

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Setting the Stage

September 2, 1996

Harry woke to the usual sounds in the dormitory: the muffled sounds of breathing; snoring; the murmurs of boys who talked in their sleep. Now that he was back in school, he reckoned that he'd improve the room with a round of silencing charms on all the beds. He really didn't care to listen to Ron snore or listen to his best mate bicker with his girlfriend while sleeping.

The layout in this year's dormitory was much like his rooms in prior years, although the beds were a bit bigger, and they each had an extra drawer beneath the spacious wardrobe. After sitting up, he stretched and pushed the curtain open, snagging his slippers with his toes before putting his feet on the very cold floor. Lowering his Occlumency shield, he reached out for Ginny. She was asleep, although he could detect a sleepy response as his mind touched hers briefly. He imagined that she was smiling in her sleep, just as he was smiling now. Three months ago he'd woken up one floor below; his heart then was cold and his mouth full of ashes. He heard Tonks' voice echoing in his mind. "He wanted you to live, Harry." He smiled.

*I reckon he's happy now. I feel more alive than I have in years.*

Another voice came into his mind. "She's a girl, she needs to hear that."

He nodded resolutely.

Ron had been out late the night before; whether he was doing real Prefect work or merely spending some quality time with the brightest witch of their generation was unknown to Harry; perhaps a little of both. In any event, Ron was still sleeping soundly, so Harry figured that he'd go to breakfast and if Ron didn't join him, he'd bring something back so he wouldn't have to hear Ron's stomach rumbling during their classes. Although he wasn't eager to be writing and taking quizzes and exams, it was good to be back, if only to see his friends again.

The common room was empty as he passed towards the portrait hole. He paused briefly at the stairway to the girls' dormitories, shrugging at the minor inconvenience of not being able to wake Ginny for breakfast. He'd see her soon enough; and now that he had a reason, he figured he'd devise a way around the anti-boy charms on the stairs.

The Great Hall was buzzing quietly; each house table had a smattering of students engaged in breakfast. Hufflepuff, oddly enough, was almost full. Watching the table, he noticed that each first-year Hufflepuff seemed to be accompanied by an older student, mainly sixth and seventh years.

*Huh, why did we never do this?*

He made his way to the Gryffindor table, taking care to sit next to a pair of first year students, Eoin something-or-other and his sister, Madison.

"Morning, Eoin, Madison," he said, flinching a bit at their shocked expressions.

"Morning, sir," Eoin gulped. Madison said something in reply, but it was inaudible.

"I'm Harry, Harry Potter," he said, trying to look friendly.

"Yes, sir," Eoin replied.

"It's Harry, not Mr. Potter and definitely not 'sir,' all right?"

"But you're the Boy Who Lived," Madison exclaimed.

"Last I checked, Madison, that's not a royal title. My friends call me Harry," he said, reaching for the bowl of scrambled eggs.

"Right, Harry," Eoin said with a whisper of confidence.

"What's your first lesson?" he asked, trying to remember what it had been like to be a first year student.

"Potions!" they replied in unison.

Harry rolled his eyes. "You've got a substitute - be thankful, I had him for five years. You're only going to have him for two weeks until his replacement arrives."

"Is he as bad as they say, Harry?" Eoin asked.

Harry bit into a triangle of toast and thought of a temperate response. He swallowed the toast and swigged some pumpkin juice. "He knows his

stuff, but he's very heavy-handed, and he favours his own house terribly," he observed. Thinking back to his own first exposure to Severus Snape, he pinched a sheet of parchment from Madison's bag, scratching down some of the stumping questions (and answers) from his first year. Then, in a fit of mischief, he wrote his own question. "Five will get you ten that he's going to ask some of the following questions, trying to convince you that you know nothing and that you should meekly withdraw from school so as to not waste his valuable time. If you do answer his questions, he'll probably take house points from Gryffindor for being insufferable know-it-alls," he explained.

Madison's eyes were wide. "He wouldn't do that, would he?"

Harry looked at her over the rims of his glasses. "If he doesn't, I'll bring you back some Butterbeer from Hogsmeade," he offered. "If he gets too obnoxious, ask him the last question on that sheet of parchment and let him know that you're a friend of Harry's. If that ends up getting you in detention, I'll do my best to set things right. But promise me this, if anyone give you a hard time, Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff, come tell me," he said sombrely.

"You're not a Prefect, what can you do?" Eoin asked earnestly.

"You're right, I'm not, but I do know how to make things happen, and I always stand by my friends. So, can you say that? 'I'm a friend of Harry's?'"

"I'm a friend of Harry's," they recited in unison as they pushed away from the table.

"Enjoy your first day, and welcome to Hogwarts," he said with a smile before he wrinkled his nose. He caught a whiff of a particular spicy smell.

"I'm a friend of Harry's, can I sit down here?" he heard from behind.

"Sure, Cho," he replied, spearing a bite of sausage.

Cho turned the seat sideways, leaning on the seatback with one arm while she refilled her cup of coffee from the carafe on the table.

"Aren't you a cream and sugar girl?" he asked.

"I was, now I'm a 'trying-to-learn-how-to-drink-it-black' girl," she replied with a chuckle. "What you did with the Firsties was very sweet," she said, looking in to his eyes.

"Stop it, you're ruining my rakish reputation – I'm supposed to be described as rugged and manly and risk taking, you know, all those Gryffindor virtues, not *sweet*. Anything but that," he said sardonically. "I just wish that someone had warned me before *my* first class," he sighed.

"Would it have helped?"

"Probably not; Snape hates my Dad, so he's been taking it out on me for the past five years going on six."

"What did your Dad do?" Cho asked with concern.

"Made his life a living hell from what I can piece together, but that's beside the point. If Snape ever reproduces, I'm not planning on extending the vendetta for another generation," he said, refilling his coffee.

"Which is why you're in Gryffindor and not Slytherin," she observed.

"It doesn't always boil down to Houses, Cho. Some things are right, some things are wrong. It doesn't matter who's doing it, or why," he said.

"Like breaking school rule and Ministry Decrees?" she asked impishly.

"I never said I was perfect, Cho, just that I recognized what's wrong," he said, putting his knife and fork on his plate in a crossed position. The plate shimmered briefly and then disappeared.

"I'm sure I'd get a different answer on the perfect question if I polled the females of Hogwarts," she said tauntingly. "There are some very interesting rumours flying around about you and the break-in at Gringotts," she said, looking meaningfully over her cup of almost empty coffee.

"Yeah, I'm sure," he said.

"So it wasn't you?"

"It was a dragon, Cho. I'm not an Animagus," he said.

She smiled secretly. "That's good enough for me," she replied.

Harry was suddenly very tired of this dance, and decided to come right out with it. "What's on your mind, Cho?" he asked bluntly. "You've been angling to talk to me all summer." He braced himself, hoping he wasn't walking into a trap.

"Yeah, well, that's been overtaken by events, Harry. This summer I wanted to see if you were interested in giving it a go again," she said, looking down at the table.

"What about Michael?" he asked.

"What *about* Michael?" she replied. "We dated a while – it was fun, but he didn't propose and I didn't offer to have his name tattooed anyplace that I don't normally show in public," she said.

Harry blanched at the notion.

"I need to ask you a favour," she said.

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm no good with tattoos," he quipped.

"I'm not kidding, Harry. I'm applying to study as an Auror, and I wondered if you would write me a letter of recommendation. You know, in your capacity as leader of the Defence Association," she said, catching her eyes with her own.

He returned the gaze and, to his surprise, found himself feeling and hearing her surface thoughts. Anxiety about her request, regrets about how things turned out between them, and a faint pang of longing. The last bit startled him. He blinked and looked away, pulling up his Occlumency shield for good measure.

"I'm not sure how much weight my name will carry with the Ministry of Magic," he replied.

"I'm not applying to *our* Auror program, Harry. My Dad is Chinese, my Mum is Korean, I speak Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean and English – I'm applying to the programs in Taipei, Seoul and San Francisco. Your name carries great weight there. The foreign ministries of those countries sometimes have a better grip on what's going on in this country than our own Minister of Magic," she said dourly.

"Not a problem," he heard himself say. "I'll write about how well you caught on to the advanced charms and hexes and about your Patronus. The fact that you can produce one under real-world circumstances should be impressive as well," he said.

When he looked up again, he saw a broad grin on her face.

"Thanks, Harry, that'll be great," she said earnestly.

"Cho?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Don't kick yourself about the boy-girl thing. I wasn't ready. Not for you, not for anyone. You'll find someone worth the tattoo," he said with a smirk.

"What about her?" she asked.

"That's a very special situation," he temporised. "We—have a lot in common." He hoped that she wouldn't ask for an explanation.

Cho blinked slowly and then nodded. She placed her hand briefly on his arm. As she touched him, he heard Mm'lau growl in the back of his mind. "Thanks," she said.

"That's what friends are for," he said blithely.

"Yeah, and I'm a friend of Harry's," she said, walking slowly back to the Ravenclaw table.

He looked down at his coffee cup – what was left was cold. He felt warm hands on the back of his neck. He closed his eyes, leaning back into the touch, unclenching his shoulders.

"Talking with the ex-flame all that stressful?" Ginny asked sweetly.

"I wasn't aware that it was stressful until the right woman came along," he replied, with a smile for her. "Good morning. I'm glad you're here. If you weren't here I'd be back to that miserable clod of angst that you ambushed last year." He pulled her hand off his neck, kissing her palm and then slowly kissing the web between her thumb and palm.

"Stop it," she hissed. "If you're going to do that, we need to be somewhere else," she said sternly.

"Oh?" he said, looking up innocently.

"You're just winding me up. I need to eat and get out of here," she said before she leaned close to his ear. "I will take a rain-check, though," she said breathily.

Harry shivered. This was going to be a very different year.

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He'd changed his mind; being back at school was a pain in the rump. N.E.W.T. level classes were tough – it was the first day of class and he was already behind. He paused long enough to snarl the password at the Fat Lady and as he entered the common room, he tossed his book bag next to the first open chair. Leaning back in the chair, he closed his eyes, shutting out the sounds of the room, raising his shield to stop the buzzing that was assaulting his consciousness. His glasses left his face, and then warm soft fingers began to stroke his forehead. He lowered his Occlumency shield, but kept his eyes closed.

*That better be you.*

*Who else would dare approach you when you're this tired and cranky?*

*I'm not cranky. I am tired though. This is the year that I am going to flunk all of my classes.*

*Nonsense, you're just going to have to pay more attention than normal to Hermione.*

*Yeah, right. If I follow her planner, I might get to see you for breakfast and maybe lunch every other day.*

*It's not that bad. I missed you at lunch.*

*I had lunch with Dumbledore. I'm going to be having special tutoring – I think it's called 101 ways to whip Harry's sorry arse.*

*Ooooh, can I sell tickets?*

*Laugh while you can, pretty kitty – as soon as you're done with your Animagus tutorial, you'll be invited to join me – as the co-whippee, not a whipper.*

"Changing the subject, I had a long chat with Cho," Ginny said aloud.

"She approves, by the way," Harry said, his eyes still closed as Ginny stroked his eyelids with her fingertips.

"Of what?"

"Of you – of us. She said, quote, good choice, take care of her, close quote, full stop."

"When was this?" she asked.

"On the train."

"Where was I?" Ginny asked.

"You were asleep on my lap at the time," Harry said with a smile.

"So she knows," she said.

"Of course she knows," he replied.

"That would explain the whispering," she said.

"What whispering?" he said, taking her hand from his eyes as he turned to look at her.

"The 'how did Ginny Weasley snag Harry Potter?' whispering," she said, pulling a face.

"Simple, you took advantage of my secret fetish," he said, reclining back in the chair.

"And that is?"

*Beautiful red-haired women with one or more dragons etched on their back.*

*Mr. Potter, you say the sweetest things.*

*I try.*

"Anyway, you interrupted me. Cho dropped by at lunch, looking for you. You weren't there, so she left a portfolio with the recommendation form and a prepaid international owl-mail envelope with me, which I guess makes it official," she said, stifling a yawn.

Harry yawned sympathetically. "What's official?"

"That I'm your official Hogwarts girlfriend. It's in the *Girlfriend's Manual*, you know, chapter seven – other duties of the girlfriend - 'the girlfriend shall act as an extension of the beau for business and social purposes, including, but not limited to, serving as receptionist, carrying messages and small packages to the beau in a timely fashion,'" she quoted, rolling her eyes in the fashion of a schoolgirl reciting a particularly difficult assignment from memory.

"You're okay with that?" he asked, his eyebrows crunched in concentration.

"With what? she asked.

"With the whole boyfriend/girlfriend game. A girlfriend is someone who puts up with you for more than one date; you're much more than that to me," he said, reaching out his hand.

She clasped his hand, twining her fingers through his. She felt the now-familiar rush of his consciousness washing over her mind as she brought her Occlumency shield to nil.

*Yeah, I know. I've known since the day we cooked dinner at the Burrow.*

*Calling you 'girlfriend' seems cheap, maybe shallow I guess.*

*True, but I'm not quite ready to explain to people that according to the customs of The People, we are betrothed.*

She felt a surge of warmth across their bond before he broke off the link.

"Care for an early dinner and then a fly on the pitch?" he asked.

"Sounds like a date, Mr. Potter," she replied.

"Is that a yes?" he asked.

She touched the tip of his nose with her thumb. "That's a yes. Stow your books and we can be off."

Harry pulled out his wand, circling it over his book bag. The bag disappeared in a blink.

"Very impressive," she said, letting out a low whistle. "N.E.W.T. level charm?"

"No, this was one I looked up on my own," he answered.

"You are going to show it to me," she said confidently.

"Of course, let's go eat," he said, pulling up from the chair

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Hours later, Ginny stormed into Hermione's room, throwing her cloak on the floor.

"I hope that you're done with my brother, because I may kill him sometime this week," she said fervently.

Hermione put her finger in the book she was holding to mark her place and looked up at the flushed teenager who looked as if she'd run in from the pitch into the Gryffindor girls' dormitories.

"What's he done now?" she asked.

"Harry and I went to dinner and then went for a fly on the pitch. After that we were walking back to the castle," Ginny said, tugging on the elastic holding her hair into a pony tail.

"So?" Hermione asked innocently.

"So that's when Ron comes out from the castle, calling for Harry to talk about Quidditch practice," Ginny said.

"Connect the dots for me, Ginny. Ron is the Gryffindor Quidditch Team Captain; why is that unusual?" Hermione said.

"Because it was dark by then, and the only way he could have found us was by using Harry's map!" Ginny spat. "I'm fairly certain that Harry was going to kiss me tonight!"

"Oh. Ohhhhh," Hermione said as the significance of the scenario unfolded. "Well, I can't say that I'm surprised, but I will see what I can do to raise Ron's consciousness on the topic of leaving you two alone. I'll let you know tomorrow morning at breakfast, all right?"

"Thanks, Hermione," Ginny said before she leaned over to pick up her cloak.

"But other than that, it was a nice fly?" Hermione asked.

"It was a very nice fly," she said with a broad grin.

"So it wasn't a wasted evening?" Hermione queried.

"No, not at all – it just could have had a more smashing ending than it had with my brother's interruption," Ginny said, looking into Hermione's eyes.

"It will happen, Ginny. I'm sure of it. Now, if I'm not mistaken, you have a paper to write for Herbology, day after next?" Hermione asked.

Ginny nodded.

"You'll find my notes from all of last year's classes in a binder on your pillow. I thought it might save you a spot of time this year, what with all the extracurricular activities you're going to be involved with," she said with a knowing smile.

"Oh yes," Ginny replied. "Quidditch, Quidditch is very important you know," she said with mock seriousness.

"Yes, it's very important that Chasers be able to score," Hermione said, nodding solemnly before she began to giggle.

"You're terrible!" Ginny exclaimed.

"Thank you," Hermione said, opening her book again.

"Thanks, Hermione. Sometimes I just have to blow off steam, and you're the only one besides Harry who halfway understands what's going on in my

life," Ginny said, turning towards the door.

"It goes both ways, you know," Hermione said.

Ginny nodded. No further words were necessary.

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Author Notes: Welcome to Stories from Sixth Year. I've many stories to tell from Sixth Year, but I'm not going to tell the story of Sixth Year – you'll have to wait for The Half-Blood Prince for that, I reckon. Most of these stories will be single POV, much shorter than the chapters in TLOS Part III, and will sometimes begin and end with narration setting the scene. So, without belabouring the point – Eoin and Madison Norbeck (I knew their names even if Harry forgot) will show up again. They, of course, got into trouble with Snape on their first day of class. Harry interceded on their behalf and got their detention revoked and the lost house points restored. Eoin and Madison are brother and sister, but are not fraternal twins – one of them is adopted, although if you ask them, they'll say that they forget which one is adopted and which one was born a Norbeck. Madison fancies Harry, but realizes that Ginny has beaten her to the punch, but still, a girl can dream, can't she?

Sneak peeks of work in progress can be found on my LiveJournal – Kokopelli20878

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Spin, crash, burn

"Hermione, Luna's looking for you," Lavender said, looking up from a paper she was writing by the window in the Common Room.

"I know," Hermione replied with some irritation. "People have been saying that all day, but I haven't been able to find her." She regretted her tone of her voice when she saw Lavender recoil. "I'm sorry, Lavender," she apologised. "It's just that it's a bit tiresome to hear the same message repeatedly. You are maybe the eighth person to give me that bit of news."

"Maybe she's with Neville," Lavender offered, raising her eyebrow suggestively.

"I can't find *him* either," Hermione replied.

"Ohhhhh," Lavender said. "Ask Harry, maybe he knows."

"Harry's on the pitch," Hermione replied. "It's the first practice tonight."

"I take it you don't regard that as a worthy event on your calendar," Lavender replied drolly.

"In a word, no," Hermione said firmly. "Quidditch is a game – a very nice game, but it's only a game. I go to the games, I cheer, I look the other way when your boyfriend brings things into the dormitory when we win the cup, but Quidditch does not regulate my life the way it does with some people."

"Like all of your closest friends," Lavender said with a smile.

"Yeah, like them," Hermione said, hitching her new book bag a bit higher onto her shoulder. "Is that Potions?" she asked.

"No, it's Divination – Firenze has this open ended question that we're supposed to answer 'completely yet succinctly.' When I'm finished with that, *then* I'm going to take a crack at Potions," Lavender said, wrinkling her nose.

"Let me know if you need help with that," Hermione offered.

"Thanks, I appreciate it, roomie," Lavender said, frowning at her paper as she re-read it.

Hermione scanned the common room, found nothing out of order, and ascended the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Rather than wandering through the rooms assigned to the first year students, as was her practice early in the school year, she went immediately to the sixth-year students' floor.

Her bed was the closest to the window and furthest from the loo, which was as she preferred it. Crookshanks was nowhere to be seen, but as the curtains were drawn on her bed, perhaps he was taking a pre-dinner nap on her pillow.

Hermione drew her wand.

*I left the curtains open this morning, I'm certain of it.*

She opened the curtains with one hand, wand at the ready.

Luna Lovegood was asleep on her bed, curled in a ball, clutching Crookshanks to her chin. From the blotches on her face, she had probably cried herself to sleep. Hermione had a notion why she was here. She pulled a box of tissues out from her wardrobe and warmed some water for tea, intending to wake Luna when the tea was done. To her surprise, when she was measuring the tea into the pot, she heard Luna's dreamy voice behind her.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, I did not intend to nap on your bed. I have been looking for you," she said with a sniffle.

"Yes, that's what everyone has told me. Would you like some tea? It will be ready in a minute or two," she said cheerfully.

"That would be lovely," Luna said, her overly large eyes blinking at a faster rate than normal.

"I suppose asking you how you got into Gryffindor Tower without a password would be useless," Hermione said.

"Oh, no," Luna replied. "If you were to ask, I would tell you that there are several ways into the tower, but the most reliable way is to bounce an Echo charm off of the portrait at an oblique angle, which replays the last bits of sound from that area – I taught Neville that for the times that he would forget the password," Luna said, rubbing her cheeks with her fingers.

"What's wrong, Luna?"

"It's over, Hermione," Luna said, staring at her, blinking like mad. "Whatever it was that I had with Neville, it appears to be over," she said, grabbing a tissue from the box. The tissue never made it to her face. Luna let out a keening wail, followed by a torrent of sobs. Hermione shut the door and cast a quick silencing charm on the room, moving to sit next to her friend. She rubbed her back and patted her hair, hoping that Luna would find comfort in these actions, feeling inadequate for the job of comforter.

*Lavender should be here. I'm rubbish at this sort of thing .*

Just when she thought the sobs had played out, Luna began anew. She clung to Hermione like a woman drowning in the surf. This last round of sobs waned, petering out into a string of hiccups.

"I suppose there was no avoiding that," Luna said drolly as she reached for a fresh tissue. "I never thought I loved him, but it hurt terribly when Neville suggested that we call it quits," she said looking up into Hermione's eyes.

"I don't know that I have anything comforting to say to you, Luna. I'm not very experienced myself at these sort of things," Hermione said awkwardly. "I guess this proves one of those smarmy truths that you don't know how much something means to you until it's gone," she said, reaching for a tissue herself.

"You've been hanging out with boys too long, Hermione," Luna said with an odd laugh. "I'm not looking for you to fix me right now, just to listen and hold me while I come unwrapped."

"That I can do," Hermione said calmly, scooting back on the bed, hugging her knees to her chest. "I'm honoured," she said after a moment of silence.

"It's not like I had a whole lot of options, Hermione," Luna said sadly. "I know many people at Hogwarts, but consider very few of them to be true friends. My male friends would at best misconstrue tonight's events, and at worst would attempt to punish Neville, which leaves me with my female friends: you and Ginny, and Ginny has been unavailable all day. You've been so kind as to reach out to me this summer that when I began to fall apart at lunchtime, you were the first person I thought of. I hope that I have not presumed too much of our friendship," she said, reaching out to Crookshanks who had just hopped back up on the bed.

"No, not in the least," Hermione said, "as I said, I'm honoured that you thought of me."

The two girls sat in silence for a while, Hermione straining to think of something useful to say that wouldn't sound like the lyrics to a Muggle love song, Luna absent-mindedly scratching Crookshanks beneath his chin.

"May I ask you a personal question, Hermione?" Luna said, looking at the wall of the dormitory room.

"You may certainly ask – I may or may not answer it though," Hermione said with a smile.

"It has been obvious that you have feelings beyond friendship for both Ronald and Harry for quite some time – how did you choose between them?" Luna asked.

Hermione was silent for a while. "I didn't," she finally answered.

"How can that be?" Luna asked.

"I didn't choose," Hermione explained. "I've always had a thing for Ron, but when I was honest with myself, I knew I had a certain attraction to Harry, which I probably share with the majority of heterosexual girls at Hogwarts. This summer my Mum and Dad had Harry over for a picnic luncheon and Mum began probing Harry about whether or not he was interested in dating anyone in general and me in particular," Hermione began.

"No!" exclaimed Luna. "Wasn't that embarrassing for you – for Harry?"

"It was mortifying," Hermione said frankly. "When I pressed him in private, Harry said that he had a short list of girls that he was interested in, romantically I guess, and that he'd taken me off of his list because he didn't want to ruin our friendship. Your name made the short list, I might add. A few weeks later it was Harry's birthday. Ron came home with me that night to talk to my parents, asking their permission to ask me out. I didn't choose – I was chosen. End of story, full stop."

"I – I am surprised – I had no notion that Harry even knew I was a girl. I take it that Ginny was also on the short list," Luna asked.

"Right in one," Hermione answered.

"I'd always thought that whenever you finally chose between them, I'd throw myself at the other," Luna confessed. "They are both terribly attractive – and I'm not talking about their looks."

"They are," Hermione agreed. "So, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Certainly," Luna replied proudly.

"How did things start with Neville? I know I asked that question this summer when we spent the afternoon together, but you never answered the question, we got onto a tangent and I never followed up," Hermione explained.

Luna laughed, a thin laugh, but still more merry than maudlin. "You are one of the few who can follow me when I'm ping-ponging from thought to thought, which is truly amazing, given how linear your own thinking is most of the time. You are correct; I didn't answer that question, did I? That was rude, I'm



sorry. I'll see if I can answer without getting lost again," she said, closing her eyes briefly. "Daddy dropped me off at the memorial service, the one for Harry's godfather. He was late, of course. We'd been interviewing one of the victims of the Licking Fungus outbreak in Diagon Alley, yet another story that the Ministry of Magic was trying to suppress last summer. They fear the truth more than they fear Old Tom, you know, thinking that people would prefer to live with lies than any level of dread or fear. I did it again, didn't I? Well, back to St. Simons. Mummy and Daddy would take me to services there when I was younger, before Mum died. We'd attend the Lessons and Carols service before Christmas and sometimes for the Easter Vigil. Our parish near Ottery St Catchpole was too small for anything other than Morning Prayer and Holy Communion once a month. Stepping into St. Simons was a happy thing, even though I knew that Harry would be hurting through the service," Luna explained, stopping to take a breath after blowing her nose.

"Daddy stopped attending services altogether after Mum died, and I haven't gotten back in the habit now that I'm at school. I'm digressing again, aren't I? After the memorial service I had a long chat with Father Martin asking about parishioners I used to know. He asked me about Daddy. Then the music began. I was most surprised that you were not there. It was so odd to see only two of the Three Gryffindors, which is what we call you in Ravenclaw, you know. I love to dance. Mum made sure that I knew how, she thought it made for being a proper witch, don't you know. I figured it wouldn't hurt to ask Ronald to dance. I knew he didn't fancy me the way I fancied him, but I figured that there was no harm in asking. My backup plan was to ask Harry to dance. I figured that I might be able to make him laugh. By the time I made it across the Parish hall, Harry was dancing with Ginny and Ronald was dancing with Susan. They made a striking couple, by the way, should you ever tire of him. So there I was, ready to dance, with no dance partner. Neville broke away from talking to one of the adults and asked me if I'd like to dance. He was very thoughtful," Luna said, breaking to take another breath.

"How was he as a dancer?" Hermione asked.

"Well, I'd heard stories from Ginny about the Yule Ball – apparently he's improved a bit since then. We had a lovely time. I tried to give him graceful opportunities to bow out or dance with another girl, but he asked me to dance for all the numbers. When things broke up for the evening, he came home with me by Floo, because I wasn't sure whether or not Daddy would be home yet. I'd had a lovely evening, so before he took the Floo back home to his grandmother's house, I wanted to make sure that I gave him a hug. That part didn't quite work out, you see. I had my mouth open to ask him a question when he kissed me, although later he claimed that I kissed him, which is preposterous. It was a bit more than I'd bargained for, although it was a lovely kiss," Luna said, staring off into the distance. She was silent for a minute. "Evidently he enjoyed the evening, or maybe he enjoyed the kiss, perhaps both, I'm not certain any more. He owed me the next day with a very nice note and asked me to the Muggle cinema the following Friday. We've been seeing lots of each other ever since. We had a bit of fun, I learned a lot about snogging, and then we talked last night about where things were going. I respect him, I really do – he's an honourable man. I hope that we can remain friends without being all odd and awkward," she said, stopping for a moment. "All right, I'm odd, he's awkward, so maybe we can be friends without being spectacularly odd or awkward, how's that?"

Hermione smiled what she hoped was a cryptic smile, nodding her head.

The door to the dormitory burst open, admitting a tousled Ginny Weasley, still outfitted in a grubby Quidditch practice uniform. "Whoo-hoo!" she exclaimed, thrusting her fist into the air before catching herself, mouth open, staring at the two girls sitting on Hermione's bed.

"Hullo, Ginny," Luna said airily.

"I – I'm so sorry that I barged in here without knocking," Ginny stammered. "This isn't a good time, is it?" she asked, looking at the pyramid of used tissues on Luna's lap.

"Of course it's a good time," Luna replied cheerfully. "Hermione has been most helpful, lending her ear while I used up all of her Muggle tissues," she said with a wry grin.

"I heard about Neville," Ginny said. "I'm frightfully sorry."

"You've nothing to be sorry about," Luna replied. "We made a mistake, we fixed it, now we're moving on." She tossed the tissues into the rubbish bin by Hermione's bed. "Well," she said, standing up from the bed. "I'll be going now so you can share your joyful secret." Luna looked out the window at nothing in particular.

Hermione caught Luna's hand. "We're all friends here, Luna," she prompted.

"What made you think that I was getting ready to drop a big girly secret anyway?" Ginny asked.

Luna turned to face Hermione. "I've known Ginny since we were both toddlers. She generally does not tolerate being grimy or sweaty, but instead of going to the showers after Quidditch practice, she runs up the stairs, past her floor to burst into your room. As the castle is not on fire, I presume that this she wishes to share something that she would rather share with you than her small-minded, gossiping roommates," Luna explained.

"Meow," Ginny replied.

Luna smiled broadly. "Yes, it's catty, but recently-heartbroken Ravenclaws are to be given allowances, lest we turn into hosepipes," explained Luna.

"Well?" Hermione asked Ginny.

"Thanks for reining my brother in," Ginny said. "He gave me clean-up duty with Harry after Quidditch practice tonight." She paused for effect.

"And?" Luna asked.

"And we had the pitch to ourselves as we put all the gear away and then walked back to the castle. A lovely unsupervised, uninterrupted moment," she said.

"Did he kiss you?" Hermione asked excitedly.

Ginny nodded.

"How was it? Luna asked.

"How was what?" Ginny asked.

"The kiss, silly," Luna replied.

"Oh, you know, the usual for first kisses," Ginny said. "Bumped noses, smeared glasses, I think he may have split my lip," she said, putting a finger on her lower lip. "But on the whole I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"Well done," Luna said. "I must say that I'm surprised, however. I thought that you were much further along than that," she observed.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Ginny asked, hackles rising.

"You relate to one another as a well established couple. I presumed that you had already been intimate," she said, looking down at her shoes.

"You're bonded, aren't you?" she asked as she looked up.

Ginny nodded. Hermione gasped softly.

"I shall not share that admission with anyone. It's very easy to keep secrets when most people don't believe what you say in the first place," Luna offered.

"We're not keeping it a secret, actually," Ginny said after a moment.

"But neither are you shouting it from the rooftops," Luna countered. "It is time that I got back to my own room," Luna said, giving Hermione's hand a squeeze. "You have been a true friend today, I shall not forget your kindness."

"Friends always know how to find me, Luna," Hermione said solemnly.

"I shall treasure that, Hermione. But I really must be going. Good night, Gryffindors," she said in a sing-song tone.

"Good night, Luna," Ginny and Hermione chorused as Luna padded out into the hallway.

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September 5, 1996

Dear Diary,

Where to start . . .

All of my professors have made their point by now. It's OWL year for the fifth years and we've been cruising through school for the first four years, forgetting what little we'd learned by the first weekend in July, arriving back at school with perfectly empty heads, but if we agree to buckle down and only sleep four hours a night, we might revise our way to a passing grade on the O.W.L.s. As much as it pains me, there might be some truth in those owl pellets. Hermione hates coffee, but the first (and probably last) time I saw her with a latte in her hands was when she began revising in earnest last year.

Personally, all this talk about O.W.L.s makes me want to hurl. I have my tutorial with McGonagall tomorrow – step one on becoming an Animagus. Having already experienced life looking through transfigured eyes I guess I'm not as awed by the task as I once was. I mean, being a dragon is cool. Being a snow dragon is ultra-cool, and now I'm supposed to be getting hot and bothered about turning into a common housecat? Puh-leeze!

Harry kissed me today. I suppose that it should be a Really Big Deal (I am memorializing it in my diary, aren't I?) but at this point in our relationship it was nice, but kind of anticlimactic.

I was surprised though, I'll give him that.

Being at school, I have to have my Occlumency shield up halfway almost all the time I'm awake. If I don't, I'm hearing a little buzz in the back of my skull from all the magical minds in the immediate vicinity. That buzz doesn't need to go on very long before it becomes really annoying.

