd feel lots better if I had an idea how you plan to deal with Allegra *and* Voldemort all by yourself." No answer. "I know you've done it before, but really...this isn't Hogwarts." No answer. "Harry?" Sorry put out a hand and poked the air where Harry's voice had come from, but there was no one there.

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Hermione walked down the sidewalk, holding the compass in front of her and drawing curious glances from the passersby. Cho had done an excellent job with her enchantment; not only did the needle point in the direction she was to proceed but the compass face changed colors to denote range. She'd parked the Jeep and begun walking when it had changed to blue, which meant that Harry was within one kilometer of her position. Her heart was pounding excitedly as she kept walking and the face began shading to green...that meant within 100 meters.

Smoke was rising into the sky from somewhere up ahead and the street was becoming congested. She looked around; police cars and fire trucks clogged the street before her. Evidently there had been a fire, though she didn't know why Harry would be here. Perhaps the fire had something to do with Allegra, she thought.

She quickened her steps as the green compass face began lightening to yellow...50 meters. She stared up the street but she didn't see him. Ahead of her on the sidewalk was a blond man with...she stopped short. It was Sorry, standing on the sidewalk and staring fixedly at the burned-out building with his arms crossed over his chest.

She glanced down at the compass and took a step forward, but one step was all she was able to take. Abruptly, an arm shot out of a doorway to her left, grabbed her arm and yanked her roughly off the sidewalk, another hand clamping over her mouth so she couldn't cry out. The door to the street slammed shut, the darkness enveloping her like a glove, leaving her alone in the grip of a stranger.

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 11: Long Day's Journey Into Night*

Hermione's heart felt so far up her throat she was amazed she could still breathe. As soon as darkness descended, the strong hands of whoever was in here with her released their grip on

her arms. She pressed herself up into the corner, straining her eyes to get a look at her new acquaintance. "What the hell?" she rasped. "Who are you?"

"Just another innocent bystander," came a voice...a woman's voice, throaty and American and so very Eartha Kitt. Hermione knew it from somewhere.

"What do you want?"

"Only to help you."

Hermione whipped out her wand. "Lumos!" she cried. Its tip blazed brilliantly forth. Hermione sighed, sagging against the wall in relief. "You gave me quite a fright, Quinn."

"Sorry. When I saw you heading down the street, I..."

"Oh, bloody hell!" Hermione cried, remembering what she'd been doing. She pulled out the compass. Its face had gone back to plain white. "Bollocks! I've lost him!"

"Who, Harry?"

"Yes! He was here...somewhere...and now he's gone. Damn you, I almost had him!"

"I know! Why do you think I stopped you?"

Hermione gaped at her. "What are you talking about?"

"You think Sorry was alone out there? Allegra's little Junior Achievers are everywhere, making sure that their little weenie-roast didn't draw any undue wizardly attention. Harry knows this, which is why he was wearing his invisibility cloak, in case you hadn't figured out why you couldn't see him." Hermione said nothing, feeling sheepish...she hadn't, in fact, figured that out. "If you'd gone barreling in there with guns blazing you would have exposed Harry \*and\* blown Sorry's cover."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably, feeling suddenly like she was in far over her head. "I didn't think of that."

"Of course you didn't. You're not a spook, it's not your job to think of stuff like that. That's why I'm here."

"How did you know?"

"Remus Lupin owled me and told me what Harry was up to."

"How did \*he\* know?"

"Oh, they know everything over there at I.D., it's best not to ask how. He can't do much himself without Pfaffenroth getting suspicious so he asked me to take a look-see. I deduced your involvement all by own self...though it wasn't too big a deductive leap...and when I checked sure enough here you were, hot on his trail. I thought you might appreciate some help more than he would, and it being summer holiday I didn't have much else to do so here I am," she said, her eyes twinkling.

"You didn't come here to stop me?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Wouldn't it be futile to try?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I won't try to stop you. What's that?" she said, pointing at the compass.

Hermione glanced down at it, feeling a little bit embarrassed; she was sure that this jury-rigged talisman would seem hopelessly amateurish to Quinn. "Well...I suspected Harry was going off on a solo vision quest when he left so I put a homing talisman on him. This compass is enchanted to follow the signals."

Quinn grinned. "Swell! That makes things lots easier. That was a good move with the homing talisman. Where did you hide it on him?"

"I stuck it under the hood of his cloak. I'm a little worried that it'll fall off or get lost."

"Well, we'll burn that bridge when we come to it. For now I suggest we get back to it."

Hermione nodded. "Okay." She started for the door but Quinn grabbed her arm and led her out the back way. "Thanks for your help. I would have found him myself, though."

"Of course." She grinned and clapped Hermione on the shoulder. "Come on, Mrs. Peel. We'll make a spy of you yet."

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In Harry's dream, he was sitting in the Gryffindor common room in his favorite squashy red armchair. There wasn't anyone else around, just the fire blazing in the hearth before him. He felt comfortable and very much at home.

"Harry," said a quiet voice. He looked around...sitting in the armchair next to him was his father. He recognized him from all the pictures Hagrid had given him, though he looked older. He looked, Harry realized, as he would probably look if he were alive today. His black hair was shot through with distinguished streaks of gray and there were smile-lines around his eyes and the corners of his mouth.

"Dad," Harry said. "Thanks for coming." He somehow wasn't surprised to see him there.

"How could I miss your graduation?" James said.

"But...I graduated ten thousand years ago."

"You're so tall," his father said, looking over at him with a tender smile. Harry looked down at himself and saw that he *was* tall; some part of his mind was aware that his dream self was taller than his waking body really was. His shoulders sat up above the back of the chair and his legs stretched out before him. "You're not supposed to be that tall. You're just a baby."

"I'm not a baby anymore, Dad."

James shook his head slowly from side to side. "I was supposed to be there to help you grow up, to show you how to be a man," he said sadly. "Why wasn't I there? Who helped you?"

"The elves helped me," Harry said.

His father nodded as if this made perfect sense. "Your mother knew the elves too," he said, looking over his shoulder. Harry craned around and saw his mother coming towards them from the portrait-hole. Her long red hair hung straight down her back, she appeared to be the same age as James. Hermione, dressed in a flowing white gown, was walking with her arm in arm. They passed between his chair and his father's without acknowledging either of them, then stood before the fireplace and faced each other.

"Your skin is pale," Lily said, tracing one finger down Hermione's cheek.

"It's wintertime," Hermione replied. "I haven't had much chance for sun."

Lily reached out and embraced Hermione warmly, smoothing her hair with one hand. "It's time to go now," she said.

Hermione drew back, nodding. She and Lily joined hands, then turned towards the fireplace and stepped into the fire. Harry cried out and tried to get up to pull them away from the flames, but found that he couldn't move from his chair. He watched helplessly as their bodies turned to smoke and vanished up the flue. He looked at his father, who was watching with clinical detachment.

"It's all for the best, Harry," he said. He turned towards him and smiled, then his face began to turn to smoke and dissipate into a cloud of mist.

Harry jerked awake, breathing hard. He sat up and looked around, unsure where he was. His surroundings clicked into place...he was in a safe house the I.D. kept in northern Ireland. He scrubbed his hands over his face, damp with sweat, the image of his father's face turning to smoke lingering before his eyes.

He just sat there for a moment, listening to the crickets chirp outside his window. Persephone ruffled her feathers in her sleep and he could hear the wind rustling in the trees. You \*were\* supposed to be there, Dad, he thought. To teach me how to shave and give me my first broom and hug me in that back-slapping way that men hug each other. I had to get the facts-of-life talk from Mr. Weasley, and I learned how to behave like an honorable man by watching Albus Dumbledore and my other professors. I got my validation from my schoolmates, and my Christmas presents from my friends and their families.

The old sorrow rose in his chest again like a distant relative that just won't go home but keeps sleeping on the couch night after night. Every time he thought he'd really and truly gotten over his lack of parents something happened to remind him of just how much he had missed out on during his childhood and beyond. He wished his parents could have seen him become a wizard and win the Quidditch cup for Gryffindor and wear his Head Boy badge and defeat their murderer and a thousand other things he'd done that he was proud of and that he knew his parents would have been proud of too.

Tears pooled up in his eyes and he shut them tightly, scrunching up his face and willing the pain to retreat to the distant corner of his brain in which it usually resided. The image of his mother embracing Hermione floated before his eyes unbidden...I wish they could meet you, he thought. They would love you, too.

That did it. He gave in; his head dropped into his hands and he let himself cry.

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In Hermione's dream, she was looking down at a rocky beach in shades of gray and silver. The sun was low on the horizon and the surf was flowing in tendrils of foam and water over the pebbly sand at the shore. Large boulders loomed at the edge of her field of vision. A figure was walking towards her along the waterline. As it drew closer she saw that it was Harry. Even though she knew it was only a dream, her heart swelled just to see him and to see that he was alive even in this most ephemeral of forms.

He walked along the damp sand of the beach leaving shallow footprints that were obliterated by the surf. He had his hands in his pockets and he was looking out towards the horizon.

Suddenly he looked off past her and grinned, raising his hand to wave at someone she couldn't see. He crouched and opened his arms for a small boy of about four years old who ran to him, arms flapping. Harry scooped up the child and stood, holding him against his shoulder, the little boy hooking one arm familiarly about his father's neck...for of course Harry was the boy's father, who else would he be? Hermione watched, feeling detached from the tender scene, as Harry pointed out towards the ocean and talked to the little boy. Who's his mother? she wondered. Is it me? Then where am I?

Harry looked back over his shoulder and his eyes seemed to bore through her and she felt herself falling forward...

Suddenly she was in the Cloister back at Bailicroft, except the walls were gone. In their place there was only fog, a dim and chilly fog that crept right up to the bed where she was. She was sitting in the middle of it staring around herself at the stones of the floor and the moss growing between the cracks (in reality the floor in the Cloister was hardwood) and the little fingers of fog creeping up the bedsheets. She looked around and there was Harry right in front of her, in fact she was sitting there in his arms. She looked down and saw that neither of them had a stitch on, but that felt very natural. Harry smiled at her, looking deep into her eyes, and then bent to kiss her neck. Hermione relaxed against him, smiling to herself and sliding one arm around his shoulders...suddenly she felt something in her hand, her fingers gripping it tightly. She glanced down and saw the glint of metal, but before she had barely registered the fact that she was holding a very long, sharp knife her arm took on a life of its own and she thrust her hand forward, plunging the knife into Harry's heart.

She gasped and scrambled backwards, holding her bloody hand up before her eyes. Harry just sat there, his mouth wide open and his eyes staring, with the knife sticking out of his chest and blood pouring out of the wound. He reached out towards her then fell forward onto the sheets.

Hermione was kneeling on the grass looking down at a gravestone inscribed "Harry Potter, The Boy Who Died." There were no dates on it and there weren't any other gravestones nearby. She looked around and realized that they were in the glen near Hogwarts, the same one where they'd found Ron's body. She stared down at the grave, feeling numb. Someone tugged at her sleeve; she looked up and saw the little boy from the beach. She thought her heart would break at the sight of him; he had Harry's green eyes and her own wavy brown hair. His face was wet with tears and he was holding a bunch of flowers. He bent and put the flowers next to the gravestone, then climbed up into her lap like he'd done it a thousand times. Hermione hugged him because she didn't know what else to do even though she had no idea who this child was, if he was some sort of mental projection of a combination of her and Harry or just a representation of her inner child. "Daddy," the little boy said in a tear-choked voice.

A hand grabbed her shoulder and jerked her around quickly. She stared up into Harry's furious green eyes; he was standing there covered in dirt and mold, his wizard's robes torn and tattered, the knife still sticking out of his chest. He shook her shoulder, hard, and just kept shaking and shaking and shaking...

Hermione struggled awake to find Quinn sitting on the edge of her bed shaking her shoulder. She sat up, feeling the sweat running down her face. "Wha...wha..." she managed.

"You were screaming in your sleep," Quinn said, her own eyes muzzy with sleep. "My God, you scared me half to death! Bad dream?"



Hermione covered her eyes with both hands as if to shut out the images that still lingered. "Horrible...horrible." To her relief, Quinn didn't ask her what it had been about, just sat there and held her hand. "I'm just afraid...of the worst."

Quinn shook her head. "Don't worry about Harry, he can take care of himself."

Hermione sat up, the sheets pooling around her waist. "You don't understand...there's something happening to him, we don't know what it is."

Quinn frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He's been having these...attacks. The first one was severe enough to put him in a defensive coma that we designed to protect him from just such an occurrence. The second wasn't as bad, but it still knocked him out."

"These attacks...can you describe them?"

"They start with pain in his scar. It hurts from time to time, it used to get bad if he was around evil, but he said this was worse than anything he'd felt. Then he'd lose consciousness."

"Did these attacks occur during rainstorms?"

Hermione thought for a moment. "The first one did...and yes, it was raining the second time as well." She looked up at Quinn. "Does that mean something to you?"

"Someone may have been trying to contact him, or send him a message." She tapped her forehead. "From the mind of one wizard to the mind of another."

"It must have been someone evil if they were trying to hurt him."

"They might not have been trying to hurt him. You said the second one was less severe?"

"Yes...though Harry said that it felt closer."

"As if the sender realized they overdid it with the first message and were gentler the second time."

Hermione was stunned. "I hadn't thought of it like that."

"Perhaps the sender was trying this for the first time...which is why I asked about the rainstorms. The electrical activity in the atmosphere during a storm makes it much easier to send such messages. A novice would choose such a night to compensate for his or her inexperience. Did Harry say if he received any impressions during these attacks? Words, pictures, names, faces?"

"He didn't say...but then, I didn't think to ask."

"He may not even be aware of it, it's a rather traumatic way to get a message. There are ways we can retrieve any information he might have received. Can you think of anyone who might want to send him covert messages?"

"What about Sorry?"

"I don't think so. Didn't he say he expressly avoided contacting Harry?"

"I don't know who else it would be." She bit one knuckle, considering. "There is something else I should tell you. It's about a man I've been seeing, Gerald Van Haven."

"What about him?"

"Just before I left Hedwig brought me a message that said simply 'Spellbound Books,' which is where Gerald worked. I went there and found out that Gerald died a year ago. I saw a photograph of this man, and it did appear to be the man I knew as Gerald."

"Interesting," Quinn said casually, but her eyebrows were furrowing. "Who would take over a dead man's appearance and identity?"

"I don't know, but whoever it was went to an awful lot of trouble."

"Seems too risky to me. I assume he took you out in public; what if you'd run into someone who'd known the real Gerald?"

"I don't want to think about it. It gives me the creeps, I don't mind telling you."

"I imagine it would. And there's also the question of who sent you the note that led you to this discovery? Did you recognize the handwriting?"

"No."

"The plot thickens."

Hermione flopped back onto the bed with a sigh. "It was quite thick enough before, thanks." They said nothing for a few moments. "I don't want to be here, I want to be out looking for him."

"Relax. You need a few hours' sleep...and so do I."

Hermione turned on her side. "Where are you from? Where in America, I mean?"

"I'm from a little town called Loves Park."

"Sounds romantic."

"Only if cornfields turn you on. It's in northern Illinois."

Hermione frowned. "My U.S. geography is a tad rusty. Where's Illinois?"

Quinn smiled. "Sort of in the middle."

"I've never been to America. I've always wanted to visit."

"It's nice. Big. Sometimes if I'm traveling by car I marvel at the sheer amount of space in that country."

"Harry likes it there."

"I love Scotland, but I do miss the good old U.S.A. sometimes. When I hear another American voice, or on the 4th of July, or when something reminds me of home."

"Why did you take the job at Hogwarts instead of one of the Stateside wizarding schools?"

"When I started looking for a position there wasn't one available in the States. Vailsmith has had the same Defense professor for fifteen years, Yamagosa is happy with their current staff, and Shreve's Landing just hired someone new."

"What about the Enforcer Academy? That's in Texas, isn't it?"

"San Antonio, yes. I spent quite enough time there as a student, thanks."

She smiled, intrigued by this peek into Quinn's past. "Which school did you attend?"

"Shreve's Landing."

"I've heard it's beautiful there."

"It is. Almost too much so. Distracting, you know." She smiled. "But then Hogwarts is pretty scenic, too."

"That it is." Hermione laced her fingers together behind her head and stared upwards, examining the cracks in the ceiling. Hmm, that one looks sort of like Prince Charles, she mused.

"Are you going to be all right?" Quinn asked after a few silent moments.

Hermione sighed. "I will be when we find him."

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Inspector Davies of the local police stood examining the smoldering wreckage, shaking his head sadly. An entire apartment building reduced to a rubble. Damned shame...four people killed, all in one family.

"I don't get it," the fire inspector said after a long silence.

"What don't you get?" Davies asked.

"It takes \*time\* for a fire to get hot enough to burn an entire building to the ground. We got here only a few minutes after the smoke was reported, we should have had plenty of time to get the blaze under control. Instead...this," he said, kicking at a piece of charred wood on the pavement.

Davies suddenly whirled around. "What the hell's the matter with you?" the fire inspector said.

"I could have sworn something just brushed past me."

The fire inspector sniffed. "It's just the crime-scene willies."

"No, I'm telling you. All morning I've felt like someone's standing near me but there's never anyone there."

"You need a holiday, you do."

"Yeah," Davies said, turning back to the burned-out building.

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Sescha pressed the handkerchief against her face, trying in vain to stifle the sobs. The flat was swarming with Muggle police, she could sense their blank sensibilities and their hardened souls from where she sat in her kitchen, clutching a mug of tea in one hand. For the moment they were leaving her alone, tending instead to the documentation and removal of her husband's dead body.

A woman slipped in and sat down next to her. "Mrs. Hough?"

"Yes."

The woman bent her head close to speak softly. "I'm Willa Thompson, I'm an Enforcer."

Sescha relaxed, relief flooding her to have one of her own with her. "Oh, I'm so glad you're here...I can't tell them anything."

"Tell me what happened."

"I came home from work and found my husband...he was...was..."

Willa shushed her. "Do you think your husband was the sort to take his own life?"

"No!" Sescha exclaimed. "That's just what \*they\* made it look like!"

Willa frowned. "They?"

Sescha's voice dropped to a hushed whisper. "You know...the dark ones." She cut her eyes away as if she were afraid of the very words she spoke. "They're building themselves up again, you know. We deny it but we all see the signs. You-know-who may be gone but evil never dies!" She pressed one hand against her eyes. "They wanted my husband, but he wouldn't give in. He fought them."

"Why would they have wanted him?"

"I don't know!" She began to cry again. "His work was...secret. He couldn't tell me about it and it just ate away at him. But lately he'd come home and charm-lock the door and jump at the slightest noise...like he was being pursued. He'd become anxious, more secretive than even he'd been before. I knew something awful was going to happen...but he'd never kill himself, never. He was strong...that's why they had to kill him."

Willa nodded. "All right, Sescha. We're looking into it."

She shook her head, a slow and despairing motion. "You can't stop them. Ordinary wizards like you and me, and the Enforcers and the Ministry, we can't stop them. All we can do is watch and wait until it's our turn." She looked up at Willa with frightened eyes. "There is someone who can stop them, I think. I just hope they don't get him first."

"They can't get to Harry Potter."

Sescha smiled grimly. "They can get to \*anyone.\* They'll find his weakness...it's only a matter of time." She watched as Willa left the room, appearing just as unsettled as Sescha felt.

Suddenly Sescha felt a warm pressure on her hand as if someone had laid \*their\* hand over her own. She jumped and would have cried out, but a hand she could feel but not see was pressed against her lips. "I will stop them," a voice whispered into her ear. She could feel the speaker's breath against her cheek. "Don't let them win before they've won."

And then it was gone, leaving Sescha to wonder if she were going quite insane.

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Quinn sat holding the compass in the passenger seat of Harry's Jeep as Hermione drove. "Um...bear to the left!" she said.

"I can't, there's no road."

"This is a Jeep, isn't it?"

Hermione tossed her an alarmed glance, then braced herself and eased the Jeep off the two-lane highway and onto the grassy fields of southern Kent. "Hang on!"

"Wait! Stop!" Hermione slammed on the brakes and Quinn stood up in her seat, turning in a circle with the compass held out before her. "He's moving!"

"Blast!" Hermione yelled, hitting the steering wheel with her fist. "Can't he stay in one bloody place for more than an hour?"

"Wait for it..." Quinn stood squinting at the compass face while Hermione sat impatiently in the driver's seat, her fingers digging into the padded steering wheel. "Got it! Back to the road!"

Hermione twirled the steering wheel and stamped on the accelerator; Quinn grabbed the roll-bar and flopped back into her seat. "Direction?"

"Just follow the road for now."

They drove in silence for a few moments, Quinn keeping her eye on the compass while Hermione urged the car ever faster. The sense of urgency that had come upon both of them had been steadily building for the past few days as a now-familiar series of events unfolded again and again. They would start off in the direction the compass indicated and get maddeningly close only to have the needle spin and the compass face blink back to white as Harry Apparated or flew away from them. They'd been all over the country and even taken one jaunt across the Channel. Hermione's nerves were frayed to a jagged edge, and all the close calls were even wearing down Quinn's good humour. She kept telling herself that every time he moved to a new place at least it meant that he wasn't dead...and that her homing talisman was still in place. He was pursuing Allegra, that much was clear. Close on his trail, they'd seen the destruction and tragic loss of life that had drawn him...the calling-card of a relentless dark force gathering strength and momentum.

A flash of white streaked past the Jeep, the car swerving momentarily as Hermione jumped, startled. The white object slowed and paced the car; it was Hedwig. "Come on in," Hermione said. Hedwig swooped into the car and settled between the bucket seats, dropping a note in Quinn's lap. She leapt into the air and flew away again.

"It's for you," Quinn said. Hermione pulled over to the side of the road and took it, frowning. She popped open the seal and unfolded the note. "What does it say?" Wordlessly, she held it out so Quinn could read the message, just two words written in script: Carfax Abbey. "Carfax Abbey?" Quinn said, puzzled. "Wasn't that the church that Count Dracula wanted to buy?"

"Yes," Hermione said, folding the note. "It's also a real place, an old broken-down rectory in Kent. It was the site of the Mandelawan Uprising in 1232 during the unrest of the Post-Carthagian period. There was considerable discord amongst wizards of the time as to the extent and faithfulness with which the Yager Convention was to be upheld in matters of affectual magic. It led to a lot of infighting and eventually the uprising, which was ultimately quashed."

"You lost me. Way back there."

"The history isn't important, it's just that Carfax is a relatively significant historical site in the wizarding world."

"Who sent the note?"

"I don't know...but I can tell you that it's the same handwriting as the note that said 'Spellbound Books.'"

The two women just looked at each other for a moment, considering. "Someone's leading us around by the nose, Hermione. I don't much like it."

"Nor I...but I trust Hedwig. And the first note doesn't seem to have been malevolent in nature; I'm certainly glad that I know the truth about Gerald...or part of it, at least." She nodded towards the compass. "What does it say?"

"Northeast, towards Scotland."

"Hmm. Kent's in the opposite direction." She looked at her companion. "What do you think?"

"Well...if we follow the compass we'll probably just lose him again. But...someone sent this note about Carfax Abbey for a reason, it's got to be relevant. If we go there now..."

"We could get there before he does." Hermione put the Jeep in gear. "Let's just hope our paths actually cross this time."

"That would be a nice change of pace, wouldn't it?"

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Harry sat cross-legged behind a large tree, slapping at bugs and listening intently to the whispering grapevine near his left ear. About a hundred feet away in a clearing in the woods was a small log cabin known to belong to a Circle member; earlier today he'd followed Torgo, a wizard he knew to be a favorite stooge of Allegra's, here from the site of a double homicide in Wessex. From his vantage point he could watch the cabin through a spyglass, and with the aid of the vine he could hear everything that was said.

He often wondered what Muggles would say if they knew that their saying "heard it through the grapevine" came from the wizarding world, namely a magical strain of vine called whispering grapevine. Plant one half of a cutting near where you are and the other half near the people you're spying on, say the proper spells and within ten minutes the grapevines will grow to maturity and whisper to you everything that's being said, word for word...they even do the voices.

Harry peered through the spyglass, which afforded him a lovely view through the front window into the living room. The three wizards and one witch were inside, conferring intently with each other. Harry was having to restrain himself from jumping up and down with excitement from all the beans they were unknowingly spilling. He didn't recognize the other three wizards, but he'd already given them names of his own without even thinking about it.

"No, the vault is somewhere in America," Torgo was saying. "It's the decryption spells we need first."

Mr. Mohawk paced anxiously as he spoke. "Goddamn it, why can't that bitch do her own dirty work?"

"Shh!" Ms. Eyeliner hissed. "Don't call her that!" Harry smiled to hear Allegra referred to by that term, one that he'd been known to apply to her himself.

"Oh sod it, she can't hear us," Mohawk said.

"You never know, she has spies everywhere." She's not the only one, Harry thought.

"We're in the middle of the bleeding woods!"

"Where is this place?" said Mr. Monobrow. He seemed to be the ranking wizard, the others all snapped to attention when he spoke.

"It's down in Kent. Some abbey...something Abbey, I dunno. We're supposed to get the directions tomorrow morning."

Harry frowned. An abbey in Kent. Carfax Abbey? That was a sobering thought.

"I'm getting restless just sitting here doing nothing," Eyeliner said.

"Did you hear about Potter?" Mohawk said. Harry perked up his ears.

"What about him?"

"Bugger went AWOL. Allegra says he's losing it."

"I don't believe it. We couldn't be that lucky."

"I'd love to get my wand on that fucking asshole."

"Oh shut it, he'd squash you into tandoori paste without breaking a sweat." Harry smiled. Knowing what your enemies really think of you was an invaluable luxury he wasn't accustomed to having.

"Still. You know Allegra used to shag him?"

"Get out!"

"I'm serious. Back in her good-guy days."

"Ugh. Still, makes you wonder," Eyeliner said.

"Wonder what?"

"What such a goody-goody would be like in the sack."

A general outcry went up at this statement. "I did *\*not\** need that image in my head, thank you so bloody much!" Mohawk yelled. Harry had to clamp his hand over his mouth to avoid giving himself away with loud hoots of laughter.

"So what about this abbey?" Ms. Eyeliner asked Torgo.

"I dunno. Just that Her Majesty was rather worked up about it. It's something about the vault in the States."

"What's in that vault that's so all-fired important?"

"What, do I look like one of the inner sanctum? I just work here. I just know she can't get to the vault without going to this abbey first, don't ask me why."

Harry bit his lip, thinking. He cocked his ear towards the vine again but the wizards were getting out some playing cards. He didn't think he'd get any more out of them tonight.

He touched his wand to the whispering grapevine and it shriveled into a small cutting which he plucked out of the ground and tucked into his kitbag. He picked up his Jet Stream and flew off into the night.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Whoa," Quinn said, stopping short.

Hermione drew up alongside her, holding two torches. She flicked them on and handed one to Quinn, looking up at the ruined stone facade of Carfax Abbey, backlit by the nearly-set sun, its walls taking on a bloody red glow in the advance of twilight. "I know. Creepy, isn't it? Hundreds of wizards and witches died here in the Uprising."

"What are we looking for?"

"Blast if I know. The structure is mostly in ruins and very well explored, I've been here myself. If there's something secret, I'm inclined to think it's underground."

The two women walked softly towards the Abbey, circling around the side and entering through a gaping hole in the stones. Their footfalls echoed on the half-rotted wooden floor, their flashlights making solid beams in the dusty air. "Well," Quinn said, "where shall we start looking?"

Hermione smiled. "Maybe we won't have to." She pulled out her tiny spell compendium, handing her torch to Quinn, who shone it on the pages so Hermione could read the words through her magnifying glass. "Ah...here we are." She read a spell to herself, her lips moving silently, then closed the book and stepped forward, both hands raised palms forward, fingers splayed. Quinn watched her as she began to speak the words of the spell, Latin and some other languages too, softly lest they be heard. "Radium manifestus, et lumine ad oculae!" she finished, her hands glowing a brilliant purple color. At the end of the spell she clapped them together and a burst of purple light flew from her and filled the space around them. Quinn smiled as the walls went semi-transparent except for a small square near the far end of the abbey which glowed a brilliant golden color.

"Nicely done," she said. "That's not an easy spell."

"Shows you only what's been hidden," Hermione said, taking her torch back. "Hurry before it fades." Even as they walked across towards the glowing part of the floor the walls began to seep back and the golden light faded, but not before they reached it.

"Must be a trapdoor," Quinn said.

"It's very well hidden. I can't see any seams, can you?"

"No." They both bent to the floorboards. Hermione pulled out her wand.

"Oh well, when in doubt..." She tapped the floor at their feet. "Alohomora!" A square seam drew itself in the floorboards and the trapdoor popped up to reveal a curving flight of stairs beneath. Hermione sheathed her wand. "That was almost the first spell I learned...certainly comes in handy."

Quinn put out a hand and stepped to the head of the stairs, the tacit message of 'let me go first' understood between them. She drew out her wand, a thick and powerful-looking combat wand, and held it at her side. Hermione followed her slowly down the stairs, shining the torch over Quinn's shoulder. The stairs led to a narrow stone passageway, dark but for their torches.



They walked slowly forward. The scrape of their shoes seemed very loud on the floor, and Hermione was sure she could \*hear\* the beetles scurrying through the stones. The corridor sloped gently downward through what seemed like an endless series of twists and curves. Suddenly Quinn stopped short. "What?" Hermione hissed.

"Do you see that?" she said, pointing up ahead where there was a sharp corner to the right. Hermione squinted, realizing that she could \*see\* the corner. There was a faint light up ahead.

"Let's go," Hermione said. "I don't want to spend the night here if I can avoid it."

They moved forward a little more quickly, the light grew stronger as they approached. They rounded the corner and found themselves in a short corridor perhaps two meters long, that then turned back to the right again forming the bottom of a U-shaped hairpin turn. In the center of the short corridor was a door with two small flame torches mounted in the wall on either side of it. Hermione was about to move forward when suddenly Quinn grabbed her by the arms and they ducked back around the corner. "Shh," Quinn hissed. "There's someone else down here."

"How do you know?"

"I saw their shadow at the other end of the hall." She peeked around the corner. "I can't see anything," she whispered quietly.

"Who could it be?"

"I don't know. The fact that they're hiding from us isn't a good sign." She took a deep breath. "Okay, on three we go for it."

"Go for it? Is that wise?" They were both speaking as quietly as possible, almost mouthing their words.

"Well, it is two against one."

"And we know that how?"

"Single shadow, one pair of shoes scraping. And we should try and immobilize him before he tries to escape....or immobilize \*us.\*"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Okay. Count of three. One. Two. Three!" They leapt together into the short corridor, wands raised. At the same moment their mysterious neighbor leapt around the corner with \*his\* wand raised.

For one shocked second, all three of them just stared at each other, adrenaline hanging in the air like the smell of ozone around electrical towers. Hermione stared into Harry's green eyes, her mouth hanging open. "Harry!" she breathed.

Harry dropped his wand. "Bloody hell," he muttered.

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Three tired wizards trudged along a path leading up a long hill towards a country house not far from Carfax Abbey; it belonged to a friend of Harry's in "the business" who was away on sabbatical.

No one was really speaking much; they were all exhausted. Hermione was running over recent events in her mind and trying to fit them into the larger picture...a picture she wasn't sure she knew the shape of yet.

The scene in the corridor had been confused to say the least. The minute she saw him Hermione was overcome with irrational anger that he had eluded them for so long, and that he'd left in the first place even though she'd expected it. Harry wasn't exactly all smiles himself; one of the reasons he'd left had been to protect her and here she was, not cooperating. Quinn had demanded to know why Harry was sneaking around the abbey and if he'd sent them the note that had led them there, and for a good five minutes they'd all just stood there talking at each other and not listening at all.

Finally Harry had held up his hands, quieting them. "All right," he'd said. "I came here because Allegra is sending some wizards here tonight to steal what's in this vault."

"What is in the vault?"

"I'll show you." The vault door was not locked, apparently whomever had built it had considered the enchanted trapdoor to be protection enough. It swung open into a small room containing nothing but a square pedestal that rather resembled a filing cabinet. It stood in the center of the room like a golem waiting to be woken. Harry opened the doors mounted into the front of the pedestal...to reveal nothing inside.

For a moment he'd been completely dumbstruck. "Okay, I'm waiting for the punchline," Quinn had said.

"But...it was all here!" he said. "When I got here I checked and...they were here!"

Hermione came forward and peered over his shoulder. "What was?"

"Um...well, the general wizarding public doesn't really know this, but after the Mandelawan uprising some of the dissenting wizards, who'd been doing very illegal magic, hid their records and spellbooks in this vault. I wasn't sure why Allegra was interested until I saw tonight that one of the scrolls talks about a secret underground catacomb in America where are hidden 'the keys to the metamorphosis.'"

Hermione sucked in her breath. "The changeover."

"Yes, that's apparently what Allegra thinks."

"Why didn't you take them yourself?"

"I wanted to catch the thieves for interrogation, so I waited outside the door." He looked at them, his face grim. "No one came to the vault until the two of you...or at least, I didn't see them."

She looked up into his face. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That with their time-travel magic they could have slipped in without my knowing it." He shut the doors and slammed his hand against the stone wall. "Damn it!"

He had stormed out, leaving Hermione and Quinn no choice but to follow him. Hermione felt very uneasy...he seemed so angry. He'd said nothing as they drove to this house and now he was trudging forward, dispirited. She wanted very much to touch him or at least \*talk\* to him but he seemed so far away and deep in thought.

They reached the house and Harry pulled a key out of his kitbag to open the front door. He walked into the large front living room and then stopped, turning to face her. Quinn slipped into the other room to give them privacy.

Hermione took a deep breath, ready. "All right, Harry, will you let me explain? I know this isn't what you had in mind but really, it's better this way. Now, I know what you're going to say and I..."

"I love you," he said flatly.

Hermione just stood there, hands raised, her mouth hanging open. That was the first time he'd said that. "Okay, I didn't know you were going to say \*that.\*"

He took two steps towards her. "I spent most of the walk up here thinking about it. I should be angry. I \*want\* to be angry. There's a million reasons why I didn't want you along and why I still don't. I should be much happier if you were safely in Bailicroft surrounded by wards and spells and other wizards...but none of that matters now." His lips slowly curled into a smile. Hermione dropped her hands and sighed. He reached out and grasped her by the upper arms. "I know I didn't seem very welcoming when you showed up at the Abbey, but I'm tired and I'm angry at Allegra and the entire situation. I tried to feel angry at you, too...but I'm just too glad to see you, I can't help it. I suppose what it comes down to is that...no matter how good the reasons are for me to go this alone, I..." He looked down at the floor for a second, then back up at her face. "Deep down I don't care about the reasons, I still want you with me." He bent and kissed her, softly but firmly, then let his forehead rest against hers. "I still \*need\* you with me."

Hermione sniffed and laced her hands together behind his neck. "Good, because you're not getting rid of me now after I've just spent three days driving all over Creation looking for you."

He pulled back, his brows furrowing. "Come to think of it, how \*did\* you find me?"

She smiled and ran her hand under the hood of his cloak near the seam...there it was, a small nubbin like the head of a thumbtack. She pulled it loose and held it up before his eyes. "Did you think you were fooling me when you left that evening?"

He shook his head slowly. "No, I didn't...but it seems I underestimated your resourcefulness, Dr. Granger."

"A mistake you'll not make again." He chuckled and drew her into a tight embrace. "Come on, let's get something to eat, I'm famished."

"You know this house has a lovely master suite with a very large, comfortable bed."

"Are you coming on to me?"

"Oh my, yes."

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Quinn lay awake as the three-quarter-moon rose, listening to the night breezes outside her window. When she judged the time to be right she rose and flipped the covers back; she was fully clothed underneath.

She picked up her shoes and padded barefoot into the hallway, peeking through the half-open door into the master bedroom. They were both asleep, a single candle casting dim light over their forms. Hermione lay on her side with one arm and one leg thrown across Harry, the sheets tangled around them. Quinn smiled and slipped quietly down the stairs.