We had our first team practice for Quidditch tonight – we'll be holding try-outs on Saturday to fill the spots that are missing and hopefully to fill a reserve bench as well, but before we did that, Ron wanted to see all of us do our stuff. As practices go, it was more than all right. It's a bit odd, though, to see Oliver Wood channelling through my brother, though. I guess it goes with the Captaincy. After practice, His Excellency, the Captain of Quidditch, pressed those closest to him (me and Harry) into service, putting the equipment away and making sure that the pitch was ready for the next team. By the time we recaptured the Bludgers that Sloper had failed to properly secure, it was well past sundown and dinner, but Harry and I are frequent diners at Chez Dobby, so quieting the growling in my belly was not a major concern.

When we walk together, Harry usually has his hands in his pockets and I have my hand in the crook of his arm. That seems to fit us as a couple, rather than the arm around the waist that so often degenerated into a bum squeezing session when I was with Michael (not that I have any objection to Harry squeezing my bum – it's just not his style). On rare occasions we'll walk holding hands, which can get out of control if we aren't on top of things – when we have skin-on-skin contact we can talk mind to mind; Harry calls it "touch-talk" - but if we get too worked up, we have the same

problem we used to have with Double Legilimency – we walked into a number of walls and almost fell down an equal number of staircases before we figured out that certain things should be best left to times when we aren't moving.

Because we were on level ground, we were holding hands, which I didn't mind at all. Halfway back to the castle, he stops and says "I don't want to go in just yet," and then looks at me in the pale light of the moon. I should have seen it coming, but it was a long day at the end of a long week. He leaned down and kissed me. We bumped noses, of course, and it took quite a while for Harry to get the smudge off of his glasses left by my oh-so-cute nose. My lip's a bit tender too. I did kiss him back once I got over my shock and surprise. Walking back to the castle, I'm sure that the smile on my face may have strained a few muscles too.

We agreed to shower and then meet for a rendezvous at Chez Dobby. I raced up the stairs to bounce in Hermione's room, when I found she had a red-eyed visitor.

Neville and Luna broke it off today. :(

I didn't get the particulars, and didn't particularly want to know the particulars. When I met up with Harry later tonight, he told me that he'd discussed it with Neville. Now there's a case of the blind leading the blind, Neville going to Harry for relationship advice, but there you have it. Neville, honourable lad, felt bad about snogging a girl that he didn't have deep feelings for. They have agreed to stay friends, but they're going to nix the snogging for now. I predict that they'll end up in each other's arms before Christmas, but I've been wrong about a lot of these things before.

Well, diary, I'm knackered, and tomorrow's another school day.

TTFN

GMW

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## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year The First Weekend

The Great Hall was quiet – not all that unusual for a Saturday morning. Ginny entered the hall, knowing that there would be a space open opposite a certain black-haired sixth-year student at her house table. Holding her place was a perfectly prepared cup of coffee; there were certain benefits to being Harry's girlfriend.

Harry had caught on early to the basics of Ginny Weasley maintenance: if she was hungry, he would feed her; if she was starting to get pink in the cheeks, he'd give her a tall glass of water; if she was storming, he'd stand there and take it like a man; and when she was crying, he'd hold her. She could get used to this type of pampering, if only school wouldn't get in the way.

Harry was reading the Daily Prophet when she sat down, putting the paper down long enough to slip his hand on top of hers, opening up the touch-talk link.

**Good morning, beautiful**, he thought to her before he turned his gaze back to the newspaper and his hand to his quill.

"I'm going to be spending the evening after supper with my revision group," she said while he was jotting something down on a small pad of paper.

"Uh-huh," he replied.

"I'm thinking of cutting my hair – maybe a Mohawk with spikes," she said in a monotone.

"Uh-huh," he said.

"My period's late, I think I'm carrying Draco Malfoy's love child," she whispered.

"Uh-huh," he grunted.

"Harry, have you heard a single thing I've said this morning?" she asked.

Harry put down the paper and looked at her. "You're revising with your friends tonight, I love your hair the way it is, your period's not due until the middle of next week, and I would still love you even if you were carrying a litter of ferrets," he said before reaching for another slab of toast, spreading it evenly with strawberry jam and placing it on her plate.

"Thank you," she said.

"For the toast?"

"No, for paying attention to me: if I'd wanted grunting, I'd sit with my brother," she said, making a small face.

"What, and give the gossips something new to talk about?" Harry said in an odd tone.

"Speaking of which, what did you do to Maddy Norbeck? The girl is crushing on you big time," Ginny said, wrinkling her nose slightly.

"Who?" Harry replied.

"I thought as much. Gryffindor first year, her brother is trying out today for a slot on the reserve bench."

"Little slip of a girl? Black hair, big brown eyes? I know her as Madison, her brother is Eoin. All I can remember doing with the two of them was trying to encourage them at breakfast the first day of classes that they would survive Potions," Harry said, slipping another piece of toast off the tray.

"Maddy said something about getting her first detention with Snape cancelled," Ginny said before biting into her own toast.

"Oh yeah, that," Harry said, his eyes sparkling with a bit of repressed mirth. "I did do that a day later," he admitted. "It was only fair, as I'd got her into the detention in the first place."

"You're holding out on me, Mr. Potter. Not a good thing, especially when talking about rivals for your affection," Ginny warned with a mock seriousness.

"What?" he asked, coughing a bit of coffee into his napkin.

"Maddy came to me last night and asked me what my intentions were towards you," Ginny said with a grin.

"Oh, brother! I hope you told her that your intentions were strictly dishonourable," he said.

"Actually, she told me that she was going to honour my prior claim on your life, but if I tire of you, she let me know that she's going to be standing in the wings, waiting to take over," she said dramatically.

"So you have an understudy now?" he asked.

"Something like that – I guess that's a better label than pre-pubescent stalker," she said.

"Hey, remember, I like 'em short," he teased.

"Not that short, I'm sure, and I'm not certain that you'd be able to tell that she was a girl in the dark," she jibed.

"Well, in that case, tell her the deal's off," Harry said with an airy wave of his hand.

Hermione entered the Great Hall, walking directly to the spot where Harry and Ginny were seated.

"I'm going to go mad this year," Hermione said to no one in particular as she sat down.

"And just how would this be different from prior years?" Harry asked as he reached for a teapot from a spot further down the table.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked sharply as she held out her teacup.

"You go mad every year," Ginny said, biting savagely into her jam soaked toast.

Hermione rolled her eyes, turning to Harry.

"Don't look at me, I happen to agree. 'I think I mistranslated one rune on my O.W.L. exam. I'm certain that I'll fail, and then they'll kick me out of school and snap my wand in two as a result,'" Harry said, raising his voice in a credible, if breathy imitation of Hermione in full whinging mode.

"I'm not that bad," Hermione said, rolling her eyes again.

"You are a wonderful friend, a Gryffindor by right, beautiful on the inside and the outside, but you take school way too seriously, which is why, of course, that Ron and I have to sacrifice our academic standing to balance you out," Harry said sombrely.

"Yeah, right," Hermione said, filling her cup with tea.

"Where's Ron?" Ginny asked.

"Ronald," Hermione said with an annoyed air, "is too busy for breakfast, as he is preparing his remarks for the Gryffindor Quidditch tryouts."

"Blimey, he's channelling Wood again," Harry said with mock alarm.

"I told you it goes with the Captaincy," Ginny observed. "Anyway, changing the subject, Harry was just going to tell me what he did to put stars in Maddy's eyes, Hermione."

"Madison Norbeck?" Hermione asked. "The one who's crushing terribly on Harry?"

"C'mon, Hermione, it can't be that bad," Harry protested.

"She sought me out on Tuesday, asking me a long list of questions about you, the final one being whether I thought you'd be willing to ask a certain first year student out on the next Hogsmeade weekend," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"What did you tell her?" he asked.

"I told her, aside from the fact that first years aren't allowed, that you were spoken for, and that I admired her pluck," Hermione answered.

"Yeah, none of us here would know anything about pining away with unrequited love," Harry said, opening his eyes wide, batting his eyelashes furiously.

They all laughed.

"So spill, Harry," Ginny urged.

"I got a really good night's sleep after the welcoming feast, waking up early the first day of classes, which is a bit odd, but there I was. I noticed when I came into the Great Hall that all of the Hufflepuff firsties seemed to be assigned to a sixth or seventh year student," he said.

"Yeah, Hannah Abbot mentioned that at the first Prefect's meeting," Hermione interjected.

"So it hit me that maybe I should make an effort to talk to some of the firsties and try to set them at ease. I sat down with Eoin and Madison and we started talking about Professor Snape and Potions. I wrote down what I could remember of the questions that Professor Snape asked us on our first day, you know those questions that no one other than Hermione had a chance of answering. Then for good measure I gave them a question to ask Professor Snape," he said.

"What was the question?" Hermione asked.

Harry snorted. "Whether it was sporting to assign readings to half of the class but not the other half for the first day of classes," he said.

"You didn't," Ginny said.

"Professor Snape did that?" Hermione asked.

"Yes and yes," Harry answered the two women in his life. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think that either of them would have the brass to ask the question in class," he exclaimed.

"But they did?" Ginny asked.

"Madison did, actually. I reckon she was properly sorted into Gryffindor," he said, pausing to pour Ginny a fresh cup of coffee without being asked. "Professor Snape, of course, blew a gasket, taking house points and assigning a nasty detention for the next day for the pair," Harry said, refilling his own cup. "I really felt bad about that, so I figured that I was duty bound to do something to fix it."

"What did you do?" Hermione asked.

"I waited until Professor Snape was with Professor Dumbledore and then pulled a Nathan the Prophet number on them," he explained.

"A what?" Ginny asked.

"It's a story from the Bible," Harry explained. "King David was fooling around with another man's wife, which was wrong, and he used his connections as King to get the other man killed in battle so he could pick up the widow as wife number three or four, which was despicable. There was this Prophet named Nathan who came into the king's court and told him a story about a poor farmer who had his lamb stolen from him by a rich neighbour. King David got all huffy and said that the rich neighbour deserved to be punished, at which time Nathan points at the king and says, 'Your Majesty, you are that man.'"

"What's that got to do with Snape?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I got the two professors cornered and asked them a bunch of questions, which at first blush seemed to be pointing to that toad Umbridge, things like 'should a student be punished for telling the truth?' and other soft Quaffle questions. After I got both of them nodding, I started asking questions that Snape knew good and well were nothing more than what he'd done to the Norbecks," Harry said.

"Did you go for the kill and say 'Professor, you are that man?'" Ginny asked.

"Nah, Snape's already been humiliated once by my Dad, I didn't need to pile on that day. I just let him know that I knew and he up and did the right thing, restored the points and cancelled the detention. I expect that Professor Dumbledore figured it out, but as I left he gave me the oddest of looks," Harry said.

"So you had a perfect chance to humiliate him and you let it go?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, I guess," Harry answered sheepishly.

"You know what that proves?" she asked.

"No, what?"

"Madison's got good taste," she said, picking up Harry's hand to kiss his palm. ***I'm so proud of you, Harry .***

***Thanks.***

"Hey," Hermione said, "could one of you stop making cow eyes long enough to pass the strawberry jam?"

"Moo," he replied, sliding the pot of jam down the table toward his friend.

"Harry," Hermione asked after swallowing her first bite of toast, "just where were you when you found out that the Slytherins got the first day's reading assignment before the Gryffindors?"

Harry made a face while choosing his words carefully. "Certain questions should not be asked if the answer would make a Prefect responsible for reporting rule breaking," he said.

"Well," Hermione said with a twinkle in her eye, "if someone was in a position to hear such information, hypothetically of course, where would they be, and what would they have been doing at the time?"

"Well," Harry said, "hypothetically someone must have been in the Slytherin dungeons when the announcement was made, and as to what that someone was doing, I suspect that it would have had something to do with the upcoming outbreak of dancing legs that Slytherin will be exhibiting in about a week," he said, winking at Ginny.

"Tarantella Toilet Paper?" Hermione asked.

"Might be," Harry replied, "it's a new product at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes this month."

"So, I'm going to be seeing a bunch of dancing Slytherin boys within a week?" Hermione asked.

"Not just the boys," Ginny added, returning Harry's wink.

"I'll write home for a camera then," Hermione said with a broad smile, "certain things must be captured for posterity."

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September 8, 1996

Dear Diary,

We had open tryouts for the house team yesterday – Kirke is still on the first string as Beater, but he's got a new partner, the fearless Eoin Norbeck. Sloper is now on the reserves, which he graciously accepted without whinging at all. We've got reserves on all the positions, which is a good thing, given the way that we lose players through the year due to injury. The extremely plucky Madison Norbeck is playing as reserve Seeker. Better to keep your rivals close where you can keep an eye on them, I guess. She's doing better than I did with my first year crush, although I did notice with some glee that she walked into a bench when Harry said 'hello' before practice.

Hermione's got my personal timetable created for the year – lucky me. She was decent enough to put in 'Harry time' which we put to good use tonight. The raven-haired beau took me for a walk after dinner tonight. The tension has been building between us since Thursday when he first kissed me. I found out tonight what happens when that tension gets unleashed.

We were engaged in a favourite pastime, exploring the castle, when we found ourselves in a windowless hallway lined with tapestries. We stopped walking and our heads clanked together like two highly charged magnets. I will give him this; he's getting better with the kissing! We moved quickly from gentle smacks to a hungry gnawing, which, by the way, was bloody fantastic. He held me close, sliding his hands from my waist up my back. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending upon your perspective, my shirttail was hanging over my waistband and we made skin-on-skin contact. If I thought that skin-on-skin contact was excruciating before we were bonded, I was wrong. I lost control of my magic when he did that, and I opened my eyes to see that the tapestries on either side of us had burst into flames, which now that I think of it in the safety of my room, was pretty funny. We snapped apart from each other and doused the tapestries, doing what we could to erase any trace of our magical mishap. Discretion being the greater part of valour, we ran away from there, figuring we were safe if we got back to the Tower before curfew.

The tension's still there (no surprise that) and I'm going to scout out some good places tomorrow, but the next time we go for a walk I'm going to make sure my shirt is tucked in, and to make extra sure, I'm going to put a sticking charm on the shirttail.

TTFN

GMW

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Lest I get the knickers of the canon purists in a twist, first year students *may* play Quidditch, but for obvious reasons, the tryouts will normally select older students. First year students *may not* possess their own brooms at school, which means that the Norbecks will either practice with school brooms, or perhaps a generous benefactor will supply team brooms for those students unable to purchase or possess their own brooms.

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Welcome to my parlour

It was a sunny day, which for Scotland in September was as rare as a genuine smile from Professor Snape. Harry was perched on a battlement of the castle. If he'd been visible, people would have wondered why he hadn't yet fallen, but he wasn't visible; he was Disillusioned for the practical reason that he could set and forget the Disillusionment charm, while dragon-style invisibility took too much of his attention when he was working on sophisticated, subtle magic.

His last tutorial with Dumbledore had taken an odd turn, with Dumbledore asking what seemed like rhetorical questions. At the end of that tutorial, over tea and ginger biscuits, Dumbledore had admonished him to "play with your magic and listen to your dragon." The dragon, in turn, had told him to "consider the spider," which was neither helpful nor enlightening, so he'd spent a good amount of time instead quantifying his skills at Legilimency before he returned to "consider the spider."

Distance, it seemed, mattered when it came to Legilimency. The strongest connection was touch, of course, followed by direct eye contact. Without those two strong connections, his ability to listen into other people's mental chatter was fairly hit or miss. As a rule, boys were easier to read than girls. Ron Weasley was ridiculously easy; Harry could tap into his thoughts from across the Great Hall on a good day. Hermione, on the other hand, was practically impossible. If he was touching her, he could sense some of her surface thoughts, but anything that she deemed private would soon be relocated into a portion of her consciousness that was, to Harry, inaccessible. Discussions with Ginny were not at all helpful, as Ginny suggested that perhaps he needed to improve the quality of his contact with that particular subject. "I'm not going to kiss her just to read her mind, Ginny," he'd said with exasperation.

"Oh, and for what reason *would* you kiss her, Harry?" she'd replied.

"It would have to be bloody important. If Ron ever caught me, I don't think I'd survive, and if I did, you'd be sure to polish me off," he said snappishly.

Ginny had smiled when he'd said that. "Hold that thought, Mr. Potter," she'd said before giving his cheek a kiss and returning to her reading for Potions.

After fleshing out the limits of his Legilimency, he'd returned to "considering the spider." Upon reflection, there was a lot more possible than just the Gossamer Ward. He'd begun the research by recreating a scene from Gulliver's Travels, which involved tying Ron to his bed one evening while he was asleep, something that Ron didn't discover until the next morning. The next experiment involved tacking Seamus to the ceiling with magical threads after he'd lucked into a stash of Fire-whiskey and passed out. This would have been well-received by all in the dormitory, except for the fact that Seamus had started chundering when he regained consciousness. Given the drop from the ceiling to the floor, the spattering was something awful. Neville's book bag had taken the brunt of this lack of control, and for once Harry was glad for all the practical cleaning experience he'd gained at the Dursleys.

A few well-placed hints from Mm'lau led him to his next experiment, which took place on that sunny September afternoon.

Harry smiled as a breeze blew his fringe off of his forehead. He really needed to get a haircut, as he didn't favour the shaggy look that Ron was cultivating this year. Closing his eyes, he let the single strand of spider thread extend down the wall of the castle and across the lawn towards a group of girls. Although they were too far away for him to recognise faces, Harry could tell by the way that they were chattering away that it was Hannah Abbot, Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. With a nod to the magical spider, he concentrated on landing the thread onto Lavender. The strand landed between her collar and her elegant, pale neck. Harry watched with concern as she brushed her hair off of her collar, but the thread, which was immaterial, was still in place. He closed his eyes and concentrated. He couldn't hear Lavender's thoughts, but he could feel her essence weakly, which was jarring; prior to this the only person he could sense this way was Ginny. The flavour and scent was entirely different, of course, but part of him felt guilty experiencing another woman in this fashion. He justified himself in the notion that he was doing his homework, and he'd have to share the results with Ginny anyway. He hoped that this didn't blow things up, as things on the Ginny front had been too good to believe of late.

He sent out three more spiders, extruding three more strands to join the first. Closing his eyes, he could make out the faintest whispers of Lavender's thoughts. He quickly sent out eight more spiders, instructing them to plait the strands together. The thoughts were now terribly clear:

*I wonder if she knows that she whistles when she makes that 's' sound? Do I do that? It's so annoying – I have something witty to say, but this stupid cow just won't stop talking and I don't want to interrupt her just yet .*

Harry twiddled with the plait connecting him to Lavender, tapping into a different part of her consciousness until he was seeing what she saw, and hearing what she heard. His senses reeled for a moment, making him glad that he'd stuck himself to his perch with a stout sticking charm before he'd begun this experiment.

"So anyway, Anthony Goldstein is, like, making eyes at me from across the library, so when I finished my charms assignment, I pick up my bag and walk over to his table. 'Anthony,' I say, 'do you want something?' It was kinda funny watching him sweat as he looked up and down between my eyes and my chest. I racked him a bit. 'Anthony, my eyes are up here,' I said. Boy, was he squirming. So, finally, he swallowed three times. I just love watching a man's Adam's apple move, you know, and he asks me if I'm going to Hogsmeade with anyone on the first weekend," Hannah said



breathlessly.

"What did you tell him?" Parvati asked.

"I told him that I'd let him know," Hannah replied. "I don't know yet whether or not Terry wants to ask me, so I'm keeping my options open."

"Yeah, right," Harry felt Lavender say, but whatever was said next was lost as Harry broke the connections, feeling somewhat soiled by his voyeurism. He was also somewhat miffed at the mindless gossip he'd just overheard, but he was thankful that he hadn't chanced upon a more embarrassing conversation concerning their amorous adventures, or, worse yet, perhaps a discussion of the relative merits of various methods of feminine hygiene.

He needed a Ginny fix, but by his watch she was still in class. He cancelled the sticking charm and climbed down from his perch, although he remained Disillusioned. He didn't feel like talking to anyone right now. Ginny was in Herbology right now, which meant that she was in one of the greenhouses, or at least she should be there for the next fifteen minutes. Harry jogged across the grounds, taking care to not raise attention to his almost invisible form. Once he found the right greenhouse, it wasn't hard to spot the flash of red that indicated her location within. He scaled the ladder leading to the catwalk at the top of the greenhouse, finding a secure perch, where he sat down, taking several deep, cleansing breaths. He sent out the spiders, a round two dozen this time, plaiting a cord that dropped through a conveniently open window. He could have pierced the glass with the magical thread, but it was easier to visualize the magic without dealing with the illogic of sending something that seemed solid through a solid surface. The spiders dangled the plait in front of Ginny, who was grafting a grapevine. She brushed at her forehead with detached annoyance, unknowingly binding the end of the magical plait to her wrist.

The connection was good. He felt the normal hum of Ginny's surface thoughts while she finished the graft. Quidditch practice, revisions, whether or not her GOTBWL jersey was clean or dirty, her desire to visit the loo and a vague annoyance at the pebble in her left trainer. *Time to go for the gold*, he thought to himself.

*Hey there beautiful. Care to join me behind the greenhouse when you're done with class?*

Ginny slammed her shield up and then, after looking around, first with normal vision and then with Farsight, she lowered her shield to half strength.

"Where the hell are you, Potter? You scared the snot out of me!" she hissed.

*You haven't answered my question.*

"I'm not that type of girl, Harry. Behind the greenhouse is the favourite location for groping Quidditch groupies," she said with a sour expression.

*And you know this how?*

"I have six older brothers, five of whom played Quidditch. I didn't believe the stories until Ron told me about fighting off the advances of Stephanie Strathmore after winning the Cup last year," she said in a whisper, hoping that no one was watching her talk to herself in the corner of the greenhouse at the end of class.

*You don't have to talk out loud. I'm not, after all .*

*All right, I'll bite. Where are you, Mister Potter?*

*I'm on top of the greenhouse on the catwalk, but I'm Disillusioned right now.*

Using his Farsight, he looked carefully for evidence of an Anti-Apparation ward sweeping through the greenhouse. Finding none, he popped down next to Ginny and cancelled the Disillusionment charm.

"You aren't supposed to be able to do that," Ginny said.

"I won't tell Hermione if you won't," Harry said, flashing a genuine smile.

"So," Ginny said, wrinkling her nose as she traced a finger around the collar of his shirt, "just what were you doing up there that I could hear you inside my head?"

"Playing with spiders – I'll show you how it's done when we eat at Chez Dobby tonight. C'mon, if you're not wild about the idea of canoodling behind the greenhouses, let's go walk down by the lake," Harry said.

"Let's not; it's bound to be crowded on a nice day like today – let's walk down to Hagrid's hut," Ginny countered.

"Hagrid's gone today," Harry objected.

Ginny gave a wicked smile. "I know."

"Let me get this straight – round-heeled scarlet women get groped behind the greenhouses, but virtuous witches take their beaux to Hagrid's when he's not there," Harry observed.

"That's about the size of it, Mr. Potter, unless you'd care to wait behind the greenhouse until Stephanie is free," Ginny said with a straight face.

"Nah, I turned her down when she asked me to the Yule Ball back in my fourth year," he said, shaking his head.

"What possessed you to turn her down?" Ginny asked.

"I certainly had no idea that she had a tarnished reputation," he said, "so I think the fact that she was a head taller than me at the time might have had something to do with it."

"Well now, that would put her most interesting assets at eye level, wouldn't it?" Ginny said.

Harry made a sour face and said nothing.

"Oh, c'mon, you've grown, what, two inches since then?" Ginny asked before releasing a peal of laughter. "Well, it's too late for Stephanie now, you're mine, all mine!"

Harry flashed another smile. "That was lovely," he said. "Say it again."

Ginny gave him an odd look, but she looked him full in the face and said, "You're mine, all mine."

"Now make me believe it," Harry said.

Ginny gave a light growl as she pushed him against a tree along the path to Hagrid's hut. She stood on her toes as she pulled his face to hers, starting with the lightest of kisses.

After a while, he truly believed her.

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Drafts of Stories from Sixth Year are available on my LiveJournal page, <http://www.livejournal.com/users/kokopelli20878/>

Author's notes: Some chapters are what I call "moving the pieces around so that they are in position for the next chapter." I had a lot of that when I was writing TLOS. The magic discussed in this chapter has a place in a number of following chapters, so it has to be introduced somewhere. The purpose of any chapter is to either advance the plot, or tell us something about the characters – I hope that I did a little of both today.

British idiom note: chundering is one of the unfortunate side effects of alcohol poisoning – on this side of the pond we speak about "blowing chunks" or "worshipping the porcelain goddess." Having attended a public, land-grant university, all of my experience of this phenomenon was second-hand, except, of course, for the cleaning up afterwards part.

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Chapped Lips

September 25, 1996

Dear Diary,

It's cold out and we'll probably get another ten inches of the white stuff tonight. I've never seen snow come this early, but we are in Scotland. I used to love snow, but lately I see it as more of a bother than anything else. I suspect this may be an attitude that I'm picking up from Harry. The only time he likes snow is when he's sitting snug and warm inside the castle, knocking back some hot cocoa. I swear that Crookshanks is more enthusiastic about snow than this boy. Speaking of which, he's been rather tightly wrapped of late. Dumbledore was mightily impressed with the spider magic, but now Harry's back to duelling – at least he gets a good shot at Snape some days, so it's not a total loss.

I know that Harry says that he wants to be an Auror when he's finished at Hogwarts, but I seriously doubt that's going to happen. He seems to enjoy teaching and he's really good at it. When he finds out something interesting, odd or "useful" (read that prank-worthy) he usually drops everything and shares it with me. This has interrupted many a revision session, but somehow he almost always shows us a way to connect the tidbit of the day with the topic that we were revising before he interrupted us (how he does that, I'm still not sure) so the girls in my study group no longer groan when they see him coming; although a few of the girls are excessively friendly, if you know what I mean. If we were talking about any male other than Harry, I'd be pulling my hair out, but Harry is constitutionally incapable of being unfaithful, so I'm not worried about competition.

The exception to that statement, of course, is Daphne Greengrass. I don't know why she upsets me so much. Okay, in her stocking feet, she's a half inch shorter than Harry and has gorgeous blonde hair the colour of straw and piercing blue eyes. Then there's the figure – on my best day I look like a skinny boy with bumps. Daphne, however, looks like a walking advert for under-wire bras. She's from an old, well-to-do wizarding family that has been active in the Church of England since the time of St. Augustine (of Canterbury, not Hippo – see, I learned something this summer!) In other words, she's everything I'm not, apart from the bond thing.

There are times that I wonder if Harry regrets marking me.

I know what I'm getting from this relationship, but I'll be hanged if I can figure out what I'm doing for Harry. Maybe I need to fret about this some more when I'm awake.

Changing the subject, in light of my earlier screed against Daphne, I will say this in her favour: she clued me into how church works at Hogwarts. A long time ago, say during the 1400's, Hogwarts had a full time chaplain and a chapel. What we now know as the Room of Requirement was the original Hogwarts chapel, but during the reign of King Henry VIII, something happened and Hogwarts lost its chaplain. Sometime during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, arrangements were made for students to attend services at local Scottish churches. Hogsmeade, surprise, surprise, has no church of any persuasion. The nearby town of Hooper, however, has three: a Church of Scotland parish, a Roman Catholic mission and a Church of England chapel run by the Grey Friars. Daphne tried to explain to me how it was really a parish of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, but the local politics aspect of it flew past me, so I'm not going to try to explain it here.

Students wishing to attend services contact the head of their House. So now on Sunday mornings, Harry visits McGonagall's office at some ungodly hour to use the Floo for travel to the chapel at Hooper. I'm asleep at that time, as that's the only time in my Hermione approved schedule that I can sleep in. This does not mean, however, that Ginny Weasley is among the "unchurched masses destined for perdition." (Daphne's words, not mine!) The Grey Friar chapel in Hooper has a Saturday afternoon service at the much more civilized hour of 6:00 p.m. that I've been attending for several weeks now. I see a smattering of students from other houses in attendance (including Daphne) along with some singletons I recognize from Hogsmeade. I suppose that there might be some Muggles in attendance as well, but it's never come up in conversation. The services at Hooper are quite different from Sunday mornings at St. Simon's. There's no choir and there's no organ either – the music is provided by a couple of Friars with guitars. The words to the songs are projected onto a wall by a Muggle projector (which would thrill Dad). Daphne calls these services the "happy-clappy" time, but I don't mind it in the least. Instead of the old 1662 prayer book, we use the modern language English Prayer Book, which is much easier to understand. The rector is a very nice fellow named Father Harper – if he has a first name other than 'Father' I haven't heard it used. Harry says the Sunday morning service is pretty much like St. Simon's.

Harry has his secrets and I have mine. I've been talking to Fr. Harper about being baptized. I wrote a few letters to Mum in which I asked her about our family's religious affiliation, or lack thereof. Mum and Dad don't mind my going to church, provided that I stick to chapels run by the Grey Friars, whom they trust, it seems. Mum said something sensible like 'a happy home has but one religion' and let me know that if Harry's a churchman, I need to get with the program or call it quits with Harry. Since the latter is not an option (lifelong bonds being what they are), I am learning all that I can on Saturday nights. Mum sees it as a go-along, get-along thing, but I find that I enjoy the singing and my heart is much lighter by the time I get back to Hogwarts, just in time for a hasty dinner and an evening with my revision group.

The revision group is a big help. It's all girls, naturally. Thus far it's two Gryffindors, a Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff. There are no Slytherins in my year that I trust (Daphne is in Harry's year, naturally, and no longer interested in O.W.L. revision) otherwise we'd have one of them too. Hermione's notes are a great help, of course.

Well, time to call it a night. I'm working with McGonagall tomorrow. My tutorial has been changed to Thursdays, matching Harry's schedule I guess. I'm nowhere near the point where I'll be sprouting whiskers and a tail, but Professor M says very nice things about my progress.

TTFN

GMW

~+~

September 26, 1996

Dear Diary,

I thought I'd turn in early tonight. I was wrong. It's as cold as a banker's heart outside and we've got a good thick covering of snow on the grounds. I saw Harry at breakfast, and didn't expect to see him again until the end of the day. I expected maybe a smooch from him before I turned in, but he asked me to go out for a walk instead. Given the cold and his hatred of snow, I questioned his sanity, but I saw the need and longing in his eyes.

We walked through the castle and out onto the grounds, stopping at a spot overlooking the lake. I came prepared this time, my shirt-tail properly tucked in, sticking charm applied, and about twenty layers of clothing to deal with the cold weather. I didn't set anything on fire, which is a marvel in itself.

I didn't know that I could kiss a boy for two and a half hours straight. If you'd told me last spring that I'd be gnawing on Harry's face for the evening, I'd have told you that you were barmy. It was unbelievable, it was marvellous, and it was way too short. About twenty minutes into the snogfest, I realized that neither one of us had our Occlumency shields in place. I took advantage of the connection and began browsing through Harry's brain. He'd spent the morning doing some very difficult magic, and then the afternoon duelling with Snape in the presence of a Dementor. Harry has never told me about what he sees and hears when the Dementors are nearby. Now he doesn't have to. It was terrible, really, hearing his father die, hearing his Mum scream before I saw the green light flash. Then I saw Cedric, and Sirius of course, and then things that haven't happened – me dead on the Quidditch pitch; Hermione lying on the ground, cold and stiff; Ron in a pool of blood. All this took a minute or less. After that, I gave myself to the not terribly difficult business at hand, kissing the stuffings out of one Harry James Potter, the boy I love. I might add that he's come along way in the kissing department.

When he asked me to go for a walk, I could tell that his heart was cold. I guess that's an occupational hazard when you train with Dementors. Two and a half hours later, I could tell that his heart was tired, but now warm and content. A more cynical girl would say that he was using me - a brilliant snog instead of a hot toddy and a shower - but I was most willing to be used in this way.

I'm beginning to see what Harry's getting out of the relationship. He wants desperately to be loved and desired. I think I can deliver in volume on that front. To Harry, my love is like an anchor, something that doesn't move in the chaos surrounding his life. In return, he loves me back. His love is fierce at times – like a raging storm, which is not surprising in the least, considering how powerful he is. I wonder at times why I'm not afraid of him.

Tonight was about love and need, not about lust and gratification. Having fended off Michael Corner for more than a year, I know a bit about those latter topics after all. Mum prattles on at times about how wonderful Harry is and how he's such a gentleman. She doesn't know the half of it.

I think I've answered my own question as to why I'm not afraid.

I trust him.

I trust him not to kiss and tell. I trust him not to take advantage of me when I'm riding high on emotion.

I trust him to take care of me.

If ever he's faced with the choice of saving me versus offing Tom, I've made it quite clear what I expect him to do. I want Tom dead. Once Tom is out of the way, however, I suspect that I will be one very well protected girl. What did I ever do to deserve this?

Well, enough for one night's rambling. It's after curfew, my lips are chapped and my broad little behind is going to be seriously dragging tomorrow if I don't get some sleep.

GMW

~+~

9/27/96

Dear Diary,

Today was another really disgustingly long day. I'll try to keep this entry short for fear that I may end up with ink on my face – again.

I got hauled out of Charms today by Professor M, returning to the scene of the crime as it were. Evidently, I'm not the only one with accidental magic issues. Although it's as cold outside as the innermost circle of Hell and the grounds are covered by a thick covering of ice and snow, the spot where Harry and I were – uh, smooching – is bright and green and bursting with life. The tree we used to prop ourselves up last night is in bud and the lawn surrounding the tree is rich with snowdrops and crocuses in bloom. If there were any hedgehogs out last night, I'm sure that they're preggers by now – the whole area is bursting with life. Okay, so when things get interesting, I'm burning and he's bursting with life; go figure.

No points deducted from Gryffindor, to my surprise. Perhaps honesty *is* the best policy. For now, though, I'll work on not getting caught.

Notwithstanding the bitter cold, Ron (the Insane) held Quidditch practice this afternoon after classes in what little light remained. We took a break about every fifteen minutes for warming charms. After the usual exercises, we had a scrimmage between the first-string and reserve teams. The new players are working out well, although a few stand out. Maddy ploughed into the snow several times – she just does not give up. After the first scrimmage we did a mix and match scrimmage, with various reserve and first-string players trading places. Harry flew with the reserve team, using Maddy's Cleansweep. Maddy, naturally, flew with the first-string team on Harry's Firebolt. For a practice match, it was a thumping good game. The reserve team was ahead, thirty to ten when the Seekers saw the Snitch on the far side of the pitch. Maddy was flying about thirty feet above Harry at the time, so the first thing she did was a loop, smacking into Harry as she dropped in altitude.

I don't think he was expecting that.

That element of surprise won her a half-length lead that Harry just couldn't erase. For once the Snitch cooperated and didn't do anything bizarre – Maddy caught it cleanly. An instant later, Maddy and Harry were on the ground with Maddy letting out a screeching whoop that I swear could be heard at Hadrian's Wall. Ron bowled them both over and then picked Maddy up on his shoulders for a run the length of the pitch. The reserves are all feeling about seven feet tall tonight, although I doubt that Maddy is much above four feet tall when she's wearing boots.

Harry and I began to put the equipment away when the Norbecks shoed us off to the showers. After a well deserved, very hot shower, I charmed my hair dry and walked back to the castle with Harry. He stopped once we got inside the castle. I suspected that he had a detour in mind, say to some place *private*, but I was surprised when he suggested that we stop by *Chez Dobby* for pudding. I didn't have to be asked twice.

Over the strenuous objections of certain members of the faculty, a small room off of the main kitchen has been set aside for us as a private dining room. Officially, it's just a place to eat our meals in peace when we can't take the mental din of the Great Hall, but thanks to Dobby, we get a little bit of special treatment. The first few times we visited, Dobby was on a French cuisine kick, so I dubbed it *Chez Dobby*, which stuck, much to Dobby's delight.

I had some wonderful consommé, a wedge of chocolate cake and glass of milk. Harry had two slices of apple pie and a large decaf latte.

He was fidgeting a bit, which is normal. Dobby is so bloody obsequious as to get on anyone's nerves. Harry continued to fidget even after Dobby left. I'll try to recap our conversation.

"Uh, Ginny?"

"Harry," I said, flashing my twenty-Galleon smile, making flirty eye contact.

"Uh, a lot of people have been talking to me lately," he began.

"Like who, Harry?"

"Parvati, Dean, Neville, Hannah, Anthony, Daphne," he said, not noticing me wince at the last name.

"And?"

"They all say I'm a lot more pleasant to be around this year," he said.

I smiled again. "You *are* a lot more pleasant to be around this year."

"I was a real berk last year," Harry said.

I didn't say anything, smiling sweetly, wondering where this was going.

He swallowed a couple of times and then pierced me with the Potter glare. I could tell that he wasn't using Legilimency, but with eyes like that, he didn't need to.

"Ginny Weasley, you are the best thing that's ever happened in my life," he said softly.

Of all the things that I had been trying to anticipate, that certainly was not on my list.

"Better than finding out I was magical, better than flying," he said.

"Better than Quidditch?" I asked lightly, trying to not start blubbing. This was bloody significant for Harry.

"Let's not get hasty," he replied, grinning that grin I love to see on his face.

He took our empty plates and opened the serving door. Once the door was open, he found a small plate with two chunks of Honeydukes' special dark chocolate. It's very nice to be friends of Dobby. He tossed a chunk to me; I snatched it out of the air.

Snack time was over.

We walked back to the tower following our now normal route. I had my hand in the crook of his arm, basking in the time we had together.

"You revising tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?"

I think it might be time to replenish the Slytherin supply of Tarantella Toilet Paper," he said, giving me that grin again.

"How long could that take?" I asked rhetorically. "I'm in – let's do it after dinner."

"Sounds like a date," he said, flashing that grin again.

"No one can show a girl a good time like you, Mr. Potter," I said.

Harry gave me a wink.

The usual crowd was haunting the Gryffindor common room when we returned. Seamus started hooting when I kissed Harry goodnight.

*He's next* Harry said by touchtalk.

*Agreed* , I replied.

If anyone had asked me this morning how this evening would have ended, I would have predicted a repeat of the snogfest. Anyone who thinks that I would have objected doesn't know me very well.

How things ended up was even better, though.

Life with Harry is on edge at times, but it has its rewards.

GMW

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Author's Notes: The UK has national churches – in Northern Ireland, it's the Church of Ireland, which is a member of the Anglican Communion – in Scotland, it's the Church of Scotland, which is a Presbyterian church strongly influenced by John Knox – in England it's the Church of England. There *are* Anglican churches in Scotland, but they are part of the very small Episcopal Church of Scotland. In the TLOS universe, the Grey Friars are a religious order in the Church of England, under the oversight of the Bishop of London. They normally serve in *chapels*, which belong to the order, rather than *parishes* that belong to the local Church of England diocese. Most (but not all) of the members of the Grey Friar order are wizards. All are celibate males, although older, married people are accepted as Oblates of the order.

The default prayer book in any Church of England parish or chapel is the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which is lovely in its language, but about as hard to understand as the King James Bible (Authorized Version). The official modern language prayer book at the time of this story was the cumbersome Alternative Service Book, and its somewhat underground rival, An English Prayer Book, favoured by the Evangelicals.

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## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Valley of the Shadow - Part I

“Io, Ginny,” Hermione said, looking up from her parchment as her best friend came in through the portrait hole. “You look steamed.”

“I think someone needs to acquaint Madison with the notion of boundaries,” she said quietly, her nose wrinkled.

“So, into which topic has Miss Norbeck poked her very cute button nose?” Hermione asked.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “She asked me if Harry had asked me out to Hogsmeade yet.”

“And you said?” Hermione asked.

“Not the first thing that came to mind, that’s for sure,” Ginny said with a curled lip. “I told her ‘not yet’ after which she muttered something about ‘presumptuous’ and took off towards the library. Galloping gargoyles, what I could have done with that much nerve at her age.”

“It’s not like you’ve suffered from lack of nerve during your short lifetime, Ginny,” Hermione said wryly.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do, but still, the little dynamo’s refreshing most of the time. She hexed Malfoy in the hallway this morning, you know,” Hermione observed.

“Did she get caught?” Ginny asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Only by me,” Hermione said with the faintest of smiles.

“What did she do?”

“Penetrating freezing charm,” Hermione said before letting a deep chuckle escape.

“She froze his knickers?” Ginny asked incredulously.

“Assuming that he was wearing any,” Hermione said before rolling her own eyes. “I prefer not to think about that.”

“Oh, that’s just too good,” Ginny gasped between laughs. “I’ll take back half of the things I’ve thought about her this morning.”

Ginny collected herself, hoisting her bag back up on her shoulder. As she was halfway up the stairs to the girl’s quarters, Hermione called to her.

“I will talk to her today, if you’d like. About boundaries,” Hermione said.

“That would be great,” Ginny called over her shoulder.

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Dinner that night was a quiet affair. They had agreed to use their privileges at *Chez Dobby* sparingly, which made the private dining room all the more special as a respite from the buzzing of the Great Hall. Although the meal was basically the same as that served above them, Ginny suspected that the students were not getting the choice of two different fruit pies for pudding.

After dinner, Harry poured up a cup of coffee, their usual postprandial ritual. She noticed that he was on edge, but refrained from engaging her Legilimency.

“So, Ginny,” he began. He was swallowing a lot. Ginny smiled. “Um, yeah, this weekend is the first Hogsmeade weekend,” he said, avoiding eye contact.

“Mm-hum,” she replied, taking a sip of coffee. Watching him squirm was delicious payback.

“Youwannago?” he blurted.

“Go where, Harry?” she asked sweetly.

“To Hogsmeade, with me,” he said.

She smiled broadly. “Of course, I’d love to.”

Harry exhaled forcefully.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” she asked. “Did you think I’d really say no?”

“I dunno,” he replied. “I thought I didn’t need to ask. I thought we’d already talked about it.”

“When?”



"When what?"

"When did we talk about it, Harry?" she asked.

"August first, in the Herb Garden, at the Burrow," he said, sliding his hand across the table until it was on top of her own.

Ginny shivered as she felt a burst of emotion come across the link that Harry had opened with the physical contact. She tossed her head, moving a strand of hair behind her ear with her free hand.

"We did talk about it then, didn't we? Well, you got it half right, I suppose," she said, drawing a gulp of coffee from her cup. She flashed a smile as she returned the cup to its saucer. "I did agree to be your date at the Ball, so you don't have to ask me again, but I only agreed to the *concept* of going to Hogsmeade, not any particular weekend."

She watched a flicker of expression pass across his face. "That's mad, you know," Harry said after a moment.

"I'm a girl, that's how these things work. I suppose I have Madison to thank for this. Where did she get you?" Ginny asked.

"In the shins," he answered.

"What?"

"I was in the Library, taking a power-nap between assignments. Mm'lau woke me up just before she struck, otherwise I might have accidentally hexed her," Harry said.

"Mm'lau didn't protect you?" Ginny asked.

"Maybe she didn't think Madison represented a threat, or maybe she thought I deserved it or something," he said.

"Probably the latter," Ginny murmured.

Harry pulled a face. "Bloody conspiracy it is," he grumbled.

Ginny gathered up the dishes and banished them to the serving door before she slipped around the table to sit on his lap. "I'll make sure it was worth the trouble," she said, pushing her fingers through the hair on the nape of his neck as she kissed his forehead.

"What trouble?" Harry asked.

"See? Better already," she said before she returned to laying down a strand of kisses around his eyebrows and down the side of his face. Harry was making a quiet, guttural sound she'd dubbed the 'Harry purr' which inspired her to take things a bit further.

"It's still mad," he protested.

"Hush," she said, tilting his chin to get better access to those wonderful lips.

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"Ginny?" Harry asked several minutes later when she was resting her head against his.

"Yes, Harry?" Ginny answered sleepily.

"Why do you flinch whenever I mention Daphne?" he asked.

Ginny pinched his arm. "It's not nice to soften my resistance and then ask me a question like that," she protested.

"I wasn't softening you up, and, I might add, I didn't start this bit of spontaneous nuzzling. I thought we were going back to the Tower when I found myself pinned under my Krulach," he said, placing an appreciative hand on her bum. "Besides, you didn't answer my question."

Ginny pushed back the hair that was attempting to cover her face, worrying her lower lip with her teeth before she took a deep breath. "I feel so inadequate around her," she said. "Her perfect hair, her eyes, that figure, her family's been active in the C of E since the time of good Queen Bess, plus, I've seen how she looks at you," she said with a pout.

Harry began to shake.

"You're laughing at me!" she exclaimed as she placed a knuckle between his ribs.

Harry captured her hand, holding it still.

"Do you know what she wants?" he asked.

"Aside from stealing away to the Room of Requirement and having her way with you?" Ginny asked.

Harry snorted. "I'm afraid that the only girl with that fantasy is you, dear."

*Don't bet on it*, Ginny thought to herself.

"Daphne spent her summer with the Daughters of Charity," he said, shifting Ginny on his lap.

"Is that a band like the Weird Sisters?" Ginny asked.

"No," he replied, shaking with mirth again. "It's a bunch of Anglican nuns. Daphne is trying to figure out whether or not she has a religious vocation."

"A what?" Ginny asked.

"She's trying to figure out whether or not God is calling her to be a nun," he explained.

"But she's so pretty," Ginny protested.

"It's not just the ugly ones that get called to religious life," he said.

"And how do you know so much about the topic?" she asked as she squirmed on his lap.

"Chats with Father Martin," he replied.

"So she's not asking you out to Hogsmeade?" she said playfully.

"Nope."

"Not asking for a demonstration of the proper wand motions for the full body bind?" she said.

"Uh-uh."

"Not trying to sit close to you during Morning Prayer so you can look down her blouse?"

"Uh, no. She attends services with *you*," he said.

"Oh, right," Ginny replied.

"So, have you been looking down her blouse on Saturday nights?"

"I don't play on that team," she replied.

"You didn't answer the question."

"I've seen her starkers, I don't need to look down her blouse."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Quidditch practice, last year. I was dating Michael at the time and felt very good about my, uh, development when I came into the showers as the Slytherin team was leaving. There she was, starkers in the shower. Set my self image back by years," she said bitterly.

Harry wrapped his arms around her, rubbing her back gently. "I don't give a flying fig about Daphne. The woman of my dreams is sitting on my lap right now."

"Really?"

"Really."

"You know, for someone with the social graces of a troll, you do say the sweetest things sometimes," she said as she plucked off his glasses.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"They'll be in my way," she explained as she repositioned herself in his lap, placing her hands on his ears. "For this," she said as she placed her lips on his.

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The week passed fairly quickly. After a gruelling Friday and a tedious but productive Friday night, Saturday morning came. Ginny met Harry in the common room before they walked to breakfast. On most Saturday mornings, the Great Hall was quiet, but not today. The room was buzzing with excited students, third year and above, chattering about Hogsmeade. She looked up at Harry.

"You seem worried," she said.

"Nah, just preoccupied. You ready to go?"

"I was born ready," she replied.

"We'll see about that," he said with a smile.

As they made their way to the gate, she saw McGonagall and Filch, checking names off of a list. "Harry?" she asked, "who signed your form?"

“Uncle Moony,” he replied.

Filch scratched his quill on a list as they passed by. Professor McGonagall coughed lightly. “Potter, a word, please?” she asked. Harry pulled aside, cocking his ear towards her.

“You’ll have minders today – they will be discreet,” she whispered.

Harry nodded. “If they lose me, Dobby knows where I’m taking Ginny for a picnic,” he volunteered.

“Very well, PotterH,” she said as a brief, cryptic smile played across her lips, “make it count.”

Harry looked up at her, startled, but she’d turned away by that time, returning her attention to the queue of students.

~+~

Hogsmeade with Ginny was not all that different from Hogsmeade visits with Ron and Hermione, except for the hand-holding and occasional furtive kiss between shops. Aside from that, many of the destinations were the same: Honeydukes, of course, and a brief visit to Zonkos before making the obligatory visit to the new WWW kiosk which was manned by George in the morning and Fred in the afternoon. The bulk of the morning, however was taken up by the visit to Gladrags where Ginny spent what seemed like an inordinate amount of time looking at fabric, giggling over sketches with the proprietress, and what seemed like an endless discussion of shoes, purses and accessories (including a discussion of foundational garments that sent Ginny into yet another fit of the giggles), and finally a brief session of measuring. When that was done, Harry selected dress robes in a complimentary colour, which took all of five minutes, and they left the store.

They were walking along the crowded thoroughfare when Ginny tugged on Harry’s sleeve. “There’s a problem here, Mister Potter,” she said impishly.

“Oh, and what might that be, Miss Weasley?” he asked.

“Your beloved is hungry – you need to feed me,” she said.

“I think that can be arranged,” he said, his eyes scanning the crowd. He took her hand, nodding to indicate that she needed to lower her Occlumency shield. *We’re going to walk into the thick of that crowd up ahead and then turn invisible. We take a left at the Ironmonger’s shop.*

*So we’re not eating at the Three Broomsticks?*

*No. With a bit of assistance from our favourite house-elf, I planned a bit of a picnic.*

*Oooh , a surprise. Unlike you, I like surprises.*

*Ready now? On my mark, one, two, three. Lovely job, Miss Weasley.*

*Thank-you, Mister Potter. Just who are we avoiding?*

*Minders.*

They walked hand in invisible hand down a quiet lane and then took an overgrown trail that seemed to peter out a hundred or so feet from a rocky foothill.

“Now what?” Ginny asked, reappearing after Harry did.

“A wee bit of a climb up this hill,” he replied.

“Then what?” she asked.

“Then I feed you,” he answered with a smile, scrambling up the rocky face.

They reached an outcropping when Harry took her hand. “Now we go in,” he said, disappearing into the rocks. Ginny followed, marvelling at the charms that concealed the opening.

“You’ve been here before?” she asked.

“During the Tri-Wizard tournament. I used to meet Sirius here when he was on the run, before he went to Grimmauld Place,” he said, closing his eyes, leaning back against the wall, biting his lip.

“Harry, are you all right?” Ginny asked with concern.

Harry shook his head, whispering “no.”

Ginny pressed herself against him, hooking her thumbs into his belt, collecting her thoughts before she pressed her forehead against his chest. She pushed a carefully collected bundle of thought and emotion to him, hoping that she could express it without words. Harry resisted at first, and then accepted the surge, raising his hands inside her cloak, feeling the crisp fabric of the back of her blouse. He gave her a brief squeeze before breaking away.

"Thanks," he said. "Just when I think I'm over mourning him, something else crops up," he explained as they walked into the cave. They passed through a narrow switchback before the cave opened into a larger chamber. Harry took a path that led around the perimeter. "Mind where you step," he said, "there's a bit of guano in the middle."

"Guano?" Ginny asked.

"Bat poop – in the warmer months, this cave houses a goodly colony of bats."

"Oh," she said. "You take me to the nicest places, Harry."

"Hush," he said playfully, leading her to an opening that led away from the chamber. After passing through another switchback, they began to see sunlight, or at least what appeared to be sunlight. The tunnel opened up to what appeared to be a wide balcony, overlooking the village of Hogsmeade.

"The opening is charmed, just like the back door. From the outside it looks like a rocky hillside. As far as I can tell, it's Unplottable, so we shouldn't show up on any of Uncle Moony's maps. Sirius kept Buckbeak here. I'm fairly certain the charm work is his, but we never discussed it," he said, before he clapped his hands.

The clap echoed in the cave. When the echo subsided, a picnic basket had appeared. Harry knelt by the basket, removing tiny chairs and a table from it. He tapped the chairs and the table, and they sprang to full size, then tapped the table, and linens and table service appeared. Ginny gave him a puzzled look. "Dobby doesn't quite grasp the concept of picnic," he said, "but he does understand what a Weasley wants."

"So there's a little heart-shaped bed in there as well?" Ginny asked mischievously.

"Uh, that would be a 'no.' There is a couch, however," Harry said, a blush moving up the back of his neck.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," Ginny said, placing her fingers lightly on his cheek.

Harry nodded. "Let's eat, and then we can talk about it."

"Sounds like a plan," Ginny replied, touching the tip of his nose lightly with her little finger.

The basket contained chilled butterbeer, hot chicken, cold potato salad and a plate of fresh fruit. Pudding was a collection of chocolate biscuits.

"Ummmm – I take back what I said about your taste in dining establishments – that was almost as good as Mum's," Ginny exclaimed.

"Dobby does do nice work," Harry said, topping off Ginny's glass of butterbeer before he tossed the now empty containers back into the picnic basket.

"So where's that couch?" Ginny asked.

"Eager, are we?" he asked.

"I'm a Weasley – satisfy one need, another crops up to take its place," she said.

"And what need might this be?" Harry asked, as he pulled another miniature piece of furniture from the basket.

"The need to be with you, to touch you, to have you all to myself," she said.

With a tap, the couch became full size. Harry nudged it so they could take advantage of the scenic overlook. "I think I can accommodate that," he replied, sitting down on one end of the couch, patting the cushion next to him. Ginny eyed the couch and then Harry, kicking off her shoes before stretching out on the couch, using his lap as a pillow.

"So, what was up with all the whispering?" Harry asked, once Ginny stopped squirming for a comfortable position.

"What whispering?" she asked.

"Everywhere we went, people were pointing and talking," he answered.

"Oh, that – well, I guess the word is finally getting out that Harry Potter has a girlfriend," she said with a smile.

"C'mon, everyone knows that we're together," Harry protested.

"Not really," Ginny said. "Other than the Gryffindors, who, I might add, do a pretty good job keeping mum about anything involving you, we've kept a low enough profile that a number of people in the other houses are totally unaware that we're a couple. Hermione still gets discreet inquiries as to whether or not you're available."

"You're having me on," he said.

"Nope – I'm not. So today, walking down Cauldron Lane, hand in hand, we kinda went public in a big way. I wouldn't be surprised if we show up this week in *Teen Witch* or the gossip section of the *Daily Prophet*," Ginny said, rolling her eyes at the last statement.

"That's inevitable, I guess," Harry sighed.

Just so long as it's written up as 'Scarlet Haired Sex-Kitten snares Boy Who Lived' rather than 'Boy Who Lived takes pity on scrawny sister of best friend,'" she said with a grin. She squirmed a bit, trying to find a more comfortable position until she sat up, snuggling into his side, moving his arm so that it was draped around her. "Much better," she sighed.

"I agree," he answered.

They sat in silence for a while, watching the fat puffy clouds travel across the sky over Hogsmeade. Ginny finally broke the silence.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you remember the time we went to Gringotts?" she asked.

"I'm not likely to forget that day anytime soon," he answered.

"Why did you touch me then?" she asked, looking over her shoulder to glance at him before looking away again.

"Touch you?" he asked.

"Yeah, like this," she said, moving his hand until it was cradling her bosom.

Harry stiffened and then relaxed. "Oh, that," he said.

"Yeah, that," Ginny said, placing her hand on top of his to keep it in place.

"Well, uh, I thought I was going to die that day," he said.

"And?" she asked.

"And that was something I wanted to do before I died," he said, feeling the warmth return to the back of his neck.

"And it was so terrible that you haven't wanted to repeat the experience?" she asked defiantly.

"No, not exactly," Harry said.

"So why do we always stop at kissing?" she asked.

"Good question," he answered, sitting silent for a moment. "Lack of time, mainly, lack of privacy, and, uh, I guess I just don't want to go further right now," he said.

"Why is that, Harry?" she asked.

"It's not because I don't want you, that's for sure," he blurted.

"So why do you stop?" she asked.

"Because I want to treat you respectfully, because I told your Mum and Dad that I'd treat you like a lady," he said.

"And treating me like a lady means that I'm going to be a virgin on my wedding day?" she asked.

"Pretty much," he said.

"And I don't get a say in this?" she asked petulantly.

"Uh, no, of course! You get a say, you do!" he said, feeling unprepared for this whole line of conversation.

Ginny looked down for a moment, looking like she was trying to choose her words carefully. "Harry, when the time comes I'm going to promise to love, honour, obey, and protect you in front of God and my family, but even then, I'm not going to be controlled by you. Making decisions about *us* without consulting me is controlling – I didn't care for it when it was Tom and I don't care for it from you," she said, gazing straight into his eyes.

He blinked. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I forgive you," she said, kissing the tip of his nose lightly.

"I don't want to wait that long."

"How long?"

"Until we're married – I'm terrible at waiting," she said.

"And I'm terrible at skulking around," he replied.

"Which means?" she asked.

I might remind you that we're students, living at a residential school, in dormitories. When we, uh, do that stuff, I don't want to be doing it in some broom closet or empty classroom and then go sneaking off, afraid that Filch will catch us, like we're doing something wrong," he explained.

"No?" she asked.

"No – when we, uh, do that, you should have a ring on your finger and my name tacked after yours, a flat to call our own with stuff," he said, searching for words.

"Stuff?" she asked impishly.

"Like sheets and beds and doors that can be charmed shut without a prefect or the school caretaker banging on the other side," he said.

"Fair enough," she said, a wry smile curling on her lips.

"So you agree?" he asked hopefully.

"No, but I respect your position," she said, moving around until she was sitting on his lap. Reaching up to play with the hair over his ear, she kissed him, tenderly at first, followed by deeper, more forceful kisses. "Relax," she said, breaking off from a kiss, "I'm not going to have my wanton way with you today; at least I'm not planning on it." With the hand that wasn't curled around his shoulders she began unbuttoning her blouse.

"*What* are you doing?" he asked.

"Compromising," she answered as she undid the last button.

"Oh, is that what this is?" he asked.

"Yeah, I read in one of Mum's Witch Weekly magazines that it was important for couples to work out compromises," she said before she kissed him on his neck, just below his ear. She then nimbly began unbuttoning the buttons on his shirt.

"Well, in that case, I guess I'd better . . . compromise," he said, sliding his hand across her stomach and up her side.

"Yeah, if you know what's good for you," she murmured.

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"Harry Potter, sir, Dobby is looking for you!"

"Shite!" Ginny exclaimed as she leapt down the couch, frantically rebuttoning her blouse.

"Harry Potter, sir, Dobby regrets to inform you that Professor Dumbledore wants you to return to the castle, immediately," Dobby said as he passed through the illusion charm that shielded the mouth of the cave from the outside world. Dobby blinked as he looked up at the two teenagers solemnly. "Was the picnic to your liking, sir and miss?"

"It was excellent, Dobby, the best picnic basket I've had the pleasure to eat in ages," Ginny said, carefully but casually buttoning the last button on her blouse.

"Dobby is most pleased, young miss. Dobby takes great pleasure in caring for Harry Potter and his friends, especially such a beautiful young lady friend such as you is," he said. Turning to Harry he said, "Harry Potter, sir, would you prefer that Dobby pops the two of you back to Hogwarts, or would you prefer to go back to Hogwarts by the special Portkey that Professor Dumbledore provided Dobby when he was sent to find sir and miss?"

~+~

Dear Diary,

Oh, dear God, forgive me, because I'm a miserable slag. Amen

Somehow I doubt that will take care of it. Oh well, I'm still trying to get the hang of this thing.

What a day. What an utterly splendid, lovely, frustrating, horrifying day. Ever since my first trip to Hogsmeade as a kid, I've always enjoyed it. When I was little, Mum preferred to do most of her shopping at Hogsmeade over Diagon Alley. In hindsight, I suspect that she was worried about the twins wandering off – although they can find trouble wherever they go, it was probably a good move on her part to minimize their access to Knockturn Alley.

Being in Hogsmeade, with Harry, was lovelier still. As Harry noticed, there was a lot of pointing and whispering wherever we went. If he ever wanted to keep our relationship a secret, that's probably not possible. There was a certain satisfaction to going public with Harry. I imagine that it's not as satisfying as being pelted with rice as we leave church, but it's a start. We stocked up on the usual supplies, visited the new WWW kiosk and then went to Gladrags. It appears that the woman who runs the shop was an old flame of Sirius. But for last June's tragedy, she would probably have been the next mistress of the House of Black, Harry would still have a godfather, and I would still be without Harry. If you think I don't feel conflicted about this, you don't know me very well. But I digress again.

For reasons known only to Abigail Loomis, she's outfitting me in a complete wardrobe for the All Hallow's Eve Ball (and I do mean complete) for the paltry sum of ten Galleons. Harry says that it's not charity insofar as she's banking on receiving some favourable publicity when a picture leaks out

(and we know it will) with me in her gown standing next to Harry. I suppose that I should feel guilty about trading on Harry's notoriety, but the inner bargain hunter in me wants to tap-dance on the tables for finding a great deal.

I thought we'd be eating lunch at the Three Broomsticks, as Harry's not likely to darken the doorway to Madam Puddifoot's any time soon and he's not too keen on the Hogshead either. The delightful lad is full of surprises – we went for a very romantic picnic. I dropped more than a few hints that I was on the randy side, to little effect. Note to self: hints are wasted on Harry.

We managed to have a very grown up discussion about the physical side of our relationship, which was a bit of a shock. I don't care what Hermione says, Harry is *not* a normal boy. He desires me, that much is clear every time I touch him with my shields down, but his intentions are so honourable. His commitment to my being a virgin on my wedding night is no doubt attributable to Mum, but I wouldn't put it past Father Martin either.

It's not so much that I mind the whole purity thing – when I give myself to Harry I know that it will be forever. Rather, what rankles me is that he made a decision, no, a *commitment*, on something that concerns *us* without ever talking to me. I respect Harry – he didn't back down, not much, but he did realize that he'd stepped in it again. I pressed my advantage and unbuttoned my blouse, unbuttoned his shirt, rearranged a few things and had some quality skin-on-skin time with the boy I love. Lest you think, dear diary, that I am no longer qualified to call Unicorns, rest assured that whatever base plans I might have had for slaking my carnal lusts today, we were interrupted. By Dobby of course. Damn.

The time alone with Harry was – well – magical, but in hindsight, I'm worried. In less than one hour (I have only the haziest notions of time for that day – my watch was in my pocket and that was one place my hands didn't roam) I went further with Harry than I'd gone with Michael during the course of a year. I think what amazes me is that I didn't have an exit plan, I didn't have a bright line, beyond which I could not cross. In hindsight I realize now how foolish I was to push Harry further today. He has boundaries and I don't, which may be a problem the next time I throw caution to the wind.

We took a Portkey to Dumbledore's office, where, much to my surprise we were met by Jasmine. Talk about cognitive dissonance. Of all the people I expected to see in Dumbledore's office, she was not on the list. There we were, hand in hand, looking like – well, two teenagers in love. She swept her eyes over us, noticing everything, smiling that Mona Lisa smile. Dumbledore needed to speak to Harry in private for a bit, during which Jasmine pointed out that I was misbuttoned. With a flick of her wand my blouse was set right, which was a nifty charm to be sure. I'm going to practice it tonight when I finish writing this entry. ;-)

Jasmine and I grew close together this summer when I was training with her. Aside from the training, of course, we had a topic of mutual interest: Harry. We'd discussed my then nascent relationship with Harry frequently. So it wasn't a big surprise that the first thing out of her mouth when Dumbledore closed the door to his office was "So, how's the kissing thing working out?" We shared a hearty laugh together and I got a sisterly hug after dishing out some of the details. She drew herself up straight after her Hermione sized hug and solemnly said "Remember, you're the experienced one in this relationship, Ginny. Harry hasn't a clue how these things work." I nodded and was rewarded by her knowing Mona Lisa style smile.