She laced up her sneakers and snuck into the yard, squinting in the darkness. An indistinct figure detached itself from the shadows near the edge of the woods and came silently forward. Quinn hurried to meet it, guiding it back towards the shelter of the trees. "You're late," the figure whispered.

"I had to make sure they were asleep." She glanced up at the silent house. "Hermione knows about you. She went to Spellbound Books as you'd hoped. The note was a stroke of genius."

The man's smile was almost invisible in the darkness. "Did it frighten her?"

"Not so much frighten as freak out, I think. How would you feel if you found out a man you'd been seeing had been dead for a year?"

Gerald shrugged. "I couldn't say. But it's information she needs." He sobered. "Do they suspect?"

"Not a bit. They're too preoccupied with this changeover business."

"Well, it'll all be over soon."

"Thanks for the note about the Abbey."

"You might have missed him without it. And it's better you join forces sooner than later. Makes it more convincing in the long run."

"How's Allegra?"

"Nervous about Philadelphia. The scrolls have given her the lock spells but the tablets themselves...that's another story."

"You should have seen Harry's face when he realized the scrolls had been taken right out from under his nose." She hesitated. "I'll get him and Hermione there in time."

"Good, you better. They both need to be there for it to work."

"If it doesn't work we're both screwed." She sighed. "What about Sorry?"

"No one knows. I think it's better to hold that trump card until we need it, don't you? Besides we need him for the changeover."

"Does he know about Winter?"

"You'd think he'd have figured it out by now, wouldn't you? But no, he doesn't know. Simple-minded fool," he said, teeth gritting. "Allegra plans ahead, I'll give her that much."

"All right. You get back. I'll see you later."

Gerald smiled and melted back into the shadows. Quinn shivered at a sudden breeze, clutched her sweater more tightly around her, and went back to the house.

*Author's Note: Just for clarification, since there's been some confusion on this point. The Gerald that Hermione dated, and the one that Quinn met with at the end of chapter 11, isn't the real Gerald. The real Gerald Van Haven died a year ago, none of our heroes ever met him. Someone impersonating him met and dated Hermione, and is now in league with Quinn. This imposter also sent Hermione the two notes, one of which led her to Spellbound Books and the other of which led her and Quinn to Carfax Abbey. The identity of this imposter is not known...yet. Everyone with me? On with the show.*

*Author's Note 2: You may notice that there are suddenly references to things mentioned in Goblet of Fire. I tried to resist the temptation so it'd be consistent, but hey...I'm only human.*

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 12: Truths, Lies and Secrets*

Hermione stood under the spray from the shower head, the water cascading over her neck and shoulders. Despite a good night's sleep she felt deeply tired, every muscle protesting their lack of rest these past few days. This was the best shower she'd ever been in. It was a large tiled stall separate from the bathtub with good, strong water pressure, built-in shelves and even a little bench.

She ran her soapy hands over her body, shutting her eyes tightly and letting the water flow over her face. Gerald and I once took a shower together, she remembered. I thought those were *his* hands touching me and *his* lips kissing me...whose were they, really? What horrible, evil person did I allow to know me in the most intimate of ways? What did he really look like under Gerald's face? Did he laugh at me, knowing he had me fooled?

She scrubbed harder, grabbing a loofah off the shower rack and dragging it across her skin as if to rub off the ghostly imprint of that stranger's touch. She opened her mouth and let the water roll in, sniffing as it went up her nose. She grabbed the shampoo and dumped some in her hair, brutally scratching her fingers through the soggy strands as her other hand rubbed the loofah over her body...her skin began to turn red and raw underneath it.

I'm freaking out, some distant part of her mind chimed in. Delayed reaction. She threw the loofah onto the tile floor and braced her hands against the wall to stop their shaking. "Harry?" she called softly. No answer. "Harry!" She tried in vain to keep the beseeching note out of her voice, feeling silly for calling to him for help in the shower, but silly or not she needed him.

She heard footsteps from the bedroom and the shower door opened. "What's the..." He stopped when he saw her face. "Okay, hold on." He reached out and drew a large fluffy towel off the rack and stepped into the shower stall, unmindful of the water spraying on his clothes. He drew Hermione out from under the shower head and wrapped the towel around her shaking body. "Shh, just relax." He led her out of the stall, into the bedroom and sat her down on a chaise lounge that was set into a bay window. He crouched in front of her, wrapping the towel more closely around her. "You wanna tell me what's wrong?"

"I can't stop thinking about it," she said in a rush.

"About what?"

"About Gerald touching me." Harry frowned, blinking. "Oh no, not like that!" Hermione hurried to add, realizing how that had sounded. "It's...horrible."

"What?" he said, confused.

Hermione took a deep breath and told him the whole story, the note about Spellbound Books, the real Gerald's death. By the time she finished he was staring at her with a wide-eyed, stunned expression. "I put it out of my mind to concentrate on finding you...I suppose this morning I just started thinking about it."

"I can't believe it," he said, hoarse. "Do you realize what this means?"

She nodded. "That in all likelihood there's been a stranger spying on us for all the time I've been dating him."

Harry shook his head. "I knew I didn't like that guy. I thought I was just jealous."

Hermione smiled, feeling better already. "You were jealous?"

He looked up at her sheepishly. "Of course I was jealous, it just manifested itself as annoyance at his entire personality." He straightened up and sat beside her. Hermione swung her legs up across his lap and he drew her into his arms. "Apparently my emotions are a lot smarter than I am because they knew before I did. It hurt to see you with him, just as it hurt to see you with Horace, and Rufus, and that git Dr. Kilroy." Hermione pressed her lips to his jawline just below his ear and let her head fall to his shoulder. No one spoke for a few moments. "When I find Gerald...or whoever he is...I'm going to beat him to a ruddy pulp," he said grimly.

"Shh, don't talk like that," she said. "That won't solve anything."

"No, but it'll sure make me feel better." She said nothing, realizing that while Gerald had hurt her in a very personal way, by his actions towards her he had also hurt Harry in a completely different way. "Are you feeling better?" He rubbed his hands along her bare arms as if to warm her.

"Yes," she sighed. "I'll be better still when I know who he really was." She drew back and looked into his face. He was staring at some point over her shoulder, his eyes far away. She smiled gently, running her hand down his cheek so that his morning stubble rasped under her fingers. "You're tense," she said, feeling through the fabric of his shirt the tightness of the muscles in his neck and shoulders.

"*I feel* tense. Whatever's ahead of us in the next few days, we can be confident it won't be relaxing."

"You used to get so nervous before a confrontation or a contest. You never believed you had the stuff."

"I still get nervous, I've just gotten better at hiding it. At least I always had you and Ron to help me prepare."

"Poor Ron. He was always the one getting Stunned eight times." They both smiled sadly. Hermione watched Harry's face as a troubled expression came over it. He suddenly released her and moved a bit away from her on the chaise. "What's wrong?"

He hesitated. "He was my best friend," he said softly.

Hermione sighed, wondering if they'd ever be free of this. "I know."

"More than that. He was my brother, the one I never had."

"He was my friend too, Harry...and more."

"Yes, but...well, there's just something about male bonding. Ron was my peer, and by that I mean a boy of my own age, and the first one to accept me completely." He thought a moment. "All the time we were at Hogwarts I felt guilty for taking what was his. I took the recognition he should have had for being a Weasley. I took his independence, because people always saw him as my sidekick. I even felt like I was taking his mother's affection, even though I was glad to have it." Hermione said nothing...what could she say? It was true. "He never resented me...well, almost never. He stood by me and welcomed me into his life, his family." He looked up at her, a haunted look in his eyes. "Now I'm taking something else that was his. What must he think of me?" He stared at his hands, his jaw working uneasily.

Hermione reached out and took his hand, afraid that the entire future of her relationship with this man rested on her ability to find the right words at this moment. "Harry, look at me." He did. "I want you to listen to me very carefully." She fixed her eyes on his with the most sincere expression she could muster. "Ron is dead, and you and I have been mourning him for ten years. You feel guilty because you're now experiencing some of the happiness that he missed. Don't look so surprised, I feel it too. But who's to say how things would have turned out if he had lived?" Harry looked away. Hermione grasped his chin and turned his face towards her again. "I love you," she said softly. Harry shut his eyes for a moment and exhaled mightily as if a great weight had been lifted from his chest. "And I can't remember a time when I didn't love you, even if I wasn't smart enough to know it. What's more important, I can't imagine not feeling that way, regardless of who was or wasn't with us."

He blinked, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that although I cared deeply for Ron, even if he were still here, I don't think my romantic relationship with him would be. If Ron had lived, you and I would still be here together...except we wouldn't have to have this conversation, because Ron would be here too and he could hug us and tell us for himself that he's glad for us." Tears welled up in her eyes as she realized just how much she wished that were so. Harry was staring at her, his own eyes overbright as well.

"You know, I was supposed to be comforting *you* when I brought you out here," he said, drawing the towel tighter around her. In his eyes she could still see those vestiges of insecurity left over from a childhood in which he was denied every form of love and affection...deep down he still believed he didn't deserve it. He was fiddling idly with the edge of her towel, not meeting her eyes. "Do you really?" he whispered.

She smiled. "Yes. And you'd better get used to the idea." He smiled back.

"I'll try. It's just a new concept." He kissed her forehead near the hairline...and then his face scrunched up in a moue of distaste.

She drew back, alarmed, as he began to smack his lips and stick his tongue out as if he'd tasted something awful. "What? What is it?"

"Ugh...shampoo! Ack! Bleah!" He jumped up and ran into the bathroom as Hermione laughed, unable to stop herself.

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Hermione rose with her dishes and went to the sink, dropping a kiss on top of Harry's head as she passed. Quinn smiled at them from across the table. "You two are so cute," she said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "She's the cute one, I just work here."

Quinn pushed her plate away. "We need to talk about what happens now."

Harry crossed his arms on the edge of the table as Hermione returned to sit next to him. "Allegra now has the scrolls from the vault at Carfax. Where she is, that's the question. Sorry said she took a sudden trip to the States last week, it's likely that the changeover materials she's after are there." He shook his head. "Bloody colonials," he muttered, winking at Quinn to show he was just kidding.

"It's a big country," Hermione said. "It'd be nice to narrow it down."

"I examined the scrolls at Carfax before you two arrived. They're the code charms to unlock something, presumably some sort of crypt or vault where the keys to the metamorphosis are kept...but fortunately for us, they're also time-sensitive. They can only be used at a certain time of day at a certain point in the lunar cycle. Allegra's first chance to use them would be midnight Eastern time, which is 5 a.m. our time...that gives us less than 24 hours to find those keys, whatever they are, before she does."

"Did Hermione tell you about my theory of your attacks?" Quinn said

"Yes. It's an interesting theory but I don't think I received any information during my attacks, and even if I did, how would we know the intent behind it?"

"It strains credibility to think that Allegra or someone working for her would go to all the trouble of contacting you mentally and then back off when they realized they'd hurt you."

Harry still looked skeptical. "Honey, I can put you in a trance," Hermione said. "Try and retrieve what, if anything, was sent to you. Then we can decide what to do with it."

Harry thought for a moment. "All right, it's worth a shot." He stood up with his own dishes, smiling down at her. "Thanks for calling me 'honey,' by the way."

They finished the washing up in short order and adjourned into the sitting room. Hermione installed Harry in a leather recliner and sat in a straight-backed chair next to him.

"All right now, just relax," she said, her voice low and smooth. She pulled out her wand and whispered a few words; its tip began to glow with a soft lavender light. She held it before Harry's eyes. "Hypno ad dormirum," she whispered, moving her wand in small circles before his face. "Sophias ad oculum..." Harry's eyes fixed in a sort of faraway stare, the lavender light glinting off their green irises. She lowered the wand; his eyes didn't move.

"Harry, can you hear me?" she said softly. He nodded. "All right. I want you to think back to your first attack, and I want you to..."

He suddenly sucked in a breath and began to speak, very rapidly, saying what sounded like a spell. Hermione leaned closer but was unable to pick out individual words.

"Stop," she said. He stopped talking. "Is that a spell?" He nodded. "Where did you hear it?"

"The pain..." he murmured. "It was behind the pain." Hermione and Quinn exchanged a glance. Hermione pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill.

"Can you write it down?"



His hand reached out for the quill and the parchment. She slipped a book under the parchment on his lap so he could write; the words flowed quickly from the quill as his hand moved on its own across the parchment. Hermione read over his shoulder; it did appear to be a spell. He finally let the quill fall. "All right," she said. "Now I want you to..."

That was as far as she got. He suddenly let out a sharp cry and sat bolt upright, slapping both hands over his forehead. "Harry!" she cried, reaching out to grasp his arm. He wrenched it out of her grip and struggled to his feet, screaming in pain and clutching his head. He fell to his knees on the rug and then to the ground, writhing in pain, his back arching and his face contorted in a rictus of agony. Hermione knelt next to him, her arms reaching out towards him, afraid to touch him. Quinn whipped out her wand.

"Do something!" Hermione cried, too distraught to think of anything herself. Quinn raised her wand and opened her mouth to speak...but before she could, Harry suddenly relaxed and fell silent. Hermione immediately leaned over him, checking his pulse and peering into his eyes. She sagged, relieved. "He's okay," she whispered. She sat down near his shoulders and gently stroked his forehead. "Harry?" she said quietly. "Can you hear me? Harry?" His eyelids fluttered and he opened his eyes, looking up at her.

"Why am I on the floor?" he croaked. Hermione helped him sit up and stayed there with one arm around his shoulders. "What happened?"

"We're not sure," Quinn said. "You were under hypnosis. You wrote down a spell and then you collapsed in terrible pain."

One of his hands rose to finger his scar. "I don't remember. A spell?"

"Yes," Hermione said, showing him the parchment. "Do you recognize it? I don't."

"I thought you knew every spell ever written."

"Apparently not."

"I don't recognize it, either...but it looks like a two-person spell. See?" He pointed to the writing. "It's in two parts, one for each wizard."

"Well, it's not going to do us much good if we can't figure out what it does. We're cut off from all our usual resources."

Harry got up. "Not all." He grabbed another piece of parchment and scrawled a note on it. "I'll send this to the Librarian."

Hermione frowned. "That little girl down in Research?"

Harry glanced at her. "She's not a little girl."

"Then what is she? How long has she been there?"

"I don't know what she is, I've never asked. And I think she's been there since the beginning of time, at least. If she can't tell us what this means, then no one can. Persephone!" he called. With a flutter of wings the tawny stealth owl landed on his shoulder so he could attach the note to her leg. "Take this to the Librarian, but don't let anyone see you." Persephone nipped at his ear and took off through an open window, vanishing from sight as she did so. "The Librarian has no political loyalties, she will feel no obligation to tell anyone at I.D. that I've been in touch with her. All things being equal, she'll stay silent." He sat down on the couch,

rubbing his temples with his fingers. Hermione perched protectively on the arm of the sofa next to him, Quinn took a seat on the ottoman before them.

"Did you remember anything else?" she asked. "We still don't know where Allegra is."

He frowned, his eyes staring at nothing as he concentrated. "Yes. I have an impression of a city..." He pressed his first two fingers to a spot above his left eyebrow, scrunching his eyes shut in thought. "A city near the water...something about brothers? Love of brothers?" He looked up at Hermione, who answered his puzzled look. Quinn, however, was smiling. "That means something to you?" he asked her.

"Philadelphia," she said. "The City of Brotherly Love."

Hermione was nodding. "Philadelphia was home to a lot of colonial wizarding societies. They got into some pretty rough magic over there back in the day."

"There's a system of secret catacombs underneath the city," Harry said. "Shielded from Muggle eyes and even from wizards, most of whom don't know they exist. Five'll get you ten that whatever Allegra's after is hidden down there. Those tunnels go on forever...most of it is unexplored, who knows what secrets are buried under that city." He stood up with an air of action about him. "Let's get our things together and meet back here in five minutes," Harry said. "We'll Apparate out together." As quickly as if someone had said "break" the three scattered. Quinn headed for the guest room, Harry and Hermione for the master suite.

Hermione hurried into the bathroom, tossing her hairbrush and tooth powder into her bag. "Heads up!" she called to Harry, tossing his shaving kit towards him. He caught it neatly and stuffed it into his kitbag.

"Is this your sweater?"

She poked her head around the corner. "Nope."

"Hmm. Must be Dana's."

Hermione wiped down the countertop and her own wet footprints on the tile floor. "Who's this Dana?"

"She's an Auror. Friend of Sabian's...an ex-wife of Sabian's, actually, one of many. This is her house, she's in China on sabbatical."

Hermione came into the bedroom, holding her pack. "Aurors aren't part of the I.D.?"

"No. We're global Federation employees, they work for their Ministries. We do all sorts of things relating to intelligence, they just hunt. We do work together sometimes. They're rather more pragmatic than we are. They tend to shoot first and ask questions later...we're all about asking the questions."

"Moody said we'd make good Aurors, remember?"

"He wasn't Moody," Harry said darkly. He very rarely discussed those events, and Hermione usually avoided bringing them up.

She zipped up her pack and put on her cloak. "Hey," she said, stepping close to him. "You still look nervous. One would think you'd never done this sort of thing before."

He forced a smile. "Oh, I have. Just...never with the woman I love right in the line of fire." He drew the string on his kitbag and grabbed his cloak from off the back of a chair.

"Look, don't throw a wobbly on me, all right? If you start freaking out, then *I'll* start freaking out, and it'll be one big freak-out extravaganza."

"I'm not freaking out, I'm just being realistic." He met her eyes. "If something happened to you...well, I don't know if I could stand it."

She slipped her arms around his waist and hugged him. "Nothing's going to happen to me, all right? It's not as though I just bought my wand yesterday. It'll be all right." She pushed away the thought of something happening to *him*...which, really, was just as likely as misfortune befalling her, if not more so. "Let's get this over with."

They separated and went downstairs to find Quinn waiting. They went out to the front porch and stood there in a row. "Ready?" Quinn said. "On three. 1...2...3." They all vanished, and then a fraction of a second later reappeared in the same spot.

Hermione looked around. "Hmm. Seems as though Philadelphia looks a lot like Kent."

"We're back in the same place," Quinn said.

Harry looked around with a sigh. "I was afraid of this. Let's try it one more time just to be sure." He counted to three again and they Disappeared...and once again reappeared in front of Dana's house.

"What was it you were afraid of?" Hermione asked.

"She's put up security wards around the city. You try to Apparate in, you just bounce right back. There are similar charms around Hogwarts and the I.D. We're not going to be able to Apparate in."

"Then I have a question," Hermione continued. "How the blazes are we going to get there?" Harry and Quinn looked at each other blankly. "It's too far to fly on broomsticks. We can't buy plane tickets without Muggle money and we can't change any wizard money until Monday when Gringott's opens, and even if we could change some money right now I don't have that much on me, and even if I did we'd never get seats at this short notice!"

"Can't we just Apparate outside the security charms and then hitchhike or something?" Quinn said.

Harry shook his head. "No, she'll have thought of that. We won't be able to get near enough to reach her before midnight tonight." He stood there thinking, the other two watching him and hoping for a brilliant idea. When they saw a slow devilish smile spread across his face, they knew he'd had one. "But I think I can make some other arrangements."

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The taxi left them off in a rather industrial neighborhood. "Should I ask what we're doing here?"

Harry glanced at Hermione. "Do you know where we are?" he said, walking up a driveway nearby.

"Of course, we're in Little Whinging...but I've no idea why we're...oh!" she exclaimed, as they drew up by a large sign in front of a grubby white building. "GRUNNINGS," it said.

"There's no place like home," Harry said as they walked past.

"I thought you hated it here," Quinn said.

"I didn't say there wasn't anyplace *better*, I said there was no place *like* it."

"Should you perhaps take off your cloak, Harry?" Hermione said. She and Quinn had already done so. "We are among Muggles, after all."

"I think I'll leave it on, thanks." They drew up to the security gate. A guard held out a hand to stop them, glancing at Harry's odd appearance.

"D'you 'ave an appointment?" he asked.

"No," Harry said confidently.

"State your business, please."

Harry made a small gesture with his hand. "You don't need to know our business."

The guard nodded amicably. "None of my affair, I'm sure."

"You'll let us in now."

He stepped aside and held the gate open. "Come on in, please."

"No one needs to know about this."

"Of course not, sir. I'll just be here at the gate."

"Thanks ever so much." The gate swung shut behind them.

"Nice work, Obi-Wan," Hermione said, coming up next to him.

"The Jedi stole it from us, you know."

"Can I ask how you did that?"

"Let's go in here," Harry said, angling towards the front door and deftly changing the subject. He swept through the front doors and right past the receptionist with another cryptic hand gesture; she didn't even glance up at them. Hermione's curiosity was mounting...she couldn't tell how Harry was doing this. He didn't seem to be using a spell or a charm or his wand.

Hermione and Quinn followed him through the corridors; he seemed to know where he was going. Finally they stopped before a pair of double mahogany doors labeled "Director." Harry didn't even knock, just opened the door and walked in.

Sitting behind a very large desk was Harry's cousin Dudley Dursley. He stood up, his florid face going pale at the sight of them. Hermione held back a smile at how the mighty had fallen...where once Dudley had made Harry's life a living hell with fear of merciless poundings, now their roles appeared reversed. Whereas Dudley had become a short, round, pink-faced man with a rapidly receding hairline and a doltish expression, Harry was tall, handsome, and held himself with an air of understated power. It was difficult to believe the two were related; they almost didn't appear to be the same species. "Get out!" Dudley squeaked in a nasal, whiny voice, pointing back towards the door. Harry ignored him and strode up to the desk. Hermione understood why he'd kept his cloak on, it really added to the

mystique as it billowed out behind him. Quinn and I must look like bodyguards, she thought. They stood on either side of him and said nothing.

"Hello, Dudley," Harry said. He pointed one finger at Dudley and flicked it downwards; Dudley flopped back into his leather desk chair, looking surprised to find himself there. "Have a seat."

"What do you want?"

Harry smiled, but there was no humor in it. "Do I need a reason to pay a visit to my relatives? I'd think you'd be happy to see me, Dudley."

Dudley appeared to be frightened to death of Harry. Hermione didn't quite understand that; surely Dudley knew that Harry would never actually hurt him. Then again, those who have no qualms about inflicting pain on others are the first to believe that others are equally capable of inflicting pain on *them*. "I'll call my father," Dudley said in a plaintive voice.

Harry chuckled, shaking his head. "Still hiding behind Vernon, Dudley? He's probably out on the golf course."

"No he's not! He's..."

"I'm not afraid of Vernon, and I'm not afraid of you, Dudley. Do you know how many big, bad evildoers I've put away? You're small potatoes." Hermione, with effort, refrained from giggling. She'd never in her life heard Harry speak with such bravado. He sounded like he was auditioning for the part of the Dashing Hero in some cheesy Saturday afternoon serial...but she knew that it was all for Dudley's benefit, and he seemed to be buying it completely. He leaned forward and planted his hands on the desk, staring right into Dudley's piggy little eyes. "Here's what you're going to do, Dudley. I know that Grunnings owns a private jet. You're going to loan it to me for a few days."

Dudley's eyes widened. "What? I can't possibly..."

"Oh, yes you can. You're not going to be using it, are you? The only places you ever go are home and to the local ice cream shop. You're going to give me the keys and then if anyone asks where it is, you're going to tell them that it's in the shop." Hermione watched him closely. He didn't appear to be compelling Dudley to agree as he had the guard at the gate. She supposed that Dudley was easy enough to boss around without using magic.

Dudley drew himself up a little. "What if I don't?"

Harry straightened, backed up a step and smiled. "You will," he said...and for just a moment, his eyes glowed red. Hermione bit her lips to keep from grinning. It was so easy to intimidate people who already thought the worst of you. A little magical window-dressing and they were putty in your hands.

Dudley fumbled in his desk drawer, pulled out a keychain and tossed it to Harry. "Here, take it," he managed. "Just go away."

Harry slipped the keys into the pocket of his cloak. "My best to Vernon and Petunia," he said, turning around. He swooshed out of the room, Quinn and Hermione close on his heels.

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" Hermione said, hurrying to keep up with his long strides so she didn't trip over his cloak.

He smiled at her, and it was his regular smile instead of the sinister smile he'd given Dudley. "Do you blame me? I don't get to play the heavy that often, it's kind of fun."

"So we're hijacking Dudley's jet," Quinn said, "but who's going to fly it?"

Hermione pulled out her wand. "If Arthur can enchant a car to make it fly, enchanting a plane to fly itself shouldn't be too hard."

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"Now *that* is the ugliest thing I've ever seen," Hermione said. The three wizards were sitting on a bench in front of Independence Hall in downtown Philadelphia and staring at the 70's-style glass pavilion that housed the famous Liberty Bell. It was almost noon and they'd landed in Philadelphia just an hour ago. Their first stop had been the Philadelphia I.D. field office, where Harry had sent a stealth owl to Sorry.

Harry nodded. "It looks like the last holdover from the disco era."

Hermione looked at Quinn. "Isn't this bell a treasured historical relic? You'd think they'd find someplace better to house it."

Quinn shrugged. "I agree it's ugly, but they didn't consult me when they built the thing." They fell silent for a few moments. Quinn sat slumped down on the bench with her arms folded over her chest, looking generally impenetrable. Harry sat in the middle with his legs crossed, looking around at the scenic park and holding Hermione's hand. She sat on his other side with one leg tucked beneath her, biting her lip in thought.

"Are we waiting for something?" Hermione finally asked.

"Yes," Harry replied. "Sorry. Hopefully he's here in the city with Allegra, and it won't take him long to answer my owl."

"Can't we start looking for the crypt without him?" Quinn said, sounding a tad exasperated.

"Where do you suggest we start?" Harry said patiently. "Those catacombs stretch for hundreds of miles with hundreds of entry points."

"Harry," Hermione said, "Allegra wants you for the changeover, right?"

He hesitated. "Probably."

"So why hasn't she tried to capture you? Sent wizards to kidnap you?"

He sighed. "Because she knows I'm coming. Why do you think she provoked me by attacking George, Laura, Remus, Lefty...she wanted me to come after her."

She released his hand and turned to face him. "You don't need to oblige her."

"Yes, I do. If I don't she'll start killing." He looked at her. "She'll come after you. I'm essentially walking right into her clutches and gambling on my greater skill to come out of it in one piece...but the odds are stacked in my favor. She underestimates me, she always did, and I've learned a lot since she left. And I have a few aces up my sleeve...you, and Quinn, and most importantly a man on the inside with the element of surprise." He shrugged. "With any luck she'll never get her hands on me. Whatever she's here to steal, we may get to it first."

Hermione shook her head. "Sounds like a lovely way to get yourself killed."

"Not just killed," came a new voice. They all turned to see Sorry standing behind them. "Changed over. That's much worse than killed." He came around the bench and sat down next to Hermione.

"Sorry," Harry said. "You got my note."

"Yes. Allegra brought me here so I could look at the tablets as soon as they're unearthed."

"Tablets?" Hermione said.

He took a deep breath. "All right, to start at the beginning: the changeover is a delicate ritual requiring just the right balance of subject mentality, practitioner skill and environment. I've participated in the Muggle-to-wizard changeover, as others have before me. Allegra assumed that the reverse process was the same ritual."

"But it's not," Harry said. "That's why it didn't work on Leland."

"Correct. As it turns out the changeover of a wizard is far more complicated, and the existing ritual is inadequate. You can imagine the magical power needed to reverse all the spells a single wizard has done in a lifetime. It's a process that has the potential to reshape events on a global scale. It's much more involved than a few incantations and some creative visualizations."

All the pieces were clicking together in Harry's mind. "So Allegra sent out the troops looking for any source material on the original rituals. Lucius Malfoy found some here."

"My ancestors were the wizards who originally wrote the two changeover rituals...one of them creative, and one of them destructive. They realized the power of the destructive changeover and vowed never to use it. The stone tablets that described the rituals were passed down in secret..."

"Until they found their way to the colonial wizards who built these catacombs," Hermione said.

Sorry nodded. "They hid them here so no one would ever find them, and then they hid the charms that open the crypt at Carfax Abbey. Lucius found the crypt by tracing the last surviving ancestor of those colonial wizards and torturing him." He pulled out a folded-up piece of parchment and gave it to Harry. "I've drawn a map through the catacombs. Allegra hasn't seen fit to tell me where the crypt is...trust is not her strong suit, believe me...but I know the general area. You'll have to search for the crypt itself, but this at least can narrow it down for you. There's an entrance to the catacombs under a tree in front of the Magnolia Cafe on Locust Street, you'll need to start there. You can't miss the tree, it's the one with all the beads in it." He stood up. "This is as much as I can do. I hope you can get to her soon, because frankly I'm getting nervous. I feel like I'm going to slip up and blow my cover at any second."

Harry stood up and laid a hand on his shoulder. "You hang in there. It'll all be over soon." Sorry nodded.

"Listen," he said. "In case things go wrong and you need to find Allegra's hideout...I've got an Apparation locator in my pocket. Here's its partner." Hermione took it. "After she gets the tablets she's taking me there." He hesitated. "There's something else that you should probably know."

"What?"

"Her time manipulation magic? She's gotten far, far better at it. She can send people further and with less effort."

Harry shook his head. "If I knew how she was doing it I might be able to design a counterspell."

"I can't tell you exactly how it works, but I can tell you that the reason it's so strenuous is that it's largely a mental projection."

"Like a glamour?" Hermione said.

"A bit, yes. The wizard has to visualize their destination and then summon magic powerful enough to transport them there."

Harry blew air through his teeth. "I can see how that might really take it out of you."

Sorry shrugged. "I don't know how that will affect what's happening here, but forewarned is forearmed." He smiled at them. "Good luck." He turned and walked away; Harry just stood there and watched him go.

Hermione sighed. "Can I ask...again...why you're not calling in the cavalry?"

"Because she'd never miss a mobilization, it'd tip her off. I'm hoping she doesn't know I'm this close to her, and if she doesn't I'd like to keep it that way."

Quinn stood up. "We should sneak into those catacombs as soon as possible."

Hermione jumped to her feet as well. "Come on! It'll be crawling with Allegra's goons!"

"No, I don't think so," Quinn went on. "If she knows where the crypt is, and that she can't unlock it until midnight, she's probably back at her hideout preparing for the changeover."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Because that's what I'd do," Quinn said. "I'd want all my ducks in a row so that the moment I had my victim I could perform the ritual immediately and not have to wait around looking for potion ingredients or something."

"She's right," Harry said. "If we want to get to those tablets before Allegra does, we've got to do it now. The sooner the better."

"There's also the tiny problem that we don't have the charm locks for the crypt, and even if we did they can't be used until midnight."

He shook his head, staring off into space. "I can get in."

Hermione felt anxiety rising in her chest, inexorable like the tide, and with it the knowledge that Harry wasn't telling her something...something very important. "Oh, you can? Like you put the whammy on that guard at Grunnings? How, exactly, can you get in? And if we get the tablets, then what?"

Harry went on as if he hadn't heard her. "There are still things you don't know, Hermione. I can get in and get those tablets...and then wait for her to come after me. Then we'll see."

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Sorry was right...you couldn't miss the tree. The Magnolia Cafe, as it turned out, was a Cajun/Creole restaurant, and the tree on the sidewalk outside the restaurant was festooned with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Mardi Gras beads that were given to the patrons as souvenirs and then tossed into the tree for goodluck.

Hermione put up an Unremarkable Charm around them so that they could search for the entrance unobserved by the steady flow of passersby. Harry knelt on the sidewalk, crawling about and inspecting the gratings around the tree. He finally lifted one of them and peered underneath. "Here," he said. Hermione and Quinn bent and looked down...underneath was a smooth channel of stone like a slide that curved down, away and out of sight. Without a word, Quinn sat on the edge and slipped down. Hermione followed her, and then Harry, shutting the grating over his head.

Hermione slid for what seemed like forever, and then the slide suddenly wasn't there. She flew through a short reach of space and felt Quinn's arms catch her around the middle and they both thumped to the ground. A few seconds later Harry came hurtling out of the slide and landed on his tailbone, wincing in pain. "Dammit," he said, getting to his feet and rubbing his backside. He looked up at them sheepishly.

Hermione got out Sorry's map and illuminated her wand. "This way," she said. Harry took the lead and they started down the corridor. Hermione fought back the feelings of dread that this place inspired. The catacombs were not the close, cramped, rough-hewn tunnels she'd been expecting. They were cavernous arched passages laid with stones, the floors littered with loose rock, cave detritus and occasionally the bones of wizards long dead. The blazing tip of Harry's wand, held high over his head, seemed very small in the inky-black darkness that filled the space.

They continued on through a bewildering series of passages, Hermione following Sorry's crude map as best she could. No one really said much; the dank atmosphere seemed to stifle conversation as well as thought. She tried to keep her sense of direction about her but after half an hour she was totally disoriented. At last they reached the end of Sorry's map. "That's as far as he knows where to go," she said, folding it and putting it back in her bag. They were standing at a T-junction before a great stone wall encrusted with moss and dribbling with brackish threads of water.

"We must be near the river," Quinn said. "It's so damp down here."

Harry turned to them. "We should split up."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"No, he's right," Quinn said. "We'll have to search both passages for the crypt, it'll go faster if we split up. We'll explore separately for say, fifteen minutes and then meet back here and decide what to do."

Hermione still felt doubtful. "I'll go this way," Harry said, pointing to the left. "Quinn, you and Hermione go the other way."

Hermione gripped his hand for a moment. "Be careful," she said.

He nodded, squeezing her hand back. "You too. Stay close to Quinn, and watch your back." He turned and walked off to the left. Hermione watched him go, swallowing past her lingering uneasiness, then turned away and followed Quinn down the other passage.

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Harry walked purposefully down the passageway, examining the walls as he went, wondering if he'd even recognize this crypt when he found it. It could be hidden, he thought, or enchanted to appear as part of the wall.

His stomach was busily tying itself into knots. No matter how often he engaged in dangerous espionage-related activities he never seemed to get used to it. His nervousness was only compounded by Hermione's presence...I should have had her come with me, he thought. Then I'd know she was safe. She's safe with Quinn, he told himself. She was a damn good Enforcer and from what he'd heard an even better DaDA professor.

He rounded a corner, then stopped short as all his questions about the crypt were answered.

Cut into the wall was an immense square door carved with runes that looked vaguely familiar. He stood there numbly and looked up...and up...and up to the vaulted ceiling meters above. His jaw dropped at the sight of it. Whatever he'd expected this wasn't it. It was hardly a hidden crypt, more like an extremely ostentatious and obvious crypt.

He stepped closer and examined the runes carved into the door. He didn't recognize the language. He wished again, for a totally different reason, that Hermione was with him.

He didn't know how long he stood there staring at the door and puzzling over the runes on it...a few minutes, perhaps...but when remembered the business at hand he realized it was high time he went back to the rendezvous point and told Hermione and Quinn of his discovery. He turned around, then leapt back and flattened himself against the crypt door.

Opposite the crypt door was not a blank corridor wall but a medium-sized chamber that he hadn't even seen, so focused on the crypt had he been. Standing in the chamber were at least twenty of Allegra's dark wizards who had probably just been lurking there waiting for him to come along...and idiot, he had walked right into it. He had been so concerned about Hermione and focused on finding the damned tablets. Watch your back, he'd warned her. He'd do better to take his own advice. Allegra, standing in the center of the group, walked forward with her hands on her shapely hips, smiling at him.

"Oh, Harry. Did Lefty teach you nothing? Always keep a wall at your back." She held up a hand, seeing him tensing up. "Tsk tsk," she scolded. "Don't even try it. There's a lot of us here, Harry. Not even you can take all of us...though twenty of my wizards against you *might* finally make it a fair fight." He sagged, letting his wand drop. She walked forward and took it out of his hands. "And here I thought it would be hard to capture you, Harry. I knew that Dr. Granger was your Achilles' heel, but I never thought that her mere presence would unnerve you so much that you'd walk right into my hands."

He just glared at her. "You've got me. That's what you want, isn't it? I want your word that you won't harm her."

Her smile widened. "What do you care? You haven't told her what you really are, have you? I warned her that she didn't know you." She shook her head. "But they never believe the ex, do they?" She walked back and forth before him, twirling his wand in one hand. "What is she to you? Really, now, the truth. Remember who you're talking to; you have no secrets from me."

Harry sighed, not wishing to play her game. "I love her."

"Surely not. That little mouse?"

"She's worth a hundred of you, Allegra."

She leaned closer, her perfume wafting around his face. "You didn't think so when you came panting like a dog to *my* bed."

He smiled thinly, unfazed. "Well, we all have to go slumming now and then, don't we?"

Allegra's smug smile faded. "You're not the man I once knew, Harry. You've grown up. You're tougher." Her smile spread once again across her icy features. "Which only makes this all the more satisfying."

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Hermione and Quinn stood at the T-junction, saying nothing. Hermione was tapping her foot anxiously and glancing at her watch. "He's five minutes late," she said tightly.

Quinn nodded. "Let's give him a few more minutes."

"No," Hermione said, straightening up and grasping her wand tighter. "I'm going after him. You coming?"

Quinn stepped forward. "Right behind you, Mrs. Peel." Hermione strode off down the left-hand corridor holding her wand before her with no idea what she'd do with it if someone attacked her. All the defensive spells she'd once known verbatim had cleverly fled her brain now when she needed them most.

"I wonder if he found the crypt," Quinn said.

"Maybe it's hidden...it's hardly likely that they'd make it really obv..." She stopped short in the hallway, so suddenly that Quinn ran right into her.

"Geez," Quinn breathed, looking up at the mammoth crypt door. "That makes quite a statement..." She trailed off when she saw Hermione's face. She was staring not up at the door but down at the floor of the passage. Quinn followed her gaze. In the middle of the passage was Harry's kitbag.

"Oh no..." Hermione murmured, lurching forward. She fell on her knees by the bag and snatched it up. "There's a note," she said in a flat tone.

Quinn watched her as she read it and her shoulders slumped; she clutched his kitbag to her chest and her head drooped. Wordlessly, she held out the note. Quinn took it and held up her wand so she could read it:

"Hey Hermione- Missing something? -The Ex."

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 13: The Dweller on the Threshold*

Allegra watched as a few of her wizards tossed Harry, bound and hooded, into a cell and slammed the bars shut. She waved them out and sat down on a bench against the opposite wall. Harry just stood there, hands behind his back.

"You're not fooling me, Potter," Allegra said, sounding amused with the entire situation. Harry took a few steps forward until he was just inches from the bars, then slowly brought his hands out from behind his back, free of the cuffs that had bound them just moments ago, and tossed the restraints through the bars to clatter to the stone floor at her feet. He reached up and pulled the hood off his head.

Allegra chuckled. "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage," she said. She stood up and poked at the cuffs with the toe of her boot. "I knew these could not hold you, but this will," she said, motioning to the bars of the cell. "It's enchanted so thoroughly that not even you can slip out. I don't recommend any attempts at escape. I can't have you damaging yourself before I get the chance to change you over."

Harry gripped the bars tightly and stared out at her. "Are you happy here, Allegra?"

She looked calmly back at him. "All right, now with the attempts to reach the goodness that you're sure must be lurking inside me if you could only just \*reach\* it!" she cried, melodramatically laying the back of her hand across her forehead. "Save yourself the trouble. You can sweet-talk me, you can patronize me, you can even threaten me...nothing you can say will sway me from my master."

Harry took a step back, his face sad. "Then you deserve him."

"I'll take that as a compliment, even though I know you meant it to sound threatening." She pressed up against the bars of his cell. Harry backpedaled another step. "You know, this is supposed to be the part where the evil ex-lover, having entwined the hero in her web, taunts him sexually and displays her shapely body parts in an attempt to, ahem, get a rise out of him. Then your line would be something in the manner of 'Get away from me, vile wench, you'll never get any satisfaction out of me.' Then I'm supposed to toss my hair about, give an evil cackle, display my cleavage shamelessly and promise you a long, slow death full of spiders and hot pokers and...oh, I don't know...quicksand, perhaps." She grinned merrily at him.

Harry shook his head. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

She shrugged. "Eh. It has its moments."

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Quinn watched Hermione pacing in a circle in the middle of a chamber a safe distance from the crypt. "I think you're being a tad hasty," she commented.

"Hasty? Hasty? Allegra's taken Harry, we can't get into the crypt without him, she'll do her thing at midnight, get the tablets, do the changeover and that'll be the end of the world as we know it not to mention the end of Harry. Forgive me for feeling a sense of urgency."

"Urgency without a plan of action is wasted energy."

"I have a plan of action. I'm going after him."

"\*You're\* going after him?"

"Well...you're coming with me."

"And you and I all by ourselves are going to infiltrate Allegra's secret hideout, free Harry and save the world, is that it?"

Hermione stopped short, facing Quinn with her hands on her hips. "You have any better ideas? I'd be delighted to hear them!" Quinn said nothing. "Then shut up! What are you, afraid of a little action? I thought you were a good Enforcer!"

"I \*was\* a good Enforcer, and part of being a good Enforcer involves knowing when you're outnumbered!"

Hermione stepped closer to her, one hand out. "Quinn, I don't know you that well. But I have to wonder if you have any idea what it's like to really share your life with someone. To be there for every significant moment, every triumph, every tragedy and to be so close to them that it's hard to tell where you end and they begin." She took a breath, her eyes shining, her words coming quickly and with agitation. "Well, \*I\* know what that's like. I'm lucky enough to have someone who is as essential to my life as the air I \*breathe\* and then I was lucky enough to fall in love with him!" Her last phrases were almost shouted. She stepped back and took ahold of herself, and when she spoke again, she spoke softly. "I understand your hesitation. You're under no obligation to come along, but I - am - going. I can't stay here and do nothing, I'll run mad." She resumed her pacing. Quinn followed her with her eyes.

"Hermione, you know I'm with you all the way."

Hermione smiled sideways at her. "I do now."

"What's your plan?"

Hermione reached into her pocket and pulled out the Apparation locator that Sorry had given her. "Sneak in," she said.

Quinn gestured towards the locator. "So we Apparate to Allegra's hideout using Sorry's locator as a guide."

"Yes."

"A lot of things have to go our way for this to work," Quinn said, ticking them off on her fingers. "Sorry has to be \*at\* the hideout, wherever that is, and not off in Broken Spoke, Oklahoma getting double-tall lattes for the whole crew. Those locators have to function properly, which is by no means guaranteed. We have to manage to sneak by Allegra's wizards once we get there. And as I'm sure you're aware those locators will only put us within 10 meters of Sorry's position, and for all we know 10 meters away could be in the middle of a lake or something."

Hermione sighed. "Well, I know how to swim." She looked around. "I suppose there's no time like the present. I'm so anxious I feel like I'm about to jump right out of my skin."

Quinn nodded, holstering her wand. Hermione held out the Apparation locator. "Ready?"

Quinn hesitated a moment. "Let me see that," she said. Hermione handed her the locator. "I used to be in charge of locators for my squad. They can get screwed up pretty easily, I'd better check it before we trust our physical integrity to it." She examined it visually for a moment, then held up her wand and said a charm over it. The locator glowed bright blue in response, which seemed to please her. "Seems okay." She handed it back to Hermione.

"All right, let's go," she said, holding out her hand palm up with the locator in the middle of it. Quinn laid her hand over it and wrapped her fingers around Hermione's so they were both touching the locator. "Now."

The two women vanished. Hermione shut her eyes tight as she Disapparated, keeping them closed as she felt herself rematerialize. There was ground beneath her feet and air around her body; at least they weren't in the middle of a lake. She felt Quinn's hand grasped tightly in her own.

She cautiously opened one eye, then the other. Quinn was standing before her with her eyes also shut. "Psst," Hermione hissed. "You can look now." Quinn opened them, dropping Hermione's hand.

Hermione looked around. They were in a narrow tunnel made of rough stone with an arched ceiling. It was lit with flaming torches set into the wall every twenty feet or so. Quinn sighed. "Oh great. This is *\*so\** much different than the dank stone tunnel we were just in."

Hermione turned in a circle. "Where are we? Do you suppose this is Allegra's hideout?"

"If it is, I'm very disappointed in her. It's so cliché and Gothic." She cocked her head. "Do you hear anything?"

Hermione listened. "No." She fumbled in Harry's kitbag, into which she'd also transferred the contents of her pack, and came out with Cho's compass. She grinned, relieved. "We're in the right place...look, the compass face is green...that means Harry is close." She pulled out Harry's invisibility cloak. "Come on, we can't be too careful." Quinn stepped to her side and Hermione draped the cloak around both of them.

The two women began slowly walking along the edge of the corridor, following Hermione's compass as best they could. "Wherever we are, it just keeps getting creepier and creepier," Quinn whispered. Hermione nodded in complete agreement. The walls were damp and in places overgrown with lichen. They didn't see another living soul for several minutes. Finally the passage began to slope gently upward, and the sound of voices began to filter down to them. "Shh," Quinn whispered. They both stopped and listened. "Sounds like five or six people." They inched forward and the illumination grew brighter.

The corridor opened up into a balcony that looked down into a pit-like room, roughly circular. Quinn and Hermione snuck up to the ledge and peered over. Half a dozen witches and wizards were moving about arranging some chairs and tables. Near the far side of the room was a raised circular platform; sitting upon it was an ordinary straight-backed wooden chair fitted with wrist and ankle irons. Hermione shivered. "Kinky," she muttered.

"Where does she want this thing?" one of the wizards called across the room.

"I don't know. I think it's for the tablets, so probably near the chair." The first wizard was lugging a thick wooden podium across the room. "Where's Carlisle?" the second wizard said. "He's the expert."

"He's still in Philadelphia. Allegra left him in charge down in the catacombs."

Hermione blinked. "He's...he's not here?" she said. Quinn returned her puzzled look. "If he's not here then how did *\*we\** get here?"

"I don't know...perhaps he was here and he only just left."

"We've been here five minutes, that's a bloody huge coincidence." She took the locator out of her pocket. "What did you do to this thing back in Philly?"

"Nothing! I just checked it!"

"This could be a trap if we've been brought here on purpose," Hermione said, frowning.

"Trap or not, Harry *\*is\** here, right?" Hermione nodded. "Then we don't have much choice. Come on, let's get moving."

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Harry sat cross-legged on the floor of his cell, experiencing an odd combination of extreme stress and extreme boredom. Being the only occupant in the five cells that he could see, he had no company except the wizard who sat at the door guarding him. Allegra hadn't been lying about the enchantments around the cell, he'd tried an experimental unlocking charm on it and the response had nearly fried his arm off. The guard hadn't tried to stop him, probably because he knew the deterrent value of the punishment would be far more effective at preventing escape attempts than any warning he could deliver verbally.

Footsteps were drawing nearer, a whole group of them. Harry got to his feet and faced the door as Allegra came in, accompanied by four of her wizards in matching dark green cloaks with silver piping around the seams and edges. Harry jerked his head towards them. "Who's that, your honor guard?" he said.

Allegra smiled. "Just some of my little helpers." She nodded towards Harry. The guard at the door stood up and withdrew a large gold key from the pocket of his cloak. He inserted it into the keyhole and the entire door of the cell glowed red for a moment then died down. One of Allegra's wizards opened the door and yanked Harry out by the arm, slapping chains on his wrists as he did so. "Those are enchanted chains...unbreakable," Allegra said. "So don't try it." She turned and walked out. Two of her wizards grabbed Harry's arms and marched him out of the room, the other two wizards bringing up the rear. Harry's mind raced, thinking of escape. He could break ordinary chains, but not enchanted ones...at least not in this situation. Sitting calmly in his office with time to concentrate he could do it. Even if he could manage to break them, he was quite efficiently surrounded.

After a long trip through many dank and dimly lit corridors they came into a circular pit-like room with a raised platform at one end. A dozen or so witches and wizards were standing about, waiting. Allegra stepped to the raised platform and made imperious gestures with one arm; the wizards holding Harry maneuvered him to the middle of the floor facing her. They removed the chains but kept firm grips on his arms and shoulders. "Is this your throne room?" he said sarcastically. "Holding court for your loyal subjects?"

"I serve my master."

"Voldemort never managed to kill me in the dozen or so times he tried, what makes you think \*you\* can do it?"

She ignored him, glancing around at their surroundings. "This is my little hideaway. What do you think?"

He looked around. "Nice. Homey. Could use a coat of paint and some track lighting." He looked back at her. "Why have you dragged me down here? You can't change me over yet, you can't get the tablets until five a.m."

"Very true. But we do have business to take care of before the ritual is ready."

Harry suddenly felt quite sad looking at her and listening to her casual manner in discussing his upcoming demise. "Do you have any feelings left, Allegra?"

She stepped down to his level and stood before him. "Oh, are we to talk about the past, are we? Goody."

"No, I really want to know."

"Why this sudden interest in me?"

"I've always been extremely interested."

"Because you want to see me strung up and punished for what I did to you."

"I want to see you punished for what you did to a lot of people. It's not about me."

"Oh, yes it is, Harry," she said, leaning forward, her eyes flashing. "It's always about \*you.\* You're the great Harry Potter and everyone worships the ground you walk on."

He shook his head. "Don't insult my intelligence. You're not doing all this because you're jealous of whatever power you think I have."

"You only want to know why I'm doing all this because it will make you feel better to have a reason. You want to know if it's because I want the power, or the control, or the ability to cancel Christmas if I want to, or maybe my mother just never loved me. Well, perhaps there is no reason. Maybe I just like it. Maybe I'm just a bad person."

"You don't think you're a bad person."

"How do you know?"

"No one ever does, even if they clearly are one."

"You always want to find something good in everyone, Harry. It's a crutch I fortunately don't share."

"Did you ever care about me? At all?" he said, the sudden question taking her by surprise. He had wondered about this at least a million times over the years and he thought he might actually get an honest answer at this moment. "Or was it all just an act?"

She sighed. "It's difficult to tell where reality ends and the act begins, to tell you the truth." She smiled coldly. "I knew that if I ever wanted to beat you I had to \*know\* you. So I seduced you. It wasn't hard. You were just a kid, giddy with all the trappings of your new job at the I.D. and eager to embark on a vision quest like a real live grownup. You couldn't wait to prove yourself...and not just on the job. You were Lefty's most enthusiastic student in training classes and you were overeager and clumsy in bed."

Harry just shook his head, one eyebrow cocked witheringly. "Do you all have some sort of standard Evil 101 textbook? 'Chapter 3: How to discourage your opponent by attacking his masculinity.' Fortunately I don't need your validation of my sexual prowess...in fact I'd be delighted to learn that you faked it every time. I've always hated the idea that I made any part of your time with me enjoyable."

Allegra resolutely ignored him, though he could see that his lack of reaction to her taunts rattled her. She continued. "Back then, I saw in your eyes a youthful vigor and a brash readiness to try anything." She peered at him. "I don't see that brashness there now. You're not giddy, and you're not eager. You've seen too much and you've been hurt too badly."

"Don't flatter yourself. I never loved you."

"If you say so. But I made you into a real adult, Harry. Not even you can deny that. You would not be the man you are today if it weren't for me."

"Perhaps not." He raised his head and looked into her eyes. "Perhaps I'd be a better one."



She stepped to the raised platform, back in charge. "Tonight I will change you over. It will be a shame to lose a person such as yourself in the world from a purely academic standpoint, after all you are the only one of your kind, but the benefits far outweigh the risks in that regard."

"Did you drag me down here to listen to another villainous monologue? Save it, I've heard it all before."

"No, I have another purpose." She picked up a sword that was leaning against the chair on the platform and idly twirled it against the stone floor. "I'm doing this for a lot of reasons."

"To undo all the spells I've ever performed and return Voldemort to his full power."

"You'd think, wouldn't you?"

He blinked. "But...I thought that..."

She grinned at him. "Who told you that? Your friend Sorry?" Harry stared, all the color falling from his face. "Oh yes, I know all about it. If you think that he could fool me with his little double-agent routine then you must have a very low opinion of me indeed. Even with Liu's help he couldn't manage it."

Harry was speechless. A cold lead ball was forming in the pit of his stomach. If she knows about Sorry, what else does she know? "Why haven't you..."

"Drug him out the back and blasted him into a million pieces? He's far too useful to be wasted. As long as he thinks he's fooling me he'll keep doing a fabulous job of researching the changeover for me. He's just as interested as I am in what's on those tablets...and in case you're hoping he'll conveniently mistranslate something so I can't change you over, then I'm sorry to disappoint you. I have another changeover expert working independently, one that Sorry doesn't know about."

Harry shook his head. "You do plan ahead, don't you?"

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. But we were discussing the changeover. According to the documents I uncovered months ago which started this whole quest, the ritual will only reverse those spells that the wizard has intentionally performed. So your babyhood victory is immune."

"What a shame. How disappointed your master must have been."

"My master is indifferent to Voldemort. Your changeover will have other effects that will benefit us." Harry suddenly felt like he'd stepped into the middle of a play where everyone knew their lines but him. "I see by the look on your face that you'd assumed my master \*was\* Voldemort." Harry's mouth opened and closed a few times. "It's unwise to assume in your line of work. When did I ever say that I served Voldemort?"

Harry's mind raced. She'd always referred to him as "my master." He'd just thought that...idiot, he scolded himself. You \*did\* assume. "Who then?" he managed.

Her smile widened. "No, I don't think so." She clucked her tongue at him. "You know better." Harry's heart was pounding. He wasn't sure he could take another surprise. Allegra was holding far more of the cards than he'd originally thought. "Now then. We keep getting distracted, but I do have a purpose here." She began to pace back and forth across the raised platform, tapping the sword against the floor in time with the click of her heels against the

stones. "The changeover I am to do on you this morning is difficult even in the best of circumstances. The fact that it's \*you\* on whom I am attempting it only exacerbates the difficulties. So I need you to do something for me." She stopped and fixed him with a steady gaze. "If the ritual is to be successful, you must be in the correct frame of mind. Therefore I need you to submit yourself willingly and without resistance."

For a moment Harry wondered if she was joking...but soon enough saw that she wasn't. He snorted brief laughter. "Don't hold your breath."

"Believe me, it will make things a great deal easier on you."

Harry set his jaw, marveling that she could even entertain the delusion that he'd agree to just surrender to her. "Allegra, you're insane if you think I'll submit without resistance."

She winked at him. "You may not think so, but you will." She glanced at one of her wizards near the door and gave him a brief nod. He turned and left the room. Everyone waited...Harry was beginning to get a very bad feeling.

A few moments later the wizard came back into the room, followed by another wizard dragging something behind him, something that was struggling. As they entered the throne room Harry's blood ran cold. "Oh no," he breathed.

It was Hermione.

She was gagged; her hands were bound loosely before her and she looked flustered and disheveled. Her eyes darted anxiously around the room. The wizard dragged her up onto the platform and stood her before Harry. Allegra moved to stand behind her, placing one arm amicably about her shoulders. Hermione just stared straight ahead, her whole body tense.

Harry felt like his brain was trying to fly apart at the seams. He couldn't concentrate, all he could do was stare at Hermione standing there bound while he was helpless and surrounded by Circle wizards. Allegra could do anything she liked to her, anything at all. He suspected that he knew what she'd meant when she'd assured him that he \*would\* surrender. "It's okay," he mouthed at Hermione.

Allegra ran one finger down Hermione's jawline. "Look who we found skulking about," she purred. "Isn't love wonderful? She came here to save you, I imagine. She'd have done better to have stayed home. Her friend escaped but we'll find her soon enough. Do not entertain thoughts of rescue. Professor Cashdollar may have been a good Enforcer but this room is surrounded by enough wizards and witches to blast her into oblivion." She looked at Hermione, whose jaw was clenched so tight Harry wondered that her teeth didn't crumble. "Thank you for coming," she said softly. "You've given me the perfect tool to use against Harry."

In a burst of rage Harry tried to run forward but the wizards holding him yanked him back so hard his arms nearly pulled out of their sockets. "Let her go," he growled, trying to sound a lot more threatening than he felt.

Allegra made a big show of considering this carefully. "Hmm. No, I think I'd better keep her here." She walked around to stand behind Hermione, leaning on her shoulders. "What would you do to save her, Harry?"

He stared into Hermione's eyes, every muscle tensed and his heart thudding heavily against his ribcage. He said nothing. Allegra already seemed to know that he would do anything to save her.

"I would be willing to let her go unharmed, Professor Cashdollar too...if you'll submit to the changeover willingly." She reached up and pinched Hermione's cheek with a twinkle in her eye. She was enjoying this.

Harry's eyes darted from one woman's face to the other. Hermione shook her head at him, emphatically. He shot her a look...what do you expect me to do? it said.

"Give me your answer, Harry!" Allegra exclaimed.

"I'll do it," he said through gritted teeth. Hermione shut her eyes. Just buy yourself some time, he thought. Time to think. "I'll do it, I'll surrender...as long as you promise not to hurt her."

Allegra smiled. "Agreed." She walked around her prisoner, examining her. Hermione just stood there, facing grimly forward. "What is it that you see in her, anyway?"

Harry couldn't take his eyes off her, scarcely daring to believe that Allegra was through with them. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"Look at me," she said, stepping to one side and spreading her arms wide. She was wearing a black velvet bodysuit that laid over her skin like paint. "I'm a knockout! I'm sexy! I'm a hot little number! Don't look at me like that, you thought so yourself at one time." Harry just scowled at her. "And now look at her," Allegra said, standing at Hermione's side and gesturing towards her. "I mean really, Harry. She's wearing \*khakis.\* And \*chambray!\* And look at her hair...so \*wavy\* and \*plain.\* She doesn't have too bad of a body, really. I could put her in a black vinyl catsuit that'd knock your socks off." She grinned at him. Harry was waiting for the other shoe to drop. She'd gotten him to cave, what else could she possibly want right now?

But Allegra wasn't finished with him, it seemed. She glanced from one to the other, evaluating their locked gazes. "How long since the first time you two doth made the beast with two backs?" She thought a moment. "Hmm. I'm guessing no more than a week. You've still got that new-passion aura hanging around you. It wasn't there when I met her in Detention." She strolled down from the platform, around Harry and then back again, taking her time. "You should be thanking me, really. There's nothing like an impending crisis to make one acknowledge long-buried feelings." At this, Harry did look at her, surprised. "Ha. Thought I didn't know, didn't you? I saw the look in your eyes when you used to talk about her, which was all the bleeding time." Her voice took on a sneering tone. "Hermione this, and Hermione that, and blah blah bloody Hermione was Christ down from the bleeding cross. Best friend, my ass." She stood next to Hermione again, idly playing with a strand of her silky black hair and tapping the flat of the sword against her thigh. She sighed and shrugged. "Too bad, really. You should know better than to give me such delicious leverage."

Harry gave her the deadliest stare he could manage. "You wouldn't dare." Allegra was looking at him with a speculative gaze that he didn't like one bit. A cold sliver of fear slid through his abdomen. He was painfully aware of Hermione, standing silent and probably frightened, just at the edge of his field of vision. "Please," he said quietly, deciding that he couldn't keep up his defiant facade when faced with such a delicate situation. Ordinarily if an enemy attempted to intimidate him into giving in he had a strict policy of not blinking. But now...he just couldn't. He couldn't risk provoking Allegra into harming Hermione. "Please leave her alone." He swallowed hard, making a quick and surprisingly easy decision. "I'll beg if you want me to," he said in a low voice. A small sacrifice of his pride was nothing if it placated this woman in front of him...a woman whom, at this moment, was wholly unpredictable to him. "You promised not to hurt her if I agreed to give in."

Allegra walked around behind Hermione. "Yes, I remember. You know what, though? I lied."

And with that, she reached up, tore the gag out of Hermione's mouth and then plunged the sword through her back.

All the breath was pulled from of Harry's chest as if someone had stuck a fishing hook down his throat and yanked it out. He wanted to cry out but couldn't for lack of air, he felt like someone wearing steel-toed boots had just kicked him in the stomach. Hermione sucked in a huge gurgling breath, her back arching like a bow, the tip of the sword protruding through her chest and blood gushing out of the wound to soak the front of her shirt. Over her shoulder Allegra's face was grinning and grinning. Harry felt his mind trying to get away from him like a bird on a tether straining for the sky. For a moment he thought that the sight of her body, a body that he had held in his arms and touched with great tenderness, impaled on a sharp piece of metal might push him right over the edge. He held onto himself with a great effort; it was like trying to keep a grip on a greased rope. He struggled against the wizards holding him, his face frozen with his mouth open in a voiceless cry. Allegra withdrew the sword and Hermione fell to the platform; in a pure refinement of cruelty she gave a small nod to the wizards holding Harry and they released him...in some distant, still coherent part of his mind Harry marveled that it wasn't enough for her to murder the woman he loved, she had to make sure that she died in his arms.

Harry rushed up to the platform and fell to his knees beside her, drawing her up into his lap, panic flooding his mind and rendering him incapable of conscious thought. "Oh God...Hermione..." he croaked. "Oh no..." She stared up into his face, blood dribbling from her lips. He pressed his hand against the wound in her chest even though he knew in some part of his mind that it was hopeless, feeling the blood pouring from the wound in her back and staining his jeans. Her hand lifted slowly to his face and settled on his cheek. Harry held it there, dry breaths rasping in and out of his throat, too horrified to even react. Allegra stood over them, the bloody sword held at her side, watching.

Harry looked into Hermione's eyes. "No," he whispered, seeing them grow dim. "No, don't leave me...please, Hermione..." He clutched her body to his chest. "No no no no..." He pressed his forehead to hers as if he could give her the life that was in his own body. A long rattling breath escaped her throat and she shuddered once, then went limp. Harry held her tighter, blank shock and despair clouding his mind. He looked up at Allegra's grim face, his own streaked with blood. "Why?" he cried. "She was no threat to you, why?"

She bent down and looked into his eyes. "Not because she was a threat to \*me.\* Because she was dear to \*you.\*"

"I loved her," he choked out.

"Then that was her bad luck, wasn't it?" She reached down and smoothed Hermione's hair. "What do you have left to live for now, Harry? She was the last thing, wasn't she?"

He stared up at her face, the grief chased from his mind by blinding homicidal rage that fell over his vision like a red haze. "I will kill you," he said, his voice low and hoarse and deadly. "I'll get away from here or die trying. And then I will come after you and I won't stop until I find you and then I'm going to \*hurt\* you until you \*beg\* me to kill you...but I won't. I will drag it out for months and years and when I'm finally done I will reach into your chest and tear out your heart...as you've just done to me," he finished, his voice catching on the last phrase.

"Brave words. You may even do as you say. But it won't bring her back."

Harry held her gaze for a moment but the crushing weight of what had just happened was too much for him and his face crumpled. He bowed his head into Hermione's shoulder, one hand tangling into her hair, his shoulders shaking with silent sobs that were inadequate to express the grief that suffused him. Allegra made a small motion to the wizards who'd been holding him earlier and they came forward and pried him away from Hermione, his arms gripping her body like a vise. "No," Harry kept repeating quietly. His mind was trying to get away from it and he couldn't think or act or do anything as they hauled him to his feet and began to lead him out of the room. His feet wouldn't move on their own, Allegra's wizards dragged him along like a dead body...which was, in truth, what he felt like.

Allegra watched until he was gone, then spoke to the other wizards in the room. "Get rid of this," she said, motioning to the body at her feet. "We won't have any trouble controlling him now."

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They tossed Harry into his cell, slamming the bars home and leaving him alone with that same stone-faced guard. Harry paced back and forth, his hands making meaningless spastic movements in the air, first grasping at his hair and then pulling at his cloak and then rubbing at the bloodstains on his shirt and sleeves. His chest heaved with great gulping breaths of air as if he'd just run the hundred-meter dash.

He stopped and let his head droop; his chin trembled and he felt the sorrow rising in him like magma in a volcano that would erupt and tear him to bits. He saw her in his mind, laughing, dancing, smiling at him across a pillow backlit by the moonlight. He clenched his hands into fists, hands that still remembered the texture of her skin, pressing them to his face to shut out the image of the life leaving her eyes.

He rubbed at the scar in the palm of his hand as he paced. I let her die, Ron, he thought. I let you die, and now I've let her die. I've failed you both in every way. I had two best friends. I had a substitute brother and I had a woman I loved, and now there is only me. Alone with nothing but my revenge.

He began to shake and his legs buckled beneath him; he fell to his knees on the stone floor of the cell. He threw his head back and screamed out his grief to the ceiling, his whole body thrumming in sympathy with the despair that ran through his blood in a poisonous tide. His voice gave out and he sagged to a sitting position, burying his face in his hands and waiting for the tears that refused to come as they had come so freely for Ron...but this was worse, far too much worse for mere sobs to express. Ron had been his best friend. Hermione had been...she was something I can't put into words, he thought. And she was all I had left. He crumpled forward until his forehead rested against the stones, his body folded in half at the waist with his arms clutched around his midsection as if to physically hold himself together. Ron hadn't died in his arms, and he hadn't had to feel the life leave his body as he'd had to feel it leave hers, knowing that a part of himself died with her.

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Hermione and Quinn, both concealed under the Invisibility Cloak, skulked along the corridor. "Check the compass," Quinn whispered.

Hermione pulled it out. "Bloody hell, it's back to white again." In the last half an hour the compass had switched from green to white and then back again, now it was once again white. "They can't be moving him that far that often."

"They may be keeping him in a magically shielded location that the homing charm can't see."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, that's possible." She looked around. "Where the hell are we \*now?\*" In their forays around this...whatever this was, they had seen dungeons and large meeting halls and what looked like residential chambers and a lot of rooms full of cells. Now they were back in yet another dank, dimly lit corridor. They had passed a few people in the hallways, but it seemed like this was a very large facility and the number of Circle members was relatively small.

Quinn was looking around, frowning. "You know, I have an idea where we might be."

"Where?"

"This might be Lexa Kor."

Hermione frowned. "The old prison?"

"Yes. It was decommissioned when Azkaban was built, some six hundred years ago, I think."

"I remember hearing of it, but I don't remember where it is."

"No one knows. The day Azkaban opened its doors, Lexa Kor vanished right off the face of the earth. One day there it was, sitting in the valley, and the next day all that was there were some sheep. No one knows what happened to it."

"So how did we end up here? And where \*is\* here?"

"Some people think that Lexa Kor was stolen by dark wizards and put into a pocket."

"That's difficult. Anyone can take a point in space and expand it past its physical boundaries," Hermione said, thinking of the back seat of the Weasley's old Ford Anglia, "but it takes a lot of magic to make a pocket large enough to hold an entire castle."

"But think of the advantages. If they pick a small enough point to expand, once the castle's inside the pocket it'd be virtually invisible! It wouldn't show up on maps and it wouldn't be accessible unless you \*knew\* to Apparate here." She looked around. "Yep, I think I'm right. And I might be able to remember the floor plan, I have a book about it." She turned in a circle, took a look out the window, and walked up and down the corridor for a moment, dragging Hermione along with her. "I think we're near the western outer wall."

"That'd be really helpful if we knew where we were going."

"We should try and head to the main public areas...Allegra would probably pick those to use as her headquarters and meeting rooms. And that pit-room we found when we first got here, that was the execution theater! Stupid, I should have figured it out before this." She grabbed Hermione's hand. "Let's go. This way."

They hurried through the corridors, Quinn leading the way. They came to a Y-junction and paused for a moment. Quinn was pondering which way to go when they both looked up in alarm as a horrible sound came to their ears. It was a scream, a terrible wrenching scream that sounded like it came from the very depths of someone's soul; it was a sound of absolute suffering. Hermione gasped, growing cold all over. "That's Harry," she whispered.

"Are you sure?" Quinn whispered back.

"Positive."

"My God, that scream! I've never heard anything like it!"

"I have," Hermione said grimly. "I've heard him make that sound only once before. I can't imagine what could be causing him to make it now." She looked at Quinn under the cloak, anxiety clearly visible in her eyes. "Let's go. We've got to get to him."

"Sounded like it was coming from this direction," Quinn said, pointing down the right-hand corridor. Hermione nodded in agreement and they walked quickly past the Y-intersection, their need to hurry at odds with their need to be as quiet as possible.

Hermione's mind raced as they passed through one corridor after another. What is she doing to him? she thought. Torture? Some sort of attack charm that's driving him mad and making him see things? She tried not to think about it and just concentrated on getting to him.

Finally they came to a large double door. Quinn stopped in front of it. "I think this is the infirmary. We can go through it, it'll save us some time." She put her ear to the door. "I don't hear anything."

Hermione looked up and down the corridor and then pulled the door open; they quickly slipped inside and closed the door after them. It was a large, depressing room lined with beds and steel tables. The air seemed to echo with the cries of the injured, the tortured, the despondent. "Let's hurry," Hermione hissed. "This place is creepy." She grabbed Quinn's arm and they scurried across the floor. Hermione kept her head down, not wanting to look around, so when Quinn gave a brief cry and stopped short she was almost jerked off her feet in surprise. "What?" she whispered.

Quinn's eyes were wide and shocked. "Look!" she hissed, pointing to what looked like an autopsy table.

Hermione gasped and clapped her hands over her mouth to stop the cry that rose in her throat. Lying there on the table was a body...her own body. "Oh my God!" she said shakily. "That's...me!"

Quinn ducked out from underneath the cloak and edged closer, finally stretching out a finger to poke the body's leg. "Well, it's real...and it does look like you." Hermione forced herself to come forward. The body was dressed in the same clothes she was wearing at the moment, except that she wasn't covered in blood. "She's been stabbed," Quinn said, pointing to a gaping wound in the body's chest. She met Hermione's eyes across the table. "I think..." She sighed. "I think I might know why Harry was screaming."

In her surprise Hermione hadn't even thought of what it meant, but the truth of Quinn's words slammed home in her brain with an almost audible clanging sound. "Oh no," she breathed. "Allegra killed her in front of him so he'd think I was dead!" She looked up at Quinn with a stricken expression on her face. "I never thought she'd do anything so horrible to him."

"Oh, of course not. Just because she's attacked innocent people, killed those who went against her and plans to undo your boyfriend's very existence is no reason to think that she'd do anything \*evil.\*"

Hermione wanted to feel annoyed at Quinn's sarcasm, but given the validity of her point she couldn't bring herself to it. "Harry was right," she murmured. "I wouldn't last a day in this business. I do look for the most flattering explanation."

Quinn was poking the body's arm. "How do you think she did this?"

"Well, it can't be a Polyjuice potion, that requires that one be alive. The second this woman died she'd have reverted back to herself. It must be a glamour, they can be applied to anything."

Quinn jumped as if she'd suddenly remembered something and thrust a hand into one of the many pockets in her cloak and came out with a pair of large and exruciatingly ugly 70's style hornrimmed spectacles with blinding silver lenses like thin films of mercury.

"What are those?"

"Old Enforcer trick. They're Glamour Glasses. Put them on and you can see through any glamour." She slipped them onto her face, her eyes on the fake Hermione's body. "Yep. Glamour. Big time."

"Who is it?"

"I don't recognize her. But here, see for yourself. Another function of Glamour Glasses. Just touch the masked object while wearing them..." She laid a hand on the body's arm and the glamour rippled and dissipated. "...and all is revealed." The woman on the slab was a stranger to Hermione. She looked about 35 and was clothed in dark red wizard's robes. "Probably someone who didn't jump high enough when Allegra said 'frog.'" Quinn took off the Glamour Glasses and shook her head sadly. "Why would she do this? Why the subterfuge?"

Hermione, her face thoughtful, shook her head to indicate she didn't know. "Here's a better question...how did she know what I'm wearing right now? It's accurate right down to the tear in my cloak. That only happened a few hours ago, in the catacombs." They locked eyes, the same thought flashing between them, then they both began looking surreptitiously around the room.

"Are we being watched?"

"I don't know, but the questions keep piling up, don't they? How did we get here if Sorry's in Philadelphia? How did Allegra duplicate my appearance? And how did she trap Harry in the first place?" She regarded her companion through narrowed eyes. "Anything you want to tell me, Professor Cashdollar?"

Quinn looked back, her gaze flat. "Anything you want to \*ask\* me, Dr. Granger?"

For a long moment the two women stood regarding each other silently from opposite sides of the dead body before them. Finally Hermione held up the cloak, beckoning Quinn inside.