Harry finished up with Dumbledore and we walked to the inner courtyard by the gate that led to Hogsmeade. Jasmine summoned the Portal, gave me a wink and then disappeared into a brighter, sunnier garden on the other side. Harry gave me a firm, but chaste kiss before following after her through the golden door.

While waiting for Harry, Jasmine told me that Abelard was in the hospital – he'd had what appeared to be a stroke. Jasmine believed that seeing Harry would lift his spirits, so she came to Hogwarts, requesting permission to borrow him for the day. I really wanted to go along, but Jasmine was insistent that while she could probably sneak one visitor into the hospital, she'd get chucked out if she brought two. After much wheedling and whinging, I relented. Jasmine seemed to be fairly immune to the typical tactics I'd employed against Mum since I was a toddler.

I walked back to the tower in a funk. Although I had had almost a full day out with Harry, I felt short-changed and abandoned. Although I could still sense Harry after he'd left, what normally gave me comfort now mocked me. I'd been left behind.

It was no surprise that my brother and his brilliant girlfriend were the last Gryffindors to return from Hogsmeade. When I saw them approach the castle, I scrambled down to meet them so I could have someone to sit with at dinner. Although I tried to put on a happy face, I was still dangerously out of sorts. Hermione leaned over and asked if I was okay, to which I replied, "Yes, sort of," and then she asked where Harry was. Explaining that he was away visiting his tutor in the hospital explained a lot.

"Harry's not going to do well with this," she said to me. I put on a wicked expression and said "I'll have to see what I can do to take his mind off of it when he returns," which seemed to shock my bushy-haired friend. Ron finally lifted his head up from his dinner plate and asked me how the Hogsmeade visit went. When I told him that it was brilliant, but cut short, he reminded me that we'd get a chance to do it again in three weeks. He was in enough of a good mood that I wheedled him into trading my treacle tart for his serving of apple cobbler, so I hadn't completely lost my touch. If there were any scintillating bits of conversation at the table tonight, I'm sure I missed them. I was distracted by Harry being gone, and still wallowing in self-pity at having my time cut short. I walked back to the tower alone, using the solitude to stretch my senses out and feel for Harry's signature. I could tell that he's worried, but he was also reasonably content, so I guessed that Abelard was okay. I'll know tomorrow, I guess. Speaking of tomorrow, as I'd missed the Saturday evening service, I guess I'll attend morning services with Harry, which means that I'd best wrap up inscribing my immortal thoughts upon your creamy pages, dear diary of mine.

GMW

6 October, 1996

Dear Diary,

Well, it's Sunday morning, but Harry was still gone when I woke up today. Wherever he is, he's still there. After the world's quickest shower (being small has its advantages) I made my way out of the tower to Professor McGonagall's office, but it was unexplainably sealed. As I couldn't get to church, and Harry was still away, I decided to do something about the gnawing hunger in my middle, so I took off to the Great Hall for breakfast.

As I hadn't felt like eating much last night, I took additional servings on everything for breakfast: porridge, toast, eggs, kippers, tomatoes and a bowl of fruit compote, snickering at myself for assembling a breakfast sized for Ron, or maybe Jasmine. Midway through the porridge, I felt the familiar bloom of warmth in my middle signifying that Harry had returned to the castle. Part of me wanted to run off to meet up with him, but I was still out of sorts, so I stayed in place; better that he finds me rather than the other way around. All at once, the Great Hall seemed to fill up with chattering students. Ron and Hermione were carrying on an elliptical discussion which indicated that either they were rowing again, or they were trying to talk about something without tipping me off. Puleeze – I'm kept in the dark enough as it is. I was tempted to fire up the old Legilimency, but that's a dangerous task at best when surrounded by magical minds in the Great Hall.

Harry made it into the Great Hall, taking his place opposite me at the table. "Aren't you forgetting something, Mr. Potter?" I called out to him, tapping my finger on my cheek where I wanted a kiss. Harry took the hint and leaned across the table to kiss me. Just before he pecked me, I grabbed him by the collar and gave him a proper kiss. Hermione tutted softly and Ron began to choke on his coffee. I let go of Harry, letting him sit down again with a broad smile on his face. "Mmm," he said, licking his lips. "Kippers."

Neither one of us noticed Zacharias Smith as he approached. He plunked a folded up copy of the early edition of the Daily Prophet down on the table between us. The paper displayed a photograph of a Dark Mark shimmering above what appeared to be a burning house. Smith was fuming. "So, Potter," Smith growled. "How long is this going to go on?" he asked Harry in a loud voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry replied. Zacharias unfolded the paper, displaying the caption "Dozens killed in Death Eater attack in Brighton."

Harry sat still for a moment. Conversation in the Great Hall had stopped. All eyes and ears it seemed were on our table. "You from Brighton?" Harry asked Smith, using his very best Snape impression voice.

I worried that Harry was going to let loose just then, but he didn't do anything other than gripping the table. I noticed afterwards that Harry had left little scorch marks on the table's surface. Harry stood up, addressing Smith with a quick and quiet "I'm sorry for your loss," before he darted out of the Great Hall, looking back over his shoulder at me long enough to mouth "I gotta go."

Smith stomped back to the Hufflepuff table. The conversations in the Great Hall resumed. I crossed my silverware on my plate and left the Great Hall. Hermione caught up to me in the corridor outside. She grabbed me by the elbow, turning me around. "Go to him," she implored as she looked me in the eye.

"I don't think so," I replied. "I think he'd rather be alone right now."

Hermione gave me an odd look, fury burning in her eyes. Although her lips weren't moving, I heard her next thought as clearly as if she'd spoken it aloud.

*Just because you're sleeping with him doesn't mean that you know what's best for him .*

I blinked. I'm fairly certain she didn't know that I was picking up on her thoughts. I decided to lash out at her a bit. "I disagree. I think I do know what's best for him. That's one of the differences between us, which is why he chose me over you, Hermione. I know when to leave him alone."

The look on Hermione's face was worth the trouble. She let go of my elbow (which I believe broke the accidental Legilimency link) and I scurried off to my room to write this diary entry. Hermione, I'd discovered this fall, is a natural Occlumens most of the time. Evidently eye contact and touch combined can overcome this natural defence.

I've just reached out to sense Harry's presence, recoiling at the flavour. He's doing something with his magic right now that dampens my ability to tell where he is and what he's doing. By the strength of his signature I'd swear that he's in the castle, but I'll be hanged if I can tell where. Maybe I'll nip up to his room after I finish my homework and nick his copy of the Marauder's map. My homework, incidentally, refuses to do itself in my absence. So much for the notion that being a witch solves practical problems.

TTFN

GMW

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The voice was unmistakable. "Harry Potter, Sir, Dobby is looking for you," Dobby cried.

Ginny zipped to the end of the couch, scooping herself into her brassiere before she began to furiously button her blouse. Harry watched in fascination, smirking as he buttoned up his own shirt.

"We're up here, Dobby," he called once Ginny was covered up.

"Harry Potter, sir, Dobby regrets to inform you that Professor Dumbledore wants you to return to the castle, immediately," Dobby said as he passed through the illusion charm that shielded the mouth of the cave from the outside world. Dobby blinked as he looked up at the two teenagers solemnly. "Was the picnic to your liking, sir and miss?"

"It was excellent, Dobby, the best picnic basket I've had the pleasure to eat in ages," Ginny said, carefully but casually buttoning the last button on



her blouse.

"Dobby is most pleased, young miss. Dobby takes great pleasure in caring for Harry Potter and his friends, especially such a beautiful young lady friend such as you is," he said. Turning to Harry he said, "Harry Potter, sir, would you prefer that Dobby pops the two of you back to the castle, or would you prefer to go back to Hogwarts by the special Portkey that Professor Dumbledore provided to Dobby when he was sent to find sir and miss?"

Harry glanced at Ginny, who shrugged. "We'll take the Portkey, I guess," he said with a frown.

Dobby giggled as he pulled a tiny miniature white rose from the pocket of his harlequin checked trousers. He shook it with a grand gesture, transforming it into a full-sized rose. "Harry Potter must hand this to his lady while he expresses his feelings for her. Both sir and miss must be touching the rose for the magic to work," he said, stifling another giggle when Harry shot him a dirty look.

Harry took the rose from Dobby, raising one eyebrow as he looked from Dobby to the rose and then to Ginny. Extending the rose with a flourish he said "Fair maiden, a token of my esteem." A quizzical look passed his face when nothing happened.

"Harry," Ginny whispered, "you have to express your feelings."

"Hmph," Harry snorted before he bent forward to give her a tender kiss. The now-familiar yank behind the navel grabbed them both as the cavern disappeared. Instead of the cavern, they were now standing in the outer chamber of Professor Dumbledore's office. Sensing someone to his left, he let go of the rose long enough to twist into a battle stance, albeit one where he was still holding Ginny's hand. He took a deep breath. "Hello, Jasmine. I wasn't expecting you," he said as he straightened up.

"Even so, you took the initiative after being surprised. It appears that my efforts this summer were not wasted," Jasmine said with a grin. "It is so good to see you both. I know it's disappointing to be yanked from a Hogsmeade weekend, but Abelard dearly wanted to see you, Harry."

"Is something wrong?" Ginny asked.

"Abelard fell ill yesterday and asked me to fetch Harry," Jasmine answered. "But first your Headmaster asks for some time alone with your Krulach." She gave the word the throaty sound it deserved. Harry went through the door to the inner office, closing it carefully.

"Oh Ginny!" Jasmine said as Ginny launched herself onto her mentor. "It is so good to see you two together. Are you happy?" she asked.

"Very," Ginny answered.

"And Harry?" she asked.

"Well, according to Harry, I'm the best thing that's ever happened to him," Ginny said with a bit of a blush.

"I suspect that he's right," Jasmine said sagely.

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"Harry," Dumbledore exclaimed as he rose from behind his desk. The two wizards shook hands before Dumbledore gestured that he should sit down. Harry looked about the office, noting with gratitude that most of the items he'd smashed last summer were back in their proper places, repaired and whole.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"They were things, Harry. I have too many things and each of them can be replaced, but our friendship is unique, and if damaged can not be replaced. It is a shame that it took me this long to learn that simple fact," Dumbledore said.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Your father would be proud of you – you gave your minders the slip in Hogsmeade. Can I assume that you were using Padfoot's old lair?"

"Possibly," Harry replied with a smirk.

"It is my business to know things, Harry. There are two unplottable spots in Hogsmeade. The Aurors know of but one. I know them both. I appreciate your desire for privacy, especially on a fine autumn day with a lovely companion. I appreciate that you insured that someone knew your whereabouts. To the extent that I can, I will respect your wishes for privacy," Dumbledore said warmly.

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied.

"You may dispense with the 'sir' while we are alone, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"Yes, s - er, Headmaster," Harry replied with a grin.

Fawkes gave a gentle crowing sound, appreciating the humour in the exchange.

"Harry, I called you back from the attention of the lovely Miss Weasley because Abelard fell ill yesterday and requested this morning that you be allowed to visit him. At first I was going to dismiss the request out of hand, as I have reliable reports of Death Eater activity, both here and abroad,

but Miss Kadakia was most persuasive. Unfortunately, for operational reasons, Abelard can safely receive only one visitor," Dumbledore said.

"I see," Harry said. "How bad off is he?"

"He is in no danger of meeting his maker any time soon, much to his regret," Dumbledore said with a wry expression. "I also wanted to advise you that I will be away from the castle for a bit more than two weeks, coming back just in time for the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match on the twenty-fifth. While I am gone, I only ask that should anything untoward happen, that you would confide in the members of the Order that are on faculty."

"Uh, right," Harry said, thinking that it would be a cold day in Hell before he voluntarily confided anything to his Potions instructor.

"I also wanted to relay to you that Professor Snape has repeatedly requested the opportunity to test your progress in Occlumency. I have begged off until now, but if you are willing to put up with him for a brief moment, I'm sure that it would be informative for all involved," he said, nodding at Fawkes as the phoenix began trilling an odd, humorous tune. "All I ask is that you leave me with a functional Potions instructor when you finish."

"You mean you want me to leave him better than I find him?" Harry cracked. "Not to worry, I think I can do what I have to do without leaving marks."

"Excellent! Now, if you would be so kind, I have a small package that needs to be transported to Abelard. Notwithstanding your prior plans, you may need to stay overnight, but in no event should you stay past Sunday evening," Dumbledore said.

"How is he, exactly?" Harry asked.

"As of today, he is conscious and able to communicate after a fashion. His attending physicians and healers believe that he experienced a minor stroke, although they are divided upon his ability to recover from this malady. My own opinion is that nothing would be better for him than seeing his summer student again," Dumbledore said, twisting in his chair to open a drawer in his desk. He pulled out a zippered portfolio that appeared to be made of some sort of exotic leather. "This case is charmed so that only Abelard or Jasmine may open it. I would not tempt those charms if I were you; George Weasley did the charm work for the last layer of protection."

"Thanks for the warning – I'll kerb my curiosity," Harry said lightly.

"Most satisfactory. Now, enough with business. How are you Harry? Classes, the D.A., Quidditch, Miss Weasley?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry chuckled. "All of them are faring better than I'd imagined, especially the latter," he said with a broad smile.

"You do make a lovely couple. I've had to shake myself more than once to argue with my eyes that I'm not seeing your parents out of time," Dumbledore said.

"You're not the first person to make that mistake," Harry said wistfully, thinking of Abelard.

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Harry felt torn as they walked to the inner courtyard of the castle. He wanted to see Abelard, but not at the expense of leaving Ginny. Pulling his shield to naught, he snagged Ginny's hand, opening up their touch-talk link.

*I don't want to leave you .*

*I know, but you need to do this, Harry .*

*What are you not saying?*

*I don't like to be the little woman, waiting behind for the hero to return.*

*You know that I'd rather have you with me, don't you?*

*Good answer, Harry.*

He squeezed her hand and received a sunny smile in reply.

As they gathered in the courtyard, Jasmine called the portal, opening the golden door swiftly, her battle wand clutched in her left hand. Stepping through the portal she scanned the new vista and then beckoned to Harry. Ginny stood on tip-toe, kissing him soundly before whispering in his ear. "Take as long as you need and then hurry back," she said.

Harry nodded and then walked through the portal, closing the door behind him.

Ginny stood in the courtyard, arms wrapped around her chest, watching the portal disappear.

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"Where are we?" Harry asked Jasmine.

Jasmine looked around the neatly manicured grounds of the park they'd just entered. "In a park of course," she said with a smile.

"No, I mean, where is this park? We're not in Uganda, the trees are different, the light is different."

"Very good, Harry," Jasmine said with an appreciative nod. "We're in Capetown, South Africa. There's a small private hospital here that's jointly

run by Muggle doctors and Magical healers. It's the only place he trusts when he's ailing."

"So, what's the security concern?" he asked.

"Well," she said, placing one hand on her hip, "aside from your problems with Voldemort, Abelard has accumulated a number of adversaries over the years, any number of which are always waiting and watching for an opportunity to take a practicing seer out of play. A hospital is a difficult place to secure."

"So, why can't Ginny come along?"

"Oh, Harry," Jasmine sighed, reaching out to smooth a bit of hair above his ear. "You don't have the luxury of being a teenager in love. Everything you do – everything you and Ginny do — has to be considered in the light of how it fits into the grand strategy. If the two of you are gone on a Sunday, watching eyes and ears at Hogwarts will report that to the other side. If just one of you is missing, it's less likely to be thought of, much less reported. You and your inner circle are watched all the time. When we visit the hospital, you'll be under a Glamour that will make you look like my brother Ravi – the people who watch here will find nothing odd in that, while it would be quite out of the ordinary for a major player from England to be seen visiting one of the last seers on the continent. Information is important. Denying information to the other side is doubly important."

"Okay, I guess," he said.

"Hold still," Jasmine said as she plucked her delicate wand from her sleeve, chanting softly as she swept the wand in arcs over his head. He felt warmth trickling over his head, not unlike the cold dripping sensation of a Disillusionment charm. Jasmine looked at him carefully and then smiled broadly. "Mum would be proud," she said, conjuring a small hand mirror.

Harry looked into the mirror, seeing a dark haired, dark eyed Indian man looking back at him. "So, this is what Ravi looks like?" he asked.

"More or less," she said. "Let's go see Abelard."

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As they walked in silence along the sidewalk, Jasmine slipped her hand into Harry's, earning a sideways glance from the teenager. He felt a tingling in his hand. Jasmine was attempting to open a touch-talk link. Harry set his shield to naught.

*Can you hear me?* said a lilting mind so unlike Ginny's thought pattern.

*Loud and clear,* he replied. *I didn't know that I could do this with anyone other than Ginny.*

*Any fairly accomplished Legilimens can do this, although I could see how this would be a cosy link between lovers.*

"We're not lovers," Harry bristled aloud.

*No? How about two companions, sharing a life bond, who are very much in love? I could see it when the two of you arrived in your Headmaster's office. I have no doubts that your intentions are honourable, Harry.*

*Thanks.*

*Now, remember, we're brother and sister. Stay close to me, I'll walk and talk us through the security at the hospital.*

*Yes, dear sister.*

*That I'll do.*

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The sign in front of the building read "St. Luke's" in English and another language that Harry didn't recognize. They stood before a registration desk, were issued stick-on badges inscribed with their names and a room number, presumably Abelard's room, and directed to a hallway leading to a large lift. Jasmine produced another card, passing it across a panel beside the lift door. The panel lit up briefly and then a delicate bell chimed, announcing the arrival of the lift. Once inside the lift, Jasmine examined her faux brother carefully and then turned to face the lift door, apparently satisfied with her examination.

The hallways had few windows, but they were well lit without being overly bright. From one of the windows Harry could see a formal garden within the walls surrounding the hospital. Someone, Harry couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, was trimming a hedge. Jasmine took his hand again.

*He's just woken up.*

*Your bond?*

*Yes – I was terrified when I couldn't feel him across the bond yesterday. I never moved so fast in my life. Mum was a bit frosty with me for dropping a tray of buns in the kitchen until she figured out what I was doing.*

The hallway ended. Jasmine touched the wall with her fingertips. A small rectangle appeared. Jasmine nodded and then motioned for Harry to place his hand beside hers. He felt a tingling similar to what he'd felt when the portal had been attuned to his signature.

"It knows you now," she said. "You could come back without me and still gain admittance, which says a lot about your relationship with my master."

At Jasmine's nod, they removed their hands from the wall, causing a doorway to appear. Opening the door revealed a room that was a close copy of the guest room in Abelard's villa. Several pictures adorned the walls not covered by bookcases. A hospital bed sat beside a window looking over the same courtyard that Harry had seen earlier. The figure on the bed was impossibly small, but when he turned his head with difficulty, the sparkling eyes remained the same.

"Hhhh," Abelard hissed with difficulty. "Haaary," he said, his eyes darting from Jasmine to a spot on the end of the bed. Abelard patted the bed with his left hand. Letting go of Harry's hand, she climbed nimbly onto the bed, curling up beside Abelard. She gave his forehead a kiss before taking his hand. Bowing her head briefly, she looked up and spoke. "It is so good to see you again, lad. I trust that you and your lady friend are well," Jasmine said, using the precise, measured diction that Harry associated with Abelard.

Harry looked at the two quizzically.

"I can speak with great difficulty today. Jasmine has been my hands for years, now she is my voice as well," Jasmine said.

Harry looked at Abelard. "You're speaking through her?"

"Do not be troubled, lad, I'm not possessing her, it is rather more like the touch talk you two shared on the way here," Abelard said through Jasmine. Abelard then smiled. "It is difficult for her though, not speaking her own words."

Jasmine made a face and then spoke. "That's not true! I can still talk!"

Abelard laughed a wheezy laugh and then winked at Harry.

"I have a package for you, sir," Harry said.

"You've been at school too long, lad. I'm neither your headmaster nor a knight – you need not call me sir," Abelard said.

"Yes, - uh – Abelard," Harry said.

"Place the package on the bureau over there – I will attend to it tomorrow," Abelard said, gesturing a sloppy motion with his right hand. "I am merely impaired, not dead, lad. I've lost fine motor control on my right side and have great difficulty speaking. Thanks be to God, I can still read and my magic appears to be intact. Thanks to the swift action of my bodyguard, assistant and amensius, the physicians and healers were able to minimize the damage done by the stroke. So, enough about the deteriorations of an old man; how is school?"

Harry looked around, bringing a chair alongside the bed. "I'm ahead in most of my classes, except Potions, which hasn't changed much. I'm teaching the D.A. again. I'm playing Quidditch again, and I see as much of Ginny as I can, given all the rest of the activities," Harry said.

"You realize, lad that your eyes sparkle when you talk about your lady?" Abelard asked.

Harry felt the beginnings of a blush on his neck. "Well, they should sparkle, she's very special," he said proudly.

"Indeed she is," Abelard said. "How is Father Martin?"

"I don't know; I haven't seen him since I started school. I've been attending at the chapel in Hooper on Sundays," Harry said.

"Oh? Who is the rector there?" Abelard asked.

"Father Harper."

"Michael Harper?"

"I've heard him called 'Father Mike' by some of the adults," Harry said.

"Michael Harper! I was his discussion group leader for his first retreat with the Grey Friars. I do not want to think how many years ago that took place," Abelard said through Jasmine. Jasmine laughed while Abelard gave a weak chuckle.

Harry heard a small chime ring next to the door. Jasmine was up in a flash; opening the door and helping Mrs. Paprikash carry in a large basket. The room was soon filled with savoury smells. Dinner had arrived.

"It is so good to see you, Mister Potter," Mrs. Paprikash said, bowing slightly to him. She looked about the room and served up two plates, one with normal portions, and the other with double portions. Jasmine took the larger plate, sitting down again next to Abelard. While they ate, Mrs. Paprikash reviewed the folder of medical records and forms at the end of Abelard's bed. Although it took some getting used to, Harry was soon able to tell when it was Jasmine speaking and when it was Jasmine speaking for Abelard. The fact that she was eating and feeding Abelard from the same plate seemed unremarkable. After their meal, Mrs. Paprikash bundled up the plates and containers into her basket and left. They continued with their after dinner banter for a while until there was another chime at the door. A healer wearing turquoise robes asked to speak to Jasmine. She looked to Abelard, who nodded, and then left with the healer. The healer returned shortly without Jasmine, examining Abelard briefly before making notes in the chart at the foot of his bed. The healer nodded at Harry and then left.

Abelard looked up at Harry. "Hhhh," he said, or tried to say.

Harry moved his chair closer to the bed, taking Abelard's hand, remembering to set his Occlumency shield as low as possible. His hand crackled

as the touch-talk link opened. The thoughts were booming at first, until Abelard discerned that he didn't need to project his thoughts as forcefully with Harry as he did with Jasmine.

*Harry, lad, could you read to me?*

"Sure Abelard, what would you like?" Harry asked.

*On the end table are two books – the burgundy coloured one is in Greek, the green one is in English .*

Harry pulled the green book off of the table, opening it with one hand. It was a Bible.

*Read me some psalms, lad. Start with Psalm 62, you'll find it in the middle of the book.*

"For God alone my soul in silence waits; from him comes my salvation," Harry began to read, looking up from time to time at Abelard. Although his eyes began to droop, his lips were moving along as Harry read. From there he moved on to another psalm and yet another. Abelard held up his hand, looking at Harry, who put the Bible down.

*Read to me from Romans, lad.*

Harry paged to the New Testament, and then past the Gospels and book of Acts, finding the beginning of Paul's epistle to the Romans.

*Pour yourself a glass of water, lad. It's a long book.*

Harry smiled and then poured two glasses, one for himself and one for Abelard. It was a long book. The book was prose, not verse, so it wasn't as easy to read aloud as the Psalms. He stumbled from time to time on the odd names and the awkward syntax, but after the second chapter he developed a rhythm. Again, although Abelard's eyes drooped, his lips moved in time with Harry's reading, word for word. He took a break at every chapter, extending Abelard's glass so he could sip on the straw, and then sipping from his own glass. Abelard interrupted him as he was a few paragraphs into chapter five.

*Read that again, lad.*

Harry read the paragraph again, reading slowly and emphatically. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

*Does this make sense to you, Harry?*

Harry paused a moment. "I guess so," he answered.

*Do you believe that it is true?*

"I don't understand what you mean, Abelard," Harry said.

*You know more of life and death than most men ten times your age. Would you die so that others might live?*

"Yeah, I would. That's the point, isn't it?" Harry answered.

*But would your death reconcile men to God?*

"Of course not – that's already been taken care of," Harry responded.

*How has that been taken care of?*

"By the Son," he answered. "That's what I believe. Do you believe that, Abelard?"

*With all my heart, lad. Abelard motioned for the water glass, taking a long draw of water through the straw. Let me rest a bit - I am weary.*

Harry sat in silence, wondering briefly where Jasmine had wandered in the hospital. Surely Abelard was not to be left alone. He resolved that he would stay there until he was relieved by Jasmine or told to go home. Abelard stirred slightly and then reached out for Harry's hand.

*Before my stroke, I was doing something foolish, lad. I was scrying the paths of your lifeline .*

"I don't understand, Abelard," Harry said quietly.

*I found your magical signature and then followed it forward in time through the various possible futures. Difficult work at best, nigh unto impossible when the subject's life has as many swirling eddies of magic and counter-magic acting on it as there are on your path.*

Harry said nothing.

*I cannot read very far into your possible futures, but what I can read indicates that you are in grave danger; danger within, danger without. You are not yet strong enough to engage the darkness .*

“What can I do?” Harry asked.

*I cannot see the answer with certainty.*

“Do you have a guess?” Harry asked.

*We began your training this summer. You are a powerful wizard, Harry, but you need to be stronger still. But that is not enough. Where a man's treasure is, there is his heart. Protect your heart, Harry. Enough of this – I am quite weary, it is time to rest.*

Harry gave Abelard a last sip of water and then lowered the bed a bit. Jasmine returned while he was making these adjustments, placing a kiss on Abelard's forehead. He was already asleep.

“It's too late to take you back to Hogwarts, Harry,” Jasmine said softly. “There's a guest room here in Abelard's suite – why don't you get some sleep and then we'll return you to school in the morning?”

“When was the last time you slept, Jasmine?” Harry countered.

“Wednesday,” she said sheepishly.

“How about we split the night? You crash now and I'll wake you in a few hours?” he asked.

Jasmine nodded, smiled and then kissed him quickly on the cheek before turning quickly away towards a door at the back of the room. Harry pulled a book from the shelf and settled into the chair next to Abelard's bed. He heard the sound of a quick shower and then saw the sliver of light under the door wink into darkness.

The book was an interesting, if somewhat unusual explanation of various charms. Why anyone would want to cast a charm that made objects glow faintly was not entirely clear to him, but it was an interesting charm that had not been covered yet in the sixth year syllabus. He looked up from the description of the next charm when he heard Abelard snap his fingers. Harry took his hand.

*Do you think that you could cast that charm?*

“Yeah, I think so,” he answered.

*Could you do so while also casting the sensor cloaking charm?*

“Sure.”

*Then do so, now, using me as the anchor of the Aurora charm .*

Harry cast the Aurora charm wandlessly while casting the sensor cloaking charm with his wand. Abelard's body glowed briefly and then the shimmer of light disappeared.

“What was that about?” Harry asked.

*It cloaks my magic from Jasmine's bond; otherwise she'd wake up once she discerned that I was awake again .*

“That's very considerate,” Harry said.

Abelard laughed, wheezing softly. *I may be old, but I'm not dead. Help me down from this bed, lad, I need to pull a few books from the shelves .*

“Let me get them for you,” Harry said anxiously.

*I have been resting for a day and a half – I think I am able to stand for a minute or two without causing calamity .*

Harry helped his mentor rise from his bed, hobbling over to one bookcase and then another, pulling volumes from the shelves. Abelard stacked the books on the table beside his bed and then shrank them to the size of small coins. He nodded at Harry and then returned to bed, pulling the covers up to his chin with a satisfied sigh. Within minutes Abelard was asleep again, seemingly exhausted from his brief expedition from his bed. Harry scooped the miniature books into his pocket, noting the time on the wall clock. He figured he'd give Jasmine another hour before he roused her, knowing that she'd flay him alive if he attempted to go without sleep himself. He yawned and then returned to the odd book of Charms, having a new appreciation for the Aurora charm. The next charm described in the book is odder still.

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Jasmine placed her hand on his shoulder, shaking him gently. The guest room had been dark, but a slice of light flooded in from the opened door.

“Harry, it's time. We have to get you back to Hogwarts,” she whispered.

Abelard was still sleeping, the early morning light playing across his features. Jasmine bent low, kissing his forehead before leading the way out of the room. They walked in silence through the now empty hallways of the hospital and out into the chilly morning air. Five minutes later, the Portal arrived and ten minutes beyond that he was in the Great Hall, slipping into a seat at the table across from Ginny. A pang of emotion burst within him as he caught her eye. She was indeed his treasure.

Aren't you forgetting something, Mr. Potter?" she asked, pointing to her cheek. Harry bent over the table to kiss her cheek, but was not entirely surprised when she grabbed him by the collar and kissed him soundly.

"Mmm, kippers," he said.

He startled slightly when a copy of the Daily Prophet was slapped onto the table beside them.

"So, Potter, how long is this going to go on?" an angry Zacharias Smith snarled.

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Write to me – I write back

Author's Note: Abigail Loomis is courtesy of Katrinka of the SugarQuill.net and is used with her permission. All of the *Stories from Sixth Year* are intended to be stand-alone stories, rather than chapters in a larger book. *Valley of the Shadow* is one story, broken into two pieces for the ease of my readers. I have requested that the two pieces be posted the same day, allowing the impatient reader the opportunity to blitz on into the next chapter. We see here in this story the same events from two different Points of View. Not surprising, the narrative is slightly different when Harry is recounting it from when Ginny is recounting it – life is like that – deal with it.

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## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Valley of the Shadow - Part II

His head is throbbing as he stands. "I've gotta go," he mouths to Ginny as he leaves the Great Hall. The halls are deserted on a Sunday morning – the further he gets away from the Great Hall, the less chance there is to run into anyone. He wants nothing more at the time than to be alone.

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"What were you doing when Death Eaters were burning my home?"

The encounter was more than an hour old, but the question was still ringing in his ears. He figured the question was rhetorical and should not have been answered. He knew that if he did answer truthfully that he'd been feeling up his girlfriend at the time that he'd go down in a withering crossfire, given the typical Weasley temperaments of Ron and Ginny. Well, at least part of Abelard's warning of 'danger without' made sense now. The thought of whinging about the unfairness of the situation never occurred to him. Now that the relative quiet of the summer had been broken, it was time to do something about things.

The unfortunate thing was that there was no clear set of instructions: 'to defeat Voldemort, do this, this, and then that, and *voila*, destruction of Old Snake-eyes is guaranteed.' Dumbledore was absent from the castle, Abelard was recovering in Capetown, and he didn't feel up to baring his soul to Professor McGonagall at the moment, so he wandered, paced, and then wandered some more. His pacing through the halls of Hogwarts took him into the vicinity of Barnabus the Barmy, so he guessed that a visit to the Room of Requirement couldn't hurt. He attempted to clear his mind as he passed by the door, hoping that the room would know what he needed, as he surely didn't know.

He hesitated, and then turned the doorknob, pushing the door open. The Room of Requirement had turned itself into a pretty fair replica of the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. A plate was set on the table with toast and eggs, a glass of juice and a steaming cup of coffee. Next to the plate was an envelope with his name on it. His blood ran cold when he recognized the handwriting.