"Come on, let's find Harry. We'll worry about the rest later."

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"Shh...can you see anything?"

Quinn slowly poked her head around the edge of the doorway. "One guard."

"Do you see Harry?"

Another peek. "Yes. Far cell."

"How does he look? Is he okay?"

"Later. Let's worry about the guard first."



"Let me." Hermione raised her wand and they slunk as one into the long, narrow room. They crept closer and closer until they were about a foot away. Hermione thrust her wand forward and stunned the guard before he even realized they were there. "Accio!" she whispered, gesturing towards his pockets with her wand. A large golden key flew out of his cloak and into her hand.

Quinn held her tightly by the arm. "Now, be calm. We don't want to raise a ruckus and alert the entire building. Also, you don't want to alarm Harry. He's had one shock too many today. Just take it easy."

Hermione nodded. They walked calmly to the door of Harry's cell. For a moment Hermione just stood there looking at him, tears springing to her eyes. He was kneeling on the floor in the middle of the cell, curled up in a ball with his head resting on the floor and his arms wrapped around his stomach. Every few seconds his chest would hitch in the clear aftermath of a bout of intense grief. Hermione thrust the key into the lock and the entire door of the cell glowed and then popped open. Harry's head snapped up as the door swung open and then shut again, seemingly by itself.

Hermione steeled herself and then slipped the cloak off. Harry's eyes narrowed to angry slits; he sucked in a sharp breath and scrambled backwards until he wedged himself into the far corner, pressing up to his feet against the wall and staring at her. Hermione tried not to look at the blood still staining his clothing.

"Harry," she said softly, taking a step forward, her hand out. He tried to back up another step but couldn't.

"How much do you think I can take?" he said through gritted teeth, the anger fairly dripping from his words.

She blinked back the tears and took another step towards him. Quinn hung well back, not wishing to complicate matters. "Sweetheart...it's me. Hermione."

He shook his head once, emphatically. "Hermione's dead," he said in a flat, lifeless voice. It stung her to hear it. "It's a trick. Another trick. What more do you want?" he growled, as if he could talk to Allegra through her. "You've taken the last thing I loved. Can't you be satisfied with that?" he shouted.

Hermione flinched back slightly but moved still closer to him. He was hanging on by a very thin thread. "Harry, just relax. I know what you've been through in the last few hours...because I know what I'd go through if it were me. Just listen to my voice. Quinn and I came here looking for you. I heard you scream. I saw the body," she said, speaking clearly and deliberately. "The woman that she killed. She used a glamour to make her look like me." Harry's eyebrows twitched and he frowned, her words penetrating the mask of shock that still lay over his face. "She killed some unknown woman disguised as me. She wanted you to think I was dead." Throughout this speech she had been inching steadily closer until she stood right before him. "But Harry, I'm *\*not\** dead. I'm right here, I'm fine." Harry blinked at her, she could see that he wanted to believe but he wasn't sure she wasn't another cruel scheme of Allegra's and he wasn't taking any chances.

"How do I know?" he whispered, his previous fury evaporating leaving only naked sorrow in its place.

"You will know." She reached out and picked up one of his hands. "Look at me. Just let yourself believe it." She pressed his hand to the left side of her chest, covering it with both of

her own. "Feel my heartbeat. Know that it's me." She lifted one hand and laid it on his face. He flinched but didn't pull away. "It's true. She can't fool you with an impostor, because you know me better than anyone in the world. You told me that you love me. If you really do, then you know more than just my voice and my face and my favorite kind of wine. You know my soul, and you know it as no other but mine." She lowered her hand from his face to his chest, feeling the rapid thump of his heart beneath the skin. He looked into her eyes, and she could see the hope in them. She just waited, knowing he would feel the truth on his own.

His free hand rose to touch her face with hesitant fingertips...but as soon as they brushed her skin he drew them back as if her cheek burned. She smiled encouragingly and he touched her cheek again. "I'm not seeing things, am I?" he rasped.

"No. I'm real." His eyes fell shut and he sighed from deep in his chest. Hermione couldn't stand it any longer. She flung her arms around his neck and pulled his head to her shoulder. Harry stood there stiffly for a moment, then she felt his body relax and he clutched her to his chest, wrapping his arms around her so tightly she thought she could feel her ribs groaning in protest, but she didn't care. He was shaking like a leaf. Hermione stroked the back of his head with one hand. "Shh," she whispered. "It's okay." She'd never expected to be comforting \*him\* like this.

He drew back, grasped her head between his hands and began planting kisses all over her face. She just stood still and let him, holding onto his forearms. He embraced her again, more tightly than before, one hand rising to twine through her hair. He loosened his grip so he could look into her face. "When I saw you standing there I was sure I'd gone mad," he said, his voice hoarse. "I watched as she stabbed you through the back."

Hermione shut her eyes, horrified. "How awful that must have been."

"You have no idea. It was as if someone had turned me inside out." He leaned forward until their foreheads were resting against each other. "She wanted me to give in, and I would have. I had nothing left once she took you. I didn't care what happened to the world or if she succeeded in changing me over." He sighed. "I felt...I felt weak and alone and frightened." He looked in her eyes and she saw those feelings there still.

"That's how I felt when I realized she'd taken you," she said, smoothing his disheveled hair back from his damp brow. She squeezed him one more time and kissed him firmly. "All right. Are you ready to re-engage your mind to the task at hand?"

He smiled. "Give me a second. I feel like I've just run a marathon." He enfolded her in his arms once more, resting his cheek against her hair, and held her for a long moment. His hands roamed over her back and shoulders as if testing her reality. Finally he pulled back. "All right. I'm ready."

Quinn came forward and stood with them. "I don't suppose Persephone will be able to find us here."

Harry fumbled in his cloak. "She's been and gone, actually. She brought the Librarian's reply...I'm afraid I wasn't in a state of mind to look at it." He opened the envelope.

Hermione glanced around anxiously. "Shouldn't we get out of here?"

Harry shook his head. "Believe it or not, we're less likely to be caught in here. If we went wandering the corridors we'd run into someone before too long, but as long as no one decides

to come visit me we're safer here." He opened the Librarian's letter. "Dear Roman," he began to read.

"Who's Roman?" Hermione said, frowning.

Harry glanced at her, a bit sheepishly. "Um...that's my codename."

Quinn and Hermione exchanged an amused glance. "I'm still waiting to learn the secret handshake," Hermione said.

"May I read this please?" He cleared his throat and continued. "She says, 'I am most curious where you came to receive the spell you sent me, and who could possibly have sent it to you during your attacks. No one is supposed to know it. It's an artifact from the Progenitors, the first humans to harness the magical forces and become wizards. It isn't in the spellbooks because it cannot be preserved...it disappears from any writing within 48 hours. I've recopied it for you so you'll have time to study it.'"

"Interesting," Hermione murmured. "That's one way to keep a spell from falling into the wrong hands."

Harry continued. "It's a powerful incantation, difficult to execute and control. The two spellcasters must be opposites in some significant way, old and young for example, but yet connected. Related, or Enforcer partners or some other connection. It takes extraordinary concentration and magical control to execute the spell without injuring yourself. If performed correctly, this spell will bind any enemies within visual or vocal range from using magic to do harm to anyone."

"Permanently?" Hermione said, amazed. Binding spells were exceedingly tricky and difficult. Even the most successful only had a temporary effect.

"No," Harry said, scanning the rest of the letter. "She says the effect is not permanent, but its duration depends on the connection between the wizards performing the spell. Still, any way of affecting multiple wizards at once is an advantage." He put down the paper and looked at it. "Do you think we can do it?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You and me?"

"We're opposites. Man and woman. And I'd say we're strongly connected."

"How is the spell performed?"

He flipped to the page where the Librarian had recopied the spell. "The incantation is in stanzas, which must be spoken simultaneously by each wizard. After the first three stanzas, the two wizards clasp hands and speak the fourth stanza together. That's it." He handed her the spell.

"You'll need a copy too, so we can learn it."

"I already know it," he said. "It came out of my head, remember? Now that I've recalled it once I can't seem to forget it."

She looked down at the spell, mouthing the words to herself. After a few repetitions she handed the parchment back to Harry. "Okay, got it."

Harry didn't question her, knowing all too well her propensity for learning things by heart. He folded the note from the Librarian and slipped it into one of the inner pockets of his cloak.  
"All right, let's go."

"Where are we going?" Quinn asked.

Harry bit his lip. "We should try and find her main control center so that the spell neutralizes as many of them as possible."

"How are we going to do this?" Hermione said. "They're not going to just stand there and let us say all these stanzas."

Harry thought for a moment. "We'll get under the Invisibility cloak and whisper the words of the spell. With luck they won't know we're even there until we're finished. Once they're neutralized we'll need to stun them quickly so they don't have a chance to escape...they won't be able to use magic against us but they can still beat us up if we're not careful. We'll Apparate them all back to the I.D. and let them sort it all out."

"Sounds so easy."

"It always does," Harry said. "Somehow it never is." He squeezed Hermione's hand and nodded to Quinn. "Let's go."

They turned to the door of the cell. The guard was still out cold. Harry stood at the bars and listened for a moment. "I don't hear anyone in the hallway. Sounds like the coast is clear."

He opened the door of the cell, then paused. "What's wrong?" Hermione said.

His eyes were darting around as if looking for something. "I don't know. I thought I felt something." Hermione stood perfectly still and strained her ears but heard only silence. The corridor appeared to be empty except for the sleeping guard.

Quinn was peering through the bars with narrowed eyes. "I have a bad feeling."

"I'm right there with you," Harry said. The air in the corridor outside the cells suddenly began to shimmer like the space above a hot road. Harry stepped back, pushing Hermione behind him. Color began to seep into the shimmering and in the space of a few seconds, Allegra was standing before them surrounded by a half-dozen of her wizard followers. She grinned at him.

"Oh, the look on your face, Harry. You always think you've got the market cornered on invisibility." Her expression turned sour as she saw Hermione standing there. "Oh, it's you."

"Alive and well, thanks," Hermione said furiously.

"I hope you're happy, you ruined a very meticulously planned charade."

"Why?" Harry said, his teeth clenched over the words. "What was the point, besides your own amusement?"

She shook her head at him. "I take no amusement in suffering. It's simply not a concern to me. And as to the point, well I'd think that'd be obvious. You might agree to submit but you never really would. I wanted to so dispirit you that you'd welcome death. What better way?"

"How did you know our relationship had changed?" Harry asked.

"I have my sources. Now, back in the cell with you." She extended her wand and the key to the door flew from Hermione's hand to be caught neatly by Allegra's gloved fingers. "You're not going anywhere. And whatever spell you're planning to use on me, it won't work as long as you're in here. The cells are protected by anti-incantation fields." Harry sighed and backed up a step. "Soon I'll go back to Philadelphia and collect the tablets."

"Now that I know Hermione is alive, there's no way I'll submit willingly."

"I'll work around it." She put her hands on her hips. "Even if the changeover doesn't work, it will be victory enough just to kill you." She advanced on him, bright hatred burning from her iceberg blue eyes. Harry backed up, keenly aware of his vulnerability in a cell where he was without magical assistance and outnumbered six to one. "Your kind represent a significant threat to us. Voldemort knew that and he tried to eliminate you as soon as you were born, and we all know how well \*that\* turned out. It makes my master and indeed myself very nervous to have any wizards like you walking about free."

"What's she talking about?" Hermione whispered from behind his shoulder.

She smiled. "Oh my, you haven't told her. I don't think you've told anyone, have you? Methinks someone's going to have a lot of explaining to do later." She sighed. "Since we all have some time to kill, there's someone here I'd like you to meet." She stepped aside to allow a figure to come forward, one who had until now stayed in the shadows. He came to the door of the cell and the light fell on his face. It was Gerald.

Hermione sucked in a shocked breath and tried to rush forward. Harry grabbed her arms and held her back. "You!" she cried. "Who are you? WHO ARE YOU?" Harry had hold of both of her arms above the elbow and kept her back tight to his chest; she struggled against him in an attempt to reach Gerald and perhaps physically rip the mask off his face if she could.

Gerald came forward to look down at her flushed and angry face. "You look so upset, Hermione. Didn't we have a good time together?"

She stopped struggling and just glared at him, breathing heavily. "I'd just like to know who it was I had a good time with."

Gerald looked back at Allegra. "What do you think?"

She shrugged. "It can't possibly matter now."

Gerald turned back to Harry and Hermione, Quinn lurking in the background, all three of them watching him with bated breath. Gerald's expression did not change while a ripple began at the crown of his head and passed over his body as he allowed the glamour to fall away. At the sight of his real appearance, Hermione leaned back against Harry's chest, a strangled cry escaping her throat. She could feel Harry stiffen behind her, his fingers tightening on her arms until his grip was nearly painful. "Oh...my...GOD!" she screamed at the man, unmasked.

It was Draco Malfoy.

He looked...toughened. As if he had been out in the world for a long time with very little in the way of the comforts of home. He was just Harry's height but very lean and sheathed in ropy muscle. He was wearing black jeans that hung low on his narrow hips, thick-soled engineer's boots and a sleeveless dark purple t-shirt. A thick chain attached to his belt hung in an arc against his leg and disappeared into his hip pocket; prominent veins snaked under the skin of his forearms. A black leather bandoleer lay across his chest, his wand slid into a slot over his breastbone. His formerly fair skin was weathered to a leathery tan, and his face was

narrow and sharp-featured with hollow cheeks and a tight mean-looking mouth. His eyes were like chips of gray ice, their expression a world-weary thousand-yard stare. His most striking feature, however, was his hair. It had darkened from the platinum it had once been to a maplewood blond and fell well past his shoulders, twisted into hundreds of tiny braids, each of which ended in a shiny black bead. He just stood there waiting for the reaction, looking like nothing less than a complete badass.

Harry stared at him in the grip of total brainlock. Slowly, deliberately, he released Hermione's arms and walked forward until he stood before his former nemesis, whom he had believed dead. For an eternal moment he just stared at him, but he had to do something, even if it made no difference now. Harry hauled back and punched Draco across the jaw as hard as he could, which was quite hard indeed. Draco's head rocked back but he didn't even stumble. He looked back at Harry, a grim little smile on his face and a thin ribbon of blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth. "You've been waiting to do that for fifteen years, haven't you, Potter?" he said. His voice was gravelly, as if at some point someone had used his larynx to practice their tee shot.

"Draco, you \*bastard,\*" Hermione said, stepping forward. "Did you enjoy yourself? I hope you bloody well had a good time playing Gerald."

"He was a crushing bore, actually," he said, casually examining his fingernails. He smiled at her, a mischievous twinkle coming into his gray eyes. "\*You've\* got more stamina than I would have predicted, though... especially for a Mudblood." Harry lunged forward as if to attack him again, but Hermione grabbed him and yanked him back. Draco was looking from one to the other. "Well, look at the two of you. Isn't this cozy?" He stepped closer to Harry. "Remember that night I came to collect her for the company party?"

"How could I forget," Harry said.

"You should have seen yourself. Sitting there and just wishing every kind of pain and death upon me. It was all over your face. And then she came down the stairs...you did look beautiful, by the way...and your eyeballs just about popped right out of their sockets. I already knew she loved you just by the way she talked about you \*incessantly,\*" he said, rolling his eyes on the last word, "but it wasn't until then I realized it was mutual." He shrugged. "I suppose better late than never. Too bad you'll not have years and years to enjoy your relationship...although you do have the rest of your lives to spend together." He cocked his head and looked past them, life coming into his eyes for the first time as he did so. "Quinn, let's go. You've kept it up long enough."

Harry and Hermione stared, flabbergasted, as Quinn strode quickly past them and rushed into Draco's open arms. They kissed hungrily as if they'd been apart for a long time...which, Hermione supposed, they had been. "I \*knew\* it," Hermione said, her voice low and filled with a mixture of sadness and rage. "I just didn't want to believe it. I liked you too much to believe it."

Quinn looked at them. "I'm sorry, I really am. My job was just to get you here."

Hermione nodded. "The locator. Your knowledge of this facility. My appearance on the fake body. Even my relationship with Harry."

Harry spoke to Allegra. "You've had a direct pipeline into my life for months now, first through him and then through her."

Allegra stepped forward, laying a hand on Draco's shoulder. "He is an invaluable soldier. Years ago we faked his death so that he could assume any persona he liked and no one, not even the Circle, would know his identity. By helping deliver you to me he has earned his own life back. He can take his place in the inner sanctum. Perhaps he can even take his own father's spot...Lucius isn't the asset he used to be. And Professor Cashdollar has at least earned herself membership in the Circle." She smiled at her proteges. "We will leave you alone with yourselves," she said, executing a smug half-bow at Harry, who stood with his arms wrapped around Hermione and beads of sweat gathering at his brow. "When next we speak, everything will be ready. If you've any peace to make I suggest you make it now." With a swish of her robes she was gone, followed by Draco and Quinn, then her entourage of cloaked minions. The guard, who'd been revived, closed and sealed the door, leaving Harry and Hermione holding each other in the middle of the cell.

She clenched her fingers in the fabric of his shirt, her brain spinning in weary and shocked circles. "Draco," she whispered. "Harry, I slept with him."

"Shh. Try not to think about it."

"I can't stop! I feel like I'm about to crawl out of my skin! And Quinn! My God, Harry, we trusted her! We told her everything! Allegra knows so much!" She looked up at his face and saw that he too was trying to get a handle on the situation and having limited success.

"We can't trust anyone," he said grimly. "We have only ourselves now. I just hope it's enough."

"Harry...how are we going to get out of this?"

He sighed and held her tighter. "I don't know." After a long pause, he repeated it in a whisper. "I don't know."

*Author's Note: In chapter 8, Harry refers to Sirius Black as someone who Voldemort has taken from him. This does not necessarily mean Sirius is dead. Harry was deprived of a caring godfather because Sirius was imprisoned and later a fugitive, because of Voldemort and his schemes. Sirius is still alive.*

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## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 14: The Last Secret*

Harry and Hermione sat in the cell together, not speaking. He was on the floor propped up against the wall with his arms around her as she sat across his lap with her head nestled in the hollow of his shoulder. Allegra had left them there alone with nothing to do but think and no one for company except that one damned guard, who was now not only stone-faced but radiating anger at having been incapacitated so ignominiously.

"Is it all right to talk now?" she finally said.

"It was all right to talk before."

"Oh. I thought we were being quiet for a reason."

"What's left to say?"

She straightened up and stared at him, amazed. "Well, I have a few questions if it's all right with you."

He sighed. "Go ahead."

"Why did she leave us here together? Doesn't that violate some section of the Villain Code of Conduct?"

"If there were such a thing Allegra would go out of her way to violate it just to prove she could. And if she's going to kill us then she wants us alone together to better savor the exquisite agony of knowing we're spending our last moments together. She's not afraid we'll plot some escape plan. Such a possibility would not enter her calculations now that she's got us here where we're both powerless."

She laid her head back on his shoulder. "She could have killed me for real."

"Oh, no. Not in a million years."

"Why not?"

"Because it's been done already. She's seen my face when she killed you the first time, to repeat it would just be tiresome. Anyway, the longer I have to think about your death...not to mention my own...the better. She'll try and bring me down any way she can. Your fake death didn't work, so perhaps the knowledge of your upcoming actual death will do the trick. I'm sure she always intended to capture you even though she'd faked your death...perhaps now she can use you as leverage once again. If I cooperate she'll let you go, and so forth."

"Do you intend to cooperate if she proposes such a thing?"

His jaw clenched. "My cooperation would depend on my assessment of her sincerity in promising to let you go. If I believed her, I might...but it would take a lot for me to believe her at this point."

"I don't want you to cooperate, no matter what." He said nothing. "If you die I don't care what happens to me."

"Don't say that," he said sharply. "Hermione, I have to know that you'll be all right if I die and by some miracle she lets you go."

"I won't be."

He held her closer. "Yes, you will. You're stronger than that."

She pressed her lips to the side of his neck. "*You* make me strong."

"That's just your emotions talking." He heaved a ragged sigh. "We have to be realistic. It's likely that I won't survive this." Hermione tightened her arms about his shoulders and squeezed her eyes shut. "No, it's true. I can fight off a lot, but not this many all at once. She'll try to take away any advantage I have." He bowed his head to her shoulder. "I want you to promise me that if I die you'll do whatever you have to do to escape." A single hoarse sob escaped her throat. "You must promise!" he whispered urgently. "Go to Quinn, she might have a soft spot for you. I've got a feeling she goes about her villainy a tad reluctantly, she might be vulnerable. Find Sorry if she hasn't killed him too. Run, hide, use Forbidden Curses, do whatever you must to survive." He drew back and grasped her face between his hands. "If you live, then something of me lives too."

She shut her eyes and nodded. "All right, I promise."

"Good."



She lowered her eyes and spoke quietly. "What if the changeover works?"

"Then the entire world will probably change in completely unforeseeable and probably unhappy ways. In other words, it's not a good thing."

"Very succinct."

"Well, if I can't get to the point when facing death, then when can I?"

Hermione laid a hand on his face. "I really wish that guard wasn't there."

"Why? I mean, besides the obvious?"

"Well, if these are our last moments together, then I can think of better ways to spend them."

He cracked a slight smile. "Oh. I thought that *was* the obvious."

She straightened. "Maybe we should just do it anyway. Who cares about the guard?" Her cheeks flushed at this uncharacteristically brazen offer.

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "Let me get this straight. You want me to have sex with you in a cell with a guard watching as my arch-nemesis prepares our imminent deaths?"

"Well...when you put it like that..."

"I see. And are there any more comic-book trashy-romance-novel cliches you'd care to invoke at this time?"

"The only other one I can think of would be for me to beg you to impregnate me so I could at least have your child after your untimely death." She couldn't believe they were cracking jokes at a time like this, but what else was there? You could only engage in so much angst-filled hand-wringing before you went mad.

Harry laughed. "Oh yes, of course. But shouldn't you be wearing a very low-cut peasant blouse and a big billowy skirt slit up to your hips?"

"Only if you'll grow your hair out to the middle of your back and put on a pirate shirt unbuttoned down to your navel. Then we have to embrace dramatically in front of a wind machine, preferably with my décolletage hovering just on the edge of decency and a Scottish mountain range in the background."

"What shall we call it? No, wait, I've got it...'She Wore a Black Vinyl Catsuit.'"

"No no...'Hogwarts Heartthrobs.'"

"'Passion and Potions!'"

"'Wild Wizards With Weally Wong Wands!'" she spluttered, collapsing into a fit of laughter. Harry clutched his stomach, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. "Oh boy...we're going to die, aren't we?"

"Probably," Harry managed between chuckles. Their laughter slowly trailed off into a tense silence; they sat quietly, not looking at each other. Their momentary attack of mirth notwithstanding, the situation was dire to say the least. She sat numb, conscious only of the cold stones beneath them and his hand making slow circles on her lower back.

"It's too soon," Hermione finally said. Harry said nothing; he tightened his arm around her back. She leaned against him, trying to recall if she'd ever been this exhausted. It seemed a lifetime had passed since they'd woken at Dana's house that morning. "There's so much I still have to tell you," she whispered.

"I know," he said. She looked up into his eyes and saw there a thousand dreams she hadn't dared to have and all she'd secretly wished for. The rest of the world fell away and all there was in the world were his eyes, their brilliant green irises full of an expression she could not begin to describe. I've waited my whole life for a man look at me like that, she thought to herself. She slipped her arms around his shoulders and held him tightly, squeezing her eyes shut and trying to take some scant measure of comfort in the secure feeling of his embrace. One arm circled her back, the other hand twined in her hair. The rough wool of his cloak scratched her cheek; she gripped it between her fingers like a lifeline. "It wasn't supposed to be this way," he said hoarsely.

"Shh," she said. "Don't talk about it."

"We should have had years..."

"We can't change the past, and we might not have tomorrow. It's just right now, it'll have to be enough."

"I love you," he whispered into her ear. "If I had a hundred years and all the words ever written I wouldn't be able to say how much." He pressed his cheek against her hair. "And now it's my fault that you're here."

"Don't," she repeated. "Everything I've done, *I* have done of my own free will. It's not your fault."

"Why didn't you stay away?" he said, his voice laced with hopelessness.

"I couldn't. You want to know why?" She drew back and looked at him. "Because as corny as it sounds, you're the only man I've ever really loved, and I've loved you all my life. There, that's what I needed you to know." She sighed as if the sentence had taken her last bit of strength. "All right, we can die now."

The corner of his mouth slid upwards in a half-smile. "Yes, bring on the changeovers and the fates worse than death, we're ready."

Only a few minutes ago their levity had managed to break the tension...now, it fell flat and lifeless and served only to drive home the point it tried to avoid. Hermione shut her eyes, keeping the tears away only through sheer force of will. She felt Harry lean forward and then his lips on hers. Grateful for the distraction she pressed against him, relaxing into his arms. For a few moments they kissed gently, carefully, as if each were afraid the other might shatter. All at once he stopped and pulled back. Hermione opened her eyes, puzzled, to see the oddest expression on his face...as if he weren't sure where he was or what he was doing. She felt hypersensitized, the small movements of his hand on her lower back amplified to huge sweeping gestures. She could feel his heartbeat accelerating, her own racing to catch up. A flash of heat passed between them; she grabbed him about the shoulders just as he crushed her to his chest, their lips meeting in the middle with almost enough force to leave a bruise.

An observer with any sensitivity would have felt a flush rise to their face at the ardor of the scene before them. If they continued to watch they may have been put in mind of a time when they had been in such a passionate embrace as this, for it was clear that the two people

involved could not get enough of each other. They kissed with such hunger it almost seemed as if they intended to devour each other. The man held the woman as tightly as if he were trying to fuse their two bodies into one; her arms gripped him like he was the only thing keeping her from falling into a dark, tarry abyss.

But Hermione did not see any of this with such objective observation, she only felt herself burning. She felt his mouth on hers and the muscles of his back beneath her arms; she felt his hand slip underneath her shirt, his fingers searingly hot against her skin. She felt his breath on her face and heard her pulse roaring in her ears and she heard the question ringing through her mind even as her tongue delved into his mouth and she felt his hand on her breast there was still the question, the one to which she wasn't sure she wanted the answer but which she *had* to ask. "Harry," she mumbled against his mouth.

"Hmmm," he said, not stopping. She put her hands against his chest and forced herself to push him away. His face creased into a puzzled expression. "What? What's wrong?"

She didn't stop to catch her breath, afraid she'd lose her nerve. "What are you?" she gasped. "What are you?"

He just stared at her for a long moment, then sagged and let his head drop to his chest. "I'm sorry."

"What are you?" she repeated. "She said you were...the only one of your kind." He nodded weakly. "For God's sake, Harry, what *are* you?"

When he lifted his head his expression was so naked with apprehension that she feared the answer even more. "What do *you* think I am?"

"I don't know what Allegra meant, but I'll tell you what I *know* you to be." She smoothed his rumpled hair. "You're a good man, but you have faults. You're a hero, but a modest one. You're dangerous, but you're careful. You're powerful, but you're insecure. You make me laugh and you hold me when I'm sad. You're very good at Quidditch and you're a wonderful dancer and you're kind to children and you're a sucker for ice cream and I love you."

He leaned forward and placed a slow, deliberate kiss on her clammy forehead. "Nothing that I am will change any of that," he said.

"Why are you so afraid to tell me? What could be that horrible?"

"That's just it, it's not horrible at all. It could even be wonderful. It's not that I'm afraid to tell you, it's that I'm afraid of what I am. It's taken me most of my life to acknowledge it and accept the fact that...most of the bad things that have happened to me really are my own fault."

"They're not! They're..."

"Shh, listen to me. Because of what I am, my parents died. Ron died. Dumbledore and Hagrid died. Because of what I am, I am hunted. Others have been hurt in that hunt, and more will likely be hurt, perhaps even you. Because of what I am, I denied my feelings for you for years, even long after I knew in my heart that I couldn't live without you."

"All right, I'm dying of suspense! Tell me now or I swear I'll..."

That was as far as she got. The door out to the hallway banged open and wizards in green robes began filing in. Harry and Hermione rose as one; he stepped partially in front of her and

faced the door of the cell. The robed wizards lined up on either side of the door and then Allegra swished in, smiling with self-satisfaction. She'd changed her clothes; she was now clad in a long white gown of an odd diaphanous material that flowed like water around her legs. Her hair was loose and streamed down her back in an inky river. Next to her cold and perfect beauty Hermione suddenly felt like an old shoe.

"Ah," Harry said as Allegra unlocked the door to the cell. "Is that your Death outfit? Very becoming, but you know white's not practical for killing. The bloodstains never come out."

Her serene smile turned into a smirk. "I knew I could count on you, Harry. Even facing death you've still got a smartass remark to make."

"Is it time, then?"

"Yes." She nodded to some of her minions. "Bring them."

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Harry and Hermione were led back to the circular pit room with their hands chained behind them. They walked in silence surrounded by Allegra's green-robed wizards, Allegra leading the procession with her gown billowing out behind her. A few tears slipped down Hermione's cheeks as she pondered the likely fact that the man next to her was the love of her life, a realization that had come cruelly late in their relationship, and that she had touched and spoken to him for the last time.

The corridor opened up to the execution theater, as Quinn had called it. Hermione's jaw dropped, for the room was not as she remembered it. The ceiling was gone, or enchanted into invisibility, leaving only the midnight blue night sky and a sprinkling of stars above them. The room was ringed with tall torches that glowed not with flame but with green eldritch fire, casting a cold and eerie light over the room. The raised platform at the end of the chamber bore only the restraint chair and a sturdy podium, on which rested two stone tablets covered in dense writing. These, she could only assume, were the changeover rituals retrieved from the chamber beneath Philadelphia. Sorry stood behind the podium, his hands clasped before him, his face partially hidden by the hood of his cloak. Standing in rows facing the platform were several dozen cloaked wizards, presumably the Circle members and other dark wizards.

Quinn and Draco were waiting just inside the room, and as Allegra and her entourage entered, Quinn stepped forward and grasped Hermione's arm, drawing her away from the group. The robed wizard guards fell away and joined the others; Draco grabbed Harry and led him towards the platform. Hermione strained against Quinn's grip, which was strong as an iron manacle. "No!" she cried, to no avail. "Harry!"

"Shush," Quinn hissed. "You can't help him now." She stood with a hand on Hermione's shoulder, keeping her in place. Hermione watched helplessly, tears slipping down her cheeks and her teeth gritting in frustration.

Harry thought fast as Draco dragged him onto the platform. I could overpower Draco, he thought, but what would it get me? There's an army of wizards in here and they all hate me. He saw Allegra take her place before the podium; Draco paused and looked at her. She glanced over at Hermione, who was standing next to Quinn. "You make sure she stays right there." Quinn nodded. Allegra turned to one of her guards. "And you might as well chain him up as well," she said, jerking her head towards Sorry. After a few seconds of blank resignation, Sorry just sighed and rolled his eyes, not appearing to be terrifically surprised.

"I would have let you know..." Harry began, meeting his eyes.

"That she was on to me?" Sorry answered as the guard led him off the platform. "I half-suspected it anyway. But I thought she'd make full use of my help on the changeover before she hung me from the yardarm."

"Your kind of help I can do without," she said. "You'd never consciously help me change Potter over, how could I trust you? Besides, I always backup my experts." She nodded towards a wizard at the far end of the room; he stepped aside and a woman in powder blue robes came forward. Harry didn't recognize her. He looked over at Sorry, whose mouth was hanging open in astonishment.

"Winter?" Sorry breathed. Harry shut his eyes briefly, another piece of the puzzle falling into place. I should have known, he thought. How else did Leland go through the exact same changeover as Laura did? Rivers of blood and forests of thorns and 'tam htab?' Both of their rituals were performed by the same person and probably in the same place. Shock appeared to have regressed Sorry to childhood as he stared at his grandmother. "Winter...how could you help her?" Winter did not answer. "What have you done to her?" Sorry growled at Allegra.

Isn't it obvious? Harry thought. Look at her eyes, she's under an Imperius Curse. Allegra explained, smiling indulgently at Winter. "When I began my research into the changeover and obtained my first test subject, I wanted to duplicate the circumstances of a successful changeover as closely as possible to maximize its chances for success, so I took Leland to New Zealand...hey, that rhymes!...to your family home, Sorry. Your mother I stunned, your grandmother I enlisted to help me. She performed the same ritual on Leland that she had done on Laura, right down to the kinky little details. Needless to say it didn't work, but her knowledge of the ritual impressed me so I brought her home with me. Imagine my surprise when the grandson whose picture was everywhere in the house and whom she'd talked of so often showed up on my doorstep claiming to be a big bad wizard." Sorry was biting his lips, probably cursing himself silently. "So you never had a chance of fooling me, I'm afraid. Especially since Winter also let it slip that your longtime girlfriend was a housemate to one Harry Potter of my acquaintance."

"Why did you keep me around, then?"

"Curiosity, I suppose. You also came in rather handy as a means for me to feed Harry information and lead him to me. And if I were to keep Winter a secret even from the Circle, I needed *someone* to be visibly working on the changeover documents." She nodded to the wizard holding him. "Put him with Dr. Granger." Sorry was placed next to Hermione, his keeper staying by his side. Allegra turned back to Harry.

"So where's this master of yours? Are we to have the pleasure?" Harry said.

"Probably not. My master chooses when to visit, I do not issue invitations. This occasion is of great importance to us, but my master can just as easily observe from a distance." She looked at Draco. "Put him in the chair." She turned to face the podium and she and Winter fell to the preparations.

Draco shoved Harry into the wooden chair. Harry kept his eyes on Hermione, watching from across the room, as Draco slapped the built-in manacles over his ankles. He removed the chains and held Harry's wrists over the restraints on the arms of the chair, snapping them closed. Harry watched as Draco moved his fingers over the metal cuffs to slide the locking pins into place...except that he didn't actually do so, he merely made the motion. The locking pins stayed where they were. He had left the manacle closed but unlocked. Harry kept his

expression carefully neutral as he watched Draco repeat this procedure on his other wrist, right down to the pantomime, thus eliminating the possibility that he had simply made a disastrous error. As Draco finished, Harry made a very slight motion with his left foot and felt the manacle at his ankle give slightly; it too was unlocked.

Before he could even begin to wonder what this meant, Harry felt something being surreptitiously slid inside his sleeve underneath his left forearm, something long and narrow...it was his wand. Harry, stupefied, looked up and met Draco's pale eyes, and it was then that the situation suddenly took a wild lurch.

Draco's left eyelid dropped in a very fast but very intentional wink.

Harry cut his eyes away at once lest he betray something by his expression. Draco covered up by checking the restraints, then straightened and stepped to the side. Harry tried to maintain his composure while his mind was reeling. Draco was *helping* him. He'd left his restraints unlocked and had slipped him his wand. If *he* was on their side then...his eyes flicked to Quinn, standing at Hermione's side. If Draco and Quinn were on their side, then this situation was no longer quite so hopeless. All he had to do was pick his moment and he might have a shot.

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Hermione watched as Draco locked Harry into the restraint chair, her view momentarily blocked by Draco's slender body. Quinn's hand was firm upon her shoulder and Sorry stood silently next to her. Hermione felt numb with despair and the inevitability of what she was about to see. She wondered if she would physically be able to watch, but she knew that Allegra would do everything in her power to *force* her to watch.

Over her desperate desire not to think about it, her mind relentlessly circled around the idea of what it would be like to live without him. She could scarcely grasp the concept, she'd never been away from him for longer than a Hogwarts summer holiday. As she imagined this bleak possibility it was not the absence of the man who was her lover that she thought of most, instead she dreaded losing the man who was her companion, her friend, the strong wall at her back. In all the ways he impacted her life on a daily basis, small insignificant ways that collectively comprised the most important relationship she'd ever had. How can I ever go through a day knowing that he will not bid me goodnight at the end of it? How can I possibly write another paper or read another book knowing that he will never bring me tea or make me stop and go to sleep? He's a part of everything I do, everything I *am*. How can I go through my life alone without the other half of myself?

As Draco manacled Harry to the chair Hermione felt Quinn's free hand at her chained wrists. She said nothing as long fingers popped the lock on the chains open; it took all the restraint she could muster to keep still and silent as the chains were slowly and quietly lifted off her hands. Quinn grasped both of her wrists in one hand and squeezed them together quickly, the silent message clear: 'keep your hands here as if they're still chained.' She felt Quinn slip something into the pocket of her cloak. It wasn't her wand, but what it indeed was wasn't clear. Hermione glanced around to see if they were in any danger of being observed; there was no one behind them and the wizard guarding Sorry was on the far side of his prisoner, his view blocked by Quinn's body.

Hermione thought quickly. Quinn is trying to help. What the hell is she doing teamed up with Draco? Maybe she's working undercover to bring him down. But cutting *me* loose isn't going to help much. What can I do against a roomfull of dark wizards?

Draco was now standing next to Harry's chair, his hands clasped behind his back. Harry stared straight ahead, his face oddly strained and still. Allegra turned to face the gathered wizards, her back to Hermione. Winter was standing quietly next to the podium.

"My friends," Allegra said. "Thank you for coming. We're ready to begin." Winter handed her a stone goblet from a shelf behind the podium. Allegra pulled out a small knife and stood at Harry's side. She picked up one of his fingers and made a small cut in its tip; Harry's face betrayed no pain. She held the goblet under his finger and let a drop of his blood fall into the bowl; she swirled the contents and held it up to Harry's lips. He just glared at her. She smiled. "You know I can make you drink it."

Harry sighed, eyeing the goblet. "What is it?"

"Just wine, and now a little bit of you. It's a symbol."

"Then why bother? Get on with it."

Allegra shrugged and set the goblet down. She picked up a few small objects that Hermione couldn't identify and pressed them into Harry's hand. She dipped a small paintbrush into a container and leaned over him, raising the brush to his face...but it never touched him.

All of a sudden, Harry's right arm shot up, the manacle falling ineffectually to the side; in a fraction of a second his hand pistoned out and clamped tightly around Allegra's throat. The goblet fell from her hand and clattered to the floor, spraying wine on her dress.

The wizards gathered around the perimeter of the room jerked forward as if to rush to her aid but in an instant Draco whipped his wand out of his bandoleer and interposed himself between them and the chair. "Don't even try it," he hissed. Hermione's mouth was hanging open in astonishment.

Harry kicked away the ankle manacles and slowly stood, his fingers digging into her throat. He flicked his other wrist and his wand slid into his hand. Hermione realized in a flash that Draco had only feigned locking him into the chair and had probably slipped him his wand...and now he protected him. Her head was starting to throb; the variables were shifting too rapidly.

Harry's face was a mask of fury as he held Allegra at arm's length. "Just give me a reason," he growled. Winter stood placidly to the side, her face blank. Draco was watching the gathering of wizards, his eyes wide and alert, every muscle tensed.

One of the green-cloaked wizards stepped a little bit forward and pushed his hood back; it was Lucius Malfoy. "Give me the wand, Draco," he said. "You don't want to protect Potter after all he's done to you."

Draco's lips curled into a sneer. "What he's done is nothing to what you've done. Step back, Dad...or you'll be meeting all those you've sent to their deaths." Lucius hesitated.

"You're bluffing."

Draco didn't even flinch. "Care to find out?" Lucius stepped back.

Allegra's hands clutched at Harry's wrist, her face going purple. Hermione felt a grim satisfaction at the sight of it. There was no mercy on Harry's face, his clenched teeth bared as his green eyes seemed to bore holes through her.

"Now what?" she croaked. "You can kill me, Harry, but how far do you think you'd get?" Harry's left eyelid twitched a bit at this statement; he shifted his gaze to Hermione's face, then over her shoulder to Quinn. Hermione saw Quinn nod out of the corner of her eye.

"Draco," he said softly. Draco nodded, not taking his eyes off the wizards poised to rush the platform, held back only by the threat of the crackling tip of his wand and Lucius' belief in his son's determination. No one wanted to be first. Harry looked back at Allegra. "One," he whispered. "Two. Three!"

On "three," a number of things happened all at once but were almost immediately lost in the pandemonium that ensued. Harry released Allegra's neck, seized her about the waist and *threw* her into the crowd of her loyal followers, knocking several of them off their feet. At the same time, Draco leapt off the platform and dove in amongst the startled wizards, stunning anyone he touched with a flash of his wand. Quinn darted to the side and severed Sorry's chains with a sweep of her wand, and Hermione ran forward to meet Harry as he jumped off the platform, slipping his wand into the pocket of his cloak. The spell, the spell, she thought. If we can do the spell right now it'd be a tremendous advantage. By the look on his face he had the same thought.

Unfortunately neither of them got very far. She was immediately grabbed around the middle by someone behind her, and Harry was tackled by a wizard who came flying in from the left. Her captor dragged her to the back of the room and surrounded himself with several other wizards; she could do nothing but watch and struggle as chaos erupted.

The entire chamber seemed to be filled with shouting as spells and curses flew like spitballs. She watched Quinn duck and roll to avoid one and then stun another wizard who was just raising his wand at her. Draco was using his fists *and* his wand to plow through the melee as he tried to reach Harry, who was in far worse shape. Most of the Circle wizards were quite logically concentrating on him, and he was beset from all sides by wand-wielding attackers. The ones Draco had Stunned stubbornly refused to stay Stunned, they kept getting right back up again.

"Harry!" Hermione cried. He was rapidly disappearing under a pile of dark green cloaks.

Draco wrenched himself away from the hands that held him back and lunged towards Harry, but once he got there he couldn't even *find* him in what was starting to resemble a rugby pileup with Harry on the bottom.

Quinn rushed forward but suddenly found Allegra standing in front of her looking pissed as hell...before Quinn could react she found herself on the receiving end of a hard punch that knocked her to the ground. Allegra turned and hit Draco in the back with a shot from her wand. He spun around, clutching the wound, stumbled over his own feet and fell down. "You got him?" she called towards the pileup.

"I got him!" someone shouted. "Wait I lost him...bloody hell!" the wizard cried out. The pileup was...*heaving*, looking absurdly as though it were in labor. As if, Hermione realized, someone were pushing up on it from beneath. The wizards' shouts became confused, puzzled, surprised.

The hairs on the back of her neck began to stand up. Something's happening, she thought. The very air felt charged with electricity. The magic was very thick in this room, and some sense beyond the five she trusted was tickling at the base of her spine, whispering to her that no one was prepared.



All at once the rugby pileup was shoved forcibly outwards; something *burst* from the middle of it and shot into the air...Hermione gasped as she realized it was Harry. She stared upwards, amazed.

He was floating in midair about twenty feet off the ground, and he looked mad enough to chew nails. Hermione's jaw dropped open at the sight of him, because he looked different. He was...well, *glowing* was the closest her mind could come, though that wasn't exactly right. He seemed vaguely illuminated as if by footlights, his hair and cloak were moving though there was no wind, and the green of his eyes was so brilliant that they seemed to be on fire.

Someone raised their wand and took a shot at him, but he was too quick. He darted forward, propelling himself easily through the air with no hint as to how he was doing it. The Circle wizards didn't seem interested; between Sorry, Draco and Quinn most of them had been Stunned several times already, yet they continued to shake off the effects.

Harry was...flying. Without a broomstick. Without enchanted cars. With no visible trace of magical assistance. No wands, no spells, no charms or incantations. Just hanging in the air and zipping around the room like the Snitches that he had been trained to catch. It wasn't just levitating, it was honest-to-God flying. It made Hermione's brain hurt to watch it. She thought of him making the guards at Grunnings let them pass. She thought of his confidence that he *could* get into the vault in the catacombs even without the unlocking spells. She thought of Voldemort's inability to kill him as a supposedly defenseless baby.

And she thought of Allegra saying that he was the only one of his kind.

Allegra ran up to the platform, staring angrily up at her suddenly gravity-proof opponent. "Nice moves, flyboy! Do I look impressed to you?"

"No," he said, then took a nosedive downwards and slammed both feet into her chest, sending her crashing into the wall of the chamber. He landed on the platform, his boots thudding against the stones. "You look pathetic."

She smirked at him. "Well, at least *I* can count on my friends."

Before Harry could even open his mouth to reply he was knocked clear off his feet by a wizard who threw himself at his back in a flying tackle. Isn't it time for the tea interval? Hermione thought. The fighting continued unabated. Green-cloaked wizards lay here and there on the floor in extreme danger of being trampled to death. Quinn, having just forced herself to her feet after being knocked off them, stood with her back to Draco dodging curses and flinging her own at anyone who came near her.

Harry scrambled up and faced the wizard who'd tackled him. It was Lucius Malfoy. "Hello, Lucius," he said. "Nice of your supposedly dead son to lend me a hand."

"I'm not scared of you," Lucius said, whipping out his wand. As Hermione watched, Harry thrust his hand forward and wrapped his fingers around Lucius' forehead. She couldn't see what he did, but Lucius gave a convulsive jerk and dropped like a stone.

"You should be," Harry muttered, then turned and strode towards Hermione. They locked eyes, their thoughts as from one mind. Ready? Yes. Harry raised a hand and then pointed at her. Now.

She began to speak the first stanza of the spell, watching his lips move as he did the same. He raised both hands as he approached and all at once the wizards holding her were flung away as if by a shockwave, leaving her standing alone. As the second stanza passed her lips

Hermione began to feel a thrumming passing through her body as if she were sitting on the hood of a car while it was running, and her right hand began to tingle. A Circle wizard ran up to Harry from the side...without missing a step Harry raised his hand towards the attacker and he was flung away.

Hermione had to resist the urge to recoil as he approached. She didn't know what to make of him. She wasn't altogether sure she knew who he was...but she *was* sure that some part of her was afraid of him.

The wizard who'd been holding her before got to his feet behind her. Without thinking Hermione bent and picked up a wand someone had dropped and held it out, Stunning him. The unfamiliar wand sent a shock up her arm and she dropped it at once, turning back to Harry. Two wizards came at him from opposite sides and he jumped into the air, allowing them to collide beneath him.

He extended a hand towards her and she felt her feet leaving the ground. Hermione sucked in a breath and forced herself to be calm as she slowly rose to his level. She met his eyes and they spoke the third stanza. The magic she'd felt running through her body began to rush down her arm and into her right hand; it glowed a brilliant red color. She could see that Harry was being similarly affected. As the last words left her lips she could sense the magic straining to leave her control and run wild, she forced her concentration back to the spell she was casting.

All this took more than half a minute. She spared a glance below...all did not go well for the side of the right. The Circle wizards refused to stay down and kept returning to renew their attack. Sorry was slumped on the floor unconscious. Quinn was heavily favoring her left arm, her right hung limply from its socket. Draco's face was pale but it would not be long before he were overcome. These wizards had powerful protection against Stunning and other magical attacks, nothing could phase them for long. A punch in the face was almost more effective. Allegra stood on the platform watching, apparently not considering the outcome to be uncertain enough to be worth her exerting herself.

Hermione looked back at Harry. He drew her forward until she was a mere half-meter from him. She met his eyes and tried to concentrate, tried to think only of the strong connection to him which the Librarian had said was so necessary. He raised his hand and she did the same; upon some tacit signal they brought them together between them. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Allegra watching them with an angry face.

Their palms met with a sound like a thunderclap, the red witchlight enveloped them both. Hermione cried out in pain as the shock of what felt like hundreds of volts of electricity coursed through her. Harry's face was contorted into a frightful grimace and his hair stood on end, both their cloaks whipping around their bodies. Allegra was now trying to stop them. She had her wand out and was throwing curse after curse in their direction but they were inexplicably deflected. She screamed at a nearby wizard to do something, gesturing up at them with agitation.

Hermione gripped Harry's fingers like a vise, her other hand wrapped around her own wrist to keep their hands together. She heard herself speaking the last stanza without realizing she'd opened her mouth; she could only assume Harry was doing his part. With each syllable the magical circuit they had formed grew more and more powerful. Hermione struggled to keep ahold of his hand when her brain was urging her to let go, for God's sake.

She opened her eyes as the last word left her lips, relieved to see that he was speaking in synch with her. As the spell concluded, a wave of red light shot out in all directions from their clasped hands, flooding the entire room in a blood-soaked glow. The surge of magic was gone as suddenly as it had come and she was left merely holding Harry's hand several meters above the ground.

The green-cloaked Circle wizards were still fighting, but to their amazement their wands no longer functioned. One by one they backed away, suddenly unsure. Allegra was shaking her head as if she couldn't believe it. Draco, a look of grim satisfaction on his face, gleefully Stunned several wizards...they stayed down this time. His wand held before him, he herded the rest to one side of the room. Hermione released Harry's hand and sank slowly to the floor. The others just stood there staring at Harry as he floated gently to the ground.

He faced Allegra, his hands on his hips. "Okay. Now what?"

Out of nowhere, one of the anonymous green-robed goons suddenly gave a yell and rushed at Harry from the left side. Harry sidestepped his kamikaze lunge and slammed a foot into his midsection, then grabbed the guy's head and smashed it into his knee, throwing him to the side. He stepped back and faced the others, his color high. "All right, who's next?" he cried. "You want to keep this up? Fine by me! Anyone else wanna take a swing?" No one took him up on it. "Good. Then you'll all live to see a nice, comfortable jail cell."

Allegra still looked merely chagrined at this turn of events. She did not appear remotely frightened or furious. "You presume too much, Harry."

"What are you going to do? Say 'booga-booga' and wiggle your fingers at me?"

"My master..."

"Oh, enough about your bloody Master! We've yet to see hide nor hair of him! You know, I'm beginning to wonder if there really *is* a Master, Allegra. Perhaps it's just you!"

"Potter," Draco murmured. "I hate to interrupt your little melodrama, but we can't stand here all day. What now?"

Harry shot him an curt glance. "Well, since you seem to be the one pulling rabbits out of your hat around here, I rather thought you'd have planned for this contingency."

"I didn't think this far ahead. Tell you the truth, I didn't have much hope that you'd live this long."

Harry snorted. "Your vote of confidence is overwhelming." Hermione glanced from one to the other, thinking how comforting it was to see that Draco and Harry were no closer to being fast friends than they'd ever been, the former's unexpected heroics notwithstanding. It lent a certain sense of order and stability to the universe that they weren't rushing to become blood brothers. Harry stepped back, not taking his eyes off Allegra. "What happens now is that we send a message to the I.D. and wait for the cavalry."

"Not necessary," Sorry said. "I sent an owl and an Apparating locator to Remus Lupin right before the changeover ceremony began. They should be here soon."

Harry smiled. "Good. I'm glad someone here is thinking ahead."

Sorry stepped up to Harry's side. "What about Winter? Can't we do something for her?"

Everyone looked over to where she stood, still behind the podium, not having moved an inch during the entire fracas. Harry bit his lip, then nodded. "Draco, keep an eye on the peanut gallery, will you?" Draco gave a terse nod, not taking his eyes off said gallery. Harry and Sorry stepped up to the platform to where Winter stood placidly staring straight ahead. Hermione watched from a distance, keeping close to Quinn, who seemed about to collapse. Harry stood at Winter's side and peered into her blank eyes.

"I'm not terribly familiar with this curse," Sorry admitted.

"Ordinarily it can only be lifted by the witch who imposed it," Harry said, glancing at Allegra, "but I'll see what I can do." He glanced up at Sorry's anxious face. "Now...she's been under for a long time and her brain will need some time to recover. She'll probably lose consciousness at once." Sorry nodded and stood behind her, ready to catch her if she should fall. Harry thought a moment, fingering his chin, then stepped in front of Winter and placed his hands on either side of her head. Hermione saw his hands crackle slightly and Winter's body stiffen. Harry stepped away and Winter slumped into Sorry's arms, unconscious.

Hermione was watching the scene on the platform. Quinn had her eyes shut, her teeth clamped tightly together against cries of pain from her arm, which appeared to be broken. Draco was watching the Circle wizards. No one, unfortunately, was watching Allegra.

A slight movement caught Hermione's eye and she turned just in time to see Allegra bend quickly and retrieve something from the floor by the platform. She sucked in a breath as she realized it was a sword, its blade stained with blood...probably, she realized, the blood of the unnamed woman who had been killed in her own stead. Allegra moved with amazing quickness, she was on the platform before anyone realized what was happening. "Harry, look out!" Hermione cried.

Harry whirled around to see her bearing down on him, sword raised as if to slice him right down the middle. He reacted quickly, raising his right arm and swinging it towards her to deflect the blade. Hermione steeled herself against the gout of blood she was expecting as Allegra's sword severed Harry's arm at the elbow...but instead she heard only the clank of metal against metal.

As he swung his arm forward, a sword appeared in Harry's hand and met Allegra's blade in midair, still glittering from its materialization. "Ha!" he exclaimed in relief. Hermione's eyes widened as she recognized the sword in Harry's hand. It was Godric Gryffindor's, its jeweled hilt unmistakable. Upon his graduation Harry had discovered a long package in his room, a gift from Dumbledore. The sword had been inside, with a typically cryptic note from the headmaster. Rumors ran rampant in the wizarding world (where talk was *exceedingly* cheap...especially Potter gossip, a favorite and neverending topic) that Harry and his father were descended directly from Godric Gryffindor and this was why the sword had been given to him, but this ancestry had never been substantiated though Hermione had always wondered about it. Harry kept the sword mounted on the wall in his room...or did he? "Nice try," he said now to Allegra.

She stepped back, keeping her sword between them. "Are you afraid to face me without magic?"

"Why would I be?"

"Well, swordfighting was your weakest discipline. You never did beat me."

"Times change."

"We'll see." She straightened and lifted the flat of the sword to her forehead. Harry did the same, then they stood facing each other en garde.

The moment seemed to stretch on forever. Hermione stood with her fists clenched so tightly that later she would find half-moon shaped indentations in the palms of her hands from her fingernails. Sorry, his grandmother in his arms, backed up slowly off the platform to a safer distance. Draco kept his eyes on his charges, grimly ignoring the proceedings, but Quinn watched silently, clutching her arm tightly to her body.

Hermione wondered what they were waiting for...then she took a better look at their faces and understood. Harry's was stony and calm as a glacier, Allegra's was tense and excited and growing more so with each passing second. He was letting her mind do some of his work for him, just as Ron used to let his time run down to make her nervous in their ad hoc chess tournaments. Finally Allegra took the first swing, as she had to...for it was achingly clear that Harry would have waited forever.

She thrust her sword towards him, he deflected it, and it began. They moved back and forth across the platform, the sound of their swords striking each other filling the room as they parried back and forth.

"You've been practicing," she said.

"Have I?"

"Seven years ago I would have won already."

"Perhaps you've just gotten worse."

She lunged, thrusting her sword upwards. He spun around and knocked it away, forcing her to take a step forward to recover from the lunge and they swapped positions, facing each other again, the intensity of their strikes increasing as the beads of sweat began to pop out on their brows.

"Do you remember the last time we did this?" she said.

"No."

"We ended up having sex in the equipment locker on a big pile of tumbling mats."

"Ah, is *that* why you wanted this fight? Hoping history would repeat itself? Sorry, I'm spoken for, I don't care how peckish you're feeling."

He ducked as she swiped her sword at him, then rolled quickly past her, coming up in a crouch as she turned around just in time to prevent him from running her through. "Your fighting repartee has definitely improved."

"Practice makes perfect. Too bad the goons you usually send after me can't offer much in return."

Hermione was so tense she felt like she might fly apart into a million pieces at any moment. "How can they be so flippant about this?" she hissed.

"It's an attack strategy," Quinn whispered. "They're not flippant at all. Each is hoping to distract the other one just enough to finish it."

Harry had Allegra backed up to the edge of the platform, a significant step down. He thrust once and she stumbled backwards, sprawling on her back to the floor but managing to keep a grip on her sword. Harry took a step forward and jumped over her, turning in the air and landing on the other side of her facing the platform. She barely had time to scramble to her feet before he was on her again. Their blades flashed faster and faster through the air, their feet dancing on the stone floor of the chamber. "I'm impressed," she said, beginning to gasp a little bit. "You might be better than me."

"You knew that before you attacked me," he said.

"You see the blood on this sword?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember how it got there?"

"Yes."

"Well, hold that thought...perhaps we can re-enact the scene without the stunt doubles." She suddenly broke away and strode towards where Hermione and Quinn stood, her sword raised. Harry took a running leap and flipped through the air over her head, coming down directly in her path. Allegra stopped short, eyebrows raised. "Nice flip! And without a springboard!"

"You leave them out of it," he said. "This is between you and me."

Allegra's lip curled in a scowl and for the first time the false joviality left her expression. A chill ran through Hermione's body...never had she seen Allegra without that smug, sarcastic half-smile on her face. Now that it was gone she could see the blackness behind her beautiful features, and it was horrifying. "So be it," she said, and attacked him again.

This time there was no banter, no taunts, no fancy moves. There was no finesse and no holding back. They were now just trying to kill each other, plain and simple. The swords were almost a blur between them, and their grunts and gasps were audible to all. Hermione was almost unable to follow it, they were moving so fast.

Harry stepped back and tensed for another lunge. Allegra feigned a block then stepped in underneath his blade and thrust her sword downward into his chest. Hermione heard someone scream and realized it was herself; she clamped her hands over her mouth, not wishing to distract him. Harry cried out in pain...Allegra's blade had pierced all the way through him high in his left shoulder just below the collarbone. The tip protruded from his back a good eight inches. His left arm hung useless, his right somehow keeping a grip on his own sword. Hermione wanted to help him but she feared that any move she made would only make things worse.

Allegra ruthlessly twisted the sword in his flesh; Harry cried out hoarsely and fell to his knees, his face twisted into a grimace of pain, blood pouring down the side of his chest. "How are the mighty fallen," Allegra said. "The great Harry Potter, such a threat to Voldemort and all things dark, the only one of his kind...twitching like a bug on a pin right here at my feet."

He glared up at her. "What are you waiting for?" he managed through clenched teeth. "Do it!"

Hermione watched numbly. Do something, her mind insisted. She did take a step forward, intending vaguely to throw herself at Allegra, but Quinn held her back. "Don't," she whispered. "You won't help him by getting yourself killed. Trust him."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Allegra was saying. "You know there's a part of me that really is fond of you."

"Save it," he said. "It's too late."

"Very well," she said. She tensed to withdraw the sword and stab him again...but before she could, Harry reached up with his weakened left hand and grabbed the sword's blade. Blood flowed from his palm but he didn't let go. Allegra was too surprised to do anything for the moment. Harry stood up quickly and pistoned his foot into her abdomen. She fell to the ground, but her sword stayed in Harry's chest.

He grabbed the hilt of the sword, squinched his eyes shut and pulled it out of his shoulder, a cry tearing from his throat as he did so. He murmured a few words and laid his palm on the wound for a moment; his fingers glowed briefly and the blood flow stopped.

He threw Allegra's sword safely away and stood over her, his breath rushing in and out of his chest, his face wild with anger and pain. Allegra rose slowly to her knees, her palms wide in supplication. She shrugged, surrendering. That smug half-smile was back. "All right, you win." She leaned her head back, exposing her chest to him. "I'm ready. Do it."

He just stood there staring down at her for a moment, considering. He won't, Hermione thought. Of course he won't.

Harry raised the sword over his head, ready to strike. Oh God, Harry, Hermione thought. Don't do it. She could feel Quinn tensing up next to her. His face was terrible, fury and pain distorting his usually amiable features almost beyond recognition. The sword stopped at the apex of the swing and stayed there. His eyes narrowed as he looked down at her.

"What are you waiting for?" Allegra whispered. "Kill me. You know you want to. Remember how I betrayed you? Remember how I tore out your heart and stomped all over it with my football cleats? Remember how I made you think I'd killed Hermione? Remember Lefty? Take your revenge! You've earned it!"

"Harry, no!" Hermione cried. "Don't!"

"I have to," he said, his voice quavering. "The things she's done...I have to stop her."

"You have stopped her." Hermione took a hesitant step towards him. The sword was shaking in the air as he stared down at this woman whose actions had haunted him for most of his adult life. For her part, Allegra merely knelt placidly on the floor, waiting. "Look at her, Harry...she wants you to kill her. If she can't beat you then at least she can bring you down with her. Just take her to jail."

"Jail won't hold her for long," he whispered. "This is the only way."

"You know it's wrong," she said, coming a step closer. "You can't kill her in cold blood, that's not your way. You're not like her, Harry."

He swallowed hard. "I *want* to kill her..."

"Of course you do," she said. "She's done horrible things to you. But Harry...there are a million Allegras out there. If you strike her down another will rise to take her place. You can't sacrifice your soul just for her. She's not worth it."

The sword was now shaking so violently it looked like he was using it to conduct a performance of "Flight of the Bumblebee." An endless moment passed during which Hermione swore her heart did not beat as she waited for his response...then, at length, his face relaxed and his eyes fell closed. He lowered the sword and turned to face her. "Hermione...oh God..."

"I know," she said. He lurched the few steps to meet her and she caught him as he fell into her arms, his breathing ragged and Godric's sword clattering to the stones. Hermione held him tightly, his arms dangling limply at his sides. "I know," she repeated.

"I wanted to...I almost..."

"Shh. She has no power over you."

His arms rose to encircle her, marking her clothes with his own blood. He exhaled mightily and seemed to relax. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't apologize." She leaned back and kissed his damp forehead.

Harry smiled weakly down at her and seemed about to speak, but all at once he winced and staggered sideways, his good arm rising to clutch at his wound, which was bleeding anew.

"Oh...we've got to get you to a hospital," she said.

"I'm okay," he said through gritted teeth.

"The hell you are," Sorry said. He had laid Winter carefully on the floor and come forward to guard Allegra, who had risen slowly and now stood still and silent, her head lowered. "You've got a sword hole clear through your chest!"

Hermione would have voiced agreement but before she could, the air to their right began to shimmer. "Thank God," she muttered as a dozen bodies materialized in the chamber. She counted ten uniformed I.D. agents and a woman in civilian clothes she didn't recognize. Remus Lupin was at the front.

"Harry!" he exclaimed, quickly assessing the situation and hurrying forward, beckoning to the strange woman. He motioned to the agents, indicating that they were to tend to the Circle wizards. "Good God, what's happened here?"

"We'll explain later," Hermione said. "He's been stabbed."

The strange woman stepped forward and examined his shoulder. "She's a doctor," Remus explained to Hermione, for Harry seemed to recognize her. He looked past them to the gaggle of Circle wizards. "What's all this, then?"

"A good portion of the Circle, Remus," Harry said. "And we can thank this man for a large part of their capture." Draco turned around and faced them as the I.D. agents began taking the dark wizards into custody.

Lupin's eyes nearly popped right out of their sockets. "Malfoy?!?" he said, incredulous.

"He saved our lives," Harry said, wincing as the mediwitch tore his shirt to get to his wound.

Lupin threw up his hands. "We'll talk about it later. Right now let's just get everyone back to the I.D. and get you some proper medical attention." He looked over at Quinn. "You appear to need some, too."



"I'll live," she said, leaning against Draco, her lips pressed together into a grim little line.

Lupin turned and faced Allegra. "What do you propose we do with her?" he murmured.

Harry looked at her. Her lack of reaction was troubling. She had not spoken, moved, or exhibited any sign that she was aware of the world around her. It bothered him, but he couldn't see that she was any threat at the moment...not surrounded by several of his agents, at least. "Just take her back with us, I suppose. Information Retrieval will want to have a go at her, that much I know."

Hermione was watching Allegra, something nagging at the back of her mind. I've forgotten something, she thought. What? Everything's over...isn't it? She peered closer...Allegra's long raven hair was hanging in her face, obscuring her features. The strands were moving ever so slightly. As if there was a small breeze...or as if she were speaking very quietly behind that curtain of hair. "Oh no," Hermione whispered.

Allegra spread her hands out to her sides and abruptly threw her head back, her mouth moving very rapidly as she spoke a long series of words. Her eyes had gone a uniform blue color. "What fresh hell is this?" Draco growled, striding forward. Harry put out a hand to stop him.

"No! She's doing something!"

"Harry!" Hermione said. "The time manipulation magic!"

"Yes," he said, for it was plain to see that what she was doing. Lightning was crackling around Allegra's hands and a column of glittering blue light was coalescing around her body as she spoke the words. Her hair flew around her in an inky hurricane and her dress billowed wildly, whipped around her legs by an invisible wind.

Draco tried to rush at her again but Harry held him back. "We've got to stop her! She could jump backwards and stop any of this from happening! Kill you, kill me, kill everyone!"

"You can't stop her in the middle of the spell," Harry said. "It's too dangerous! A spell this powerful, to interrupt it could be disastrous! You don't mess around with time magic, it could rip this timeline apart like tissue paper!"

"Is it worth chancing her going back in time?"

Hermione heard very little of this. Her eyes were fixed on Allegra as her mind raced. In her head she heard Sorry's voice as he described the Circle's time manipulations spell: *It's largely a mental projection.* And then her own reply: *Like a glamour?*

She sucked in a breath as she remembered what she'd forgotten. She thrust her hands into the pockets of her cloak...Quinn slipped something into my pocket, what was it? If it is what I think it was...her fingers closed on the object and she withdrew it.

In her hand she held Quinn's silver-lensed Glamour Glasses. She looked from the glasses to Allegra, who was now completely enveloped in a vertical column of light so bright it hurt to look at it. Harry wouldn't allow anyone to stop her and he and Draco were still arguing about it. If she didn't do something soon Allegra would jump backwards in time and this timeline would cease to exist.

She steeled her resolve and thrust the glasses onto her face. Nothing looked terribly different, except Allegra stood out in sharp relief. She ran forward, ignoring the shouts that followed her.

Allegra's head snapped up and her eyes fell on Hermione. Her mouth twisted into a fearful grimace. She opened her mouth to speak, but Hermione was damned if she'd let her get out another of her patented sarcastic barbs.

She took a deep breath and thrust her hands through the column of light, seizing Allegra by the upper arms. It was like grabbing a live power line. She heard her own screams mixed with Allegra's and felt the time magicks crackle and spark around them as they began to disintegrate. Allegra's flesh jumped and undulated under her fingers but she held on in a deathgrip. Her eyes were frozen in a wide stare and so she could not close them as Allegra's face began to...distort, as if she were existing in more than one time at once and couldn't manage to maintain her integrity. Let go! Let go! her brain was yelling...but she couldn't. Her muscles were jammed with all the power coursing through her body, nothing was responding. She saw Allegra trying to hold on...and then saw her raise both hands, palms forward, and shove her away with a mighty effort.

Hermione shot through the air away from Allegra, propelled by a force beyond a mere shove, every nerve ending crackling and the Glamour Glasses flying from her face. She felt someone catch her as she came down but didn't see who it was...every eye in the room was watching Allegra and what was happening to her.

The column of light that had enveloped Allegra was now imploding upon her. She was trying to re-establish control but it was too late. The magicks began to tighten around her, her form pulling away with them, and swirl away like water down a drain. A final scream pierced the air and then with a slight *pop* she was gone. The room was quiet, empty of energy, and oddly vacuous as if it had lost its very reason for being. Hermione heard voices, from far away. She heard her own name, she heard someone barking orders...the voices receded and darkness encroached upon her vision. It enveloped her in its warm and insensible embrace and she knew no more.

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When she opened her eyes again, she wasn't at Lexa Kor...unless Lexa Kor had comfortable, well-appointed rooms in which their prisoners could recuperate.

The ceiling, which was the first thing she saw, was a uniform warm tan color, very soothing. She looked around cautiously...she appeared to be in a hospital bed, though her room looked more like someone's bedchamber than a hospital room.

And she wasn't alone. Harry was sitting in a chair drawn close to the bed, but she couldn't see his face. His head was bowed down on the edge of the bed, his forehead resting on one of her hands, which he was holding in both of his own. "Harry," she said, her voice sounding like her throat was full of gravel. She cleared her throat.

Harry's head jerked up and he stared at her, surprised. He was pale and there were tired purple circles under his eyes, which were red and swollen as if he'd been crying. Then he grinned and it transformed his face, she could not help but smile back. He straightened and scooted closer, gently smoothing her hair back from her forehead. "Hey, sleepy head," he said. "Look who's awake." He looked back over his shoulder and called out to the hallway. "Laura!"

Hermione smiled to see her roommate come running in from the hall. She also looked pale as she hurried to the other side of Hermione's bed, picking up one of her hands. "Oh, honey...how are you feeling?"

Hermione moved a little, tensing for pain or soreness. "I feel fine, I think." She lifted her head and held out her hands; Harry and Laura helped her sit up, propping pillows behind her back. "Bit of a headache. How long have I been unconscious?"

"Almost six hours," Harry said, sobering. "Here, have some chocolate." He handed her a piece from the bedside table. "You're in the I.D. infirmary. You stopped breathing. We didn't know if you'd make it." He kissed her hand. "I almost lost you. Again."

"Well, I'm all right now," she said, lifting her hand to his cheek. She frowned, seeing that his recently-impaled chest appeared recovered. "What about you? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," he said.

"He wouldn't let the mediwizards heal him unless they could do it right here," Laura said in a scolding tone. "So they had to make do. I'll go tell Remus and the others that you're awake." She squeezed Hermione's hand with a smile. "You've had everyone quite worried, young lady." Hermione smiled back and watched her go, then turned back to Harry.

For a long moment they just looked at each other, volumes worth of conversations exchanged in mere seconds. She sighed and slid over, patting the bed next to her. "Come up here with me." Harry climbed onto the bed and drew her gently into his arms, as if afraid she'd break. Hermione burrowed into his embrace, relaxing in the security she always found there. Harry rested his chin on top of her head and sighed. "What you did was really stupid," he said.

Hermione chuckled. "Worked, didn't it?"

"You could have been killed. You almost *were* killed."

"I had to do something. I couldn't let her get away with it."

"Stupid," he repeated. "But very brave." He hesitated. "Quinn's told me she slipped you her Glamour Glasses."

"Good thing I remembered to use them."

"I'm sure if you hadn't Quinn would have found some way to remind you." His voice was a tad cynical.

"What do you mean?"

"You must have realized that she and Draco all but set up this entire situation."

She nodded against his chest. "He sent you the messages, to your mind. The attacks."

"Yes. Hidden in the attacks was the spell that they needed *us* to perform so Allegra could be defeated. Quinn made sure we both made it to Lexa Kor, and she gave you the means to break the time manipulation spell while Draco set me free before Allegra could change me over. He used his position as one of her trusted agents to manipulate us."

"You're not happy about it, are you?"

"Well, I'd rather be fighting my *own* fights."

"But this *was* your fight. It's just that...it was theirs, too." She looked up at him. "Have you spoken to Draco? What caused this dramatic turnaround?"

"I don't know. I'm sure that will be a hot topic at the debriefing."

She snuggled close to him again. "Harry..." she began after a long pause.

"I know. We never finished our conversation in the cell."

"You were going to tell me. Your last secret."

He sighed. "I've already been through this with Remus and Argo and the others, just so I could tell you when we were alone."

"I've seen what you can do. Some of it, at least. Things no other wizard can do." She laced her fingers through his. "Tell me the truth."

He nodded and took a deep breath. "All right." He thought for a moment, then began to speak. "We're used to conceiving the world as an 'us' and 'them' sort of place. Us being wizards, and them being Muggles."

"Yes."

"As it turns out...that's not 100% accurate. There's Muggles, there's wizards, and then there's me."

"You're a wizard."

"Technically, yes. I don't wish to sound boastful, but I'm quoting Dumbledore when I say that I am a wizard in the way that humans are vertebrates. Technically true, but there's a lot more to it than just that."

"Like what?"

He sighed. "Hermione, I have powers and abilities that other wizards don't have...and new ones have a rather annoying habit of popping up unexpectedly."

"Such as being able to fly?"

"Yes, among other things. The flying took some practice, I can assure you, but it comes in very handy. And it's rather fun, to be honest." He bit his lip, thinking. "But that's not the point. What I can do isn't the difference. My uniqueness lies in my ability to control magic with my mind. I need no wands, no spells or charms, no talismans or enchanted objects. I can perform magic just by thinking about it. Magic is a force of nature, like magnetism or gravity...a force that exists apart from human beings. Ordinarily, when wizards need it they summon it and control it with assistance from wands or spells. For me, magic is just something that is within me all the time. I need not summon it or instruct it. It is a permanent part of me, and it obeys my thoughts just as my muscles do."