Harry chuckled. *Breakfast and a note from Sirius. Well, I probably do need to eat. I'll deal with the note after the toast is gone*, he thought to himself, pulling the chair out so he could sit down. The toast was good, made from bread that was an odd cross between that normally prepared by the Hogwarts kitchen and what Molly served at The Burrow. It was good, but it would be better with a pot of Molly's strawberry jam. With a muted pop, a small pot appeared next to his still steaming cup of coffee. He felt his humour improve as his plate emptied. The coffee was excellent, giving him the courage to pick up the letter.

Dear Harry,

First off, this isn't really me, so don't get your knickers in a twist trying to figure out the theological implications of how I could be writing to you after I'm dead. The Room figured that you needed to talk to a friend, and it knew enough about me to craft a fair facsimile. That being said, I do know what you're worried about.

"How do I get strong enough to finish off Old Snake-Eyes, and what can I do to protect Ginny until that's done?"

I'll be totally honest with you – I've got some ideas about the first part of this problem, but I'm at a loss as to the second part. I know a lot about strengthening magic – I am, after all, the accumulated whimsy and magic of a school of wizardry that's been in the business for more than a thousand years.

Your first lesson with Abelard held an important truth – the magic is in the wizard. That magic can be increased – like a muscle, it needs to be exercised. During this summer you trained hard every other day, Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays, allowing your magic to recharge on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, taking Sunday off to listen to Fr. Martin and hob-knob with my cousin and her fiancée. By the way I heartily approve: Moony's been alone too long. Do let him know the next time you see him.

Abelard pushed you hard, draining your magic close to zero with every lesson. This draining and recharging cycle was important – your magical reserves deepened with practice. While you've been studying your brains out back in school, the work hasn't been taxing your reserves the way Abelard pushed you this summer, aside from your sessions with Dumbledore.

So, you need to work out your magic in your spare time. I don't recommend cutting classes, otherwise Professor McGonagall will call you up short and possibly put an end to things. She has a very conservative view on a number of issues, training included. Some of the stuff you're going to be doing is a tad on the dangerous side. In your pocket you have some truly useful books from Abelard. They'll give you a pretty good curriculum for your training program. Now, all you'll need is a place, and a trainer.

As to the place, there are three Unplottable spaces within the castle: this room, the Chamber of Secrets, and what we used to call Rowena's Rookery. There is a room above the Owlery – invisible of course – and without access from within the Owlery tower, at least not normal access. The inner dimensions are larger on the inside than on the outside, which you'll find to be useful. The backside of this note can be activated once you're in the Owlery. You already know the password. To the best of my knowledge, Dumbledore doesn't know the whereabouts of the Rookery, although I'm sure he knows that it's somewhere in the castle. You need to train and train hard. Time is not on your side – it never has been. You will know when the time is right to bring your friends into this project; until then, you should exercise all of those Marauder skills you have inherited to keep this a covert operation. Once you're in the Rookery, the trainer part will work itself out – or not. We'll see.

In closing, I'm looking forward to seeing you on the other side, but not anytime soon.

Padfoot

P.S. You're going to have an opportunity to teach Snivelus a lesson soon – make it count.

Finishing the letter, he was torn between laughing and crying. For not being an authentic Sirius letter, it certainly sounded like him, especially the postscript. Well, he'd been planning for this encounter, and he hoped that he'd make Sirius proud.

"Oh, Sirius, why did you have to go and leave me? I could use a good joke right now," he said aloud. The note was placed carefully back into the envelope and into his shirt pocket. He nodded at the room as he turned towards the door. "Thanks."

The room shimmered into a grey mist as he closed the door.

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It took a while to get to the Owlery. Concluding that he couldn't avoid everyone, he Vanished himself and engaged his Farsight. As he approached the Owlery, he heard voices. A pair of Hufflepuffs, probably in their fifth year, was sending off mail. Instead of leaving after their owls had started on their journey, they settled against a window, looking out over the grounds, stealing a lazy kiss from time to time.

*Can't they find a better place to smooch? You know, like a guano encrusted cave?*

He waited them out, stretching his senses to insure that no one else was heading towards the Owlery after they left. He pulled the note from his pocket, unfolding it and turning it over. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he intoned, watching wispy lines appear on the back of the note. It wasn't as detailed as the Marauder's Map, showing only the floor plan of the Owlery. The sketch showed a stick figure labelled "H. Potter" standing by the south windows. A door-frame appeared in the drawing on what appeared to Harry to be a blank wall between the north and east window bays. The stick figure moved towards the new door on the map, placing a hand on the door frame. Little words appeared next to the figure's head. "Help me" it said.

"Well," he said to himself. "Here goes."

He walked on silent feet to the northeast wall, placing his fingers gingerly on the wall where he reckoned the door should be according to the map. He cleared his throat. "Help me," he said, feeling slightly foolish. A cool breeze blew into the tower, stirring up the pellet-encrusted floor. A few of the owls hooted softly, shifting position to get out of the wind.

"Who asks for help?"

It was a woman's voice, which was about all that Harry could tell for sure; a richly textured voice reminding him of Madam Rosmerta.

"I do," he replied. "Harry Potter."

"I did not know that name. Are you known by another?" the voice asked.

Harry thought carefully. "Among the People I am called the Servant of the Light," he answered.

The wind blew again, making him squint as the dust swirled in circles.

"I did not know that name either. You sound like a young man, but you smell like a dragon. Show yourself," the voice commanded.

Harry extended his senses. Detecting no immediate threats, he cancelled his invisibility.

The voice laughed. "Well now, young wizard, when did the Snow Dragons teach you that trick?" she asked with a peal of musical laughter.

"This summer," he replied.

"What manner of help do you require?"

"I need to become stronger," he said.

"Why?"

"I have to stop a dark wizard," he answered.

"And if you fail?"

"Everyone I care for dies, the dark wizard rules this land, and I'll be dead," he said carefully.

The doorframe in the wall became visible. The door had no knob, but as he touched it, the door swung out, revealing a circular staircase.

"Well, in for a penny, in for a pound," he said to himself as he stepped through the doorframe. He dispatched Batty to scout out the stairwell and the area beyond. By the time he reached the head of the stairs, he knew that he was the only living thing on this level of the tower; which was of little comfort. Many a cursebreaker had been maimed or worse by hexes and curses left by wizards long dead, Bill had warned him this summer. The stairwell opened out into an empty room with large windows similar to those found a floor below in the Owlery. Anger surged through him as he considered whether or not he was being sent on a fool's errand through the castle.

*Might I be heard, young dragon?*

*Sure, I could use a good laugh about now.*

**When you were in dire straights in the Chamber, what did you do?**

*I called for help.*

**What help responded?**

*Riddle mocked Dumbledore for sending me 'a songbird and an old hat.'*

Harry nodded, looking about the room with his Farsight engaged. The walls of the room rippled with an odd display of magic. A mirror that he'd neglected on his first scan of the room was ablaze with magic. He walked up to the mirror slowly, examining it carefully. He wiped the layer of grime from the glass with his handkerchief, noting that the reflection was hazy and dim.

*Any clues, M'lau?*

**Address the mirror.**

*Come again?*

**The mirror is drenched with human magic, a human woman if I am not mistaken. Address the mirror as you would the changeling glossat.**

*Talk to it as I would Professor McGonagall?*

**Indeed.**

Feeling not a little foolish, he cleared his throat. "Uh, good day, Madam," he said.

The mirror trembled a little, shaking it slightly on the wall. Harry could see the magical aura surrounding the object throb with an indescribable swirl of colour.

"Good day, Servant of the Light. What month is it?" the mirror said in the woman's voice he'd heard earlier in the Owlery.

"October," he answered.

"What year?" she asked.

"1996," he said.

"It's been a long time since anyone visited me. Thank you for coming," the voice said.

"Who are you, madam?" he asked.

"You may call me Rowena, I am the collected memories of Rowena Ravenclaw," she said. The mirror glowed briefly and then flashed with a bright burst of blue light. Harry looked closer, seeing only his own reflection at first, then he was startled as he saw a woman's face in the mirror, a face not all that different from the elegant portrait of the founder he'd seen in Dumbledore's office.

"You're one of the Founders?" he asked.

The woman smiled and nodded. "I don't suppose that you're one of mine?"

"Uh, no," he replied, "I'm in Gryffindor. Uh, at the risk of sounding impertinent, where do you keep your brain?"

"I beg your pardon," Rowena countered.

"A good friend of mine warned me to never talk to something if I couldn't figure out where it kept its brain," Harry explained.

"Oh," Rowena said thoughtfully. "Probably good advice. Have you learned yet about Pensieves?"

"Yeah," he answered. "I have a few myself."

"Indeed," Rowena said, arching a single brow. "This mirror is rather like a Pensieve, except that it's not so easy to put things in and take things out once the basic enchantment is set. Rowena – or, I should say, the witch who created me – came from a long line of witches all of whom succumbed to a mysterious dementia in their old age; they were sound of body, but their minds became feeble and bit by bit they would forget everything they'd ever learned. The prospect terrified her, so she built me; or rather she built several iterations of what would become me, storing all of her memories."

"Did it work?" Harry asked quietly.

"Alas, no," the mirror replied. "When she was but 100 years old, the dementia appeared. Within five years or so she was for all intents and purposes an empty husk. Godric made this place for Rowena's study shortly after the castle was built. In her dotage, he would come here once a year to speak with me, even after she finally died. I knew that after Godric died that visitors would be few and far between."

"What was Godric to Rowena?" Harry asked.

The mirror didn't answer for a moment, the woman's face lost in a thoughtful expression that turned into a sad smile. "They were not lovers, if that is your curiosity, although they did love one another deeply. She understood him as no other woman did – he often sought her counsel. No, Godric had but one love in his life and it was not Rowena," she said sadly, her voice dwindling to a whisper. "But enough of this; tell me of your struggles with this evil Wizard," she commanded.

Harry found a spot on the window ledge, pulling his knees up to his chin as he began the convoluted tale of Grindewald, Tom Riddle, the Marauders, the courtship of James and Lily, the Order of the Phoenix, the rise and fall of Lord Voldemort and Voldemort's return. Rowena's mirror, or as he simply thought of her, Rowena, was an avid and active listener, ooh-ing and ah-ing at all the right points, asking clarifying questions that revealed a lot of insight. They finished their discussion well after curfew, with Harry arriving back in his dormitory sometime after two o'clock in the morning.

The next morning he awoke shortly before his first class began, pulling on his trainers and throwing on the first clean robe he could find. The Common Room was empty; all the Gryffindors had long since risen for breakfast and classes.

One particular Gryffindor was heavy hearted as she trudged across the lawn to Hagrid's hut for her first class of the day. Harry had failed to show up for breakfast.

~+~

"Ron?" Hermione asked at lunchtime on Thursday, "have you seen Harry?"

"Hmph?" Ron answered, his mouth exceedingly full of bread, having shoved a large slab of buttered bread into his mouth after finishing the last of his soup. He stopped chewing for a moment and then swallowed. "Come to think of it, no, I haven't – I mean, I see him at class and all, but he's always disappearing before and after class – I bet he's with Ginny," he said with a smile.

"I don't think so," Hermione said with a frown. "I heard Ginny asking Neville about him," she said.

"And?" Ron asked.

"Neville hadn't seen him either," she explained.

Ron scrunched up his face in concentration. "So why isn't Ginny asking you?" he inquired.

"We're, uh, not talking right now," Hermione stammered.

"What are you talking about? The two of you are thick as thieves," he replied.

"Not – recently," Hermione said. "Look, Ron, I really don't want to get into that right now. I'm worried about Harry, and I'm worried about Ginny too," she said with a sniff.

"You're always worried about Harry," Ron said, giving Hermione's knee a gentle squeeze under the table. "He's alright. All of his assignments have gone in on time this week and he's ahead of me on the Transfiguration readings."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I couldn't find my book, so I nicked his book – it's underlined with those little comments he always makes in the margins," Ron explained.

"Well," Hermione said, "that's better, I guess, but I'm still worried."

"Of course you are, love, that's a given," Ron said, a certain twinkle evident in his eyes.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione said. "Don't ever change."

~+~

Thursday, 10 October 1996

Dear Diary,

What an utterly crappy day. I woke up with a headache today, PMS-ing to the max. My visitor is not due until Saturday, but I still feel like dung.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, it appears that Harry and I are not talking. I haven't seen him since breakfast on Sunday. It was bad enough seeing him withdraw last year, but that now I'm connected to him, it hurts like hell. I belong to him, and he to me, but for reasons that I can't quite figure out he wants nothing to do with me. Has he come to his senses and figured out that marking me was the biggest blunder of his life? Is he appalled that I'm such a slag for stripping the two of us and throwing myself at him during the Hogsmeade weekend? Is he pissed off that he's here in school when he thinks he should be out tracking Tom down? I wish I knew. Sweet Merlin, I need a hug right now.

Ordinarily I'd go to Hermione right about now, but she's not talking to me either. Well, that one I can figure out all on my own. She's so used to being the queen bee she can't handle the small show of independence I made on Sunday, so now; of course, I'm being punished by the silent act. Maybe I should just eat my pride and seek her out. I wish this cursed headache would clear up so I could think straight.

On the academic front, I'm doing okay in all my classes this week except for my tutorial with McGonagall. We keep going over the same things, but

bleeding nothing is happening. Crimeny, it's time to go off to the D.A. meeting – perhaps the black-haired ghost will deign to acknowledge my existence. Well, time to close this out and make it off to the D.A..

TTFN

GMW

Thursday, 10 October 1996

Dear Diary,

Well, the ghost graced us with his presence tonight, not that it did me any good. Hermione opened up the R.O.R. tonight. About 30 seconds after we all expected to start, Harry appeared at the head of the room and started in like he'd been at it already for ten minutes. I'd been watching the door and he didn't come in that way, unless he was invisible. I didn't want to engage my Farsight, as I already had a dull headache. Unlike Harry, who apparently can run his Farsight all day, using Farsight for more than a brief spell gives me a headache, which I already have in full measure, thank you very much.

The D.A. lesson was quite good, I'll admit, building nicely on some of the things that Jasmine was doing with us this summer. Before the big freeze Harry was saying that he wants to teach Apparation to the Ministry Crew (the six of us who went to fetch Sirius) but he hasn't figured out a way to do so on the Hogwarts grounds. The Anti-Apparation wards make Apparation anywhere on the grounds a pretty dicey proposition. Notwithstanding this limitation, Harry showed an ingenious application of the Banishing charm that has nearly much the same effect as Apparation, using an immovable object as the anchor, which has the effect of Banishing the spell caster. I was working with Hermione, tutoring some of the younger students during the meeting, keeping a steady eye on Harry. By the time the meeting ended, I was sure that I was going to be able to catch up with him, but poof! No Harry! I even kicked in my Farsight and scanned the room – but I couldn't catch any trace of a disappeared boyfriend.

Well enough of my heartache. I need to finish off tomorrow's assignment and be ready for revisions on Saturday. Hopefully this ridiculous lockdown of the castle will be lifted so I can attend services on Saturday. I could use a lift right now.

Maybe tomorrow will look better.

GMW

~+~

Harry entered the Rookery silent and invisible. Once he was certain that the area was still secure, he cancelled the silencing charm and made himself visible.

"Good evening, sir, are you not well?" Rowena said.

"I'm okay, I guess – I have a bit of a headache," Harry said.

"How was the duelling club meeting?" Rowena asked.

"Uh, it went fine. The Banishing Charm exercise was well received," Harry said.

"Oh good, that was one of Godric's favourite tactics. Was your lady in attendance?" she asked.

"Ginny? Yeah, she was. She did well," Harry said in a distracted fashion.

"She must be jealous by now – apart from classes and practice, you're spending all of your time with me," Rowena observed.

"She, uh, doesn't know that I've been working on things with you here," Harry stammered.

"Lovers should not keep secrets from one another without reason, young sir," Rowena chided.

Harry said nothing at first, drawing a breath and then holding his tongue. Finally he spoke: "I have my reasons," he said. "Alright now, I got the book from the library on Magical Ward Construction. Explain to me how an Anti-Apparation ward works, if you would, madam."

"Certainly, let's begin by comparing the most simple and the most difficult wards in construction and operation. Watch as I draw this diagram . . ."  
"Rowena began, losing herself in the details of the magic, eager to have an inquiring mind before her after nearly a century of solitude.

~+~

To Ginny it seemed as though the week would never end. She'd caught Harry's eye during Saturday morning's Quidditch practice, his shy smile filling her with hope, but he was called back to the castle by the new Potions instructor just before the end of practice. For her part, Professor McGonagall caught her at lunchtime, advising her that the security lockdown was still in effect, but that religious services at Hooper would be continue, thanks to additional security provided by members of the Order.

Hermione found her that afternoon, deep in the library. She was one of the few people who knew of her favourite studying spot.

"Ginny? Tonks is waiting for you in the Common Room," Hermione announced quietly.

"What?" Ginny replied, staring blankly at her papers.

"Your escort for today's services," Hermione responded.

"Oh, right. I'm sorry – I'm not all here right now," Ginny said, plucking up her wristwatch from atop her books and tucking it into her pocket. Books and papers were pushed into her satchel before she stood and stretched.

"Is everything all right?" Hermione asked sombrely.

"Eh?" Ginny replied. "Yeah, I guess – most things are just fine."

"But some things aren't?" Hermione probed.

"Right. I just wish that I knew what was going on," Ginny replied.

"With Harry?"

"Exactly," Ginny said flatly.

"Look me up after Evensong if you want to talk," Hermione offered.

Ginny smiled and nodded.

"You need to be going," Hermione chided.

"Right then," Ginny said, hoisting her bag to her shoulder. She took off at a fast trot, picking her way around the tables that clogged the aisles between the bookshelves.

"No running in the library!" Hermione hissed.

Ginny made a gesture with her free hand and ran even faster.

~+~

Father Harper stood up, pulling at the fabric of his grey friar robes before he spoke. His usual attire for Evensong was a surplice over Muggle attire, so it was a bit unusual to see him in the uniform of his order. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," he intoned.

"Thanks be to God," the crowd of young wizards and witches replied. Chairs clanked as the undercroft emptied. While most of the worshippers left by the main doors that lead to the lane connecting Hogsmeade and Hooper, a few stepped into the fireplace. Tonks approached Father Harper, whispering something into his ear before giving him a hug. She then turned to seek out the pale, quiet red-haired witch who was still seated, her forehead resting on the back of the chair in front of her.

"Time to go, lass," Tonks called boisterously.

"Yeah, right," Ginny replied, pushing up from the chair.

Tonks slipped her hand onto Ginny's forehead. "Well, you're not feverish, but you still look like your Kneazle died," she said.

Ginny smiled weakly. "It's not that bad," she protested.

"Boy troubles?" Tonks asked.

Ginny bit her lips and nodded before she was embraced in a sisterly hug.

"Did you two get into a row last week at Hogsmeade?"

Ginny shook her head. "Hardly," she whispered into the witch's ear. "We had a brilliant time, but I haven't talked to him since then, and I don't know what's wrong. I think he's in one of his moods," Ginny grumbled.

Tonks chuckled. "Well, that's the witches' lot, isn't it? Pulling our wizards out of their funks. Moony got into a right blue funk after the last full moon," Tonks confided.

"So, what did you do?" Ginny asked.

Tonks released Ginny as she ran her fingers through her hair. It changed from gold with black spikes to a medium length shade of blue. "The cure involved an ambush using a plate of fresh biscuits, some raspberry-chocolate syrup and a towel," she said as she began to blush, "oh yeah, that worked well – you should try it," she mused.

"I don't think so," Ginny replied. "I kind of pushed the envelope the last time we were doing that stuff, which now that I think of it, might be the problem," she said with a frown.

Tonks laughed. "I doubt that – I don't think that Harry could get too much of you, Ginny. He's just got a lot on his mind these days."

Ginny untied the scarf covering her hair. "It's kind of hard to work my wiles on him when he's making himself scarce," she complained.

"I thought you could always find him with that bond thing," Tonks said.

Ginny shook her head. "He's doing something with his magic – I can still feel him, but I haven't a clue what he's doing or where he is," she muttered.

"That would explain a few things," Tonks said. "Minerva said that he's not showing up on her maps at the castle. Do you think he's doing it on purpose?"

"Count on it," she said, chuckling. "He doesn't like being watched – ever." She walked to the mantle over the hearth, pulling her school robes off of a peg. "Thanks for the chat, Tonks. I'm feeling a bit better – I guess it's time to go back to the castle."

"Right then," Tonks replied, holding out her hand. "We go together."

~+~

The time spent with the revision group was always good. Tonight was no exception. Hermione's notes were tremendous, of course. Beyond explaining the material, they cross-referenced issues across different disciplines: notes from History of Magic tied into concepts from Charms and Transfiguration. Notes from Potions cross-walked into topics alluded to in History of Magic. Ginny found that attempting to teach these nuggets to her revision group strengthened her grasp on the material. None of the members of the group would consider dropping this time together – they were all learning too much. But even magical learning has its limits.

After the revision group dissipated, Ginny stretched in her chair, sending out her senses. Whatever Harry was doing, he was still doing it – she could sense something from the bond, but not what he was doing, or where he was doing it.

"Well, he can't avoid me forever," she said aloud, putting her revision notes away before pulling out her still incomplete Transfiguration and Arithmancy papers. If she finished these tonight, she could justify her Sunday morning lie-in. With a power of concentration honed by growing up in a loud, crowded house she blocked out the commotion of the Common Room and immersed her thoughts into the Transfiguration essay, stopping only for a break at the loo, which wasn't much of a break, considering that she carried *Topics of Advanced Transfiguration* into the stall with her.

Transfiguration segued into Arithmancy. The now-finished essay was carefully stowed in its folder which in turn went into her satchel. The table was presently covered with papers bearing line after line of equations. She'd dropped a minus sign somewhere, she was sure of it, unless one really could incinerate a mountain with the energy stored in an acorn. She tugged at her scalp in frustration and then drew a line through the offending page of calculations; she would start anew, hoping that she could either solve the equation properly or at least find her dropped minus sign. She rubbed her temples, wishing that her dull, throbbing headache would relent to the potion she'd obtained from Madam Pomfrey.

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Harry entered the Common Room through the portrait hole an hour later, minutes before the midnight curfew for upper division students on a weekend night. The Common Room was both quiet and dark, the only light coming from the now dying fire in the fireplace and a pair of wall sconces behind to the now slumbering form of his beloved. His heart warmed at the sight of her, and he was strongly tempted to wake her, but he knew that if he attempted to wake her under these circumstances she would range from cross to incomprehensible. He looked down at her scattered pages of Arithmancy, turning the crossed out page over to leave a note. "I've been busy this week. Missing you bunches. Breakfast with me at Chez D's on Sunday at 9:30 a.m.? Love you – H."

He stared at the paper for a minute before applying the Eyes Only charm to his message. He then considered kissing her as she slept, but then thought better of it; being hexed by an incoherent girlfriend wasn't high on his to-do list. Quiet as a shadow he rose up the stairs leading to his dormitory.

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Hermione and Ron arrived a few minutes after 1:00 a.m., having finished their last rounds of the morning. The castle was safe, although they'd roused several couples, reminding them of the limits on underage romance, and more importantly, the boundaries of curfew. Hermione clucked when she saw Ginny crashed on the table. She straightened her notes, carefully putting them into folders according to discipline and handed the newly loaded satchel to Ron while she applied a Mobilcorpus charm to pull her up the stairs to place her in bed. She stood on tip-toe to give Ron a final kiss for the morning and pulled her immobile friend up the stairway, bobbing along behind her like a lumbering balloon. Ginny's room was already dark, the beds that were occupied all properly secured with drawn curtains. Ginny's roommate Emily talked quietly when she was dreaming. Tonight's dream apparently involved a long conversation on how she didn't want to have to bake biscuits for her brother's birthday. Hermione quietly deposited her friend in bed, untying her shoes and placing them on the floor next to her satchel. The last thing she did before pulling the curtains was applying a silencing charm and disarming her alarm clock; Ginny obviously needed the sleep.

Hermione walked quietly up the stairs to her own quarters, humming a Muggle tune that had worked its way into her memory over the summer. It felt good to be able to take care of Ginny, even if it was just a trifle. Within minutes she was in her own bed, asleep, but not before she carefully checked her own alarm. It wouldn't do to miss breakfast; there were so many things that could be accomplished on a Sunday if one just got an early start.

~+~

Sunday, October 13, 1996

Dear Diary,

Well, the dear visitor is now officially late, and I still feel like cauldron scrapings. Normally I'm pretty predictable, but when I'm really stressed out, things get out of whack. The downside of this is that when she does arrive, it really, really hurts. I was bitching about this to Emily when Hermione came to take me to dinner tonight. She looked a bit weirded out by the topic. Come to think of it, she's rather reluctant to discuss bodily functions

of any sort. Well, it takes all kinds.

Emily and Hermione tried to get me to talk about how things are going with Harry right now, but I let them know in no uncertain terms that the topic was off-limits, so instead we discussed fripperies like what we're wearing to the All-Hallows Eve Ball and other girly topics. I'm hoping that whatever funk Harry's experiencing will resolve itself before then, but I suppose I should make plans. If he doesn't come to his senses this week, I suppose that I'll have to ambush him after the Quidditch match this Saturday. Maybe Tonks can owl me some chocolate-raspberry syrup. Yeah, right. Look how well being forward worked last time. Still, it's worth some deep thought, if only I was capable of deep thought. This blasted headache just won't stop – I'm hoping that it will lift when her majesty arrives, but I'm not placing any large bets.

On the academic front, I'm still doing well, surprise, surprise, in all subjects except my Transfiguration tutorial, where, surprise, surprise, I still seem to be blocked. I even sunk so low as to ask Tk'lch what I'm doing wrong, but he simply replied that he had no notion how mammals transfigured into lower mammals. He reminds me of Percy at times – really smart, but not too helpful. With my now constant headache, it's hard to talk to him too – it's like we're talking at either ends of a long echoing hallway. I'd talk to Harry about it, but I can't bloody well find him. I have a live apart from Harry – I'm just not enjoying it a whole lot right now.

Well, enough carping and complaining right now – tomorrow's another day of adventure at Britain's premiere institute of magical learning where the flame-haired maiden will play yet another round of where's Harry, and what will I do to him once I get my pale, freckled, mammalian hands on him.

XOX - M'wah

GMW

~+~

Defence Against the Dark Arts had been a bloody pain this year. Although there was no doubt that Professor Snape knew his subject, his ability to impart knowledge with impartiality was no better with this course than it was with the prior five years of Potions. Harry kept his head down and his mouth shut, answering questions only when called upon. It was amazing, really, how many right answers Harry provided that ended up losing points for Gryffindor. He was learning things, however, and it was a N.E.W.T. course, so some suffering was to be expected.

"Today's assignment," Snape drawled as he flicked his wand at the board in the front of the classroom, erasing information that most of the students had not yet copied down, "is an essay on the creation, control, detection and destruction of Inferi – I expect that it will take at least three feet to adequately cover the subject, but as you are N.E.W.T. level students, I will leave the length of the essay to your good judgment, with the exception of Miss Granger. You, Miss Granger may not submit more than four feet of essay. I am tired of wasting my time reviewing all of your inane meanderings that go beyond the assigned topic. The essay is due next Monday. Very well then, class is dismissed," he said, striding to the back of the classroom to open the door, ignoring the raised hands that shot into the air.

Ron was beside himself. "But we're playing the first match of the season," he whinged to Hermione.

"Then I suggest that you finish it before the match so you can enjoy your weekend properly," she replied primly as she stood outside the classroom, apparently waiting for Harry to come out of the room.

"Potter," Snape spat, "a word if you – in private," he said, closing and sealing the door.

"C'mon, Hermione, let's go to lunch," Ron urged, "I'm starving."

"Oh Ron," Hermione said. "You're always starving. Go on ahead, I need to talk to Harry for a minute – we'll catch up with you in the Great Hall."

"Suit yourself," he said, giving her a wink before he loped off.

~+~

"The Headmaster says that you were tutored in Occlumency this summer," Snape drawled.

Harry stood still, his hands behind his back. He nodded his head slightly.

"So arrogant, so much like your peacock of a father," Snape oozed. "Legilimens!"

~+~

Snape noted that the boy's mind was calmer, more orderly, but still undefended. He pried back the most perfunctory of barriers and began to search for a memory behind the barrier: it was a jowly man speaking on television outside of some building Snape had never seen before. He paused to analyze the memory when he heard and felt a click, similar to that of a door being closed. The memory vanished. Whatever the boy had done, he was no longer in Potter's mind, but appeared to be in deep darkness. Snape attempted to place his hands on his abdomen to take a cleansing breath, but wherever he was he appeared to no longer have control of his hands.

He felt disturbances in the air surrounding him and flinched. Whatever was in the air was hunting, hunting smaller creatures like himself. He fluttered his wings, pushing off into the air, hoping that he could make it to safety before the predators found him.

He'd successfully evaded the hunters, but somehow in all the confusion had ended up tangled; tangled in sticky cords that threatened to break his limbs as he pulled away. He once again attempted to calm himself, but he could feel vibrations travelling through the cords. Whatever animal had made the cords was coming for him; there was no escaping death tonight.

The web tore, dumping him into the darkness; he was falling, falling and falling some more. He finally landed on a rocky hillside in the darkness,



tumbling head over heels into the slope until he fell into the steaming, smouldering lake. The stench of the fumes was choking him; the lake was not filled with liquid, but instead consisted of slowly burning rocks. There was nowhere to seek shelter. By now he was in the middle of the lake, which stretched for miles in each direction. If he were able to make it back to the edge, it was doubtful that he could scramble up the steep edges of the surrounding hills – he was too weak. The heat from the rocks burned through the soles of his boots; the fumes scored his throat as he panted shallowly.

He walked endlessly, falling from time to time on the burning rocks, blistering his forearms and hands as he pushed himself up to walk erect again. Although he'd been walking for hours, he was no closer to the shore. A thin figure appeared on the shore in front of him.

"James," he croaked, "for the love of God, have mercy on me," he whispered.

He was in the classroom again, looking up into Potter's face, but the eyes were wrong, the face was James' cruel face, but Lily's kind eyes looked down on him as he reclined on the floor. He wasn't in Hell; he was back in his classroom at Hogwarts. He tried to push himself up, but his blistered hands sent spasms of pain up his arms. He noted that he no longer smelled the stench of burnt sulfur.

He was standing again, how, he wasn't sure. He pulled his robes around him. "Potter, I shall inform the Headmaster that your summer tutoring was – adequate," he said. "You may go now."

"Thank you sir," he replied. "Will you need assistance getting to Madam Pomfrey?"

"No, be gone!" he shouted.

"Yes sir, have a nice day," he said, opening the doorway wide. The accursed Granger brat was smiling at him from the hallway. It hurt to make a fist.

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"This isn't the way to the Great Hall," Harry protested.

"Humour me," Hermione whispered, looking both ways in the hallway before pushing open the door to an empty classroom. Harry followed her into the room, thinking back to the last time a friend pulled him into a classroom; it seemed like a lifetime ago. Hermione sealed the door with several charms, brushed her hair from her face and then turned towards Harry. "I want to know what's going on, Harry," she said earnestly. "You and Ginny both look like Hell, you about took the head off of several third-year students at the last D.A. meeting, and I never see you any more."

He didn't say anything for a moment. Hermione fidgeted in the silence.

"The prisoner pleads guilty. I haven't been sleeping very well; I'm doing my best to keep on top of these classes and I'm working on a study project outside of classes that's taking a lot of time," he said, avoiding her eyes as he spoke.

"What's the project?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, you know, the usual stuff," Harry said, breaking a smile, "surviving the times, defeating dark wizards, stuff like that."

"I've missed you," she said.

"I've missed you too," he replied.

"Ginny misses you too," she said timidly.

Harry turned towards the window, not looking at her as he spoke. "Did she ask you to talk to me?"

"Of course not, I'm worried about her is all," she said quietly. "What's up with you two, anyway?"

Harry fiddled with the collar of his robes as he looked out the window some more. He took a deep breath, sighing as he turned around. "I wish I knew – we're – I – blimey, I don't know what's going on. She's keeping me at arm's length right now. I invited her to breakfast on Sunday but she stood me up," he said grimly.

"Are you sure she knew about the date?" she asked.

"Reasonably sure," he answered.

Hermione fidgeted some more, bursting when she finally spoke. "I think she's pregnant, Harry," she said, wincing in anticipation.

Harry snorted, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. "Well, that's bloody unlikely," he said.

"What makes you so sure?" she asked.

"Well, I might not have been the most attentive of students when Professor Flitwick gave the third year health lectures, but I seem to remember that a witch and a wizard have to put their bits together to make a baby," Harry said wearily.

"And?" Hermione prompted.

"And Ginny and I haven't done that," he said, looking more tired than before as he turned again to look out the window.

"But," Hermione protested, cutting herself off.

"But what?" Harry asked over his shoulder.

"Are you sure?"

"That we haven't done that? Reasonably sure," he replied, making a wry smile. "I'm fairly certain that I'd remember something like that, but then again, I'm rubbish at this sort of thing anyways."

"You're not," Hermione protested.

"Yeah, right, that's why we're having this conversation, remember?"

"But her period's late!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry looked at his wristwatch, doing some figuring in his head. "She's not that late. I *don't* think she's pregnant, Hermione."

"Well, that's settled then," Hermione said, looking rather sheepish. "Oh, Harry, you must think I'm terrible."

"Nah, bossy, overly curious, meddlesome, but not terrible," he said with a smile.

"Oh, you!" she said, flicking her wand, producing a string of hornets that flew towards his face.

Harry flinched briefly before waving his open hand at the buzzing insects. They turned into coloured bubbles, glistening in the sunlight before they popped. "Very nice charm work, witch," he said.

"Thanks, yours wasn't too shabby either," Hermione replied, appearing grateful that the subject had changed

"What do you say we go get some lunch before Ron starts looking for us?" Harry asked.

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October 17, 1996

Dear Diary,

Well, with great fanfare, my visitor arrived during Herbology today. :( I've been packing supplies in my satchel for nearly a week, so at least I was prepared for that part of it, but the cramps about cut me in half when they came on me. Professor Sprout was cool about it when I asked to visit the loo, but I almost got snagged by a Venomous Tentacula on the way out – I guess I smelled different. Yech. After the visitor arrived, my headache let up a bit, but it hasn't gone away yet.

I saw Harry briefly at lunch today, the first public sighting of the ghost in over a week. He looks tired, but he seemed pretty happy as he was sitting at the table, joking and carrying on with Ron and Hermione. I would have braced him then and there, but I had just sat down with the girls in my revision group and I didn't want to make a scene leaving them to join the golden trio. In hindsight, I should have knocked him off of his chair and dragged him out of the Great Hall.

I saw him again, tonight at dinner. The evening owls arrived, including a spectacular bird I didn't recognize that alighted at the Ravenclaw table. Shortly after the owls departed, I heard a squeal from Cho Chang, who bolted from the Ravenclaw table like a Hippogriff with its tailfeathers on fire, darting straight to Harry. More particularly, onto Harry's lap where she gave him a particularly loud smack on the lips. I know that Harry has no feelings for Cho beyond friendship, but still, that sight set my guts on fire with jealousy. By the time I screwed up my courage to give that boy what for, he was gone.

On a side note, I can't hear Tk'lch any more. I can still sense that he's there, but the garbly distortion is too loud to make out anything that he says, so I've stopped talking to him. I'd go to Madam Pomfrey to check it out if I had any confidence that she could treat this any better than my everlasting headache. I also doubt that the standard healer curriculum covers the care and maintenance of Snow Dragon Pyr'gs anyway.

In a change of pace from the usual whinging and snivelling that has filled these pages in the past two weeks, I proudly report that today I transformed into my Animagus form briefly. Yeah, Ginny! I thought it was going to be painful, but to my pleasant surprise, it wasn't. To put all of this into perspective, I was only able to hold the form for a few seconds, but still, after all the non-progress of the last month, this is a wonderful breakthrough. Professor M is chuffed about it for sure. She says that once an Animagus (I'm an Animagus!) makes the first successful transformation, the subsequent changes come easier and quicker. To no one's surprise I'm a tabby cat – a red tabby cat. Blasted Weasley genes! Why couldn't I have lustrous black hair for once? Huh? Just once, okay?

Well, enough for now. My insane brother, also known as the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain, has called an early practice tomorrow morning because he's worried about our performance in Saturday's match against the snakes. Personally, I think we could play our reserves against the snakes and still win, but that's not my decision.

It's time to chase after Morphia and see if I can get something resembling a good night's sleep before tomorrow's practice.

TTFN

GMW

October 18, 1996

The red-haired tyrant, also known as the Weasley least likely to reproduce, has decreed that we will all be in bed by 9:00 p.m. tonight, even going so far as to co-opt Katie into doing a bed check in the girl's dormitories. I've half a mind to turn invisible when she drops by just to see what Ron would do if I were missing at bed check.

School was good today – I didn't have Defence Against the Dark Arts, which is always a good way to end the week. Snape's stopped looking me in the eye. Since the beginning of the year I've had my Occlumency shield running at full blast every time I know he's in the area. This hasn't stopped him from trying to get a look into my head. I don't know what is worse, men who try to look down my blouse or Legilimens who try to peek inside my head. Needless to say, this has inspired some pretty aggressive behaviour on my part, trying to lock eyes with him whenever I can. I draw the line at skin contact, however. I'm not going to voluntarily touch Snape.

Speaking of skin contact, or lack thereof, I finally caught Harry at practice today. After the usual drills and scrimmage, I naively thought that we were done. I landed next to Harry, who was drawing elaborate diagrams illustrating for Maddy the usual moves deployed by Slytherin, especially the moves they try against the Seekers. Maddy appeared to be completely captivated by Harry, so I was a bit surprised when she tugged on his sleeve, letting him know that I was waiting for him. Maddy disappeared when Harry turned to face me. I was all prepared to uncork a vicious rant when he smiled at me, causing me to forget the first half of the rant. Then he uttered three words that blew the rest of the rant out of the window: "I've missed you." I stood there speechless.

I hate my brother, I really do. It was at that moment that he decided that practice wasn't really done, and that the Beaters needed to run some more drills, which meant that the Chasers had to return to the sky. "After the game?" I mouthed to him. He nodded and walked off in the direction of the showers. By the time I finished the drills and got my own shower, Harry was long since gone, off to Potions if my memory holds true.

I had to run to make it to my next class on time, as Care of Magical Creatures is on the wrong side of the grounds from the Quidditch pitch.

New rant here. Of all the creatures that Hagrid has foisted off on us, I'd say it's a draw between the Blast Ended Skrewt and the Unicorns. Although I'm technically still a virgin, the fussy Unicorns have never cared much for me, which has given rise to all sorts of nasty rumours. Today was better than normal – they didn't run away, they didn't try to gore me, and in record time, I had my Unicorn under control. I didn't try to get it to fall asleep in my lap while I was sweetly singing, unlike certain classmates of mine in another house. Who knew that Luna had such rapport with Unicorns?

Well, Katie has informed me in no uncertain terms that I need to draw this diary entry to a close if I'm to make my 9:00 p.m. curfew. Tomorrow night, hopefully, I'll write about the humiliation of the snakes, unless, of course, I'm out breaking curfew with the ghost.

TTFN

GMW

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Hermione rose an hour earlier than was her normal practice for Saturdays. She carefully packed her Dyson's bag and padded off to the Prefect's bathroom, running through her normal ablutions before indulging in a ten-minute soak in the monstrous sized bathtub. After towelling off, she opened the package that Mum had sent that week. It was only knickers and a bra, but when she put them on she felt more confident, which is why Mum sent them in the first place. Today's makeup was very subtle eyeliner followed by an even more subtle blush before she dressed in her usual weekend wear: trainers, jeans and a long sleeved blouse. After dithering before the mirror for a minute, she left the Prefect's bathroom with the top two buttons of her blouse unbuttoned. It wasn't enough to show any cleavage, but it did show off the lean lines of her neck nicely, just as Mum said it would.

A brisk walk later she was back in her favourite chair, reading a trashy novel, her reward for being caught up on her studies. She didn't have long to wait before Ron arrived, crackling with nervous energy. He walked down the stairs with his playbook open in front of him. Not surprisingly, he didn't see Hermione standing in front of him until he ran into her.

"It's time to stop cramming, Ron; you know that playbook by heart," she said, deliberately pitching her voice just a little lower than normal.

"What? Are you mental? Today's the match, Hermione!" he said indignantly.

"Yes, today's the match," she said, locking his eyes with her own. "Today's the day that you're going to humiliate Slytherin," she said, pulling the playbook from his grasp and tossing it lightly into her bag. "You are the best Keeper in this school, Ron Weasley, and probably the best captain that Gryffindor has seen since Charlie held the job," she said, placing one hand flat on his chest. She ran her free hand up his arm until it was playing with the hairs on the back of his neck, noting with some satisfaction that he shivered slightly when she did so. "You're not playing today to show what a fabulous Keeper you are, or what a brilliant captain you are, or even to humiliate the ferret," she said in a husky tone.

"I'm not?" he asked incredulously.

"No, you're not. You're winning today's game for me," she said, pulling his head down to hers.

Half an hour later a calm, cool Captain addressed the regulars and the reserves of the Gryffindor team while a smirking Hermione Granger began to pen a quick note home.

Dear Mum,

You were right. What would I do without your advice?

Hermione had carefully prepared for this game. She'd read *Quidditch Through the Ages*, carefully jotted notes in the margins of her own copy of the Official Rules, and had even read through the playbook that Ron had carefully and lovingly assembled. George Weasley had sent her a prototype pair of Omnioculars which had an earpiece that resembled an extendable ear, allowing her to hear the action down on the pitch as if it were taking place right next to her. She tried to tell herself that it was merely trying to gain a deeper understanding of Wizarding culture, but even Pavarti could see through that flimsy rationale. She was doing all this because of Ron.

It was a bright crisp day – a bit chilly for the spectators, but just right for the players in their heavy Quidditch uniforms. She wrapped her scarf around her neck and stood to cheer loudly when Ron violently blocked a goal, sending the Quaffle back with such force that the Slytherin Chaser, a nondescript fifth-year girl playing for the first time, narrowly avoided falling off of her broom. The Quaffle was captured by a whooping Ginny, who in turn passed it to one of her sister Chasers, ratcheting up the score for Gryffindor.

Ron was playing at the top of his game; for the first forty minutes Slytherin was unable to score at all. The Slytherin Keeper, however, was not so lucky. From time to time Hermione would find Harry with the Ominoculars, trying to read from his posture or expression whether he was merely enjoying flying on such a fine day, or whether he'd seen the snitch. Thus far, it appeared that he was just having a good fly.

Slytherin called a quick time-out, the Captain spending most of his time shouting at the regular team members while angrily gesticulating. Hermione tuned her Omnioculars to the huddle in time to hear him command the Beaters to "go after the Chasers, especially the red-head." After that, Slytherin pretty much abandoned its offensive game in favour of a particularly rough defensive game that appeared to be focused on maiming the Chasers. Hermione noted with satisfaction that Ron called out a particular play to neutralize such a strategy while gaining a few more goals against Slytherin. The score was so lopsided now that if Malfoy caught the snitch, Slytherin would still lose the game.

Harry, she noted with some satisfaction, began to run interference for the Chasers by flying intersecting routes with the Slytherin Beaters, a somewhat dangerous strategy, given the propensity of all Beaters to swing wildly at objects appearing in their peripheral vision. The next forty minutes was a game of attrition; the graceful Gryffindor Chasers against increasingly physical Slytherin Beaters. Harry broke off from hazing the larger of the two Beaters, diving to a point in mid-pitch with Malfoy following a half-length behind. Hermione quickly scanned the field, starting with Ron at one end of the field, catching sight of Ginny who had just gained possession of the Quaffle from an angry Slytherin Chaser. Ginny began to sprint towards the other goal when Fletcher, the larger of the Slytherin Beaters sent a Bludger towards her back. Hermione watched in mute horror as the Bludger closed in on an intercept course with the back of her head. A moment before impact, Hermione's field of view in the Omniocular was blocked as Harry suddenly appeared, blocking the Bludger with his chest. She didn't need the audio function of the Omniocular to hear the ribs cracking. Harry spiralled to a controlled crash while Ginny continued her sprint to the goal. Ron called a time-out, gathering the team to him, regulars and reserves. Madam Pomfrey had Harry in a stretcher, casting several charms on the visible sunken area of his chest before moving him to the sidelines. Satisfied that Harry's immediate needs were being cared for, Hermione swung the Omnioculars to the Gryffindor huddle, catching the screaming match between Ron and his sister on the field.

"He's hurt, Ron, put in my reserve so I can go with him to the hospital," Ginny said heatedly.

"Not a chance, Ginny. I'm willing to play with a reserve Seeker, but I still need you!" Ron shouted.

"Bollocks! Harry needs me now!" Ginny retorted.

"Harry's unconscious – he won't know you're there for hours, but he will know that you left your position. What would Harry want?" Ron shouted.

"He would want me to do my bleeding duty!" Ginny shouted back, her face a mask of rage.

"Good, get back on that broom. After we've beaten the snakes I'll make sure that you're the first one in the Hospital wing," Ron said.

"I hate you Ron!" Ginny shouted, angrily throttling her broom handle.

"I love you too, sis," Ron said, swirling his hand to indicate that the reserves should return to the bench and the regular players, minus a substitution or two, were to return to the air.

Hermione was caught with a conflict of emotions – she sympathized with Ginny, admiring her devotion to the game when she knew that she wanted to be at Harry's side; she admired Ron's handling of the situation – objectively Harry was probably going to be unconscious for hours to allow Madam Pomfrey time to repair bones and tissues; on top of all of this, she was worried for Harry.

The game continued – substitutions were made and the players returned to the air. The Gryffindor team was shaken, but determined. Madison was flying seeker, looking for all the world like a pint-sized echo of Harry, unruly black hair flapping in the wind as she buzzed the Slytherin Beaters and then forced their Chasers off course, fainting right and left after non-existent Snitches. In the last forty minutes of the game, Slytherin finally managed to score, leaving the final score when Madison found the Snitch from under a surprised Draco Malfoy at 350 to 20.

The pitch was awash with moving, screaming bodies. Hermione moved in the opposite direction through the stands, heading not out onto the field with her jubilant housemates, but towards the exit that would lead her to the castle, and to the Hospital wing. She noted with no surprise that well ahead of her ran a small, scarlet-robed figure with flaming red hair.

A stitch in her side forced her to slow down; by the time Hermione passed the entryway to the Hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey was nowhere to be found. Glancing a second time about the hallway, she noticed Professor Dumbledore sitting quietly on a bench opposite the door leading into the room that Harry had irreverently dubbed "the Harry room." He held one finger to his lips as he beckoned to her with his free hand.

Ginny's voice came blasting out into the hallway. "What were you thinking?" she screamed. If Harry was conscious, he didn't answer. Hermione heard a crashing sound followed by a muffled "Damn! That hurt!" again in Ginny's voice. Albus Dumbledore stood and traced an oval on the wall,

tapping the space within the oval with his wand. The crack between transparent as glass, affording them a excellent view of the scene within Harry's hospital room. "I thought I meant something to you," she said in a loud voice. Hermione peered around Dumbledore to see Harry, propped up on a hospital bed, chest wrapped in fabric, his ribcage still ominously pushed in on one side. Ginny's lips quivered as she formed her words, her hands flailing in the air. "You – you said I was the best thing that ever happened in your life, but then you toss me aside like a dirty tissue. It hurts, Harry, it hurts when we are apart. I haven't been eating – can you believe that? My sleeping's been worth nothing, I've had a blasted headache for two weeks and my period was three days late." Ginny paced up and down the length of his bed, pushing the hair out of her face as she turned. "You never write me, I never see you for meals, you're always off doing something, Merlin knows what it may be. Why, Harry, why? Why won't you see me? Why won't you talk to me? Why won't you touch me?" she shouted as she stood over him. Dumbledore watched with rapt interest, tugging on his beard. "I won't be ignored, do you hear me Harry? I won't be ignored!" she screamed as she drew back her hand and slapped his face.

The crack of her hand sounded like a tree limb snapping in half. Hermione jumped up, attempting to bolt into the room, only to find Dumbledore's surprisingly strong fingers on her arms. "She's going to hurt him," she whispered loudly.

"You needn't whisper, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said calmly. "The room is charmed so that sound travels out, but no sound travels in – a charm that Madam Pomfrey is most fond of if I recall correctly. As to Miss Weasley hurting Mister Potter, while possible, that is not very likely," he said, turning so that both of them faced the charmed wall.

Ginny was draped over Harry's still form on the bed, weeping loudly as she stroked his face with her fingers, her back heaving from time to time as an enormous sob escaped from her small frame. A sweet melody began to waft into the hallway, a song of incredibly sweet and sad. A strain of harmony joined in, two voices calling and answering, waxing and waning in volume. "Is Fawkes here, Professor Dumbledore?" Hermione asked.

"In a manner of speaking, yes; I was most curious to see how this situation would resolve itself. Now that it has, I now find my curiosity waning to naught," Dumbledore said, tapping the charmed spot on the wall until it was once again opaque. "I believe it is time that I escorted you back to Gryffindor Tower, Miss Granger, where another Weasley has need of you. I shall then return to the Hospital wing, where, with any luck at all, I will be able to evict Miss Weasley from Mister Potter's bed before she is discovered by Madam Pomfrey," Dumbledore said with the quickest of winks, offering his arm as he turned to lead them away.

"Professor, do you know what's been going on between Harry and Ginny these past few weeks?" Hermione asked.

"Not in detail, but I know what is going on at the present, which is sufficient information for the moment," he answered. "Changing the subject, I note with some satisfaction that Gryffindor's Keeper played especially well. Do you have any explanation for that, Miss Granger?"

"Not a clue," Hermione said with a giggle.

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When Madam Pomfrey returned from London that evening, she found her patient sleeping soundly in his bed, the bone-healing potions having finally taken hold. The curious thing was the small red tabby cat that was stretched across his chest, asleep under a protective hand. She wasn't aware that Mr. Potter had a second pet, but this one seemed quite devoted to him, going so far as to seek him out when he was in the Hospital wing. She made several notes in her chart and then charmed the doors shut for the night.

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## Epilogue

A firstie Hufflepuff was waiting outside the pitch as practice broke up. She solemnly approached and handed him a note written in a familiar thin hand on pearl grey parchment. Harry nodded at the firstie who turned on her heel and disappeared into the crowd of Gryffindor team members who were leaving the pitch and Ravenclaw players who were just arriving. He caught Ginny's eye and then looked down at the note. She'd received her own notes, so without drawing attention to the fact that she abruptly shut down a conversation, she withdrew from a catty discussion she was having with one of her sister Chasers about the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend and sidled up alongside her mate as he walked towards the castle.

"What's up with the old man?" Ginny asked irreverently.

"Oh, I'm doing just fine," Harry replied, tucking the note into his pocket.

"Not you! The other old man," she exclaimed as she attempted to slip her hand into the pocket.

"If you want to hold hands, love, all you have to do is ask," Harry said, extracting her hand from his pocket.

"Tuh! Like I'm not getting enough contact these days," she said, trying to *Accio* the note from his pocket using her non-dominant hand and a bit of wandless magic. Harry caught the note as it rocketed out of his pocket. There were days that it was not good to be the second-best Seeker at the school.

Ginny felt an odd pressure on her ears as Harry extended a silent space about them as they walked. "Dumbledore wants us to come up to the Hospital wing post haste, but clearly indicates that no one is hurt. Will that satisfy the curious cat?" he asked, rubbing his thumb between the knuckles on the back of her hand.

"Might," she said impishly, sticking her tongue out at him as she tossed her bag at him. Catching the bag, he slung it over one shoulder along with his own bag, smiling as he saw the hindquarters of a red tabby sprinting up the trail to the castle. The transformation was becoming more effortless as she gained experience. The biggest hurdle was learning how to transfigure clothes along with the Animagus shape. A nine pound tabby cat has no use for five pounds of school uniform and shoes, while a newly transformed girl under most circumstances desperately wants those same clothes at the end of the transformation cycle. Ginny called her animal form "Tick-tock" and had crafted a collar for the cat bearing a little charm that

said "My name is Tick-tock and I belong to Harry Potter." The collar stored the transfigured clothes within its plaited strands.

As Harry reached the hallway leading to the Hospital wing, the now familiar tabby pranced across his path, rubbing alongside his ankle. In a practiced flash, Ginny was wrapped around him, kissing him below his ear. "It's Tonks and Lupin and Dumbledore," she reported as she pulled away from him. Neither of them liked surprises.

Opting for a direct approach, Harry pushed the door open, kissing Tonks on the cheek before grabbing Uncle Moony in an embrace.

"Harry, we got him," Lupin said hoarsely.

"Wormtail?" he asked incredulously.

"Almost as good, we got Fenir Grayback," Lupin said with some satisfaction.

"The dog that got you?" Harry asked.

Lupin nodded. "The same; this should break the back of Voldemort's efforts to recruit among my kind," he said with some satisfaction.

"Excellent! So, how long do you have?" Ginny asked, coming alongside Harry.

"Funny you should mention that," Lupin said with a brief smile. "I think we have time for dinner, assuming that you and your lady are willing to put us up at *Chez Dobby*."

"*But of course*," Ginny said in a thick ersatz French accent.

"I, alas, must content myself to dining at the head table tonight," Dumbledore said. "Once again, thank you for your excellent team work."

Tonks nodded, blushing slightly while Lupin bowed.

"So, let me look at you two," Tonks said loudly. "No bruises or obvious scratch marks, you two seem to be getting along. Are you going to give Auntie Tonks the full story or do I have to drag it out of your girlfriend when we visit the loo?"

"I suspect that you'll interrogate her fully no matter how forthcoming Harry is over dinner," Lupin said wryly.

"True, all too true," Tonks said, shaking her hair as she lengthened it, colouring it a bright tomato red. "Let's go eat."

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Over soup, Moony told the tale of how he'd been tracking Fenir for a fortnight, acting on the last day, calling in his coordinates on a Muggle telephone after securing the area with a stout Anti-Apparation ward. Ginny noticed that from time to time Tonks would answer questions posed to Moony or complete his sentences when he paused to think of the right word. This was behaviour that she normally associated with the twins, but, come to think of it, she'd seen her parents do the same thing. She smiled inwardly, wondering if she'd ever start doing this with Harry.

As the main course was served a silence came over the group that was punctuated only by the clatter of knives and forks on plates and muttered "can you pass the . . ." and "More?" as serving dishes were passed back and forth. Tonks broke the silence as she stabbed her last piece of asparagus (delightfully out of season), bringing it up to her lipstick-decorated mouth. "You realize, of course, that once you get out of here you won't be eating like this, don't you?" she asked, looking at Ginny and Harry.

Ginny looked at Harry thoughtfully. "Oh, I don't know, Tonks," she said, wiping her mouth with her napkin. "Dobby has talked to me plenty of times about following after Harry once he leaves Hogwarts."

Tonks played with her hair, absentmindedly putting it back in an elastic that she'd conjured on the spot. "So, how long were the two of you not talking?" she said boldly, fixing them with a firm look.

"More accurately," Ginny replied, "how long were we not touching?"

"About two weeks," Harry said, looking into the bottom of his coffee cup.

"And how long before you started noticing the effects?" Moony asked.

"About two, three days," Ginny replied. "I got a headache that just wouldn't go away, then my internal magic started going wonky."

"Neither one of you noticed the symptoms?" Moony asked in amazement.

"In a word, no," Harry said, looking from Ginny to Tonks to Moony. "You know, Molly knows, Dumbledore knows, but you were out in the field, Dumbledore was abroad and Molly was back at the Burrow. Everyone around us, including us, thought that we were just having a spat."

"Actually, Molly was out in the field too," Tonks said, "but you never heard that from me," she said with a smile. "Are the three of you going to enlighten me as to what you're talking about?"

Moony cleared his throat. "Abelard warned us of a side effect coming from the bond that Ginny and Harry share. Until they're actually, uh, married, they can't go very long without touching one another – if they do, they get sick."

Tonks face was screwed into a curious expression. "Let me get this straight – the two of them are bonded, but it's not quite stable until they are

*married*, and until then they have to keep touching or they'll get sick?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "That's about it," he replied.

"So, why aren't you *married* already?" she asked.

"Well," Ginny began, "there's the slight problem that he hasn't asked me yet, compounded by the fact that for the moment, both of us are still minors."

"Well, certainly it's not a *ceremony* that the magic is looking for is it?" Tonks asked. "This has something to do with lots of bare skin between the sheets?"

"Uh," Harry began, looking for the entire world like a deer facing the headlights of an oncoming lorry. "Yeah," Ginny answered, her ears turning red.

"So?" Tonks asked rhetorically. "I don't see the problem here."

Moony stifled a guffaw. "Dora, I think you're embarrassing them to death. Do you remember your Care of Magical Creatures section on Dragons?"

"A bit, why?" Tonks asked.

"Dragons conceive when they mate," Moony said.

"But Harry and Ginny aren't dragons!" Tonks protested.

"Biologically, no, but they have a great deal of dragon magic operating in their systems. When my nose is particularly acute towards the full moon, they don't smell like humans at all, they have a very unique dragon-flavoured scent to them," Moony said.

"You never told me that," Ginny protested, looking at Harry.

"Told you what?" Harry asked.

"The near certainty of having a baby part," Ginny pouted.

"If I remember correctly, the last time we came anywhere close to discussing this topic in private, we were interrupted," Harry said tersely.

"That changes things," Ginny said, nodding calmly.

"I would hope so," Harry said.

"Yeah, that means I'll have to wait until, what, October of seventh year if I don't want to be big as a barn when I'm sitting for my N.E.W.T.s," she said, smiling as she sipped some coffee.

"Am I to assume," Tonks said with some delight, "that he's making you wait until marriage?"

"Indeed," Ginny answered, "terribly cruel of him, not to mention old-fashioned."

"I hate to wait," Tonks said knowingly.

"Me too, but I've waited five years for him to notice me, so I'm used to it by now," Ginny said. "So, until then, I guess I just have to make do by sleeping with him."

Moony began to cough, while Tonks sprayed the table with the coffee that she'd previously been sipping. "I beg your pardon," Moony said.

"You know, bed, pillow, sleep, eight hours of rest and all that?" she said with a wicked grin. She pushed away from the table, stood alongside Harry and blinked. During the blink she shrank in size, transforming on the fly into her Animagus form. The red tabby cat blinked knowingly at Tonks and Moony before jumping lightly onto Harry's lap where she began to delicately lick the heel of her right rear leg before curling up.

"Very impressive," Moony said.

"Indeed," Tonks echoed. "What do you call her, Harry?"

"Tick-tock, which is both a play on the name of her dragon guardian and an allusion to her distinctive purr as she puts herself to sleep," Harry said. "It's quite hypnotic, really."

"Have your roommates figured it out yet?" Moony asked.

"Well, Seamus, Dean and Neville just think that I picked up a cat on the last Hogsmeade weekend. I think Ron knows, but we haven't had a chance to talk about it yet. He seems very interested in checking whether or not my curtains are closed at night," Harry said.

"I imagine," Tonks said.

"Damn, she's asleep," Harry muttered.

"That's a problem?" Moony asked.

"Yeah, if she sleeps now, she'll be up chasing after things all night," Harry said.

"Poor dear," Tonks crooned "perhaps I can conjure up some yarn for you before I leave."

As they laughed, the red tabby cat opened one eye and then glared at them all with two blinking eyes.

"Oops, we're in for it now," Harry said.

"You don't know the half of it," Moony said, reaching for the dessert cart.

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Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com - write to me, I write back



## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year A favour to ask

Hermione almost made it to the Great Hall when a small yellow bird came out of nowhere and startled her. Only the fact that she wasn't quite awake yet stopped her from screaming at the surprise. The bird circled around her and then alighted in her hand, where it dissolved in a gritty puff of powder, leaving a small slip of parchment in its place.

Join me in the kitchens at *Chez Dobby* – G

Hermione smiled. She'd heard of the private dining room from Ginny, but never had an invitation before. Slinging the large cloth purse that doubled as her casual book bag over her shoulder, she walked away from the Great Hall to the stairwell that would lead her to the lower levels of the castle. She had a breakfast date.

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"That was fabulous," Hermione said, wiping up the last of the whipped cream and raspberry syrup from her plate with one of Dobby's multi-grain crepes. "So, to what do I owe this honour?"

Ginny stirred her coffee clockwise and then counterclockwise.

"I need a favour," she said.

Hermione smiled. "If it's not blatantly illegal and it's within my power, of course," she said.

"Don't be hasty, you haven't heard what I want yet," Ginny cautioned.

"So, tell me already," Hermione said, pouring herself a cup of tea.

"I need you to keep Crookshanks in tonight and tomorrow night," Ginny said.

"Uh, sure," Hermione said. "May I ask why?"

"I was afraid that you were going to ask why," Ginny said. She gulped down some coffee, and pulled a face when she realized that she'd stirred and stirred, but never added any sugar. "Uh, yeah. You know where I've been sleeping recently?"

"Tuh! Of course – you've been sleeping with Harry, or more accurately, Tick-tock's been sleeping with Harry. I think it's sweet, actually," Hermione said, spooning some sugar into Ginny's cup.

"Thanks," Ginny said distractedly.

"Don't mention it, but what's that have to do with Crookshanks?" Hermione asked.

"Good Lord, you *are* going to make me spell it out, aren't you?" Ginny asked crossly. "What time of month does my period come due?"

"On the new moon, it has for years," Hermione said.

"Which means that I ovulate when?" Ginny asked.

"On the full moon," Hermione said. Her face went blank for a moment while her exceptionally bright mind pulled the facts together. "Goodness, you're going to be in heat this weekend!" she exclaimed.

Ginny put her finger on her nose. "Right on the mark, five points to Gryffindor," she said.

"What's it like?" Hermione asked.

"Actually, it's a bit like having the flu, except my dreams are filled with tomcats," Ginny said.

"Aren't there any other cats in the castle?" Hermione asked.

"There are lots of cats in the castle, but only one un-neutered male in Gryffindor tower. I'd really rather have my first time be with Harry rather than your familiar," Ginny said.

"So you haven't -- with Harry that is," Hermione said with a slight look of bewilderment.

"I haven't with *anyone*, human or feline," Ginny replied.

"Oh," Hermione said, struck silent for a moment. "Well then, I can certainly keep him restrained in my room – there's a charm for that you know. I think I also owe you an apology."

"Because you assumed that Harry and I have been going at it like frenzied Kneazles?" Ginny asked, breaking into a smile.

"In a word, yes," Hermione said, her ears turning red.

"Actually, that longing is a lot better now that I'm sleeping with him almost every night."

"I have noticed that the two of you seem to have calmed down a bit," Hermione said carefully.

"I'm bonded with Harry. I need to touch him or I get sick, but we're not doing *that* yet. It's rather complicated. I envy the normality of your relationship, even if it is with my brother," Ginny said.

"So, tonight and tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yeah, thanks," Ginny replied.

"You're welcome," Hermione said, carrying her dishes to the serving cupboard. "Ginny?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"If Crookshanks gets out, can I have my pick of the kittens?"

"I am so not going there," Ginny replied, pushing the door open. "No way, no how."

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Wade in the water

Brushing your hair at the end of the day has a number of practical benefits. The truly practical benefit is that after brushing it out, you can then braid your hair and secure said braid with an elastic band, thereby insuring that it will not be a complete nest of niffers in the morning. The less tangible benefit was the opportunity it provides for reflecting on the day, the week, or even on the past month.