Hermione considered this concept for a moment, it was alien enough that it was difficult to grasp. She couldn't imagine living and breathing magic as he seemed to...but it certainly explained a few things about him. "How is that possible?" she said.

"There's an ancient society of wizards who call themselves the Society of the Scythe. They do nothing but study magical aptitudes and inheritance...and when I turned 18 Dumbledore took me to meet them. Apparently they've been waiting for someone like me for centuries."

"Centuries?"

"Yes. Magical ability is genetic like everything else. Many genes code for it, and the combination that we inherit from our parents determines our magical aptitude. It decides whether we'll be a Dumbledore or a Neville. It decides whether we'll be better at Transfiguration or Charms. It decides whether we have the stuff to be an Animagus, or if we'll have any skill on a broomstick. The Scythes told me that there is a very rare gene, which they call the Mage factor, that floats around the wizarding world, a gene that codes for extraordinary rapport with the magical forces. It's recessive, so both of your parents have to have one of them for you to even have a shot, and then it's only one in four odds that you'll up an honest-to-God Mage, but even if you're only half-Mage it affects you. Those who have one of the Mage genes show higher magical ability, perhaps 0.5 percent of the wizarding population fits this category. Dumbledore was half-Mage, and so was Tom Riddle. You just never know for sure until after they're dead and the test for the gene can be performed. All that the Scythes had ever had the opportunity to study were half-Mages, going back over a thousand years. The odds of two half-Mages having a child and *then* for that child to beat the 1-in-4 odds and end up with two Mage factors were so small that it had never happened to their knowledge."

"Until you."

He nodded, seeming almost embarrassed by this happenstance of genetics which had been totally out of his control. "My parents were both half-Mage, and I beat the odds. I'm the first full Mage in recorded history. There. I said it."

"Oh my God," she whispered. "I don't know what to say." She looked up at him. "What can you do?"

"Well, I can do a lot of things...but some of the major ones include influencing other people's minds, controlling the weather, manipulation of matter and objects, immunity to many curses and attacks, accelerated healing and certain attack skills."

"What, like shooting laser beams out of your eyes?"

He chuckled. "Nothing quite so Flash Gordon, but the occasional lightning bolt certainly makes a statement."

Hermione shook her head. "I can't believe this. You weren't that much different from everyone else in school."

"True, but I was a *little* different. I was as surprised as everyone else when I managed to resist an Imperius Curse at age 14. I thought Moody was just going easy on me, but he wasn't. And let's not forget...the magic I would later learn to use was strong enough at age 1 to save me from Voldemort."

"I thought your mother's sacrifice did that."

"It helped, but that alone would not have saved me. Voldemort killed a lot of people, and many of those died trying to protect someone else...ultimately, it didn't save those they died to protect. I would have been just as dead if my genes hadn't protected me. Voldemort knew it and he came after me again later, over and over again. That's why he came to my parents' house in the first place. It wasn't them he was after, it was me. He wasn't sure he could kill a fully grown and mature Mage, he was pretty sure he could kill a baby one. Didn't work out that way. The Scythes don't know how he knew what I was when they didn't know themselves, but it's clear that he did and that he considered me a threat."

"You were."

"As he would later learn," he said grimly. "I didn't really start exploring the full extent of my abilities until after I left Hogwarts, and even more intensely once I joined the I.D., by which time Dumbledore was gone. Little did I know he'd charged someone to help me realize my potential."

Hermione smiled. "Lefty?"

Harry nodded. "Lefty is actually a member of the Society of the Scythe. Dumbledore asked him to make sure I learned to use my abilities...and control them." This last was said a little ominously.

"Control them?"

"Yes. It still gives me problems. Magic is nothing to be trifled with, as we both know. I may have access to more of it than anyone else but that doesn't mean I'm any better at keeping it in line. It frightens me at times, the idea that I might not be able to control it." He hesitated.

"And there are certain moral considerations. I have the ability to affect minds, as you saw at Grunnings. I could use that ability for very dishonorable purposes if I chose to. I have to set very strict rules for myself. I rarely use my more Mage-like abilities in daily life. I still use my wand on a regular basis, and you know how much use I get out of my broomstick. And there is the surprise factor...no use advertising that I have all these skills when they would be more useful later if they remained secret."

"But Allegra knew." She was unable to keep the bitterness away from her voice.

"She had to, she helped with my training. Lefty trusted her...we all did," he finished.

"Harry...is she dead?"

"I don't know," he said after a long pause. "That remains to be seen." Hermione sat up, withdrawing from his arms, and looked away. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's just...it's a lot of information to get all at once." They sat in silence for a few moments. "And you never told me this, either."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh Harry, why do we keep having this same conversation? First your job, and then Allegra, and now this!" She turned and looked in his eyes. "You say this is your last secret. Will it still be so tomorrow? In a week or a month or a year will you be apologizing for something else you haven't told me?"

"There's nothing else I haven't told you. Unlike my job and Allegra, I wanted to tell you about this years ago...but I was sworn to secrecy. Dumbledore made me promise not to reveal it. He didn't wish to make of me any more of a target than I already was."

"So why are you breaking your word to him now?"

He looked at her, his gaze intense. "There comes a time in every man's life when he has to grow up, Hermione. Make his own decisions and not accept the decisions of others where they affect his own life. That time is only coming for me now. I want you to know everything I am, and I see no reason to keep it from my colleagues or from anyone else who wishes to know. If there are things I can do for the wizarding world then I will do them. If it will give

the dark forces a second thought to know for the first time in...well, ever...that if they try something it's more than just plain Harry Potter they'll be pissing off, then I don't care if everyone knows. I didn't ask for this. I didn't *want* this. You have no idea how I fought this. I never wanted to be special, or any kind of Mage-whatever. I just wanted to be a normal kid, and a normal wizard. I wanted to have friends and classes and a normal family..." He stopped abruptly and looked away, his throat working. She knew it still hit him at odd moments. She couldn't remain distant upon seeing it; she moved closer and slipped her arms around him, pulling his head down to her chest and cradling him gently. She felt his arms go around her waist gratefully. "I wanted to be normal," he repeated. "But I always knew I wasn't. I never imagined how not-normal I would eventually turn out to be." He fetched a deep sigh. "Even so, if what I am can help anyone, then I'm glad for it. If I can stop Voldemort's heirs, real or imagined, from gaining a foothold again then I'll jump right in and use every ability I have and whatever new ones I can think up."

She smiled against the top of his head. "Well, my love...I think it's official."

"What is?"

"You were toeing the line before, but I think now you've crossed all the way over from wizard to superhero."

He began to shake and for a moment she was afraid he was crying, but then realized with relief that he was laughing. He straightened up, grinning. "Superhero, huh? I guess there are worse things."

"We'll get you some tights and a cape." She cocked an eyebrow. "You might look good in them."

He rolled his eyes. "No tights, thank you. But actually...I already have a cape. It's part of my I.D. uniform." He slid off the bed. "Which I should be putting on shortly, in point of fact."

"Uniform?" she said, frowning.

"Well, yes. Surely you've noticed all the field agents walking around in uniform and saluting me. The I.D. is something of a military organization, though not nearly as hup-two-three-four as Muggle armies. Almost all of us are officers in the Federation Enforcement Corps. We're granted commissions when we finish our training here. Most of us don't bother with uniforms on a daily basis but I do have one, and I'll have to wear it to the debriefing. It's sort of an official thing."

"Is it awful and garish like the Royal Guard?"

"No, actually it's quite nice. Would you believe that Argo hired Hugo Boss to design them? She has her flaws but lack of style isn't one of them." He leaned over her. "I've been asked to bring you to the debriefing if you feel up to it. Do you feel up to it?"

"Yes!" she said, anxious to get out of the room and hear everyone's thoughts on what had just happened. "When is it?"

He glanced at his watch. "Two hours."

"I'll just wash up...oh, I don't have any clean clothes."

"Laura brought you some from home." She swung her legs off the bed and stood up. "I must say, you are a lot less freaked out by my revelations than I thought you would be."

She shrugged. "It's not as much of a surprise as you might think. I've always known you had special abilities, I just didn't have the label to stick on them. And you're still my Harry, nothing's really changed." She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, then headed for the private bathroom.

"I have to go to my office," he said, watching her go. "When you're ready come on down and meet me there."

"Okay, see you then." She shut the bathroom door behind her as Harry left the room.

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Hermione left her room scrubbed and clean-smelling, feeling infinitely better for it. An agent in the black uniform of an I.D. field operative was stationed outside. "Dr. Granger," he said pleasantly. "Feeling all right?"

"Uh, yes, thanks. How do I get to Harry's office?"

"Just call for your bubble, it'll take you there."

"I don't have my own bubble."

"Actually, you do. Chief Potter said you're to have your own from now on."

Hermione gave an inward shrug. "Bubble," she said. Immediately a sea-green bubble appeared before her, awaiting instructions. "Take me to Harry," she said. It bobbed off down the corridor and she followed through the now-familiar labyrinth of corridors.

At length they arrived at Harry's office, marked with the lightning-bolt symbol on the door. She knocked. "Come in," came his voice from inside.

She opened the door and entered, then stopped short. He was standing by a filing cabinet looking down at a few sheets of parchment he was holding, dressed in his I.D. uniform. Hermione's mouth dropped open when she saw him, suddenly understanding why women the world over swooned over men in uniform.

It was very flattering and all black, which didn't surprise her. Fitted slacks over spit-shined boots. The top was a hip-length jacket, very Spartan and unadorned, broad-shouldered and tapering to the hips. It was almost a Nehru style, with a high upright collar and no trace of fastenings down the center seam. On either side of the collar split were several gold bars, probably rank insignia, and there was a gold medallion on a purple ribbon fastened over the left side of his chest. She imagined it was an award or honor of some kind.

The only indulgence to ostentation was the cape. It appeared to be a simple long length of deep purple silk draped from his shoulders, gathered there and fastened just over his collarbones with wide gold bars engraved with the same insignia that were on his collar.

She saw all this in a matter of seconds. "Oh my," she murmured.

Harry put down the documents and frowned. "What's wrong?"

She stepped forward, smiling, and laid a hand on his chest. "Well, this...this is really sexy."

A slow smile spread over his face. "Really?" He didn't sound like he quite believed her.



"Oh, yeah." She sobered, his hands lightly cupping her elbows as she rested her hands on his chest. "What's this debriefing all about?"

"Argo will want to know exactly what happened. Remus and I will give our accounts of the events, and I'm sure she'll want to hear from you and Draco and Quinn as well. I will also have some very serious questions to answer."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Maybe. When I left without informing anyone, I violated several pages worth of I.D. regulations not to mention Argo's direct orders. I could be looking at a court-martial or even dismissal. But hey," he added quickly, noting her alarmed expression, "it's unlikely to come to that. I acted in a good faith manner to safeguard the lives of others, and had I asked for permission it could have compromised the mission. Here in Intelligence we're accustomed to having to sometimes sacrifice procedure to maintain our secrecy. On top of that, I brought in a bunch of bad guys, which never hurts. Argo will probably punish me with some really boring stakeouts for a few weeks and then forget all about it. And, unfair as it may sound, being a Mage makes me rather valuable, too much so to dismiss casually."

Hermione sighed. "I'm really anxious to hear what Draco has to say."

"As am I." He looked at his watch. "Shall we go?"

They left the office and followed Harry's bubble over to an unfamiliar part of the I.D., which Harry explained was the administrative wing. Here and there were other agents in uniforms like Harry's, though she only saw one other person in a cape, and some were of different styles. They entered a wide lobby in which were set a large pair of double doors labeled "Conference Room."

She saw Draco and Quinn standing close together, and Remus was in the middle of the lobby talking to someone whose back was to them. Remus wore a uniform like Harry's except that he was capeless and his pants were more like breeches, they disappeared into shin-high black jackboots. The person he was talking to was gesticulating wildly and seemed very agitated...as they approached, Hermione smiled as she recognized the gesticulator.

"Sirius!" Harry exclaimed as they neared. Sirius turned around, his face creased into a worried expression which fell away as he saw them.

"Harry!" he said, coming forward to meet them. He embraced his godson, relief evident on his face. "Merlin's ghost, I'm glad to see you." He drew back and clasped Harry's forearms. "Are you all right? Remus said you'd been stabbed!"

Harry smiled. "I'm fine, Sirius, really. You seem distraught."

Sirius' expression darkened. "Would you believe that I just found out about all this business?"

Harry shrugged. "That's Argo for you. Keep I.D. issues strictly in-house until absolutely necessary. She must not have felt I was in any real danger or she would have notified you."

"Still, I wish I could have helped."

"You've got enough to do, Sirius. I was quite ably assisted." He smiled down at Hermione, who had her arm through his.

Sirius stood there, his hands on his hips, his eyes flicking from one to the other as if he were watching a tennis game. He looked at them through narrowed eyes. "What's going on here?" he asked. Harry grinned and shot a glance at Remus over Sirius' shoulder. He looked down into Hermione's eyes, the significance in their gaze not lost on the observers. "Oh, no," Sirius said. "Don't be cruel, now. Don't tease your poor old godfather, Harry."

"I would never tease about something so important," Harry said. "And if you're old then I'm Cornelius Fudge."

Sirius stepped forward, slowly and cautiously putting one hand on Harry's shoulder, the other on Hermione's, a hopeful smile curling his lips. "Really? You're really...really?" It seemed to be all he could say.

"Yes...really," Hermione said, beaming.

Sirius nodded happily, squeezing their shoulders, then abruptly turned and pointed at Lupin. "You owe me twenty Galleons."

"Oh, I don't think so!"

"Pay up! You said it wouldn't happen until after they hit 30, and I said it wouldn't take that long."

"That is not either what I said, I said it would be *before* 30 and *you* said it would take a near-death experience. It did *not* take a near-death experience, therefore you owe *me* twenty Galleons."

"Excuse me," Harry said, hands on his hips, attempting to look stern. "You two had a *bet* on us?"

"Oh, it wasn't just us. Who else was in on it, Remus? Fred and George and Ginny...all the Weasleys, actually."

"Don't forget Argo. Neville and Amelia. Minerva and Severus...And Fudge, too."

"Fudge?" Harry cried. "You two had the Minister of Magic wagering on my sex life?"

Sirius leaned close and whispered conspiratorially. "The Chancellor put in, too."

Harry would have said more but Argo came swishing down the hall, her own purple cape brushing the floor as she walked. Trailing behind her were more agents in uniforms. "Can we start now?" she said, going to the doors. The others fell in line behind her, all mirth evaporating. Hermione clung to Harry's hand, feeling a twinge of anxiety as they entered the large conference room. A round table sat in the center with exactly enough chairs for the assembly. They all took seats.

Argo sat between Harry and Sirius, assuming an air of command even though Sirius outranked her significantly. "Please sit still while the Oracle identifies us," she said, bending to open a box at her feet. A gleaming silver cube shot out and hovered over her head, spinning in the air.

Harry leaned over and whispered in Hermione's ear. "It's for security. The Oracle can see anyone's true identity and will make sure we're all who we say we are." She nodded, watching the cube floating over Argo's head.

After a moment's thought the cube spoke in a low, smooth female voice. "Pfaffenroth, Argola Ray. Director, Intelligence Division. Rank: Colonel. Codename: Delilah."

The cube moved on to Harry. "Potter, Harold James. Chief Wizard of Counterintelligence and Covert Operations, Intelligence Division. Rank: Major. Codename: Roman." It continued on around the table, calling out everyone's names and occupations. Very efficient, Hermione mused...effectively eliminates the need for introductions.

"Granger, Hermione Ann, Doctor of Magical Philosophy. Head Charms Fellow, Institute of Magical Academics. Rank: Noncommissioned. Codename: Isis." Hermione was absurdly pleased at having been given a codename; she assumed she'd gotten one with her Bubble. They named me after the Goddess of Love, she realized. I wonder if that's coincidence.

"Cashdollar, Quinlan Marie. Hogwarts Professor. Rank: Enforcer. Codename: Antigone."

"Malfoy, Draco Lucius. Special Intelligence Operative, Intelligence Division." At this, Harry and the other I.D. agents in the room turned to stare at Draco in amazement...none of them had known he was associated with the I.D. Malfoy just shrugged. "Rank: Noncommissioned. Codename: Charon."

"Lupin, Remus John. Deputy Chief of CCO, Intelligence Division. Rank: Lieutenant. Codename: Oberon."

"Hyde-White, Isobel Joan. Chief Wizard of Surveillance and Information Retrieval, Intelligence Division. Rank: Major. Codename: Bravo."

"Ubigando, Henry Nimeri. Chief Wizard of Strategy, Intelligence Division. Rank: Captain. Codename: Roland."

"Carlisle, Sorenson Quigley. Naturalist and Circle infiltrator. Rank: Noncommissioned. Codename: Odin."

"Chow, Grace Ming-Xia. Chief Wizard of Infiltration and Reconnaissance, Intelligence Division. Rank: Captain. Codename: Aegis."

"Black, Sirius Ian. Deputy Chancellor of the International Federation of Wizards. Rank: General. Codename: Polaris."

That brought them back to Argo. Hermione's head was spinning with all the new names. "All right," Argo said. "Let's start with you, Harry. Tell us everything."

Harry started at the beginning and told the entire story, starting from his first attack weeks ago. He minced his words when it came to their relationship but since it was part of the story he couldn't leave it out entirely. It took him almost an hour to complete the tale, what with people interrupting every five minutes to ask him for clarification. Once he'd finished, Argo turned to her. "And you, Dr. Granger. Have you anything to add? You were the one who dispatched Ms. Blackburn-Dwyer."

"I had no choice."

"No blame is implied. Please tell us what led up to this event."

Hermione took a deep breath and told *her* side of the story, starting with when she'd set off after Harry. When she got to the point where she'd hooked up with Quinn, Henry Ubigando stopped her. "So you had no idea Professor Cashdollar had ulterior motives?"

"My motive was to stop Allegra," Quinn jumped in. "Draco and I planned this meticulously."

"You couldn't have planned it *all*, Quinn," Ubigando continued. "So much of it depended on coincidence!"

"The plan was rough, I admit," Draco said. "All we knew was we couldn't get to Allegra on our own, she was too well-guarded. That's when we found out about the spell that I sent to Harry."

"Where did you find it?" Harry asked.

"I found a mention in an old text of a spell that could neutralize an entire room of wizards but could not be written down. I found the actual spell probably the same way you did."

"The Librarian? Funny, she never mentioned that to me."

"She never mentions anything, Harry. It's part of her job."

"Gentlemen," Argo said gently. "Can we proceed? Dr. Granger."

Hermione continued on, describing how she and Quinn had gotten to Lexa Kor and found the body of "Hermione". "The rest, you know," she said, sobered by the memory of those events.

"How did you know how to stop Allegra's time manipulation magic?"

"Sorry told me it was like a glamour."

"Which I learned from the man I thought was Gerald," Sorry put in. "I'm sure Draco wanted me to convey that information to Harry."

"And then Quinn used her Glamour Glasses in front of me, explaining their use. During the final moments in the chamber, she slipped me the glasses. I'm only grateful that I remembered to use them."

Argo shook her head. "Malfoy, Cashdollar...never in my life have I heard a plan so tenuous and prone to failure. I'm amazed it worked."

"So are we," Quinn muttered.

"A lot of the time we were making it up as we went along," Draco said. "I know Harry and Hermione quite well after spending months observing them, but they managed to surprise me more than once. I fully expected to have to reveal myself to them and enlist Harry's help to stop Allegra, but we were able to maintain our covers until the very end."

Argo looked to her right. "Chancellor? Any thoughts?"

Sirius looked thoughtful. "The office of the Chancellor, as always, has no official stance on I.D. business. Personally, I think you're all crazy."

Everyone smiled. "You've just been away too long, Sirius," said Isobel Hyde-White. "Stuck in bureaucracy hell 24-7."

"I do have one question," Sirius said, leaning forward. "What was the ultimate goal here? Draco, what prompted you to launch such an unorthodox offensive?"

Draco thought for a moment. "When I learned of Allegra's interest in the changeover I had already been secretly working against her for a long time." He looked at Harry. "She's

obsessed with defeating you, you know. She can't stand the fact that once, a long time ago, you made her feel an actual emotion."

Harry straightened up. "I did?"

Draco nodded. "Don't get cocky, she was in a transitional period. Anyway, I knew I couldn't let her learn to use the changeover to destroy wizards. I had to make a far more aggressive move against her than I'd ever dared, and I knew that I would have to expose myself to her as her enemy, so I'd better make it count. I knew that in her mind you were the only real candidate for the changeover, so it made sense to use you to beat her."

Harry stared across the table at him. "You could have just asked, you know."

"I couldn't take the risk. She watched me very closely, I had to keep her believing I was loyal to her, to the point that Quinn had to make like a bad guy, too."

Everyone was quiet for a moment. "All right," Harry said softly. "Now for the million pound question. Who's her master?"

Draco sighed. "I don't know. That secret is guarded like the crown jewels. I've heard his voice, I've seen an indistinct form, but I know nothing about him...or even that it *is* a him."

Argo nodded, ending discussion. "Very well, Malfoy. Now Harry, you know that I wasn't too happy with you when you went charging off like Stallone." Harry winced. "But you had your reasons. I think we can overlook it. Just watch yourself. Just because you're Mr. Hotshot doesn't make you immune to disciplinary action." Harry nodded. "Are we done here?"

"One more thing," Sirius said. "Allegra. Is she gone for good?"

All eyes turned to Harry. "I don't know," he said. "She vanished after Hermione broke her spell. She may be trapped between times, or she may be dead." He hesitated. "Only time will tell."

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The debriefing dispersed with many promises and admonitions to submit written reports ASAP. Argo and most of the other section heads went back to their offices. Laura was waiting in the lobby when they emerged, she hadn't seen Sorry yet. He rushed to her and she jumped into his arms...it had been a long time since they'd seen each other, they retreated to a corner to catch up and reacquaint themselves.

Sirius and Remus went off to Remus' office, accepting an invitation to come to Bailicroft the next day for a picnic.

Harry and Hermione stood in the middle of the large polished floor with Draco and Quinn. For a few moments there was uncomfortable silence. "Well," Harry said. "I'm still waiting to hear how you turned from Ferret Boy into the paragon of honor and manliness we see before us today, Draco."

"Don't patronize me, Potter," he snapped. Quinn put a calming hand on his arm and he took a deep breath. "Sorry," he said grudgingly. "But I still don't like you, Potter. I don't think I ever will."

"Draco, please," Quinn whispered. "You promised."

His face softened as he looked down at her. "You're right, I did." He looked at Harry again. "So you want to know what happened, eh? I'll tell you. But I need a drink. Can we go somewhere?"

A few minutes later they had Apparated outside Hogsmeade and were installed at the Three Broomsticks with butterbeer, the four of them seated around a booth near the back. "All right," Draco said. "What Allegra said about faking my death was true. I wanted to do deep cover work for her and she was practically salivating over the idea of the top-secret glamour-disguised pet spy. I did that work for a long time, spying on everyone and everything, even Circle members. Then one day she asked me to do a workup on a witch in America who is a telepath. Allegra was interested in her for obvious reasons. I worked myself into her life, disguised as a friendly female neighbor, but she sensed me and one day tried to run away from me. I got so angry that I pursued her and grabbed her. I was crazy with rage, it was like the culmination of every angry feeling I'd had since I was a kid. I would have killed her in cold blood, except she grabbed my face and suddenly I could feel her mind inside mine. I don't know how she did it but I saw myself as she saw me...a monster, an evil horrible sorry excuse for a human being. I was pretty badly shaken up. I ran off into the woods nearby.

I stayed there for a day or so then came back. Allegra had sent my father and another Circle wizard to follow up on this woman and her small daughter. For some reason I didn't go inside, I didn't tell them I was there...I watched from outside a window. I watched as my father broke that little girl's neck in front of her mother. I was so horrified that I threw up right where I stood. They dragged the woman out and I jumped them. They never knew it was me. The woman escaped and I ran away again, back into those woods. This time I stayed there."

Quinn jumped in. "At the time I was living in that same area. I was out for a walk when I happened across this man lying on the ground. He was emaciated, dehydrated, cut and bruised all over. He was barely alive. I took him home and took care of him. A little at a time he told me his story and I realized I'd heard of him...from you, Harry. It was clear to me he'd had some sort of life-changing event, so I helped him get a handle on what he wanted to become."

Hermione smiled at her. "And you fell in love with him."

"Yes. I fell in love with the man he was trying to be, and the one he managed to become."

"I decided I wanted to go back to Allegra," Draco went on. "And work against her from the inside. I knew it was dangerous and God knows I didn't want to be separated from Quinn, whom I'd fallen for just as hard, but it was the only way. How I managed to fool her for so long I'll never know. The rest, as they say, is history."

Harry was smiling. "I'm glad, Draco. I never told you this, but...I always suspected that somewhere inside you was a core of goodness."

"How can you say that after all the horrible things I did to you?"

"Childish lashing-out. It's all forgotten."

Draco looked at Hermione. "And I know I can never make it up to you for...Gerald. I really am sorry. That's what Allegra wanted me to do, and I had to go along. I'm so sorry." He sounded sincere.

Hermione swallowed hard. "I'll try to forget it. I was fond of Gerald. In a way it's almost as if you've killed him."

"You never knew him, Hermione. It almost got to be as though I had a split personality for awhile. I really wasn't Draco anymore when I put on that glamour. I became Gerald."

Harry sighed. "Well, I'm glad you're on our side now. What will you do?"

"Sirius has offered me a job at the Federation. I may take it."

"Good." He met Draco's steady gaze. "We may never be friends, Draco. Hermione may be able to forgive you for having an intimate relationship with her under false pretenses, but I'm not sure I can. You can do whatever you want to me and I won't hold it against you, but you've hurt the woman I love, and that's not something I can easily forgive."

"I understand."

"But I hope we can at least be civil, and perhaps work together. The two of us may know Allegra better than anyone alive. That alone is reason enough for us to find a way to co-exist peaceably."

"Do you think she's still alive, then?"

Harry shook his head. "I have no way of knowing. But...I don't think she's gone for good. That would just be too easy. I've been fighting this same fight since I was eleven years old, and there's only one hard, immutable fact I've learned through all of it."

"What's that?"

"Evil never dies."

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Draco and Quinn left, promising they would come to Bailicroft the next day for the planned picnic. Harry and Hermione stood outside the Three Broomsticks and looked up at the stars. "Can we go home now?" Hermione said. "I'm so tired I can hardly stand up."

"Yes, let's go home." They joined hands and walked along the road for a few minutes. Hogsmeade, like Hogwarts, was protected from Apparating, they'd have to walk to the edge of town to go home.

"I'm so glad it's over," she said finally. He didn't reply. "Except...it isn't, is it? Not really."

"It never is. But there are...pauses. Chances to catch one's breath."

"You know, we haven't had any time to be together during our normal lives. It's all been nonstop since that night."

"You think that makes a difference?"

"Of course. It's easy to be in love when people are trying to kill you and everything's life and death. It's not so easy when the daily grind gets you down and there's dishes to be washed and you can't find your favorite book and the boss is getting on your nerves."

"Oh, I think we stand more of a chance than most."

"Why?"

He stopped and turned to face her. "Because it's us," he said. "I simply cannot conceive that we could be so close for so long and finally fall in love only to have it fail."

She smiled. "Neither can I."

"So we're stuck with each other."

"Apparently."

They resumed walking. "I can think of worse things."

"I can think of some advantages to having a Mage for a boyfriend."

"There are some advantages to being one," he said. "Like this." He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled hers around his shoulder. "Hang on."

"Wh...wh...whoooooa!" she exclaimed as he rose off the ground. She clutched her arm around his shoulder, her fingers digging into his flesh.

"Take it easy!" he said, smiling. "I won't drop you!" He zoomed skyward. "This is so much more fun than Apparating."

The wind whipped through Hermione's hair and she began to relax...he was holding her up with more than just his arm, she realized. She felt weightless under the moonlit sky. They flew onward towards home, and whatever uncertainty waited for them there.

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## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PARADIGM OF UNCERTAINTY**

### *Chapter 15: Departures and Arrivals*

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*August 21st, 2007...two months later.*

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"Dammit," Harry muttered, fiddling with his tie in the mirror.

"It's not straight," his reflection commented.

"Hey, do you want to do this?"

"I can't, I'm two-dimensional."

"Then shut it!" The ends were still uneven. He ripped it off his neck and tried again.

Hermione came out of the walk-in closet in her slip, a dress in each hand. "Which one?" she asked.

He looked at her in the mirror. "Please don't ask me that. I won't pick the right one and you'll just be hacked off at me."

"No, seriously. Which one?" One was dark green, one was royal blue. That was about as much of a difference as he could discern. And one was a little longer.

"You'll look beautiful no matter which one you pick."

She smiled. "Now *that's* the right answer." She blew him a kiss and went back into the closet, which was large enough to double as a dressing room.



Hermione had moved her things into the Cloister about a week after The Allegra Thing, as they'd taken to calling it. It wasn't exactly moving in together since they'd been living together for years, and Harry had said it was pointless to put it off. There was more than enough room for two, the room was huge, had its own bathroom attached and a closet the size of a small house. Harry wasn't exactly a clothes horse, his own wardrobe took up about one quarter of the available space.

Hermione's old room was now occupied by Sorry, who was staying with them until he decided if he was going back to Greenland. Although he and Laura shared a close relationship in all other respects they didn't share a bedroom...Laura maintained that it was because she had trouble sleeping with someone else in the bed, though Hermione suspected that it was because Sorry snored like a chainsaw. She considered herself very fortunate that she and Harry were both quiet sleepers.

The knot was far too messy. Harry untied it again, grumbling. "Here, let me do that," Hermione said, coming out of the closet. She whipped the gray-and-blue flowered silk tie off his neck, smoothed it, and slipped it under his collar, her fingers quickly and expertly twisting it into a neat knot.

"How'd you get so good at that?" he said.

She sighed. "Abel always wanted me to tie his tie for him, and it always had to be perfect. I think it made him feel superior, like the Man in the Relationship."

Harry snorted. "As if he needed any encouragement to feel superior." He said nothing as she finished the knot, snugging it up to his neck. "What did you see in him?" he finally said.

"Well, imagine the first impression he gives. Well-known, amazingly wealthy, confident, suave, handsome...and at first he was flattering, attentive. I admit it made me feel special."

"Let's see...I'm well-known, I'm wealthy, I try to be confident, I'm definitely not suave, and I couldn't say if I'm handsome..."

"Oh, you're ten times as handsome as he is. Of course I'm hardly an objective judge," she said, smiling. "Besides, you're a grown-up. Abel Kilroy is still a little boy in a man's body...throwing temper tantrums and wanting his own way." She brushed down the shoulders of his jacket. "This is my favorite suit," she said.

"Mine too." It was a navy-blue gabardine with a fine white pinstripe. He had frequently worn it with suspenders, as he was tonight, for the dance contests. He smiled down at her. "You look beautiful."

She'd chosen the royal blue dress, a sleeveless tea-length with a scoop neck and a flared skirt. She'd pinned up her hair and put on a silver choker. "Thanks." She tilted her head up and kissed him. "I'm a little nervous."

"Me too." Tonight was the annual Friends and Former Pupils of Hogwarts Gala, which was held every year in late summer before the students arrived. The entire household would be attending tonight's festivities, and expected to see all their friends and former teachers as well.

Returning to Hogwarts was always a little disconcerting for Harry and Hermione, largely because of the memories of Ron that confronted them at every turn. They would be attending tonight for the first time in three years; one or the other of them had been unable to attend in the interim due to other commitments and neither wanted to go without the other. This year was unlikely to be a peaceful return, either.

News that the famous Harry Potter, whose name was from time to time mentioned in conjunction with the phrase "most eligible bachelor," was no longer quite so eligible had spread through the wizarding world like butterbeer at a Quidditch game. The fact that the other half of this illustrious couple was his almost equally well-known best friend Hermione Granger made the news even more sensational, and gave romantics the world round a nice happy sigh. Related with equal relish was the rumor that these two new lovers had vanquished the entire Circle almost entirely on their own. Estimations of Harry's heroism rose to new levels, and Hermione was elevated almost to his status in public opinion. Quinn and Draco's names were rarely mentioned, which was eminently satisfactory to them, and speculation that Harry was employed in some sort of evil-fighting profession ran rampant.

People began owling them from all over the world. Hermione was besieged at work and their housemates were peppered with questions whenever they dared go out among other wizards. Journalists showed up on the Bailicroft doorstep...Laura was famous for telling them that they were mistaken, this wasn't Harry's house, and that Bailicroft was actually a combination brothel and mortuary called "Shag 'Em and Bag 'Em."

After a few irate reporters and one very confused visit from the local health authorities, Harry and Hermione agreed to give an interview to the Daily Prophet's most reputable reporter, Davis Wilpott. They had openly acknowledged their relationship and thanked everyone for their kind interest, agreeing that it was a turn of events a long time in coming. Comments made by the interviewer about wagers being settled all around the world were laughed off. Harry had admitted that he was an employee of the Federation Enforcement Corps (though he refused to be any more specific) and that a group from their organization which had included himself and Hermione had succeeded in capturing a good number of Circle members. When asked about the fate of their leader, the villainous Allegra Blackburn-Dwyer, Harry would only say that she was unaccounted for.

Wilpott did not ask about the rumors that Harry was a previously unknown type of wizard with special powers, and Harry didn't bring it up.

And so the proverbial cat was out of the equally proverbial bag. The flurry of talk had calmed considerably...it was old news by now...but Hermione wasn't sure what sort of reception they could expect when they arrived at Hogwarts. She didn't fancy making a grand entrance like some sort of rock star, but she supposed that the people who'd be there would simply be happy for them.

"Do you ever wonder how we did it?" Harry was saying, lacing his fingers together behind the small of her back.

"Did what?"

"Lived together as friends for all those years."

She sighed. "Denial is a powerful thing."

"Not just a river in Egypt."

"Not remotely." She shrugged. "I suppose I never thought of you in that way." She grinned, her hands sliding down his back to cop a bit of a feel of his posterior. "And now I can't *stop* thinking of you in that way."

He chuckled. "Don't get fresh, now. I just got this tie on straight."

"You know, I do believe I'm halfway to being a bona fide sex maniac."

"How can I help you pass the halfway point? I want to be a supportive partner," he said, leaning down to nuzzle at her neck.

"I thought you just got your tie on straight," she said, her eyes falling shut as her arms slid around his neck all by themselves. "The others are waiting for us."

"Mm-hmm," he said, muffled against her skin.

"You know I never...had this problem...with Horace or Rufus or Abel..." Hermione whispered, the sentence broken into choppy phrases as she kissed him lightly every few words. "I would have been...hurrying them out the door...you know I hate being late..."

"Maybe they just weren't worth the extra time," he murmured.

She smiled mischievously at him, plucked his glasses off his face, grabbed his head in her hands and laid a deep, passionate kiss on him that lasted at least fifteen seconds. When she finally let him go he had a rather goofy dazed look on his face. "Ohuh," he sighed.

"There. That's what they weren't worth." She slid his glasses back on his face, pleased with herself. "Come, dear. We'll be late." She took his hand, grabbing their robes off their pegs, and led him out of the room.

He recovered himself as they reached the head of the stairs, pulling her hand through the crook of his elbow. "See?" she whispered. "I can be a sexy siren when I want to be."

"You'll get no argument from me. But if you don't want to be late you're going at it all wrong...you kiss me like that all it does is make me want to grab you, sling you over my shoulder, lock the bedroom door and have my way with you."

"My, how Neanderthal of you," she said, shoving her elbow into his side.

"Ow!"

They came down the main staircase; the rest of the party was waiting in the foyer. Hermione smiled to see everyone all dressed up; she was feeling beautiful tonight, this was her favorite dress and it even matched Harry's suit. She had long imagined how it would feel to sweep into the Great Hall at Hogwarts on the arm of a handsome date, she had just never imagined that it would be Harry. She smiled up at him, musing once again that he really was handsome...though when he had become so, she couldn't say. He'd hardly won any beauty contests in school, having been rather skinny and geeky, but Hermione had observed that the boys who were geeky or nerdy often turned out to be the best-looking men...in no small part because they did not consider themselves so.