Looking around her room, Ginny saw the ribbon she'd worn in her hair at the All-Hallows Eve ball, an event that provided a most harmonious ending to an otherwise wretched month. Other than the fact that her brother and future sister-in-law had their row *before* the ball rather than after, the ball itself had few surprises. As to the row, Harry had intervened with Ron, prompting the Weasley speed record for heart-felt apologies, which diffused what otherwise would have been a monumentally ugly scene.

Harry, of course, had looked smashing in his new robes. Ginny's gown had been just about perfect; it was cut high enough in the front to be modest, low enough in the back to let her breathe, with a skirt full enough to twirl nicely. The fact that the back also nicely showed off her "tattoo," prompting post-ball gossip as to whether or not Harry had a matching mark, was simply a bonus. The male members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team were, to a man, singularly unhelpful in confirming or denying the rumoured tattoo.

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Before the ball, Ginny's roommates were pulling their collective hair in frustration; making inquiries as to who was still available and who was newly available. Several new relationships were struck as the event approached, and a few older relationships floundered. June Thackeray, a member of her study group, stayed behind after a revision session to ask Ginny about her placid calm when most of the girls in the castle were atwitter.

"How can you be so calm about the ball?" she asked in exasperation. "You and Harry aren't *fighting* at all!"

Ginny paused before answering. "I guess we just got all that stuff out of the way over the summer," she replied.

"What? When?" June asked.

"Harry asked me to the ball at the beginning of August, just after his birthday," Ginny explained. "By the end of August we'd already had our first fight about money, because Harry wanted to pay for my gown, and I didn't want to take charity."

"How did *that* work out?" June asked, surprised that Ginny was sharing anything at all about her most-coveted boyfriend.

"We had our spat just before the break-in at Gringotts. The prospect of being killed by monsters or having our souls sucked out by Dementors rather put our problems in perspective. Ever since, I've been fairly certain that this thing with Harry is going to be long term, so I guess I'm a little more relaxed than a lot of the girls," Ginny explained.

"You're *that* certain?" June asked.

Ginny smirked. "Yeah, pretty certain – a boy who thinks about you before lighting off a whopper Patronus isn't likely to dump you for a curvier model next week," she said.

One hour and a good cry later, June left Ginny's room feeling a bit better about life in general and her on-again off-again relationship with the Keeper for the Hufflepuff Quidditch team.

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It was December and Ginny had a secret, which prompted a nice warm feeling in her heart. She knew it was a weakness, having been devastated by secret-keeping when she was barely eleven years old, but she reckoned that her enjoyment of today's secret was part of the long-term healing. To be precise, she had several secrets: she'd located the perfect Christmas gift for Harry; she was going to go to lunch, alone, with Jasmine when her summertime tutor was in town this weekend on Abelard's business, and she was going to be baptized the following weekend, just before Christmas holidays. All of these secrets had natural expiration dates, but the anticipation of releasing the secrets along with the present heady pleasure of being one of the few with the knowledge was delicious. She looked up from her studies, pulling her watch from her pocket, and concluded that she'd done enough damage for one afternoon. If she carefully routed her way back to the tower, she might be able to steal a kiss from her boyfriend before Quidditch practice; goodness knows she needed and deserved one.

The physical side of their relationship, after being the focus of a lot of angst and frustration over the past four months, had finally stabilized. Mum had warned her years ago that the fizz of feelings lasted about two years or so, after which you'd best be good friends with your mate or be ready to call it quits. She'd been good friends with Harry before they plunged into romance in the most awkward style possible, so she figured that they'd be fine when the fizz evaporated, as the life-long nature of the bond that they shared made calling it quits a most impractical option. Knowing that she was going to be with him every night, albeit in her Animagus form of Tick-tock, took some of the power out of the longing she'd experienced

earlier; it's not like she was bored with him or anything, quite the opposite, it's just that the longing, the desire to connect to him in every way possible, was not the overpowering force it was when they first were bonded.

There was a certain frustration in navigating these waters, the largest one being that she had no-one to talk to about most of the practical issues. Mum was out, as she'd no doubt go spare if she were to hear about her longings. Hermione could understand in an intellectual way, of course, but that witch's relationship with her brother was much different, and of course wasn't complicated by the overlay of dragon magic that coloured everything. Father Harper was most helpful, having led the weekly bible study she attended before services on Saturday nights, but while he did have some insight into the problems of dragon magic, he was, after all, a celibate male. Notwithstanding these limitations, he'd been most helpful, having enthusiastically approved the Tick-tock solution the first time he'd heard it. He'd suggested that she be mentored by one of the older women in the parish, specifically the witch who ran the Apothecary in Hogsmeade, but that wouldn't start until after the holidays. Until then, she did what she could with what she had at hand, a patchwork of conversations and snippets of advice from Tonks, Hermione and Luna.

The shortest way to the tower took her outside the castle, which, in early December, was not a prospect to be lightly entertained. A stiff wind blasted her as she slipped out the door, reminding her that her hair was loose.

When she slipped back into the castle and then into Gryffindor tower, she was rosy cheeked and slightly out of breath, but the effort was worth it. As she passed through the portrait hole she saw Harry walking down the stairs from the boy's dormitory.

"Going the wrong way, aren't you? Practice is that way," he said helpfully.

"I needed to drop my books off," she explained, thankful when he closed the distance between them. She wrapped her arms around him, breathing in his scent. She was midway through a most rewarding kiss when he pulled away.

"Sweet Merlin! Your hands are cold," he said. While they'd been kissing she'd slipped her hands inside the back of his shirt. "Ever hear of warming charms?" he asked peevishly, casting one on the offending hands without asking. Pulling his wand out, he drew a circle over her book bag, which disappeared.

"Where did it go?" she asked.

"If I did it right, up to your room," he answered.

"And if you did it wrong?"

"Up to *my* room. I believe you know the way."

He summoned her cloak from her room, casting a warming charm onto it on the fly as it came down the stairs like an oversized falcon. He waited for her by the portrait hole, giving her the chance to pass through the door first. When he joined her on the other side, he put his hands in his pockets and held an elbow out to her to allow her the opportunity to slip her hand into the crook of his arm. The comfort of this everyday gesture was immense, better than flowers or poetry or candlelit dinners. She felt the urge to bubble over with happiness and let one or two of the secrets loose, but she restrained herself; good secrets were worth waiting for.

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There were procedures that applied to students for being released from the grounds of Hogwarts on a day that wasn't a Hogsmeade weekend – today's expedition followed none of them. Ginny waited in a small courtyard in the castle that was visible only from the Headmaster's office, waiting for the familiar tingling she knew that preceded the appearance of Abelard's portal. The golden door shimmered into view and then opened, releasing a damp breeze into the courtyard. A small hand pushed the door open, revealing the most penetrating brown eyes Ginny had ever known.

"Long time no see," Jasmine said, smiling broadly as she stood aside to allow Abelard to shuffle into the courtyard. She was dressed in a shimmering grey version of the pants and tunic she'd worn to Harry's birthday party last summer. Dumbledore opened one of the two doorways into the courtyard and the two elderly wizards walked into the castle, slowly, Abelard leaning on his four-footed cane.

"I suspect that this is going to take a while," Jasmine said. "Ready for lunch?"

"Sure," Ginny replied. "You want to go into Hogsmeade and eat at the Three Broomsticks?"

"With all due respect to Madam Rosmerta," Jasmine began, "I wouldn't feed *Rosie* at the Three Broomsticks. Let's go to Glasgow. I know some truly lovely places to eat there, my treat."

"Isn't that kind of far away?" Ginny asked.

"Stuff and nonsense, you're not even going to step outside the castle," Jasmine said, placing her hand on the squiggle shaped handle to the portal.

"You're on, but we flip a coin to see who pays," Ginny said.

Jasmine winked and then walked through the portal. "So how *is* short, dark and handsome?" she asked over her shoulder.

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Lunch had been grand; they'd swapped stories as they ate their way through a delicious meal of Indian food. Ginny wasn't sure what she thought of chicken that was coloured fluorescent orange, but once she got past the colour, it was delicious.

Ginny recounted the Quidditch season along with some of her more notorious escapades with Harry, at least those that were fit to share. Jasmine replied with stories from prior employers, an Abelard story from the most recent trip to Japan, and a particularly poignant story about Lily Evans from Jasmine's childhood. Ginny knew that she needed to treat this last treasure with caution – losing his parents was the one wound that would never really heal over for Harry. When they returned to school, Jasmine talked Ginny into flying on the pitch, tossing an improvised Quaffle between them. They took turns playing Chaser and Keeper, forgetting to keep score. After twenty minutes, Ron and Harry joined them on the pitch. Ron took the Keeper position, allowing Ginny, Jasmine and Harry to fly proper Chaser formations, with Harry as the acknowledged weak link in the pickup team. They finished an hour later, wind-tossed and happy. All in all, Ginny thought it was an almost perfect day.

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The rest of the weekend progressed in its normal cycle, church services on Saturday night, lie-in on Sunday morning (the only evening Tick-tock *didn't* sleep with Harry was Saturday, to allow for the sacred lie-in) followed by a late brunch with Harry. Sunday faded inexorably into Monday, allowing Ginny to push through her Herbology project and finally tackle an Arithmancy paper that she'd postponed. She finished the paper, but felt the need to check a certain section against a reference found only in the library, so feeling ever so slightly that she was channelling the study habits of her best female friend, she packed her bag for an expedition to the stacks. The stated reference allowed her to catch an arithmetic error, which gave her a mixed feeling of satisfaction – satisfaction that she'd caught the error mixed with a mild annoyance that she'd made the error in the first place. Clapping that book shut made a satisfying sound; she was now totally caught up. She looked up and saw that Daphne Greengrass was trying to catch her eye.

"So is it true?" she asked as she plopped her books on Ginny's table.

"Is what true?" Ginny replied with a mild dread.

"That you're getting baptized next Saturday," Daphne said.

"Shh," Ginny replied, finger to her lips. "Yes, it's true, but Harry doesn't know yet," she cautioned.

"Why the secrecy? When were you planning on letting him know?"

"Why? Because I wrestled for the longest while over whether I was doing this for me, because I really believe in Jesus, or if I was doing this as part of my very long list of duties as Harry's girlfriend. I plan on telling Harry later this week," Ginny answered.

"Is it really going to be in the river?" Daphne asked.

"Unless it's frozen over," Ginny replied.

"Lucky you," Daphne said.

"Yup, that's why God gave us waterproof warming charms, I reckon," Ginny said stoically.

"I'm really glad that Father Harper is holding to the old ways – I think it's a lot more meaningful. You do know that you had the choice of doing it in the river and doing it by the font inside the Hooper chapel?" Daphne asked.

"Yeah, I like the older form better – keeps the riff-raff away," Ginny said.

"More truth to that than you'd imagine. The old English custom was to postpone baptisms until Pentecost Sunday to allow the water to warm up. The old name for Pentecost is *Whitsunday*, for the white baptismal robes that would be worn for the occasion," Daphne said.

"Well, aren't you the fountain of historical information? I suppose you've been waiting for a conversation where you could slip that tid-bit into play," Ginny said with a smirk.

"Nah, not really. I had to do a paper on baptism as part of my vocational discernment process," Daphne answered.

"The nuns?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, 'the nuns,' the Daughters of Divine Compassion, or as we call them – dod-see."

"Well, better *dodsee* than *dodgy* I guess," Ginny said. "Well, we're still doing the white robe thing. I had to do my own paper for Father Harper on why I wanted to be baptized."

"So why *are* you doing it?" Daphne asked.

"You know, I wrestled with that for a long while. Aside from my Mum's brothers, who died in the first war, there haven't been many believers in my family. When I started going out with Harry, going to church was part of the package, because it was something that Remus and Harry could do together on weekends," Ginny said, winding up into her rapid-fire delivery mode. "So I started tagging along, which is where I first met you, if you remember. The funny thing about it all is that going to church and hearing the bible read aloud and participating in the services was like going to a foreign country and finding out it was – *home* all along. I mean, there's funny words like *verger* and *stoup* and *genuflect*, but the heart of it all seemed obvious too – God created the world, but all of mankind walked away from God and God sent Jesus to help bring us back. It sure made sense to me. Then after school started up, I started going to services on Saturdays to make sure that this was something that *I* believed, rather than something that *Harry* believed. So, in the end, I guess it's because it's my choice – being baptized that is – I'm making this as a statement of my own belief, not some hand-me-down faith from Tonks or Lupin or Harry even. "

"Have you told your parents?" Daphne asked.

"Yeah, I'm not sure they really cared all that much. Dad thinks it's neat that I'm doing 'something Muggle,' which is how he sees it, and Mum thinks that I'm doing it as preparation for being a good little wife – if I hear her say 'a happy home has but one religion' one more time I think I'm going to hurl," Ginny said.

"So, who were your uncles?" Daphne asked.

"Gideon and Fabian Prewett," Ginny answered.

"Really? *You're* related to the Martyrs?" Daphne asked, her eyes aglow.

"The Martyrs? My uncles were killed by Death Eaters," Ginny protested.

"Your uncles were killed by Death Eaters because they refused to renounce their faith," Daphne explained. "They were baptized when they were students at Hogwarts, just like you; only for them it was when they were seventh year students. That royally brassed off some of the new Death Eaters, who accused them of being blood traitors."

"We've been called blood traitors for years," Ginny protested.

"Yeah, well there are blood traitors and then there are Blood Traitors - among some of the Purebloods, there's a large dislike for Christianity – they call it the worst form of Muggle-loving," Daphne explained. She looked around to see if anyone in the library was listening. "It's *not* a Muggle thing," Daphne said, her blue eyes flashing.

"Yeah, I know, your family's been active in the C of E forever," Ginny said.

"We're relative newcomers compared to the Patils," Daphne said with a wry smile.

"How far back do *they* go?" Ginny asked.

"Remember the Christmas story in the Gospel of Matthew?" Daphne asked.

"Yeah, Herod and wise men from the East," Ginny said.

"Those were *Magi* from the east – wizards from Persia. Padma quite proudly showed me a genealogy chart tracing her family back to one of those wizards."

"But the Patils are from India," Ginny objected.

"The family moved from Persia to South India in the fourth century, and then to England in the eighteenth century."

"So they're not Hindus?" Ginny asked.

"Nope, Padma and Pavarti have been regulars at the 8:00 Sunday service since first year," Daphne said.

"Bewitch me; I really need to get out more," Ginny said.

"What you missed was the day that Draco was bragging that his family had been leaders in the magical world for over a thousand years. Padma pointed out that when the Christ-child was born, two thousand years ago, her family was tasked with representing the magical peoples to greet him. Kind of hard to top that, in my humble opinion," Daphne said, laughing aloud, albeit quietly. "I'll be there."

"Thanks, it'll mean a lot to me," Ginny replied.

"Think nothing of it – it gave me an excuse to turn down one of the seventh year Slytherins who wanted to take me out on a date that day," Daphne replied.

"How Slytherin."

"Why thank you," Daphne said sweetly.

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Thursday came – indicating that the week was almost over. A crow sat patiently on the windowsill of Ginny's room, waiting for her to return from dinner, no doubt. One of her roommates informed her that the bird had been sitting there for a half hour and would fly away when anyone else tried to retrieve its package, an antique brass courier capsule. Ginny scanned the dark bird for odd magical signatures before concluding that it was merely a messenger from some region in the world where owls were not available. When she opened the window, the crow hopped in and stood on one foot, presenting the other solemnly to Ginny. Ginny untied the courier capsule, trying to figure out if it had a catch anywhere that would allow her to open it. There was no such catch, but inscribed on one side was the word *Engorgio* in an odd, antique script. Ginny tapped it with her wand, whispering "*Engorgio* ." The capsule grew in size until was the approximately size of a loaf of bread, at which time Ginny saw a patch that looked remarkably like a blood seal.

*That's odd, I don't remember initiating any seal other than those on the Passboxes I made with Hermione last summer.*

Figuring that there was little to lose, she pressed her thumb to the seal, allowing a previously unseen seam in the box to pop open, revealing a carefully wrapped package with an accompanying card. The handwriting was familiar – not many people wrote in the distinctive hand that Jasmine favoured. She read the card, figuring it was always safe to open, while the package might be something that should be preserved until Christmas.

Dear Ginny,

Abelard heard that you were getting baptized this weekend and went into a tizzy until I convinced him that I could get this package to you without having to penetrate Hogwarts with the Portal. Enclosed is a gift in honour of this occasion, along with Abelard's regards. It seems that it is indeed a small world – Abelard knew your late uncles Fabian and Gideon – he considered them "fine and worthy to bear the name of Martyr."

Well, without further ado, congratulations.

Although I'm not a believer myself, I've accompanied Abelard to many a church service over the years – I always find the baptismal services for adults to be touching – similar in a fashion to the service inducting members into the Shiva Guild.

I enjoyed our weekend – we'll have to make sure to make it a regularly occurring event.

JK

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Inviting the Muggleborn was easy, Ginny simply explained that she was getting baptized on Saturday and would be honoured if they'd attend. She handed them a little card which explained the details of how to get from Hogsmeade to Hooper, and then moved on to the next invitee. Many of the Magicborn were a bit more troublesome, as she had to explain, sometimes in great detail *what* she was doing and *why* she was doing it and *what purpose* it would serve for them to witness the event. None of the Magicborn were as much trouble, however, as explaining it to her own brother.

"You're doing what?" he asked at the top of his lungs, or at least it seemed that way. The Common Room was almost, but not quite empty. Hermione was "correcting" one of Ron's essays, marking it up liberally with indelible red ink in the margins.

"Oh, honestly, Ron," Hermione explained. "She's getting *baptized*; it's a rite of initiation into the Christian Church."

"And what would you know about that?" Ron challenged. "You and your lot haven't darkened the door of a church since the day your Mum and Dad got married. I mean, some single wanker of a priest is going to push my sister under the river this weekend. Have you noticed that we're living in Scotland and it's winter already? If you wait until June, I'll push you under in our pond without all the trouble and the fuss."

"Thanks, Ron, but that wasn't quite what I had in mind," Ginny said, trying to keep a straight face.

"Just trying to be helpful," Ron said with a wink. "Actually, I knew already – Colin came and told me after you'd invited him. I'd be honoured to come. You coming, Hermione?"

"I don't know, Ronald, you might not want 'my lot' in attendance," Hermione said, bristling.

"What? What did I say?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Never mind, Ron, it would take too long to explain. Just know that it was a sore point growing up," Hermione said, rubbing her temples as she put down her quill.

"What was? Being baptized? Not being baptized?" Ron asked.

"The whole church thing," Hermione explained, melting a bit as Ron stood and began to rub her shoulders.

Ginny stood, not wanting to watch the inevitable. Hermione would soften for a moment while Ron was rubbing her shoulders, planting a soft kiss on the crown of her head from time to time, until she would unleash some zinger that she was currently holding back from speaking, then they'd have a brief, hopefully very brief, argument, which would get resolved with more affection, most likely a long snog in front of the fireplace. She reckoned that the fight-makeup cycle was inevitable for them. Thankfully things with Harry were a little more straightforward. They had fewer arguments, as neither of them regarded bickering as a pleasant pastime. What friction they did have was usually smoothed out through sessions of touch-talk. While the dragon magic exacted a price, it had benefits as well.

She was halfway up the staircase to the girl's dormitory when she felt Harry approach the Common Room. She paused on the stairwell to catch his eye, being rewarded by a wink, an air-kiss and a nod from her boyfriend. The wink was an all purpose 'hello,' the kiss was obvious, and the nod let her know that he wanted to go for a walk before turning in, but he didn't want to get ensnared in the volatile couple sitting in front of the fire, where she could see, but not quite hear, Hermione launch into a lengthy explanation of something as she touched her forehead to her brother's temple.

Ginny secured her books, made her nightly ablutions, and then pulled on a cloak, turning herself invisible before she hit the stairwell on the way back down. The couple in front of the fireplace had stopped talking – Ron's hands weren't anywhere that would get him smacked by Mum, but just on general principle, Ginny put a mild alarm charm on the portrait hole door as she passed through, giving them a better than fair chance of not getting caught by students returning before curfew.

Harry was waiting for her, hands in his pockets, in their usual spot. As she slipped her hand into the crook of his arm, he vanished as well, allowing them to walk invisibly in the now darkened hallways.

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There were a number of issues in their relationship that they made up as they went along. The proper use of Legilimency was one of those. As Harry's Krulach, she had certain rights and privileges, but there was a certain etiquette involved. The bond told her a lot about what was going on with Harry, but beyond the big vitals (he's awake, he's hungry, he's injured, he's well, he's asleep) the fine details were maddeningly missing. When

his shield was down, it was ridiculously easy to slip into his mind and catch all of those details, but to enter uninvited was, just not done, any more than Harry would rip her skirt off and have his way with her on the table in the Great Hall at lunchtime. Not that she'd mind such abandon, not after a while at least. There was a level of Legilimency that didn't invade the mind, however, that involved picking up the spare thoughts and emotions that leaked out – rather much like listening to someone talk to themselves. Harry had coined the phrase for it – 'listening at the edges' which they agreed was proper at all times and circumstances – at least with each other.

Listening at the edges, she could tell that he was happy to see her, but he was also bothered about something. Ginny didn't have to be a Legilimens to figure out the likely topic – it was just a question of how long it would take before he brought it up – if he ever did. Knowing Harry, she reckoned that she'd have to force the issue – Harry was quite averse to conflict – especially conflict with her.

"Are you going to tell me why I'm the last to know that you're getting baptized this weekend?" he asked quietly as he led them to door that led to the outside of the castle.

*Okay, so I lost that bet, he's not going to beat around the bush forever, which likely means that he's not too mad at me .*

"Um, I was testing just how good your informant network is?" she asked in jest.

Harry paused long enough to give her the '*I don't believe you*' look with one raised eyebrow.

"Would it help if I said I was planning on telling you tonight?" she asked.

He smiled and started walking again.

"Probably," he said laconically.

"I was trying to figure out why I was doing it in the first place," she said, bracing herself as the damp cold struck as they moved outdoors. The lights in the castle were now catching the bits of blowing snow, creating twinkling motes of light. "Was I doing it to make you happy? Was I doing it because it was the right thing to do? Was I doing it to brass off the Death Eaters and make myself even more of a blood traitor target than I already am?"

"I'm sorry, I lost you on the last one," Harry said softly, leading them to a path that went by the lake.

"Oh," Ginny said, now regretting that she'd uncorked that particular factoid. "You know Uncles Fabian and Gideon?"

"Prewett, your Mum's brothers," Harry said.

"The same; well they were killed by Death Eaters," Ginny said.

"Yeah, they were in the Order," Harry replied.

"According to Daphne, that was just a bonus – they'd both been baptized when they were finishing Hogwarts – which twisted the knickers of some of the junior Death Eaters, who considered it to be the height of betrayal to the old Wizarding order or some such nonsense," Ginny explained.

"Hmhm," he grunted.

He stopped, pushing her back against a very familiar tree-trunk, bending forward to kiss her. It was a very nice kiss. Correction, it was a bloody-fantastic-I-wonder-just-what's-got-into-him kiss.

He leaned back, trying to focus on her through his now-fogged glasses. "So, what did you conclude?" he asked.

"About what?" Ginny replied.

"About your motivations – for getting baptized," he said with a smirk.

"Sorry, my mind was elsewhere – must be advanced age or something," she said with a giggle.

Harry swatted her bum. "You're not an airhead," he chided.

"Well, right, back to the discussion at hand," Ginny said, smiling slyly as she wiggled her bum against his hand. She laughed as she saw the look of concentration on his face break.

"Woman, you're going to be the death of me," he complained.

"Better me than Lizard Lips," she quipped.

"Thanks for reminding me," he said with a grimace.

"Don't mention it," she said. "Anyway, back to baptism. Harry, I love you, I always have in one way or another, but it's been an intense five months or so, you'll have to admit."

Harry nodded, moving his hands to the small of her back.

"And I love Jesus, but that love is relatively recent in my life," Ginny said seriously.



"So?" Harry asked.

"So I wanted to straighten out just why I wanted to be baptized – was I doing it for you?" Ginny asked seriously. "Was I doing it because it was expected? Was I doing it for Father Harper? Or Daphne, or Moony or Tonks? So I decided I wouldn't talk to you about it until I got it sorted out – and then I got into the groove of keeping it a secret and surprising you."

"What if I'd scheduled something that conflicted with the date?" Harry asked seriously.

"Harry, who checks your date book for errors?" Ginny asked.

"You do," he said.

"I rest my case," she said, bending to plant a light kiss on the soft spot where his shoulder joined his neck. She noted with some satisfaction the slight shiver that ran through him. A pity it was so close to curfew.

"Well, I was surprised," he said, letting his head tilt to one side. "The bishop of London is coming to Hooper on Sunday; we can get confirmed together the day after."

"That was part of the plan too," Ginny said with a grin.

The next kiss was better than the one that preceded it.

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A quick glance at his watch told Harry that they'd better scamper back if he wanted to be in before curfew. He didn't have any moral objections to breaking curfew, but as he had classes during first period on Friday, it just wasn't practical to make a late evening of it on a Thursday night. A half-hour later, he ruminated on whether he'd made the right choice, listening to the slumbering sounds in his dormitory. Seamus was fighting a cold, so he'd turned in after dinner. Neville was always in bed at 9:30 like clockwork. Ron turned in when Hermione sent him to bed, and no one could predict when Dean would turn in, but most nights Harry was the last one in bed.

How Tick-tock got into the dormitory, and how she knew that all the boys other than Harry were asleep was an unanswered mystery. Ron knew that she'd been sleeping with Harry in her Animagus form, but none of the other boys had ever seen her – or if they had, they hadn't thought to mention it to anyone. On every night other than Saturday night, Harry would feel a gentle bounce on his mattress as she landed on the foot of his bed. She'd walk up the length of his body, pausing to rub the side of her head against his chin before curling up in the hollow between his arm and chest. Some nights he'd talk to her briefly, but more often than not she'd place a paw upon his mouth. When in her cat form she could understand human speech, but by the end of the day it took too much energy to translate on the fly. He'd grown accustomed in the last month to falling asleep to the rhythmic sound of her purr, so much so that he was quite restless on Saturday nights when she wasn't there. Whatever strings of conversation he was considering melted away as sleep took him.

When he awoke on Friday morning, the sunlight was streaming into his window, puddling in a ragged circle on his floor. The only evidence that Tick-tock had spent the night was a small, cat-shaped warm spot on the bed. Animagus or not, Ginny was still not a morning person, and he was usually halfway through breakfast on a weekday before she'd join him in the Great Hall if she made it to breakfast at all. The usual Saturday night revision group had been rescheduled to Friday this week, as all the regulars were going to lose part of their afternoon attending Ginny's baptism, which meant that he'd probably not see her again until dinnertime.

If anyone had told him a year ago that being apart from Ginny Weasley for a day would provoke a bit of anxiety, he'd have told them that they were nutters, but that's where he'd arrived. He reckoned that if this was the worst part of having a girlfriend, he'd learn to live with it.

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The Great Hall was more crowded than usual for a Saturday morning, which was explained by the fact that today was a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry filled up his plate with the usual items and then prepared two mugs of coffee, taking a sip out of each to make sure they were correct. The oversized mug he placed across the table from him, sealing it with a minor charm to keep it warm until his girlfriend arrived. He used the time he spent eating to watch the actions of the students milling about. By the time he'd finished his eggs and was working on his second piece of toast, he felt the faintest of tugs on the bond he shared with Ginny. He put down his toast and prepared two more plates, one for Hermione and the other for Ginny.

"Ooh," Hermione said, looking at the waiting place settings. "You do have him nicely trained, Ginny."

Ginny gave Harry a surreptitious wink and sank down into a chair opposite Harry, letting her satchel fall to the floor with a clatter. After she'd taken several greedy gulps, she looked up at Harry.

"Thanks, love," she said softly.

"Think nothing of it. What's in the bag?" he asked.

"Shoes suitable for wading in a Scottish river in December, a change of clothes, a towel, my purse and my presents from Abelard," Ginny replied.

"Presents? What did he send?" Harry asked.

"A bible and a matching prayer book; he apologized that he didn't have time to get my name embossed on the covers. There is a nice inscription on the cover leaf though," she said, pulling one of the books from her satchel.

"Nice," Harry said, opening the cover with one hand. "Would you like to get this embossed when we go into Hogsmeade?"

Ginny pulled another gulp of coffee from her mug before answering. "Maybe later," which earned a laugh from Hermione. "What? What's funny about that?" she asked.

"Nothing – I didn't say a thing," Hermione answered primly.

"Yeah, right," Ginny replied before throwing a strawberry at Hermione's face.

Hermione caught it with her left hand, but crushed it in the process. "Eww, look what you made me do!" she protested.

"Should have caught it in your mouth then," Ginny replied, smiling as she watched her friend try to wipe the smudge of scarlet from her palm.

"We can't all be Keepers," Ron said, sitting down next to Hermione. He plucked a strawberry from Hermione's plate, tossing it into the air and catching it in his mouth.

"You are insufferable!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Why, thank you," Ron replied.

"Finish up quickly, Ginny, I don't like the looks of where this is going," Harry said.

In reply, Hermione tossed a strawberry at Harry, who suspended it above his plate with a flick of his hand. Minutes later Harry'd levitated two grapes and a chunk of toast to float in mid-air above his plate with the strawberry. With a little coaxing, the bits of breakfast were doing a credible version of a conga dance.

Hermione glared at Harry and then at Ron. "I'm sorry, Ron, you're not insufferable," she said.

"Oh?" Ron asked sweetly.

"No, Harry is, though," she said, trying to suppress the smile that threatened to crack the scowl she'd forced upon her face.

"Oh, Hermione, you're wrong – he's not insufferable," Ginny protested.

"No?" Hermione replied. "What is he then?"

"Irresistible," she smirked, snatching the strawberry from mid-air and popping it into her mouth.

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Harry and Ginny spent the morning ambling through Hogsmeade; Ginny finishing her Christmas shopping, picking up a present she'd ordered for Hermione that had finally arrived, and snagging up a few odds and ends for stocking stuffers. Harry spent the time tagging along with Ginny, trying from time to time to discern which of the people milling about the streets of Hogsmeade were serving as his minder for the morning. With Tonks' consent, he'd planned on walking from Hogsmeade to Hooper, breaking midway for a picnic lunch. Although there were bits of snow here and there on the ground, they were in the middle of an unseasonably warm spell, which Harry didn't mind a bit.

As he spread the tablecloth over the table he'd just conjured, he felt a niggling unease leaking out around the edges of Ginny's mostly lowered mental shield.

"What's wrong, love?" he asked.

Ginny waved him away. "You'll just think I'm silly," she replied.

"No, tell me," he said.

"I've invited Mum and Dad to my baptism and our confirmation, hoping that they'd be able to attend one or the other, and I don't think that they're going to come to either one," Ginny said plaintively.

"When did you let them know?" Harry inquired.

"Three weeks ago," she replied.

"So, about two and a half weeks before you let *me* know," he said, giving her a wink.

"You're not going to let me live that down, are you?" she asked, tossing back the hood on her cloak.

"Nope," he replied laconically.

"I really do want them there," she sighed.

"Yeah, I know – I'd give anything if Sirius were able to see this – or Mum – or Dad," he said quietly.

"Oh, Harry! Forgive me!" Ginny squealed, throwing herself on him.

Well, since you put it that way, I guess I can find it in my heart," he said, patting her back lightly.

"No, really, I'm all wrapped around whether or not Mum or Dad will be able to come, and I forget all about the fact that you don't even have that option," Ginny said. Harry didn't say anything in reply, brushing his fingers lightly across her forehead, tucking a stray wisp of scarlet hair behind her ear. She could tell that his shield was dropped to zero – she did the same and then leaned forward, touching her forehead to his.