Laura and Sorry stood close together by the door, talking quietly. Cho was holding the hand of her escort, one of her Minotaurs teammates they'd not yet met. Justin and George could be heard but not seen, it sounded like they were having some sort of fight involving pots and pans and cherry pie filling.

"Are we ready?" Hermione said, taking her cloak down from its peg. Harry took it from her and held it for her to slip her arms in; she smiled at this little display of chivalry.

"George and Justin are trying to cram all the cakes and pies into that basket." As Cho said this, a very large basket floated out of the kitchen followed by George and Justin. Using any excuse to try out new recipes, George had volunteered to contribute desserts to the dinner at

Hogwarts. They were probably expecting him to bring one pie or perhaps two, but George wasn't one to do things halfway.

"Oh my, let me put a stabilizing charm on that," Hermione said, hurrying over. "It'll tip over...no one wants to eat Cake Mush."

Harry stepped up to meet Cho's friend. "Hi, I'm Harry Potter," he said, sticking out his hand.

The man smiled. "Um, yes, I know who you are," he said, shaking Harry's hand and chuckling a bit at the very idea that he wouldn't know. "I'm Joe McCarthy." He sounded Canadian.

"McCarthy! As in..."

"Yes, that crazy Yank, I know. If you're a Communist, I promise you that I don't give a damn."

"Well, nice to meet you, and I don't think I'm a Communist."

"Joe is one of our Beaters," Cho said.

"I know. I do watch your games on occasion," Harry said, winking at her.

"Are we all ready to go?" Justin said, clapping his hands together.

"Where's what's-his-name?" Harry said to him, waving his hand in the air as he searched for the man's name. "That guy you said you were..."

Justin made a face. "Oh, you mean *Clive*? He had another *pressing engagement* and stood me up. No matter," he said cheerfully. "I met him at the gym. Guys you meet at the gym are Sickles for dozens and worth every Knut...though he did have lovely pecs." Justin sighed wistfully at the thought of being denied appreciation of said pecs, but was not long distracted. "Shall we go?"

The party went out onto the portico, retrieving their broomsticks. Harry was loaning Sorry his Jet Stream to use as he didn't have a broomstick in the country...it wasn't as if Harry needed it to get where he was going.

They took off into the night sky, seven figures on broomsticks and one unencumbered man silhouetted briefly against the moon.

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To welcome back its alumni for the Gala, Hogwarts was decked out to the fullest. The road leading up from Hogsmeade Station was lined with wrought-iron arches for the occasion, each one covered with glittering white lights, so that as you came up in one of the several dozen carriages that drove back and forth it felt as though you were passing through a leafy, sparkling tunnel. The castle itself was illuminated by a thousand candles and torches, the halls and corridors bedecked with swags and ribbons in the four House colors. It was a perfect night, not too warm and not too cool. The sky was clear as crystal and a light breeze ruffled through the banners that hung from the castle turrets.

In the Great Hall, the four long House tables had been removed and replaced with round tables, grouped in clusters to keep up the feelings of House unity, the center of the room left clear for mingling and dancing. A small dance orchestra provided the music, and at one side of the room a huge buffet table stood laden down with hors d'oeuvres and drink.

In the foyer, the large French doors that gave onto the rear gardens stood open so guests could stroll out into the fragrant backyard. The gardens were immaculately manicured, the trees and bushes dotted with tiny white lights.

At least five hundred people were expected for the Gala each year, and a former student was chosen to emcee the event. This year Bill Weasley had drawn that honor, though his duties would not really begin until the dinner-and-dance portion of the evening.

Harry and Hermione stood chatting with the Longbottoms near the Gryffindor tables. Their entrance had provoked a minor hubbub and a smattering of applause; Bill had hurriedly jumped up and urged the orchestra into a impromptu fanfare. An embarrassed Harry had shot him a glance that was half amused and half annoyed while he and Hermione weathered a storm of hugs, handshakes and excited greetings. Thankfully, the melee had been shortlived and they were free to enjoy the party. George had taken Sorry and Laura on a tour of the castle while Cho and her date stood in a loose group with their fellow Quidditch players, among whom Hogwarts alums were well represented.

Their conversation was soon pleasantly interrupted. "Uncle Harry!" came a chirpy little voice that shot across the floor ahead of its owner. Four-year-old Charlotte Black pounded towards them in her patent-leather shoes with her red velvet dress flying, her arms held up in a clear and irresistible entreaty. Harry reached down and seized her, tossing her in the air before settling her against his shoulder. Giggling, little Charlie hooked her arm companionably around his neck.

"Here's my favorite elf," Harry said with a grin, accepting a kiss on the cheek.

"Make me fly!" she said excitedly, pointing up towards the ceiling.

"Okay," Harry said. "Put your arms out, now." It wasn't necessary, of course, but it was part of the game. She thrust her arms out to either side. Hermione watched Harry's eyes narrow slightly in concentration as he let go of her. She stayed there floating in midair, giggling. She slowly rose a few feet above his head, his eyes following her as she turned slowly about and made little figure-eights in the air.

"Be careful," Hermione whispered. "Don't drop her."

"Have I ever before?" he whispered back. Charlotte laughed and crowed, flapping her arms as she "flew" about above the heads of the grownups; Harry did not let her get too high or too far away.

Sirius came strolling up to stand next to them, his eyes on Charlotte. "Daddy, can you see me?" Charlotte cried. "I'm flyin'!"

"I see you, honey," Sirius said.

"Uncle Harry's makin' me fly!"

"Well, Uncle Harry better not drop you if he knows what's good for him," Sirius said with a glance at Harry, a twinkle in his eye.

"Uncle Harry would be far less likely to drop her if Daddy didn't distract him," Harry said.

"Higher! Higher!"

"No, now that's enough," Harry said. Charlotte slowly sank into Hermione's waiting arms, clapping. Harry turned to Sirius, smiling. "Did you bring Ian?"

"No, he's a bit young for parties. He's home with the sitter." Cordelia Hunter, Sirius' Muggle wife, came up with two glasses of punch and handed one to her husband while she leaned forward to kiss Harry's cheek, then Hermione's.

"Sorry we didn't say hello earlier," she said with a smile. "Seemed like you had quite enough well-wishers without us barging in."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm sure I don't know what everyone's on about."

"Oh, nothing at all, I'm sure," Sirius said. "As if you weren't famous enough before, *now* you've defeated the most notorious group of dark wizards in the world."

"It's not like I did it alone," Harry protested. "Besides, 'defeat' is a very strong word and not one I'm comfortable in applying to the outcome."

"It's good enough for now," Sirius said quietly. "You and I both know that with rumors flying of an heir to Voldemort rising again, any defeat we can manage is welcome."

"Mummy," said Charlotte, who'd been babbling to Hermione, "Can I show Aunt Mina my new book?" As a baby, Charlotte hadn't been able to say Hermione's name accurately and had decided that "Mina" was an acceptable alternative. Thinking it was unbearably cute and half-hoping the nickname would stick, Harry had once called her that himself...and had never done so again. Only Charlotte could get away with it.

"You didn't bring it, luv," Cordelia said.

"Oh," Charlotte said, thrusting out her lip in dismay at herself for having forgotten such an important item. Harry and Hermione were Charlotte's godparents and took the responsibility seriously, serving frequently as babysitters for her and her two-year-old brother Ian, whose own godfather pitched in with equal fervor when the phase of the moon permitted it. Charlotte had quickly learned to associate Aunt Mina with reading, and being an eager reader at a very young age she was always anxious to share her new books with Hermione. Charlotte looked around, then back at Hermione. "Where's your honey, Aunt Mina?" Harry smiled. "Honey" was the word Charlotte used to describe anyone's significant other, for this was the word she heard used the most around the house by her own parents. "He said he'd bring me some little magic people for my train set."

Hermione realized that Charlotte was talking about Gerald. The last time she had watched Charlotte had been last May just before The Allegra Thing, and Gerald had come with her. Charlotte had taken a fierce liking to him, probably because he had gotten down on the floor and played with her on her beloved train set with the same solemn gravity that she accorded the pastime. Hermione could scarcely convince herself that it had really been *Draco* who had done those things. "Oh, sweetie...Gerald's not my honey anymore."

Charlotte's face fell in a comic display of disappointment. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, with almost adult-like embarrassment and sympathy. "You'll need a new honey," she said, in the same tone that a mechanic might remark that a car needed a new transmission...matter-of-fact and leaving no room for alternatives.

"Well...Uncle Harry is my honey now," Hermione said, glancing at Harry. Charlotte looked from one to the other, her brow crinkling as she considered this information.

"But...I thought he was before!" she said, the idea that Aunt Mina could have more than one honey at a time not troubling her a bit. Sirius chuckled, reaching out to reclaim his daughter from Hermione's arms.

"Out of the mouths of babes, eh Harry?"

"Hermione! Harry!" came a new voice. Minerva McGonagall came hurrying up to the little group, smiling. Snape trailed along behind her, looking merely dour. "Oh, I'm sorry. I've been busy with some last-minute details, I've only just come down to the party."

Hermione embraced her old friend warmly. "You haven't missed much...just some rather overblown entrances."

Minerva looked at her former students as they stood before her holding hands. "I must say...it really does seem right to see you here together. I always..."

Harry held up a hand to stop her, grinning. "No, don't say it, allow me. You always knew it, you were just waiting for us to realize it, and you knew we were just made for each other and you're sure we'll be fabulously happy." Minerva blinked a few times, unsure how to respond. "You'll forgive my interruption, it's just that we've heard that about eight thousand..."

"No, ten thousand at least," Hermione said.

"All right, ten thousand times now. Just once I'd like to hear someone say 'I never would have suspected it, I'm completely shocked and I think you're all wrong for each other.'"

Snape arched an eyebrow. "Well, *I* never would have suspected it."

Harry nodded to him. "Thank you, Snape. I knew I could count on you."

Their conversation continued for a few moments as accounts of the recent battle were exchanged, pleas from Charlotte for more flying were deflected, and commentary about the party and its guests flowed like water. Eventually Minerva was called away on something to do with gooseberry fool, Snape drifted off to torment Bill, Sirius and Cordelia took Charlotte out to the special party room that had been set up for the children in attendance and the Longbottoms went on a pilgrimage to old childhood haunts, leaving Harry and Hermione alone for the first time since their arrival.

Hermione strolled over to the buffet table and piled a plate with small finger-foods; without even realizing she was doing it she chose items for herself and for Harry. He came up next to her and wordlessly handed her a cup of rum punch, her favorite, while he stuck to butterbeer. She looked at the cup, then at the plate she was holding, and began to chuckle as they moved to take seats at a nearby table.

"What's funny?"

"Look at this, Harry. I pick out hors d'oeuvres for you and you get me the appropriate drink. Do you think we're a bit used to each other?"

He smiled. "We ought to be by now. After fifteen years, I ought to be able to predict what color knickers you're wearing."

Her eyes narrowed, sensing a challenge. "What's my favorite film?"

"A Room with a View."

"What's my mother's maiden name?"

"Graves."

"What was the name of my childhood pet cat?"

"Oliver Cromwell."

"My favorite colour?"

"Blue."

"What was Horace's last name?"

"Robbins."

"When does the curse visit me?"

"Usually starts around the 12th, give or take a few days."

"Who's my favorite singer?"

"Sting."

"Which is my favorite Python?"

"Eric Idle."

"Who's my favorite person?"

"Me, I hope."

"Besides you. And Ron. And my family."

"Then I'd have to go with Dr. Rousseau from Stonehenge. Or perhaps Laura." He waited for the next question, but she just sat back and grinned. "Did I pass?"

"Oh, yes. You pass. My turn?"

"Not necessary."

"Why not?"

"Because you know me better than I do, as we're both aware. No demonstrations are required."

She smiled at him, the stamp of affection clear on her face. "Want to go for a walk?"

In lieu of an answer, he just stood up and held out his hand.

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They walked down the lawn past the Quidditch field, past Hagrid's old hut, now occupied by the current gamekeeper. Harry paused and looked at it for a moment.

"Lefty reminds you of Hagrid, doesn't he?"



Harry nodded. "Hagrid was the first magical person I met. I suppose I always thought of him as my personal guardian, because he came swooping in and spirited me away from the Dursleys."

Hermione sighed. "We've lost too many friends, Harry."

He said nothing for a moment. "After Cedric died I didn't know how I'd handle it if someone else met the same fate...and Cedric was only barely a friend."

"You had to grow up fast."

"We all did."

They just stood there for a few minutes, then Hermione grasped his arm and looked up into his face. "I want to go there," she said.

He nodded, not needing to ask what she meant. He slipped his arm securely around her waist and they flew off into the night sky, the dark mass of the Forbidden Forest passing silently below their feet. Hermione felt a chill shudder through her as they flew over it; she clung to Harry tightly, feeling the pulse in his throat against her cheek.

They set down in the glen, the site of a memory that dogged their nightmares and poisoned their waking thoughts. Harry stood rooted to the spot while Hermione walked forward to where she thought his body had lain, though she'd never seen it. "Did he die here?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Or was he just left here?"

"He died here. His blood was on the ground."

"Where?"

"Right where you're standing."

Hermione looked down at the ground as if she could still make out the impression that his form had left in the grass. She held out her hand without looking up. Harry, with effort, walked forward and took it. She raised her eyes to his. "Tell me. Tell me what you saw."

He shook his head. "No. I didn't want you to know then, and I still don't."

"I have to know, Harry. Please, you can't protect me from this. I have to share that moment with you." He said nothing. "You asked me once if it would ever be just the two of us, or if Ron's ghost would be with us every step. I need to see what you saw, or we might never be free of it."

Harry held her gaze for a long moment, then blinked and bit his lip. Finally he nodded, his eyes shifting to stare at the ground at her feet. He grasped both of her hands tightly, almost painfully. She just waited as he searched for the words to describe it.

"I saw a flash of white...remember how bright the moon was? I saw something and I knew, I knew it was him. I came up to him...he just looked like a pile of rags on the grass," he said, his voice shaking. "I turned him onto his back and that's when you heard me scream. I ran."

"What did you see?" she persisted.

"His...his throat was cut. The blood looked black in the moonlight. His hair was all a mess and his eyes were open and staring up at the sky and I couldn't believe that I'd never see his grin again, I'd never talk to him or have lunch with him or play chess with him ever again." He

hesitated and seemed loathe to continue. "And there was...on his face..." He trailed off, his throat working. Hermione waited. He met her eyes again. "On his forehead was this," he said, one hand rising to finger his scar. Hermione gasped. "It was cut into the skin."

"Oh my God, Harry."

"It was a message, for me, letting me know that this death, this blood, is on my hands. If he'd chosen another best friend he'd be working on his Arithmancy homework in the common room right now." He shut his eyes, tears squeezing out of his eyelids to run down his face. "All I could think was that you mustn't see. If you saw that mark, you might hate me."

"I could never have hated you," she said, though she wondered if that were really true.

"I heard you coming and I grabbed you and I stopped you from seeing, and I closed my eyes and all I saw in my mind was you lying on the ground with your throat cut and that mark carved into *your* forehead. I knew Ron was dead and that I could do nothing more for him and my heart was breaking, so all I could do was hang on to you."

Hermione's chin trembled as the image of what he'd described hung vividly before her vision. She sank to her knees and put her hands on the ground, her fingers moving through the grass. Harry just stood over her, numb, and watched as she put her hands to her face and her shoulders began to shake. The sound of her crying rose from her and was swept away by the light breeze that ruffled through his hair. It really was a beautiful night. Cruelly beautiful. How uncaring is nature, Harry thought vaguely. We stand here in the grip of horrible memories, missing our best friend, and yet it's a beautiful night.

Harry knelt slowly and drew her close; she came against him gladly and wept against his chest. He felt the tears rising in his own throat; for once, he did not attempt to stop them. He sat down heavily in the grass, pulling her with him, and let himself cry for this loss that would not go away. Time will heal it, he'd been told many times. Time had only put distance between himself and this pain, the pain itself remained unchanged and as fresh as the day it had been created.

As he felt her shaking in his arms he realized that since that night they had never mourned him together, not really. They had talked about it in remote, empirical terms. They had stood together at his funeral, but it had been stilted and false to them. They had tended to each other's lingering emotional issues...and yet they had never just wept together since that night, never just shared their grief in any meaningful way. Their common sorrow had bound them together even more tightly than before, and yet it had also driven them further into themselves. It had made them keep each other at arm's length, maintaining that air of friendship and the illusion of closeness while they kept their feelings locked away and solitary.

They stayed there for a long time. Eventually their tears abated and their sobs quieted, the breeze drying the wetness on their cheeks. Harry sat cross-legged in the grass holding her on his lap, her head on his chest and her arms around his waist. Their chests stopped hitching and they sat silently, drained and yet cleansed.

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Hermione walked along the edge of the lake, taking deep breaths of the fragrant night air and feeling freer and lighter than she had in years. She could hear Harry's footsteps several metres behind her and the gentle lapping of the water against the banks of the lake. The moonlight glinted off the surface, making it appear silvery and incandescent.

Their mutual catharsis in the glen had felt like the last step in a long road she'd set her feet upon years ago. No matter how happy she was with him or how strong their relationship was, still Ron's ghost had stalked them tirelessly. She was always conscious of its presence, standing not between them but all around them. Bailicroft was miles from Hogwarts but somewhere in their minds and hearts they'd never left that glen. That had been the beginning of the end, the end of their childhoods. That night for the first time she'd looked in Harry's eyes and seen an adult looking back at her, and she'd seen the strain of the burden that had been placed on his young shoulders. She'd known, really *known* for the first time that whatever he was destined for, she was part of it...because she couldn't bear not to be.

Sitting there on the grass they had talked about it for the first time, and discovered that they had remarkably similar perceptions of how things had changed after Ron's death. She had felt a large weight lifting from her heart as the words passed her lips...her guilt, her despair, her resignation to her own death.

She would never be able to remember who'd made the first move, but all at once they were no longer talking but kissing, first with tenderness and then with increasing ardor. Incredibly, perhaps inevitably, they'd ended up making love right there on the grass. She would never forget looking up into his eyes as his forehead rested against hers, the stars twinkling brightly above him, the grass beneath her cool against her skin. Their cries echoed through the trees that surrounded them and Hermione felt exorcised, that the very ground was exorcised of the death that had haunted it and them.

Now she walked calmly back towards the brilliantly lit castle, smiling. Harry was trailing behind her but she could feel his presence. They were both occupied by their own thoughts and emotions for the moment, and she was glad for the time to recover her composure.

She heard Harry stop walking and turned around. He was standing by the edge of the lake looking out over its surface, his hands thrust into his pockets holding back his suitjacket. His expression was thoughtful. "What is it?" she said.

He looked over at her. "Take a look at something for me, will you?" He reached into an inner pocket of his jacket, withdrew a small object, and tossed it to her.

Thinking it was some sort of magical item on which he needed her opinion, she caught it...though she wondered at his odd timing. It was a small, flat box of the sort that might hold a medal or an amulet. She opened it, and her mouth fell open.

Inside was a ring.

"Oh," she sighed, carefully withdrawing the ring and holding it up. The band was gleaming gold, and the stone was in a plain setting...just one very large diamond. She wanted to say something but seemed to have lost the ability to speak.

Harry walked slowly up to her until he could reach out and take the ring from her numb fingers. "I was in New York about a month ago on a case," he said quietly. "I was walking down 5th Avenue and I passed Tiffany's. My feet just sort of walked me in there all by themselves." As she watched, stunned, he lowered himself to one knee before her. Hermione's mind whirled as he looked up at her, holding her hand in one of his and the ring in the other.

When he spoke again his voice was rough. "Every morning when I open my eyes, I think that I can't possibly love you more," he said. "I go through my day as I always do. I go to work, I go on trips, I come home, I talk to you and hold you, I read, I eat, I sleep. And then the next day I wake up again and see you sleeping beside me and I'm amazed to find that I love you

even more...and once again I think that that must surely be the limit, that *now* I can't possibly love you more. Then I repeat the entire process. I'm still waiting for the day that I wake up and I love you only as much as I did when I went to sleep. I don't think it'll ever come." He smiled up at her, his eyes overbright. Hermione returned the smile, her knees feeling as unsteady as a warm pudding. "When I think about my future, the only thing that's constant in it is that you're there. I can't imagine life without you."

Some sound escape Hermione's throat, a sort of half-laugh and half-sob. The tears were leaking steadily from her eyes now.

"Marry me?" he whispered, his eyes full of hope and not a little bit of nervousness. "What do you think?"

Hermione dropped to her knees, lowering herself to his level, and put her hands on either side of his face. "I think I'm the luckiest woman in the world," she said softly.

"Will you, then?"

"Yes, Harry. I will." Her smile widened into a happy grin, the tracks of the tears on her cheeks shining.

He let out a huge breath and his shoulders sagged in relief, a smile lighting up his face. They embraced tightly, exchanging warm and excited kisses. "Wow," he murmured. "I can't believe it."

She chuckled. "As if you thought I could say no."

"Let me let you in a little secret. We men put on a big show but we're very insecure. I don't think any man in the history of men has ever proposed without a big old neon light in his head flashing 'YOU IDIOT, SHE'LL NEVER SAY YES.'"

She chuckled and hugged him again, feeling as if her heart might physically burst. "Oh, Harry, you daft git. I do love you." She drew back. "And now I'll let *you* in on a little secret. Every woman from the time she learns of the concept of marriage dreams of the day that she'll get a proposal and how perfect it'll be. Well...that was a more beautiful and touching proposal than I ever dared to imagine I'd receive." He grinned and blushed a little. "And how long have you been practicing it?"

"Well...I started composing the first draft as I was leaving Tiffany's. Speaking of which," he said, holding up the ring, which had been a bit forgotten. He picked up her left hand and slid the ring onto her finger. "There. That makes it official."

She looked down at the ring sparkling on her finger. "It really is beautiful. Not to mention extravagant." She peered more closely at the rather large rock on her finger. "Merlin's ghost, is that a real diamond?"

"I hope so, or else I've been horribly swindled."

"It must have cost a fortune."

"I can afford it. Besides, I can't think of anything I'd rather splurge on."

She shook her head. "I can't believe it."

"Don't tell me this was a surprise."

She looked up. "This was a *huge* surprise."

He cocked his head and regarded her with a puzzled expression. "So you thought that I was just casually dating you before I found my *real* soulmate?"

"No, of course not. I just never expected it this soon. It is rather...fast."

"I see. I suppose fifteen years isn't *quite* enough time to get to know each other..." he said airily.

"Oh, stop. You know what I mean. We've only been together a few months."

He tenderly ran his fingers over her cheek. "And it gets better every day. I'm usually unsure about a lot of things, but not about this." He stood up and offered her a hand, which she took. They resumed their walk back to the castle, arms linked about each other's waists.

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When they re-entered the castle, the guests were just beginning to drift towards the tables in preparation for dinner. They exchanged a brief glance, and through some tacit agreement Hermione stuck her left hand in her pocket. She was bursting to tell Laura and Ginny and everyone else, but for now she just relished keeping the knowledge to herself. She held Harry's hand tightly. *Husband, husband*, her mind repeated over and over again in disbelief. *He's going to be my husband.*

Harry nudged her. "Look."

She followed his eyes and beheld Draco, whom they hadn't been certain would attend. The wizarding world knew of his loyalty shift, but he'd been extremely shy of the limelight and had refused to speak to anyone publicly. He was wearing a severe black outfit, slacks and a turtleneck, and his braids were pulled back and gathered in a bunch. He looked downright jumpy. Quinn was whispering reassuringly into his ear but he didn't look comforted. Harry and Hermione made their way over. "Draco," Harry said, shaking his hand stiffly. "We weren't sure you'd be here."

"I almost wasn't," he said tightly.

"I had to threaten him with bodily harm," Quinn added.

"Well...we're glad you came," Harry said, not sounding very glad at all.

"Carefully, Potter, you might sprain something," Draco said. "I don't need your companionship."

"No, but it can't hurt to be civil, can it?"

"I don't know," Draco said, looking unsure. "It might hurt."

Quinn and Hermione, chatting, preceded them into the Great Hall. Bill Weasley was setting up a podium on the stage near the orchestra; during dessert it was customary to recognize various former students for distinguished accomplishments. Quinn drifted towards the faculty grouping of tables, Draco in tow.

Harry and Hermione headed towards a table already three-quarters full of Weasleys: Molly and Arthur, Charlie and his family, Fred, George, and Ginny. Percy had been unable to attend and Bill would be sitting up front with easy access to the stage. Laura and Sorry, having

apparently been adopted as honorary Gryffindors by Molly Weasley, were already installed at the table and appeared to be having a grand time. Many hugs and excited greetings ensued, and room was made for the two newcomers. Harry waved to Sirius and Cordelia, sitting nearer the front with Lupin and some wizards and witches he didn't recognize.

The talk careened around the table like pinballs, everyone carrying on three to four conversations at once while trying to scarf down rolls off the basket in the middle of the table. In the middle of it all, Harry noticed that Hermione had surreptitiously moved the ring to her right hand and turned the stone towards her palm.

Soon enough the first course appeared on their plates and everyone fell to, maintaining their chatter but now talking around mouthfuls of roast duck and potatoes. Commentary on people's dates, questions about so-and-so's supposed promotion or demotion, amazed discussions of the appearance of Draco Malfoy at this gathering, gushing over various people's children, lamentations about absent friends and speculation about the coming recognitions.

Ginny had come alone and didn't seem at all unhappy about it; she, Molly and Hermione were conducting a three-way conversation though they were all across the table from each other. Arthur quizzed Harry endlessly about the recent happenings and picked his brain about dark uprisings. Charlie had his hands full with his children, while Laura and Sorry laughed uproariously as the twins regaled them with lurid tales of their schoolday misadventures.

Harry barely spoke two words to Hermione through all of dinner, as both of them were quite caught up in other conversations, but he was always keenly aware of her presence...even more so since she kept sliding her foot up and down his leg. Once during dinner she asked him if he wanted her squash tart, as she didn't care for them. As he turned to answer he met her eyes and had to smile as he saw their shared secret lurking behind them.

Finally as the desserts were being consumed and hot spiced cocoa was filling their cups, Bill stood up and went to the podium. His magically amplified voice rolled out over the assembly. "Good evening, everyone!" he said cheerfully. "I'm Bill Weasley, Gryffindor Class of 1988, and I'd like to welcome you all to the annual Friends and Former Pupils Gala." Everyone clapped.

"First I'd like to thank Professor McGonagall for choosing me to run this show, though she must be feeling a bit nervous right now wondering what I might do." Everyone glanced at McGonagall, who didn't look the least bit nervous. Bill may have had a rebellious streak but he was a sucker for Hogwarts traditions and wouldn't dare besmirch one of them. Besides, Bill knew he probably wouldn't enjoy life as a snuffbox.

"We're going to begin tonight with some recognitions of our fellow alumni," Bill went on. "First of all, to Mildred Sterncastle, who did us all a favor when she invented the Self-Correcting Quill...especially me, I could never spell worth a jot." Everyone clapped and Mildred rose to give a little bow. Bill continued to read the list of notable achievements among the alumni...wizards who'd written books, witches who'd cured curses. Although she wasn't a Hogwarts alumna per se, he mentioned Quinn's successful completion of two years as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, a Hogwarts record. He also mentioned Draco's heroics, which earned a healthy round of applause and made the man in question flush several shades of purple.

"And now," he said. "A matter of no small importance. A few words from our brand-new Minister of Magic, a chap I like to call Dad. Arthur Weasley."

Everyone applauded enthusiastically as Arthur stood and made his way up to the podium with his eldest son. "Umm...thank you all, I'm glad to be assuming this post. Minister Fudge has been very helpful to me in my career at the Ministry..." Harry had to swallow a laugh at this...Fudge was rarely helpful to anyone except Fudge. "...and I'll have some very large shoes to fill. Thank you." He left the stage to more hearty applause.

"And now," Bill went on, "A few words from our most illustrious former pupil...Deputy Chancellor Sirius Black. Sirius?"

Sirius stood and joined Bill on the stage as the assembly clapped. "Thank you, Bill. I bring everyone greetings from the Chancellor."

"The Chancellor couldn't join us tonight?" Bill said, grinning. A ripple of laughter passed over the crowd at this...because no one would have actually expected the Chancellor of the International Federation of Wizards to attend. He had never been seen. His (or her) identity was kept secret. Only Sirius, presumably, ever saw him. All business was carried out via the Deputy Chancellor, who represented the Chancellor at any functions where his presence was appropriate...in point of fact, they only had Sirius' word and the word of his predecessors in the Deputies' Office that there actually was such a person. Harry had often wondered about the point of this arrangement, but it had been in place for the entire existence of the Federation, several thousand years at least, and was therefore difficult to challenge.

"The Chancellor is very busy," Sirius said with a sardonic smile. This was the only answer he ever gave when asked why the Chancellor never attended these kinds of events, or any other kind of event for that matter. Harry wondered how busy the Chancellor could possibly be, since Sirius did all the work. Sirius looked out over his fellow alums. "Good evening, everyone. As a proud member of the Class of 1976 it's my pleasure to attend the Gala with my family. It's been an interesting year in the wizarding world. It's not usually the position of the Chancellor's office to give credence to rumors, but I see no point in ignoring them." The audience was completely quiet, hanging on Sirius' words. "We have all felt the presence of evil swirling about us again in the last few years. We tend to think of the dark forces as only rising when they are given opportunity...but in truth, they are always with us. We only feel their presence in proportion to their determination to defeat those whose task it is to oppose them. Voldemort...and I refuse to be afraid to say his name...is gone. That is certain, and you have my word on the subject. But what he represented, what he stood for, will never be gone, and there will always be those who will embrace it. These wizards who would follow darkness recently suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of those among us who tirelessly fight them, some of whom are in this room. At this time I would ask my godson, Harry Potter, to join me here to be recognized."

Harry blinked and sat up straighter, surprised. He hadn't expected anything this evening, but Sirius clearly had other plans. He glanced at Hermione and shrugged, then stood and made his way through the tables to the podium, applause washing over him punctuated with whistles, hoots and hollers.

Sirius spoke to him in a low voice as he approached. "I think a few words could help morale immensely, don't you?" Harry nodded conceding the point. "Harry has been fighting evil since before he was old enough to hold a wand," Sirius said. "I do not need to enumerate his deeds to this audience. Harry?"

Harry stepped to the podium, his heart banging away at his ribcage. Public speaking wasn't exactly his forte. "Uh, hello. I didn't prepare for this, so please bear with me. I thank you for your appreciation, but I have been far from the only person opposing the Circle and their like-

mindful compatriots. There are many, many brave witches and wizards who fight darkness in large and small ways every day. Some of them are sitting in this room. Some of them are still out there fighting right now. They deserve the greater part of our gratitude. I'll accept it only on their behalf. Special recognition is also due to Quinn Cashdollar, a current Hogwarts professor," he said, allowing the audience to applaud Quinn, who stood up and sat back down so quickly it looked like an odd sort of hop, "and of course Draco Malfoy, who shocked more than one person with his heroism, myself included." Draco sat stiffly as if facing a firing squad while the assembly cheered him, unable to even stand up and acknowledge it. "My friend Remus Lupin, who has taught me a great deal over the years and continues to amaze me with his bravery." More applause. "And last but certainly not least, Dr. Hermione Granger, who is not nearly as new to the evil-fighting business as you may think." Hermione stood up and nodded at the crowd's ovation. She met Harry's eyes and made a small motion with her hands, sliding her thumb over her left ring finger...he realized that she had put the ring back in its proper place. No one appeared to have noticed except him. Harry's brow crinkled, the question in his eyes. Are you sure? She nodded. Harry smiled and cleared his throat. "Now," he went on. "Most of you know that for some time now I have been happily filling the role of Hermione's boyfriend, but I think you should all be aware that that's no longer the case." A shocked hush fell over the audience. People looked around uncertainly. Hermione bit her lip to hold back the chuckles. "I do believe that I must relinquish that title now that she's agreed to marry me."

The uproar that went up at this statement made Hermione's eardrums hurt. She just stood there grinning out at them and might have done so for some time but for Harry, who upon dropping his bombshell had hopped down off the stage and strode through the tables to her side, whereupon he seized her about the waist, dipped her backwards in a dramatic lunge and kissed her like Rudolph Valentino. Hermione was struck by the absurdity of kissing Harry in the middle of the Great Hall at Hogwarts in front of hundreds of their friends and schoolmates, all of them whooping and cheering, but she didn't care. She kissed him back, and if anyone had dared mention that she was making a spectacle of herself she'd have told them to sod off.

The next ten minutes passed in a blur. They were immediately mobbed by friends and family, hugging and congratulating and demanding to see the ring. Sirius came up to Harry, his smile oddly strained, and shook his hand. "Congratulations, son," he said, a glint of moisture in his eyes. He turned abruptly and strode away, leaving Harry and Cordelia to watch him go with puzzled expressions.

"What's wrong?" Harry said to her, quietly.

Cordelia was staring after her husband, her brow furrowed. "I honestly don't know."

Hermione had her left hand out while Laura, Justin, Molly and Ginny peered at the ring and made the appropriate "ooh" and "aah" sounds. "Great honk, what a rock," Laura said. "You're going to develop a decided list to port."

Hermione blushed, grinning. "It is rather extravagant, isn't it? I feel like Grace Kelly...or at the very least Imelda Marcos."

"Isn't this ring *beautiful*, Sorry?" Laura said emphatically as he peered over her shoulder. "How *wonderful* that our friends are *engaged!*" she went on, over-emphasizing each word, her motive extremely transparent. Hermione chuckled, aware that Laura was just enjoying tormenting him.



Sorry arched an eyebrow. "My goodness, dear, whatever can you be implying?" he said dryly.

Laura laughed, dropped Hermione's hand and hugged her tightly. "I'm so happy for you," she whispered into her ear.

"Thanks," Hermione murmured. She watched Harry over Laura's shoulder, standing near Cordelia and having his hand shaken and his shoulder clapped by every friend who approached him. She didn't see Sirius.

Eventually the hubbub died down and everyone began gathering up their belongings so the room could be rearranged for the after-dinner festivities. Harry handed Hermione his cloak, leaning close to whisper in her ear. "I'm stepping out for a few minutes, back soon." She nodded and he turned and trotted across the floor towards the stairs. She watched him go, frowning, then shrugged and returned to the party.

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Harry found Sirius in the Gryffindor common room standing at the mantelpiece of the roaring fireplace, looking down into the flames with his hands behind his back. Without saying a word, Harry walked forward and stood next to him.

He waited patiently. Whatever was troubling Sirius, he would speak of it eventually.

At length, he did. "Sorry I left so abruptly," Sirius finally said.

"Oh, was it abrupt? I hadn't noticed."

"It's just..." He trailed off.

"What is, Sirius?" Harry asked as gently as he could.

"When you kissed her like that...well, at all once I just...I missed James and Lily horribly. I miss them often, of course, but I haven't had that sharp ache to see them in years, not until tonight." Sirius raised his head and looked at Harry...for the first time, Harry could see the years acting on Sirius' face. There were light crow's feet at the corners of his eyes and flecks of gray in his hair. "I look at you and I see them," he said, his voice hoarse. "You barely knew them, but they were the only family I had. I know you miss them too, but...don't take this the wrong way, but what you miss is having parents. What *I* miss is James and Lily. I miss his laugh, and her smile, and the way they had of speaking to each other without saying anything. I miss just sitting and talking with them, and feeling totally accepted. They loved each other very much and weren't afraid to show it. There were plenty of times when James would just grab her and kiss her, the way you kissed Hermione tonight. James would have loved that. If I close my eyes I can see him there with us tonight, laughing and clapping and crowing how that was *his* son there."

Harry felt his chest tightening, and suddenly the fact that the man next to him had actually *known* his parents was driven home with undeniable finality. He'd known it before, of course, but he hadn't really appreciated what it meant.

Sirius turned and faced him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "They would be so proud of you, Harry," he said in a choked voice, one tear trickling from the corner of his eye. "They'd be proud of what you've done, and how you live...they'd be proud of the man you are, and I know because I am." He smiled. "I'm so proud of you."

Harry grinned, more touched than he could have said. He reached out and embraced Sirius, a gesture meant as much for his parents as for Sirius, through whom they lived on in Harry's life.

The two men separated and stood there side by side, gathering their wits about them.

"Sirius...you know you're an important part of my family."

"As you are of mine."

"Then will you stand up with me?" he asked quietly. Sirius turned to look at him, a smile dawning on his face. "Will you stand with me when I marry Hermione? Be my best man?"

Sirius sighed. "Oh, Harry. I'm touched. But...I thought you'd want someone else up there. Someone with red hair, perhaps?"

"You mean, to stand in for Ron?" Sirius nodded. "I thought about it. But this day, whenever it happens, well...I'm going to be marrying my best friend in the world, the woman I love more than my own life. I want the people who matter most to me up there with me."

Sirius smiled and nodded. "In that case, it will be my honor." Harry clapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "Will there be anyone joining me up there?"

"I should think so. Remus, if he's willing. George, perhaps."

"You realize that you're walking into the very maws of Hell itself, don't you?"

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Harry, as a man who's been through it, let me warn you that the planning stages of a wedding will probably generate more arguments between you and your beloved than you've had in the entire course of your relationship. I can't tell you how many nights I slept on the couch. So don't go making a lot of plans..such as how many men you'll ask to stand up with you...without consulting Hermione first."

"Well, I just asked her an hour ago. I doubt she's started planning."

Sirius just laughed. "Oh, Harry. Your naivete is refreshing. She's been planning this since she was eight." He laughed harder at Harry's deer-in-the-headlights expression, then sobered. "Listen, while we're having deep meaningful discussions, there's something I've been wanting to ask you for some time. This seems like the right moment."

"All right."

Sirius shifted his weight and seemed hesitant before he finally spoke. "This is hard for me to say, but I must. My job is...well, it may not be as dangerous as yours, but just to give you an idea, I received a dozen death threats last week alone." He put a hand up at Harry's alarmed expression. "Very rarely is there an actual threat," he said in a reassuring tone, "but you never know. Cordelia and I aren't spring chickens, we started our family relatively late in life." He took a deep breath. "The point I'm trying to make, Harry, is that...well, Cordelia and I would like to designate you and Hermione as the guardians of our children if something happens to us."

"Oh, Sirius, nothing's going to..."

"That's what everyone thinks. No one thinks anything will happen to them. But just in case it does...if we can't do it, we would want you to raise our kids."

Harry almost couldn't find the words to reply. "I...we'd do our best. I think I can speak for Hermione, too."

Sirius looked immensely relieved. "Thanks. We've been meaning to ask you about it for some time, but the opportunity never arose. Now that you're settling down yourselves, it makes even more sense."

"Somehow I don't think that marriage to Hermione is going to qualify as 'settling down,'" Harry said with a grin.

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They returned to the Great Hall to find the party in full swing. The orchestra was pumping out tunes and people were dancing or chatting or sipping punch and nibbling on chocolates and tarts. As they always did, Harry's eyes sought out Hermione. She was dancing with Sorry and beaming a wide smile. She waved to him as he entered the room.

The song began to wind down and Harry crossed the dance floor to where Hermione and Sorry stood. "May I cut in?" he said, his hand out. Sorry stepped back with a half-bow. Hermione kissed his cheek warmly and he retreated to the sidelines. The orchestra swung into a slow waltz as Harry gently drew her into his arms, her head leaning against his shoulder and their clasped hands resting on his chest over his heart.

Laura and Ginny watched from the table where they sat with Justin and George. Ginny smiled as she watched her two friends dancing slowly, exuding an air of utter contentment. "They seem so in love," she said with a sigh.

"Yeah," Laura said. "Kind of makes you want to throw up, doesn't it?" Everyone laughed.

"Are they as happy as they look?" Ginny asked.

Laura rolled her eyes. "Spend a few days at Bailicroft and you'll find out."

Ginny grinned. "Noisy?"

"It's not so much that," George said. "Their room is quite isolated, which would help a lot if they'd only stay in there!"

"I caught them in the library once," Justin said. "He had her up against the bookshelves. Pretty steamy. I was really relieved they didn't see me...though I don't think they would have noticed if Armageddon had happened right then."

"I heard them up in the observatory about a week ago," Laura added. "Yikes."

"I've taken to walking into every room with one hand over my eyes just in case," George said, chuckling.

"Going at it like crazed weasels, huh?" Ginny said. "I suppose that's to be expected."

"I just wish they'd get past that can't-keep-their-hands-off-each-other having-sex-in-the-yard phase. They're starting to make me jealous," George said.

"He was never like that with me," Ginny mused. "Hmm."

"No offense, Gin, but I think it makes a difference when you're with your one true love," George said, a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"No offense taken. I wasn't in love with Harry nor he with me. It didn't help that I was jealous of Hermione half the time."

"You were?" Laura said, fascinated.

"Oh, sure. It was very clear to me, and to the men that Hermione dated, I might add, that they came first in each other's lives. She got the best part of him, and whatever he had left he'd offer to me." She turned to watch them on the dance floor, moving easily in sync with each other and talking softly. "They had a bond that no one else could ever intrude upon, even back then, and so much a part of each other that they could never be separated."

No one said anything for a moment, considering this undeniable fact. The slow waltz ended and they watched as Harry raised Hermione's hand kissed it, his lips lingering over her knuckles as he met her eyes.

"Hey, no snogs on the dance floor," Bill said, standing at his podium. Everyone laughed; Hermione turned red. Harry faced Bill, one eyebrow raised.

"You have a better idea, wiseass?"

"Yes. I think it's high time you put up or shut up. We've heard extravagant tales of your skill on the dance floor, let's see it!" A chorus of agreements were voiced and people began to clear the floor, leaving Harry and Hermione standing alone.

He looked down at her. "Are you up for this?"

"If you are," she said archly, dropping a wink.

Harry stepped towards the orchestra, speaking to the bandleader. "Do you chaps know 'Switchblade 327?'" The bandleader nodded and they all shuffled through their sheet music as Harry stepped back to Hermione's side, bending to roll up the cuffs of his trousers.

She was looking at him doubtfully. "You sure? We haven't done that one since the All-Brittania finals!"

"Won it for us, didn't it?"

"Yes, but it's so hard! We're out of practice."

The bandleader raised his baton and Harry led her into the starting position. "We can handle it. Just don't think about it, it'll come back."

She shrugged, acquiescing. The music started with a fast guitar riff, and on the cue they swung into it. Hermione felt the quick drumbeats guiding her steps, her feet moved by themselves. Her jaw clenched slightly; this was a very fast, very difficult dance, but tonight it seemed easy. She was peripherally aware of people lining the dance floor and clapping along, but all she really saw was Harry as they whirled around each other. She flipped in front of him in a cartwheel over his outstretched arms, that moment of weightlessness giving her the same rush it always had. She laced her fingers behind his neck as he swung her over his left hip, then his right, then swung her high in the air as she kicked her legs towards the ceiling.

She beamed a wide grin as they flew through the steps as if they'd just done it yesterday. Loud whoops went up from the audience as they executed the impressive trick moves they'd

incurred so many bruises in learning. No bruises tonight...Harry caught her out of every flip, their hands found each other unerringly, and their feet were sure on the slick dance floor.

Their friends and classmates clapped along, the band played on, and she felt like she could float away on a cloud of joy and adrenaline. Her new engagement ring flashed on her finger, and whatever worries or concerns she might have had about anything were far from her mind.

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The Bailicraft contingent stayed very late at the party. Harry and Hermione, once put in the mood, danced up a storm. Tango, rumba, swing, foxtrot...dance after dance they moved amongst their friends and classmates sure and confident.

They did not return to the mansion until four o'clock in the morning. After the Hogwarts party had been declared closed, a large group of former pupils had merely relocated to the Three Broomsticks and drunk enough butterbeer to supply a small country. Making as much noise as possible, they'd stayed until they'd been almost bodily thrown out and regretfully called it a night with many hugs and bids adieu.

As soon as they got through the front door the housemates went their separate ways. George and Justin headed for the kitchen muttering something about ale, Cho and her date went to the backyard to look at the stars and probably neck, Sorry and Laura went up the back stairs to her room and Harry and Hermione raced each other up the main staircase.

She got ahead of him in the living gallery but he grabbed her about the waist and yanked her back. Hermione slapped at his hands, giggling and feeling about twelve years old, when suddenly he ducked and, as he had threatened to earlier, threw her over his shoulder. "Hey!" she cried. This position was oddly debilitating. She couldn't get up enough leverage to jump off...besides, it was sort of fun, in a swooning-damsel sort of way. He set off towards the stairs that led to the Cloister. "I'm perfectly capable of walking, you know!"

"Ha! You'll not escape me this time, brazen hussy!" he said in a deep, swashbuckling voice.

"Unhand me, you scurvy knave!"

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"Oh, cruel fate!" Hermione cried, laying a hand theatrically over her brow. "How shall I ever go back to my quiet mountainside hamlet after the shame of my disgrace?" Harry kicked in the door to the Cloister, laughing maniacally like the villain in an Errol Flynn movie. "You can take my body, ruffian, but you shall never have my heart!"

He tossed her down on the bed and leaned over her, smiling gently, all kidding aside. "Too bad. That's the best part."

She pulled his head down and kissed him, feeling aggressive. Without warning, she gave his shoulders a hard shove and pushed him over onto his back. Before he could react she was sitting on him, straddling his hips and pinning his arms to the bed with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Brazen hussy, am I?" she purred. He grinned. "You think you know brazen? Brace yourself." She fell to with vigor, determined to give the soundproofing around the Cloister a good workout.

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"This is pretty."

"That drinks blood, if I remember correctly."

"But look at the foliage. Very colorful." Laura frowned down at the potted bromeliad. "Does it really drink blood? It looks like such a nice, agreeable flower."

Hermione walked through the maze of tables at Broomthorn's Fine Herbs and Flowers, one of the largest wizard nurseries in the London area. Laura was looking for some durna fungus for the garden and Hermione had tagged along...it was never too early to begin thinking about wedding flowers. Much as she hated to jump into planning too early...they hadn't even set a date yet...her excitement was beginning to get the better of her. Laura was her co-conspirator in this venture, in fact she egged her on relentlessly.

"Now, any bouquets we prepare should definitely include some luck-inducing flowers," Laura was saying.

"I've never seen any that don't smell like something rotten and decomposed. Besides, that's all just superstition."

They came upon a display of assorted fungi and Laura dropped the subject of bouquets and pulled out her notes. Hermione watched her rummaging through Madame Broomthorn's carefully arranged selection of pots and bags.

"Hello, Hermione," came a voice behind her. She whirled, startled, her hand flying to her throat.

"Rufus!" She sighed. "My goodness, you scared me!"

"Sorry," he said, smiling. "I thought that was you."

She returned his smile. "And so it is. Well, hello! It's been some time, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has. You're looking well."

"As are you," she said, and it was true. He'd grown a mustache and it suited him. "What brings you here?"

He looked at her blankly for a moment. "Well, being an herbologist I come here several times a week."

Hermione flushed. "Oh, of course. How silly of me." An awkward pause. "How have you been?"

"Can't complain. Work is going well." He looked past her to where Laura was watching them with interest.

"Oh, forgive me," Hermione said, remembering her manners. "This is Laura Chant, one of my housemates. Laura, this is Rufus Frost. We used to date." They shook hands. Rufus seemed about to speak but then stopped, his eyes fixed on her shoulder. Hermione looked down...he was looking at her left hand where it was holding her purse strap. She sagged a little.

"You're married," he said softly.

"No," she replied. "Engaged."

"Ah." He forced a smile and tried to look happy. "Congratulations. Anyone I know?"

Hermione grimaced. "Yes..." She met his gaze and saw only the question there. She fetched a deep sigh. "Rufus, I'm engaged to Harry." His lips thinned and he nodded. "I think you of all people are entitled to a good 'I told you so.'"

He chuckled bitterly. "You know, when I saw you here I almost didn't come over. But the sight of you...well, I just had to. Thought I'd strike up a conversation, perhaps manage a dinner invite." Hermione looked away, embarrassed. "I should have known."

"It's very recent," she said softly. "We've only been..."

"You were always so emphatic," he overrode her. "Just friends, that's all. So certain, so insistent. So was he."

"We were wrong."

He met her eyes. "You love him, then?"

"Yes, very much. I think you know I always did."

"Then I'm glad." He smiled, and it was genuine. "I told you so," he said softly. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, quick and chaste, then turned and strode away.

Laura came up next to her. "My, that was unexpected."

"Poor Rufus," Hermione said, still watching him leave. "He always believed it was Harry I loved."

"It ought to be against the law for your ex-boyfriend to be right about anything."

Hermione laughed. "Yes, it ought. But in this case I'll overlook it."

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Harry sat at a large oval table in one of the I.D.'s many conference rooms, counting heads. Twelve were expected, all six division heads and their seconds. He kept coming up one short and then with an internal forehead-slap realized he'd been neglecting to count himself. Focus, Potter, he told himself. It had been one of those days.

He unrolled some parchment and the others turned towards him, expectant. He looked around at their faces, waiting for him to tell them what their business at this meeting was. He cleared his throat. "Well. Thank you all for coming to the meeting that has no purpose," he said. "Argo wants us to instigate this weekly meeting, though why she suddenly considers our regular staff meeting to be inadequate is beyond me."

"She's tossing our offices," said Henry Ubigando. Everyone laughed.

"Oh, blast," Harry said. "I left my 'Snogs for Voldemort' badge lying around in plain sight."

"While we're all here," Henry went on, "I may as well discuss a small matter of personnel." As the chief of the Strategy division, Henry was in charge of new recruits, determining where they'd be assigned and trained once Argo had made the initial contact. "This should interest you," he said, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a card. A card from the Deck, Harry realized. Henry tossed it onto the table and it slid over to Harry, who picked it up.

He read the name on the back, expressionless. "Is this a joke?" he said, one eyebrow arching.

"Not to my knowledge."

Harry shook his head, then laid the card on the table where everyone could see the name printed there: HERMIONE GRANGER.

"Do you object, Harry?" said Remus.

"No, not at all! She'd be a tremendous asset...I'm just amazed at the timing. She's been wanting to leave her job and I'd made a few small inquiries about having her here."

"Only small inquiries?" Grace said with a smile.

"Frankly, I wanted to avoid the notion that I was pulling strings for my life partner," Harry said.

"Life partner?" Lefty said, his bushy eyebrows quirked in amusement.

"That is our agreed-upon term," Harry said with a wink. "'Fiancee' sounds so...Victorian. But I suppose those concerns are moot now. If the Deck chose her then she's in, regardless of anything I might do."

"Where shall I assign her, do you think?" Henry said. "Assuming she accepts a commission."

"Anywhere but CCO," Harry said quickly.

"Oh, of course not. That's verboten anyway, I wouldn't assign her to your division."

"I would like to have her," said the Librarian, a small and ethereal presence in her raised chair. "She has a sharp mind for Research."

"Yes, but she may not wish to spend all her time in the library," Harry said. "That's what she's trying to get away from."

The door to the conference room opened, interrupting them. Argo strode in, looking uncharacteristically cheerful. "Good morning, troops," she said.

"What brings you here, boss?" Harry said. He only called her that when he was annoyed with her.

"Glad tidings, I think." She came around the table and stood next to Lupin's chair. "Remus Lupin, I'm pleased to inform you that you have been granted a promotion to the rank of Captain in the Federation Enforcement Corps, and, if you accept, to Chief Wizard of Infiltration and Reconnaissance."

Remus stared at her, open-mouthed. He looked at Grace, the current chief of I & R.

"But...what..."

"I'm retiring," Grace said with a grin. "I've been offered a consulting job, and to be honest the pay's better. I'm vacating the position. I think you're the ideal choice, Remus."

Remus smiled, his surprise dissipating. "Well, I appreciate the confidence." He shook Grace's hand.

"You accept, then?" Argo said.

Lupin stood up. "I accept." They shook on it, then he turned to shake Harry's hand.



"Congratulations, Remus. You deserve it. But this leaves me with no second."

"It'll be taken care of, Major," Argo said cryptically, her use of his rank a tad jarring in the usually informal I.D. atmosphere. "But now I must steal Remus for some security procedures." Lupin headed for the door, shaking hands as he went, and Argo followed him out.

The remaining agents sat back down, their eyes drawn to the empty chair. "Well," Harry said at length. "That sort of pre-empts the meeting with no purpose, doesn't it? Dismissed."

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That night Harry returned home around six o'clock and went to the owl post tray, which was empty. He found Hermione in the study making some notes from the volumes open before her; he flopped down into an overstuffed chair under the window. "How many posts today?" he said.

"Only three. Seems to be easing up a bit." In the days after the Gala they'd been deluged with congratulatory notes from all their classmates and friends. It had been over a week now and the flood was abating.

He watched her for a moment, thinking his own thoughts. Her hair was tied up in a bun, little wisps had escaped to tickle her cheeks. Her narrow rectangular glasses sat perched on the end of her nose and her teeth bit at her lower lip as they did when she concentrated. "I've got something for you," he said.

"What's that?" She kept her eyes on her books.

He reached into his pocket and tossed the card from the Deck onto her desk. She looked at it blankly for a moment, then turned wide eyes to him. "Surely you're not serious."

"I am serious. And don't call me Shirley."

"You wouldn't be so horrid as to fabricate this."

"Absolutely not." He smiled. "Welcome to the club."

Hermione grinned and jumped up to lean over his chair and throw her arms around his neck. "You didn't pull any strings, did you?" she said, drawing back.

"My love, you were chosen by an enchanted deck of Tarot cards. I wouldn't know where the strings were to pull them."

"When can I start?"

"Come with me tomorrow and we'll start the procedures."

She sat back on her heels, her face flushed with excitement. "Oh, I can't believe this!" Her smile wavered a bit. "Is the training terrifically horrible?"

"It's no walk in the park. I'm afraid many of the things you'll be taught can't be learned from a book." He smiled at her anxious expression. "You'll also have to learn to do things you've been able to avoid."

"Like hit people?"

"That, among others."

She nodded, considering this. "Will I be able to work with you?"

He frowned. "Oh no, not directly. It would be against policy to have you under my command. Even if it were not, I wouldn't want you in my division."

She looked crestfallen at this. "You wouldn't?"

"Oh, not because I don't think you'd be excellent there," he hurried to add. "It's just...well, I have to be able to give orders to the agents in my division. Orders that I know may endanger them. I can't hesitate. I have to be prepared to send someone to their death if necessary. If it were you, I might not be able to do that. I couldn't do my job properly if I had to give you orders."

"I understand," she said. "Can I at least have lunch with you?"

He smiled. "Of course. And we'll still collaborate on assignments, but I won't be your direct superior." He leaned forward and kissed her. "I'm relieved the Deck chose you. I was dreading trying to get you in without it seeming like I was just favoring my girlfriend," he said with a grin. "Excuse me, life partner."

"That's the one." She stood up and leaned against the edge of the desk. "I'm going to be a spy," she said, testing out the phrase in a pensive tone.

"Uh...intelligence agent," he corrected.

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"Now Dr. Granger, I'm going to ask you a series of questions. Answer truthfully and as quickly as you can. Some of them may seem odd, but they are necessary," said the wizard seated across the table from her. He was gaunt and tired-looking, but his eyes were sharp. She got the impression that this was some sort of security procedure, though no one had actually explained its purpose.

"All right."

"Your full name?"

"Hermione Ann Granger."

"Your year of graduation?"

"1998 from Hogwarts, 2002 from Stonehenge."

"Do you own a car?"

"Yes."

"Do you enjoy foreign films?"

"Only with subtitles."

"Do you have siblings?"

"No."

"What is your brother's name?"

"I don't have one."

"How old were you when you became sexually active?"

"Sixteen."

"What is your earliest childhood memory?"

"Of going to the fair and getting sick on jelly babies."

"Do you have a significant other?"

"Yes."

"Do you prefer hollandaise or bernaise sauce?"

"I don't care for sauces."

"Are you afraid of flying?"

"On airplanes, no. On broomsticks, slightly."

"Do you know a man named Remus Lupin?"

"Yes."

"What mountain range separates Asia from Europe?"

"The Urals."

"How many states in America?"

"Fifty."

"Wizard schools in the U.K.?"

"One."

This went on for almost an hour. Hermione tried to keep her mind blank and answer each question quickly. When the questioner finally stopped, she sagged and breathed a sigh of relief. He pressed a small button on the tabletop and the door opened. Lupin and Henry Ubigando entered. "Well?" Henry asked.

"I agree with you, I think she's suited for SIR. Her answers indicate quick cognitive processing and comprehension, frankness and logic."

"Good," Henry said, motioning to Hermione. She stood up and followed them out of the small, windowless room.

"What's SIR?" she asked.

"Surveillance and Information Retrieval," Lupin explained. "They deal most directly with intelligence information, collecting and analyzing. We think you're best suited to work there. There's a lot of field work involved. Observation, stakeouts, etc. You'll be with the agents who are really 'spies' in the most traditional use of the word in that they're the ones who actually do the spying."

Hermione nodded, pleased. "Where's Harry?"

"He left, he said he had a golf date."

"Oh yes, I forgot. Any word on his new second?"

"Not yet. We're all a little anxious about that, I don't mind telling you."

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Harry leaned on his driver and watched Doug Granger tee off, the ball hooking as it always did. "I'm telling you, open up your stance a little," he said.

Doug shook his head, grumbling, and came away from the tee box. They shouldered their bags and headed off down the fairway. Claire Granger and her sister Julia were ahead of them, headed down the fairway for their second shots. "Blasted clubs," he said.

"Oh yes. It's all the clubs' fault," Harry said sarcastically.

"Watch it, smartass," Doug said with a grin. "And don't let me catch you magicking the ball into the hole again." They were on the last hole of the course and Harry still hadn't worked up the guts to tell Doug what he'd brought him out here to tell him. Hermione had agreed to let him break the news to her father, who was the only one still in the dark. She had been unable to resist telling her mother, who had been sworn to secrecy until Harry could chat with Doug. Seemed a trifle old-fashioned, but it felt right somehow.

Harry slowed his steps to increase the distance between them and the women. "Doug...there's something I need to discuss with you."

"That so?" Doug said, distracted as he tried to spot his ball in the left-side rough.

Harry stopped, forcing Doug to do the same and face him. "Well, here it is. The fact is that...well, I'd like to marry Hermione."

Doug just stared at him for a moment, then cleared his throat. "I see. Shouldn't you be speaking to *her* about this?"

Harry smiled. "I've already asked her."

"And what was her reply?"

"She said yes."

Doug chuckled, shaking his head. "In that case, shouldn't you have asked *me* first?"

Harry tossed up his hands in exasperation. "I wanted to be the one to tell you, all right?"

Doug laughed. "I'm just having you on." He sobered. "Listen, now. Hermione is my only child, and a father is always protective of a daughter. I've lain awake nights wondering about the men she's dated, how they were treating her, if they were making her happy." He put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I've never lost a moment's sleep wondering those things about you, Harry. When Hermione told Claire and I that she was going to live in London with a male roommate, and her only barely 18, well...the only reason we allowed it was because it was you." He peered into Harry's face. "But I have to ask, because I've been wondering for months. I know that she loves you. Do you really love her? Or is it just inertia and settling for a friend?"

"It's a fair question," Harry said. He looked out across the fairway, squinting into the setting sun, and when he spoke his voice was quiet. "Whenever I wake up in the middle of the night, before I can sleep again I always sit there and just watch her sleep for a few minutes. I watch her breathing, and the peaceful expression on her face, and I get a tight feeling in my chest. Sometimes it actually hurts." He turned and looked back at his future father-in-law. "That's how much I love her, Doug. I wasn't sure of that when she and I first got together, I'm know she wasn't either. I didn't know what was happening to us or what it meant, or even if it was real. But as the days passed and turned into weeks, well...I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

Doug sniffed, looking as if he might cry. "That's good enough for me." He grinned, then reached out and embraced Harry warmly. "I'm glad she chose you."

Harry smiled. "I don't think either of us had a choice."

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A few days later Harry sat in his office, gloomily sorting through a tall stack of parchments on the archeological expedition that was the top of his desk. He tossed papers over his shoulder into several piles: "Keep," "Throw," and "Other."

There was a knock at the door. "Come in!"

The door swung open and Lupin entered. "Surprise, Harry. Got a wee present for you."

"Is it a secretary?" Harry said, without much hope. "Or perhaps a blowtorch?"

"Ehh, close. It's your new second."

Harry brightened, glad at the chance to have some help. "Smashing! Send him...or her...in."

Lupin stepped aside, motioning to someone outside in the hall. As Harry watched his new assistant enter, his jaw clenched and his eyes went deadly cold.

The new second was a young man, looked to be about Harry's own age. He presented a unique figure to say the least, looking like a refugee from a Sex Pistols concert. Ripped leather trousers, a chain-mail shirt, a beat-up black bomber jacket, and motorhuckle boots that shook the floor when they struck it. His face was sharp and ferret-featured, with strange silver eyes and pale eyebrows. His hair, which gave the appearance of having been cut with pruning shears, stood up in wild spikes dyed every color of the rainbow. His right ear was pierced all the way up the lobe, a large stud stuck through his nostril attached to a chain that ran across to his other ear. He also wore rings in his eyebrow, lip, and the bridge of his nose. He grinned with a mouthful of anachronistically perfect white teeth, raising a hand in salutation. "'Allo, 'arry!" he crowed, his voice laced with acCockney accent so thick that it was almost a patois. "What's the what, eh?"

Harry lowered his head and glared at this strange personage. "Oh. My. God." he spat.

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Argo was mildly totting up her weekly schedule when the door to her office was unceremoniously banged open to admit a very angry-looking Harry Potter. He strode up to the desk and began to pace, too furious to form words for the moment.

"I can infer from your demeanor that you've met your new second," she said mildly.

"He's not my new second," Harry managed. "I wouldn't give that man the time of day if he begged me for it."

"Tut tut, Harry. Such venom is hardly befitting the great Harry Potter, Master of the Universe."

Ignoring her sarcasm, Harry planted his hands on her desk and leaned over it to stare into her eyes. "Listen to me. I *cannot* work with Napoleon Jones."

"Well, you're going to."

"I can't."

Argo returned his glare. "I said, you're going to. You'd better start internalizing that fact if you wish to continue in your present job."

"What is he even *doing* here?"

"The Deck picked him, of course."

Harry snorted and began to pace again. "I find that hard to believe."

"I don't see why."

"I'll tell you why!" he exclaimed, gesticulating wildly. "Do you know anything about him? Allow me to do the honors! Once upon a time he was a mercenary, a hired hit wizard with no loyalties or honor to speak of who'd sell his own grandmother for a fast Galleon. Then, to my eternal disgrace, he ended up as a registered Regulator, I've yet to find out how. He's ruined not one, not two, but *three* of my operations. Weeks of planning and work gone down the drain because he decided to barge in, wand blazing, right as we were tightening the net! Taking it upon himself to kick some arse without so much as a by-your-leave!" He stopped pacing and pointed at Argo. "I don't care if the Deck picked him, I don't trust him any further than I can *spit*. Accepting him here is a serious mistake, Argo. He will betray us in a heartbeat if a large enough carrot is dangled in front of him."

Argo appeared unimpressed by these revelations. "He assures me his loyalty is sure. The Deck would not have chosen him if he were unsuitable."

Harry threw up his hands. "Fine. But I will not work with him."

Argo stood up slowly, her eyes flashing. "You will do as you're told, Potter, or I'll have you courtmartialled for insubordination. Do not for one second think that your illustrious name obligates me to cut you any slack whatsoever. He's your new second. Deal with it."

They stood there in standoff for a moment, until Harry finally dropped his eyes, knowing he wouldn't win this one unless he was ready to resign his commission. He turned to leave. "You'd better be right about this," he said. As he reached the door he turned back. "And don't think I don't know that this is revenge for my little stunt during The Allegra Thing."

Argo smiled sweetly. "Why, Harry. I'm insulted that you'd believe me capable of such low motives." She waved at him. "Ta ta."

He shook his head, grumbling to himself, and left with a good hard door-slam.

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Harry stormed into the foyer at home, throwing his satchel to the floor as he ruthlessly yanked his arms out of his robes. Hermione came walking placidly through on her way to the kitchen, her eyes on a book. "Careful, dear, you're scaring the owls."

Harry reached out and caught her hand as she passed, drawing her into a fierce hug. She put her arms around him, a frown crossing her features. "What's wrong?"

He fetched a deep sigh. "Oh, nothing of consequence," he said, relaxing. He pulled back and looked down at her. "Just one of those days. Better now."

"Well, come on. You're just in time for dinner." He let her lead him through the rear corridor into the large kitchen. Everyone was already sitting around the table, handing bowls to each other. Cho's friend Joe was visiting again and Ginny was over for dinner, so along with Sorry they were nine at the unusually full dinner table. Harry sat down and accepted a mug of cider, feeling better already. The conversations ran into and over each other as he said nothing, content to just sit quietly and gather himself together while he let thoughts of Napoleon Jones, Argo, Allegra and a thousand other unpleasant things retreat to a far corner of his brain to sulk.

"You'll never believe what..."

"I saw the most interesting..."

"No, I can't possibly be there for..."

"She's being absolutely *insufferable* and I don't..."

He sat back and let the atmosphere wash over him, sighing and feeling fortunate to have such a home as this. I'm a long way from that cupboard under the stairs, he thought, looking around the table. The kid with no family and no one who cared, and now here I am. Friends who welcome me, family that transcends mere blood relation. And, wonder of wonders, she actually said yes.

At that moment Hermione happened to glance at him; she must have seen something in his face because her expression softened and she leaned close to whisper in his ear. "I love you," she said.

Harry smiled, his heart sighing as she returned to her conversation with Justin. Imagine that, he thought. She loves me. And you know, I think I believe her.

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Hermione stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, staring at her reflection. She and Laura had gone shopping at lunchtime last week and she wasn't sure how, but she had been goaded into purchasing her first-ever piece of what might be called sexy lingerie. It had taken her days to get up the nerve to put the damned thing on...it wasn't bad, really. It was a simple burgundy satin nightie with spaghetti straps, it fell to a modest mid-thigh length. Laura did have good taste...Hermione's usual nightwear was a dizzying array of cotton nightshirts and flannels for winter. Harry had never expressed any indication that he found this wardrobe at all lacking, but Laura had assured her that any man was a sucker for sexy lingerie and that Harry would be no different.

"I'll feel silly," Hermione had insisted, but Laura was unyielding. Now, wearing the thing, she did feel silly, but not quite as silly as she'd thought. It was a very good color for her, and the shape flattered her figure. Do I dare go out there in this thing?

She heard an 'ahem' outside the closed door. "Um, would it be terribly rude of me to ask what you're doing in there?" Harry said.

She took a deep breath. "I'll be out in a minute." She heard his footsteps on the wooden floor of the bedroom as he retreated. She blew air through her teeth and pulled at her hair, wondering what the procedure was. Do I make myself up? Seems silly when I'm about to go to sleep. Do I just throw open the door and strike a pose? I'll look like a reject from the Rocky Horror Picture Show. He's supposed to swoon, not fall down laughing.

She stood there debating with herself for a long time, but Harry did not make any further entreaties. Finally she took a deep breath, blew out the candles in the bathroom, opened the door and stepped into the bedroom, managing an uncertain smile.

She waited for a reaction. There was none.

She stepped closer and saw that Harry wasn't even looking at her. He was standing in the middle of the room staring down at a piece of paper in his hand. It was an owl post, she realized. It must have just come. She stepped closer. "Harry?" she finally ventured.

He looked up at her but didn't seem to actually see her. His face was pale, his jaw set. "You'd better sit down," he said.

Her heart froze in her chest and she did as he asked, sinking numbly to the edge of the bed, all worries about lingerie forgotten.

He sighed. "You need to hear this." And he began to read the letter he held in his hands:

"Dear Harry,

Please allow me to congratulate you on your recent engagement. The joys of marriage are a heaven here on earth, though I do not speak from personal experience. Your fiancée is quite a woman, as we've recently had graphic proof. I'm sure you'll be very happy. Allegra would send her congratulations as well but she is currently a bit indisposed." At the mention of Allegra's name Hermione stiffened, her hands lacing tightly together in her lap. He went on. "Whatever Dr. Granger did, it quite effectively incapacitated the formidable Ms. Blackburn-Dwyer, which I'm sure you know is no small achievement. It may interest you to know that she is currently stuck in a sort of temporal limbo, existing in the world but out of phase with it and unable to act upon it in any way. It will take some doing to get her back, but we will work it out. I shudder to think about her mood when she returns."

"You continue to impress me, Harry. I know you doubt my existence. If you did not, I would be very displeased with myself. Indeed, after a few days you will be able to rationalize away this letter. Someday we shall meet and all your questions will be answered.

Do not look for me soon. Do not expect Allegra soon. We have things to do. But with all the uncertainty you live with, this much is certain...our paths will cross again. Please accept my best wishes for your happiness.

Sincerely,  
The Master."

He looked at her blankly, the letter dangling from his hand. She stared at his face, wide-eyed. "Merlin's ghost," she breathed.

"I know."



"Is that what I think it is?"

"A threat? Most certainly."

"When did that arrive?"

"Just moments ago."

"Who could he be?"

Harry shook his head. "I have no earthly idea." His vision cleared and he seemed to see her for the first time, his eyes flicking to the satin nightgown. "Oh, honey...I'm sorry, that was atrocious timing, wasn't it?"

She looked down at herself, feeling just as silly now as she'd feared she would. "Oh no, it's nothing."

He sat down next to her and kissed her fingers. "You're beautiful, no matter what you're wearing."

She leaned against him, letting her head fall to his shoulder. They sat in silence for a few moments. "It never ends, does it?"

"No."

"What happens now?"

"Now, we go on with our lives. You'll start your training, and I'll attempt to break in my new assistant. We'll set a date and start picking out dresses and music and bridesmaids and before too long it'll be all over."

"Not over, just beginning."

He smiled against the top of her head. "Mrs. Potter."

She cleared her throat. "Ahem. Dr. Granger."

"Of course. Can I be Mr. Granger, then?"

"Oh, I like that very much. Really suits you." They laughed together, the sound of it banishing away the shadows that crept into the room with them.

He sighed. "Remember when I told you that you were my sacred space?"

She smiled. "Yes, of course. Am I still?"

He looked down at her, amazed. "You don't know, do you?"

She met his eyes. "Don't know what?"

"How precious you are to me."

She put a finger beneath his chin. "Show me."

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At the witching hour in the deathly woods in the remote hills of a far continent in a vast ocean on the surface of a spinning lonely planet, five wizards stood in a circle, hands joined, voices raised in entreaty to the gods of magic, whomever they might be.

A spinning light at the center of their circle ebbed and waned with their words, tendrils of light escaping to test the air. It grew and pulsated.

One of the wizards suddenly broke away and jumped into the light; he vanished and the others tightened their circle. Their chanting grew louder, faster. The spinning light grew stronger. "It's widening!" cried a voice from the circle of hands. "More!"

Another wizard flung himself into the light; it stretched yet wider. "Wands!" called a different voice. The three remaining wizards drew their wands and pointed them to the center. They shouted words, nonsense words, their voices as one. A loud *crack* filled the woods and the spinning light blazed forth brilliantly and was gone in a bright flash. Where it had been a lone figure huddled on the damp ground.

One of the wizards hurried forward and bent to the figure. "Are you all right?" he asked urgently.

Allegra flipped her hair out of her eyes, glowing red and blazing with hate. "Potter," she growled.

THE END

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*Author's Note: Oh no, but not quite the end! But wait, there's more! Please stay tuned for the sequel to this story, "Harry Potter and the Show that Never Ends," coming soon, same bat time, same bat channel. Thank you for reading, and I hope you've enjoyed "The Paradigm of Uncertainty." Look for chapter 1 of "The Show that Never Ends" in a few weeks. --Lori*