*I'm such a prat sometimes.*

*That's okay; it's how I know you're a Weasley.*

*Oh, you boy, you.*

***If I might break into this tender moment, Tk1ch said, clearing a dragon-sized throat. Your minders are approaching; you might want to be a bit more attentive.***

"Thank you," Ginny said aloud.

***I exist to serve.***

Harry put one finger to his mouth and then vanished. Ginny smiled and followed suit. Turning on her farsight long enough to find him, she waited beside him – waiting for their minders to appear.

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Tonks, it turned out, had pretty much the same attitude about being ambushed by an invisible teenaged wizard (and witch) as her colleague Moey. Lupin, on the other hand, found it positively hilarious. When all parties involved were back to their normal, visible state of affairs, Harry conjured two more chairs and they split the picnic lunch that Dobby had prepared. After that, they walked to Hooper, stopping outside the chapel. A stream that previously had run alongside the road between Hogsmeade and Hooper now crossed under the road at an arched stone footbridge and fed into a small pond in front of the chapel.

Lupin stopped to examine the new geography, and then smiled before chuckling. "Good show, Father Harper, good show indeed," he said.

"What, what's so funny?" Ginny asked.

"He's re-routed the stream to make a baptismal pond in front of the chapel," Lupin answered.

"Yeah, so?" Ginny said.

"Now the baptistery is the entrance to the church – which is very symbolic, very ritually correct – very much something that a Gray Friar would think up to reinforce a teaching point," Lupin said.

"And here I thought it just indicated that he was being thoughtful for the candidates, so they wouldn't have to walk very far after they got sopping wet," Tonks said wryly.

"It's both," said a booming voice from under the bridge. Father Harper tucked a wand into the sleeve of his robe as he scrambled up the bank.

"One of my mentors said that God was a ritualist, always sweating the small details. I'm not sure I always agreed with how he applied that truth, but I'm sure he would have approved of this arrangement. Good to see you all – Ginny, there's a room in the vestry where you can change – Mrs. Parker will show you where to put your things. The rest of you can join me in a spot of tea before the service, if you'd like," Father Harper said, hopping over a narrow spot in the stream to reach the path leading to the door of the chapel. The two couples followed after him, fording the stream and then walking into the chapel. Ginny gave Harry a quick kiss before darting away towards the vestry.

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To say that Ginny was distracted as she stood beside the swirling pool in front of the chapel with two other white clad candidates would be an understatement. She was pleased to see a crowd of smiling faces on the other side of the pond, including, at the back of the crowd, the two faces she didn't think would be able to attend, Mum and Dad, accompanied by the twins and Bill. She gave them a small wave before returning her attention to Father Harper, who had finished with his opening comments from the centre of the pond and moved on to the reading from the Gospel, before reading the declaration of repentance in his clear, strong voice:

*The Scriptures teach that all people are conceived and born with a sinful nature; and you have heard in these words of our Saviour Christ that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Holy Spirit. The sacramental sign of the new birth is baptism. Those who come to be baptized must affirm their allegiance to Christ and their rejection of all that displeases God. It is your duty to fight against evil and to follow Christ.*

Ginny's concentration broke for a moment as she pondered just how much of a duty she had to fight against evil, almost missing her response to the first question.

*Do you believe and trust in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, who loved the world so much that he sent his Son to die for us? Do you believe and trust in his only Son Jesus Christ who was crucified for our sins, rose from the dead, and is the only way to salvation? Do you believe and trust in his Holy Spirit, who enables us to receive God's word, repent, and believe the gospel?*

This response was a lot easier, as it was a quick paraphrase of the beginning of the creed.

*Do you desire to be baptized in this faith?*

*"Of course, that's why I'm here,"* Ginny thought, before answering with the more liturgically correct, "That is my desire."

There was another prayer, which was the sign for the candidates to wade into the pool, joining Father Harper, who'd been standing in water that was up to the middle of his chest, a charmed prayer book hovering above the water beside him. The water was bracing and cold, but as they got knee deep the warming charm cast on their baptismal robes kicked in, which made it fairly pleasant. Ginny was the last and shortest of the candidates, which was the cause of some amusement, as Father Harper had to come forward to reach a shallower part of the pond, as she knew that where he was standing would have put her in water up to her mouth.

*Ginevra Molly Weasley, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Warming charm or not, when her head dipped backwards into the water, it was *cold*, but at least it washed away the tears that had begun to flow when she'd answered the third question. She brushed the water from her face, trying to get the wisps of hair that had escaped her pony-tail out of her face when she saw two tall red-haired men in white robes at the back of the crowd. They looked oddly familiar. She broke away from staring at them when Father Harper presented each candidate with a small brass cross, slipping it over their head before tracing the sign of the cross on their foreheads.

*We receive you into Christ's congregation and sign you with the sign of the cross. We pray that you will not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified. Fight bravely under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil; and continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant to the end of your life. Amen.*

Looking back at the crowd, Ginny saw the two men each give her a thumbs-up sign before they winked out of sight.

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The service ended with another blessing from Father Harper, which was followed by a moment of silence, which in turn was followed by a burst of conversation, most of which was directed as congratulations to the three newly baptized members of the church. Harry waited a moment for the crowd to clear before he sidled up next to Ginny, who pivoted to throw her arms around him.

"Oh, Harry, that was incredible – our children are going to do this!" Ginny gushed.

Harry didn't answer, in part because he hadn't expected to embrace Ginny until after she'd had a chance to dry off, and in part because he was reading the expression on Molly Weasley's face as she stood behind Ginny.

"Harry, dear, let me dry you off," Molly said while casually casting a drying charm on Harry and then Ginny. "Ginny, darling, isn't it a bit premature to be planning things for *your* children, or do you have good news to spring on me?" she asked sweetly. Ginny's face paled for a moment.

"Uh, not yet, Mum," Ginny said, reaching for the towel that Harry had proffered from her bag.

"If I might have your attention please," Father Harper bellowed, "before Evensong tonight, there will be a reception in the undercroft that starts as soon as you lot can make it into the chapel."

"Come along, Molly," Arthur said, taking his wife's arm. "We'll see you kids later."

Ginny slipped her hand into Harry's, thankful that she could express this bit of affection openly while covertly opening up a link for touchtalk.

*Is Mum thinking what I think she's thinking?*

*Which would be?*

*That I'm preggers?*

*Uh-huh.*

*Why?*

*Might be because you've never mentioned having children with me before. I caught her thoughts loud and clear before she dried me off; she didn't appear to be too upset.*

*Oh, well, I suppose we're going to get it when we get back to the Burrow when the holiday begins.*

*You're going to get it; I'm going back to Privet Drive.*

"Since when?" Ginny asked aloud.

"Since July," Harry replied looking away. "The price for getting away early this summer was that I had to return to Privet Drive to renew the protection from the blood magic. Off-hand, I'd say it was worth it though."

"How's that?" Ginny asked.

“If I hadn’t spent August at the Burrow, I don’t think I would have fallen in love with you,” Harry replied.

“Think not?” Ginny asked, her eyes twinkling.

“Well, not as early – nothing propinks like propinquity you know,” he said.

“Did Hermione tell you that?” Ginny inquired.

“Nah, it was something that stuck in my brain when I was reading one of Dudley’s cast-off books,” Harry replied.

“Well, you’ll be missing something, ‘cause Mum gives a great talk – I know all of them by heart,” she said, screwing up her face into a fair approximation of Molly’s expression. “Harry, dear, when a Wizard and a Witch love each other very much, they get *married*, and after that, and I do mean *only after* that, they do very special things together.”

“Keep going, this is something I obviously missed growing up with the Dursleys,” Harry said.

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Breakfast the next day was much like any other Sunday at Hogwarts, the great hall was filled with a small number of students, mostly from the lower years. The students in the upper years usually chose to sleep in. Hermione, of course, was an exception to this generalization. She went to breakfast because she was an early riser pretty much throughout the year, and because she wanted to keep a prefectural eye on the younger students, and because she studied on Sundays after breakfast, so the time before breakfast was when she did something that didn’t involve studying. She normally wrote her parents a letter on Sunday mornings, but she’d done that last night after kissing Ron good night, so this morning she was reading a favourite book of poetry – romantic poetry.

“ow do I love zee? Let me count ze wayz,” Ron said in a terrible French accent behind her. “I love zee to the depf and bweapf and height my zoul can reach, when feelink out of zight for de ents of Being and ideal Graze.”

“Ronald, I happen to like that poem, and Browning was as English as I am, not French,” Hermione said, pulling herself up straight. “Do you know the rest of it?”

“Of course,” Ron replied. “It was one of Mum’s favourites. ‘I love thee to the level of every day’s most quiet need, by sun and candlelight. I love thee freely, as men strive for Right; I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise. I love with a passion put to use in my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith. I love thee with a love I seemed to lose with my lost saints, I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears, of all my life! and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.’ She had me, actually, right up to the last line, I mean, really, how can someone love you *better* after they’re dead?”

Hermione pondered this, surprised by this sudden revelation from her boyfriend. “I’ll let you know if I ever get a chance to talk to Lily Potter,” she replied, picking up her cup of tea.

“Well, yeah, there is that, I guess, but normally I don’t see someone loving you better after they’re dead, that’s my point I guess,” Ron said, sitting down with a plop into the seat beside her. “Where’s Harry?”

“Harry is at church, with Ginny,” Hermione replied.

“Didn’t he get enough of that yesterday?” Ron asked.

Hermione smiled. “Apparently not; Ginny said that the Bishop of London was coming to the chapel in Hooper for a confirmation service,” Hermione answered.

“Bit far, idnit?” Ron said, biting into a wedge of toast that he’d pilfered from her plate.

“According to Ginny, the Bishop of London seems to supervise the chapels staffed by the Greyfriars,” Hermione said, closing her book of poetry.

“So they’re not part of the Church of Scotland?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione answered forcefully. “First off, the Church of Scotland is Presbyterian, and the Greyfriars are an Anglican order under the Church of England. The Anglicans in Scotland are the Scottish Episcopal Church, but the Greyfriars have nothing to do with them. I don’t pretend to understand Christian politics in Britain.”

“You seem pretty current on it though,” Ron said, getting up to load his own plate. “Where did the Grangers go to church when you were growing up?”

“We didn’t,” Hermione replied icily.

“I thought you said your Mum was Catholic or something,” Ron said.

“She was, sort of, but she stopped going to church when she left home for college. She met Dad at the Uni when they were in graduate school,” Hermione explained.

“And your Dad?” Ron asked.

“Dad was raised Jewish, but he doesn’t go to services or anything,” Hermione said with a sigh.

“So that makes you half-Jewish?” Ron asked.

“NO! It makes me nothing at all!” Hermione hissed. “You’re only Jewish if your mum was a Jew – you’re only Catholic if you’re baptized Catholic, which I wasn’t. Growing up I was ‘the girl without any religion at all,’ which wasn’t very comfortable some of the time, I assure you.”

“So is this why you got all huffy with me last week?” Ron said, his expression softening.

“I’m sorry Ron,” Hermione said, leaning over to rest her forehead on his shoulder. “It’s still a sore point from growing up.”

“No worry here,” Ron replied, “the Weasleys are as un-churched as they come – excepting Ginny, now, I guess.”

“When I was a little girl I remember going to a Christmas Eve service with Mum’s family. I was probably all of five. I turned around in the pew and said in a very loud voice to the family sitting behind us: ‘Daddy doesn’t believe in God and Mummy’s not sure’ which, of course, was heard by everyone in the church,” Hermione recounted. “I thought that if it was true, it must be perfectly proper to share, which Mum explained to me later was *not* the case.”

“Did they ask you back to church after that?” Ron asked, slipping his arm around his girlfriend.

“No, surprisingly,” Hermione said with a short laugh.

Breakfast, after that, was spent volleying embarrassing stories from their respective childhoods, after which they went for a walk, during which Ron recited at length the poems he’d learned as a child.

As a child he’d never appreciated the poems, but now, as an almost adult, he discovered that they were truly useful for setting the mood with his girlfriend, proving once again that Molly had prepared him well for life in the magical world.

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They didn’t see Harry and Ginny again until dinner time, when they came strolling into the great hall wearing cloaks, indicating that they’d just come in from the out-of-doors, where it was snowing lightly.

“Well, good of you to grace us with your presence,” Ron said to Harry as he sat down. “Where’d you go after church?”

“We went out to lunch with the bishop and his wife,” Harry replied.

“The bishop of London doesn’t have a wife,” Hermione said.

“Very good, two points for Gryffindor,” Harry said. “Bishop Chartres wasn’t able to make it, so he asked one of his bishop friends to fill in for him.”

“Who was that?” Hermione asked.

“Dunno, I’m terrible with names. Do you remember, Ginny?” Harry asked.

“Of course,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes. “It was Doctor Carey.”

“Bishop Carey?” Hermione asked, her voice rising in pitch and volume.

“Uh huh,” Ginny replied, scooping up some mashed potatoes for her plate.

“Who’s Bishop Carey?” Ron asked, grabbing the bowl of mashed potatoes after Ginny.

“He’s the Archbishop of Canterbury, Ronald” Hermione replied.

“Is that important?” Ginny asked innocently.

“Oh no, it’s nothing at all like going out to luncheon with the Queen,” Hermione replied.

“Oh,” Ginny replied. “Well, I guess we’ll have to do that after Boxing Day, what do you say, Harry?”

“I say that you should stop teasing my sister. Hey Ron, pass me the potatoes, will you?” Harry said with a disarming grin.

“Are you really going to have lunch with the Queen?” Ron asked.

“Oh, Ron, honestly,” Hermione huffed.

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Author’s notes: well, I finally managed to wrestle the time to finish this chapter, which has been in the works for a long, long time. A cyber-cookie for the reader who can place the propinquity quote in its proper context.

Many thanks to Runsamok, my new Beta, and thanks to Sherry, who made this possible.

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year The stockings were hung

Everything had changed in Harry's life, but when he returned to number four Privet Drive, nothing had changed. Oh, there were a few things that were different: the magazines in the bathroom were current, the arrangement on the mantle of the non-functional fireplace was decorated for Christmas rather than summer, and the floor of Harry's bedroom (still referred to as 'Dudley's second bedroom') had a few new cast-off, broken things, but on the whole, nothing had changed. Tonks and Lupin had met him at King's Cross Station, bundled his things into the boot of Moony's car and drove away on York Road. Tonks monopolized the conversation with details of her upcoming wedding. She claimed that her mum was driving her mad with the details, but when Moony offered to elope instead, she gave him a cold, withering glare. As they drove into the estate, a hush fell over the car.

"We'll pick you up on Christmas Day, you know," Tonks said apologetically. "It's just a week."

Harry smiled and nodded. It promised to be a long week.

Wednesday, 18 December 1996

Dear Ginny,

Not a lot has changed here – when I walked in the house Uncle Vernon hid behind his newspaper, pretending that I hadn't arrived. Dudley tried to take a swing at me while I was taking my things to my room. Ducking, of course, allowed me to watch as his fist smacked into the wall. I smoothed the dent in the wall with a bit of wandless magic, smiled, and closed my door. I haven't heard a peep out of ol' Dudders since then. So, enough about Azkaban South – I've started work on an essay in Transfiguration tonight and I'm going to see if I can break out the old bicycle tomorrow, weather be hanged. What's Christmas like at The Burrow? I've spent most of my Christmases at Hogwarts – I figure last year's holiday didn't count because a) it was at Grimmauld Place and b) the encounter your dad had with Nagini kind of overshadowed things. Rowena assigned an interesting bit of reading – it's a journal from a Wizard named Narwad who lived in the 1800's – he served as a guide to Richard Burton, the explorer, but according to the journal, like Lockhart, many of the things that Burton said that he did were not his own exploits. Narwad was also of the opinion that Burton was a bit of a pervert, but he was too polite to come out and say it in plain words. How, you might ask, does she know about books that were written centuries after she died? Simple – she talks to the library. The school has a level of sentience – including the library. I don't really want to tell Hermione that – ever.

Mm'lau doesn't like being here – she'd been providing a running commentary on the doings of the Dursleys until I let her know that the less I knew of them, the happier I'd be.

I miss you. I don't know how I'm going to sleep this week, but I'll have to muddle through, I guess.

Yours,

Harry

~+~

Thursday, 19 December, 1996

Dear Harry,

Merlin's beard! I miss you so.

Hermione is safely home – I popped over for lunch today – having a Floo connection in her house is wonderful. She'll be skiing this weekend with her mum and dad, but she'll be back in time to drop by Christmas Day.

You asked about Christmas at The Burrow. We do all the normal things, of course, a Christmas tree, stockings by the mantle, crackers with Christmas dinner, etc. I guess it shouldn't shock you that the thing that stands out the most about how Weasleys celebrate Christmas is the food (I wouldn't be a Weasley if I couldn't carry on about food, could I?).

We get a Clementine orange in our stockings, and on years when we're particularly flush, there's a big bowl of Clementines on top of the bread box. In case you aren't familiar with this, it's a small orange, not much bigger than a Snitch, with a loose skin that's easy to peel. Most of them are pip-less, although I have found a pip or two over the years. They're rather tart, but very satisfying. Mum will brew up cauldrons of wassail, which is kind of like mulled cider. I can't really describe it, aside from the fact that this is the only way that I really like cloves. Then there's the baking – we normally bake up hundreds of biscuits as mum insists on making up biscuit platters for practically everyone she knows. When Bill comes in, he usually brings half-a-dozen panettone, usually from Milan. Panettone is sweet bread that looks like it was baked in a big flowerpot – it's a big round loaf, golden yellow in colour and tastes more like cake than bread. It has raisins and bits of candied orange and lemon peel in it, and we often serve it for pudding or at tea. It goes well with the wassail, but when a bunch of adults are over, mum will sometimes break out the muscato, which is about the only wine that I care to drink.

Speaking of drinking, I spent most of last night talking to mum after we got home from King's Cross. We weren't drinking muscato – instead we were drinking that frilly herbal stuff that you introduced to her last summer. It seems that I wasn't the only one to see Uncles Gideon and Fabian at my baptism. She asked why they were wearing white robes like mine, which led to some very interesting conversations.

Is Uncle Moony taking you to church this Sunday? If so, let him know that a certain red-haired miss would like to tag along. Are you certain that you have to stay at Azkaban South until Christmas Day? I don't know if I can wait that long.

Well, I gotta run – mum's calling for me to help her with another gigantic batch of biscuits. Although I think she does need the help, I think this is just a pretext for giving me a virginity pep talk.

Ever loving you,

GMW

~+~

Friday, 20 December 1996

Ginny,

It was a somewhat eventful day. I spent the morning doing the usual chores – okay, I spent an hour after breakfast doing chores with the assistance of discreet wandless magic. Then I finished my essay, simply because I don't want to think about schoolwork any more. I gave the notion of Apparating to somewhere I could fly some long consideration, but concluded that my minders would go spare if I were to do that. By the way, I've figured out the borders of the Anti-Apparation ward that covers number four Privet Drive. Once I could sketch out what I was looking for to Mm'lau, she was quite helpful in mastering the techniques for detecting that bit of magic.

Because I find life with the Dursleys to be depressing, after lunch I decided that I would do anything to get out. I called Moey to see if I could set up a bicycle ride. Moey wasn't available to serve as my minder, so it was Ms Laurel instead. She hasn't changed a bit. Although there's snow on the ground and it's a bit nippy, the roads were clear and dry, so it was a very nice ride.

It got a little complicated on the return trip. Mm'lau pointed out that she could sense some Dark Magic, which turned out to be a minor ambush in Little Whinging. Ms Laurel called in backup and then we sat back from a safe distance and watched the ambushers get ambushed, nabbing two newly-minted Death Eaters. I didn't know either of them, and they weren't related to any of the Hogwarts students that we know. I'm not sure what's going to happen with them, but I'm sure it's not going to be pleasant. Scrimgeour, the head Auror, isn't known for his sense of humour.

Ms Laurel was disappointed that she didn't get to take part in the strike team, a sentiment shared by Mm'lau, who's getting a bit ruthless in her old age. I thought I'd be locked down after this, but the shopping trip I scheduled for tomorrow hasn't been cancelled. We'll see – I'm hoping for the best.

St. Simon's doesn't have a Saturday evening service like the chapel in Hooper, otherwise I'd suggest attending that, if for no other reason than I don't want to wait until Sunday to see you. Moony says he'll drop by to pick you up on Sunday morning, at the usual time.

Well, enough for now.

Yours,

HJP

~+~

Almost Saturday, but according to the clock, still Friday, 20 December 1996 for twenty more minutes

Harry,

This is my third go at writing this letter. When first I heard that you were almost ambushed I started going into a fit that would have done Hermione proud, but upon reflection, I'm gratified to see that you didn't go out with your wand ablaze to round up a couple of DE losers. Thank you, thank you, thank you! It's definitely okay with me that you didn't go rushing into the fight. When next you go rushing into danger, I'm supposed to be by your side, remember?

Well, here at The Burrow we've been cranking out biscuits like Goblins minting Knuts. I stopped counting at thirty-five dozen – you don't want to know how many eggs and how much butter we've gone through. Enclosed with this missive you'll find a plate of ginger newts, which I seem to recall that you liked. I made these, but they're mum's recipe.

Tonks came by for a last minute fit and alteration of her gown – it's lovely. I won't bother to describe the dress because you wouldn't appreciate the sewing details beyond the fact that it's long with a small train and ivory in colour. Tonks looks gorgeous in it, of course. The veil is a light half-veil that uses a variation on the same charm that she put on my scarf the first time I went to St. Simon's. When she first puts it on it's ivory coloured like the dress, then it goes through a rainbow of colours and then it changes back to ivory – very appropriate for a Metamorphmagus bride. Unlike some of the tacky gowns I saw in the book at the bridal shop, it's not one of these no-visible-means-of-support dresses that threaten to fall off when the bride tosses the bouquet.

I'm fighting very hard against the fantasies of wearing a dress like Tonks' myself. That will come, some day, but old Lizard Lips needs to be room temperature before that's going to happen, I'm sure.

Changing the subject, mum did launch into the virginity pep talk when we were both up to our elbows in biscuit dough. I assured her that you are a virtue-filled gentleman who wants a virgin bride, which was some comfort to dear old mum, and then I let loose the fact that I've been sleeping with you in my Animagus form. To my great surprise, she didn't burst an aneurism on the spot.

When I explained the reason behind it, giving a very condensed version of our spat in October (omitting what happened and didn't happen in Sirius' cave over Hogsmeade), she concluded that she heartily approved of the arrangement and wouldn't oppose it continuing at the Burrow.

Yeah, mum!

Well, I need to press my face against my pillow if I hope to be of any use to anyone tomorrow.

Ever loving you,

GMW

~+~

22 December 1996

Dear Diary,

It was nice to be back at St. Simon's today and even nicer to go forward for Holy Communion with Harry. :-)

Father Harper is a nice guy and a good preacher, but Father Martin still blows me away when he steps into the pulpit. Daphne was there and after the service introduced me to her parents, who greeted me warmly. Evidently a number of other people saw Uncles Gideon and Fabian last weekend.

In four more days Tonks will become Dora Lupin – yippee! We had a girl-to-girl chat today and she filled me in on the details – when she signs the paperwork after her wedding, she's going to change her given name, which is a very minor bonus as far as she's concerned. She's been brewing Wolfsbane Potion for him since October with good results. The full moon arrives on Tuesday, Christmas Eve, which was part of their planning. I hope that Moony is fully recovered by Boxing Day!

After church we went out to brunch at a new place, a Thai-Vietnamese restaurant. One nice thing about the place is that all the staff were my size, which was novel indeed. I had a slimy noodle dish which tasted far better than it looked. The only ingredients I recognized were the bits of mushroom and a handful of very tasty shrimp. Tonks said the dish was called Pad Thai. After brunch we took off with Moony and Tonks and hit the cinema for a matinee. I, of course, didn't mind snuggling into Harry while watching a Muggle film. We went for a long walk after that and then had a bite to eat before Flooing home from Grimmauld Place. Tonks and Moony conveniently disappeared before I had to leave, giving us some time together. Thank you Tonks, wherever you are.

Fred and George are back for a visit. They have a flat over their shop on Diagon Alley, but they come back from time to time. If they stay over the holiday Harry will have to room with Ron again, which will be okay, but it will put a bit of a kink in some of my plans.



Damnation Dam, George just confirmed that they'll be staying over the hols. Ever the perceptive one, he asked if that was going to interrupt my plans. That's when I showed him my newest talent. He was quite impressed, although he did make a few rude jokes about Harry and his fondness for scarlet coloured felines – I'm not going to repeat them here. He then proposed a most audacious prank, solemnly vowing to carry his part out with fidelity; if it blows up, I'm going to be grounded until I'm thirty, but if it works – well, who knows?

TTFN  
GMW

~+~

On the morning of Christmas Eve, Harry had already packed and repacked his trunk. Tonks and Moony were going to pick him up before breakfast on Christmas Day, so with any luck; he'd be gone before the Dursleys were out of bed. In what he characterized as either a bit of moral development or psychological warfare, he'd bought presents for the Dursleys – he'd slip them under the tree before he left. The presents were entirely Muggle, not hexed or otherwise booby trapped. If it made them wonder what he was thinking, he'd consider it to be an entirely successful operation. He'd mailed off dozens of Christmas cards and letters to a number of friends, notwithstanding that he'd seen some of them less than two weeks ago.

After dinner he received a terse note in the Passbox from Ginny, which read:

Standby for a post from me at 11:00 p.m.

Given the fact that she was normally out like a light by 10:00 p.m., (except for the rare evening that he'd tempt her to join him on prowls through the castle) this piqued his curiosity, but he couldn't figure out what scheme she was working, so he spent the time reading the last few chapters of Narwad's journal. In the penultimate chapter Narwad described a type magical manipulation that sounded amazingly like some of the magic he practiced with the spiders, which is why, he supposed, that Rowena asked him to read it. He wrote down a page of notes, questions and observations mostly, looking up as the face of Dudley's cast-off clock-radio turned to 11:00.

The faintest of noises preceded the lighting of the knob on the Weasley door. He heard a humorous rumbling throaty noise from Mm'lau, but still he hesitated a moment, remembering that this *was* a Weasley he was dealing with, after all, before carefully opening the door.

Nothing exploded; there was no flash of light, no smells, shards of lightning or infernal devices. As he opened the door wide a deep ginger-coloured tabby cat came out of the Passbox, pausing to stretch before jumping into his lap. An instant later he sank down into the bed as the weight in his lap grew more than tenfold. Instead of a blinking cat, a warm and wonderful girl was now ensconced in his lap, dressed in a thin nightdress and slippers. Looking down at her attire she flushed briefly before looking into his eyes.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue? Happy Christmas, Harry," she said before joining her lips to his.

Maybe there was magic to Christmas Eve after all.

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Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com – write to me, I write back.

Author's note: This was written in three sittings, unlike the prior chapter of SFSY, which was written in a stop and start fashion over a period that probably spanned six months or more. The juices are flowing for SYSY again - yipee. Work and real life, however, are not very conducive to writing, so I have to catch the opportunity when I can. Thanks to Runsamok for the wonderful edits as the fastest Beta east of the Mississippi, and for Art's insightful comments. I write fan-fiction in part because of the interaction – with my wise readers (the pre-betas who tell me when I'm striking out – you know who you are), my regular readers, my betas, etc.

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Changing Stations

Jasmine prided herself on stability and flexibility, key characteristics for a profession that required no-notice relocations and lots and lots of travel, so she was pretty sure the relief she felt in returning to Abelard's villa wasn't a sense of coming home, but more a sense of standing down. She'd already walked the grounds with Rosie, checking a number of sensors and wards that would report all sorts of untoward activity. Now she checked the refrigerator and the pantry, making sure that there were no shortages that could interfere with household operations. Although she liked all varieties of adventure, she hated surprises.

Her most recent trip had been a courier operation, taking physical packages and packages of information to various friends, allies and customers of Abelard. She knew that he was asleep when she arrived, which was to be expected, as it was well after midnight when she crossed the threshold with Rosie. She'd caught a welcome nap on the next to last leg of her flight into Africa, so she wasn't feeling any fatigue.

She almost missed the letter – it was tucked into the stand that held the napkins – not Abelard's usual place for communications. She pulled the envelope open and read the note – typed on an old manual typewriter, which must have taken him ages, as his hands were now too twisted to comfortably hold a pen for very long.

J,

I received several favourable reports on your recent tasks. I'm glad to have you home. Rosie has missed you. We have things to discuss – please meet with me after breakfast.

A.

There was nothing untoward about the note, but she was uneasy nonetheless. There wasn't much she could do about it, so she brought her bags into her quarters, dumping her laundry into the hamper and hanging up the clothes that hadn't been worn. Because her circadian rhythm was a bit off from travelling, she set her alarm, rather than relying upon her usual sense of time. Sleep claimed her quickly when she finally retired.

~+~

Life at Abelard's villa was orderly. Jasmine was usually the first to wake, starting her day with a series of exercises in the courtyard and a lengthy run on odd days and a series of laps in the exercise pool on even days. While she was exercising, Mrs. Paprikash would arrive and begin her labours for the day, preparing meals and other domestic tasks as necessary. Abelard would rise, take his morning tea and then spend time in meditation and prayer before breakfast, where more often than not he'd be joined by one or the other of the women on his staff to coordinate the day's activities. This morning was purely routine, following the pattern.

"Where's mum?" Jasmine asked as she entered the kitchen.

Abelard looked up from his demitasse of coffee. "She's out for the morning, laying in supplies for our guests arriving on New Year's Day. You look well – I trust that things went well in Pretoria," Abelard said.

"About as well as expected – the Kashan family wants a larger percentage, but they're not willing to walk away from the transaction, at least not until they have an alternative," Jasmine reported in a matter-of-fact fashion.

"Are you ready for our guests?" Abelard asked.

"A simple task – using the Portal there should be little risk in bringing the entire party here – although I don't understand why they can't provide security on their end," Jasmine said.

"Perhaps I neglected to share that small detail," Abelard said with a small smile. "Mr Lupin is marrying Miss Tonks on Boxing Day – as he will be on his honeymoon, I believe he has better things to do than performing routine security sweeps."

"Well, good on them," Jasmine said with a broad smile.

"It's not going to be all social – Dumbledore wishes to discuss a problem in which he wishes to enlist my aid," Abelard said.

"I don't trust him," Jasmine said quickly.

"I do not trust him either," Abelard replied. "But he has served for many years in holding back the darkness, so he is to be allowed his share of mistakes and misjudgements."

Jasmine said nothing. She didn't need to; the momentary curl of her lip said enough. "What does he want?"

"He wants assistance in finding certain objects and destroying them after they are found," Abelard said, reaching for his first piece of toast.

"So, is it in the finding or the destroying that he wants help?" Jasmine inquired. "And what sort of objects are we talking about?"

"Both the finding and the destroying – as to the objects, they are highly cursed objects – and likely to be guarded or booby-trapped as well as being intrinsically dangerous. The objects contain bits of Tom Riddle's soul," Abelard said.

"The fellow they call Voldemort?" Jasmine asked.

"The same."

"Lovely," Jasmine said, curling her lip again.

"We'll receive a full brief after dinner on New Year's Day," Abelard said.

"Will Harry be involved?" Jasmine asked.

"I would not be surprised either way, but I'd place my money on a minor role if I were a betting man. Well, enough of that, we can't make plans in a vacuum, so we'll have to evaluate it after we have more facts. While you were gone, I received a call from *Mr Paprikash*."

"Oh? How is the good judge doing?" Jasmine asked.

"He is well. What did he ever do to earn your wrath?" Abelard asked.

Jasmine smiled wryly. "I'm not mad at *him*. He loves mum and she loves him, so I guess I couldn't expect more than that."

"Then what are you still angry about after all these years?"

"You'll laugh at me," Jasmine said, pouring a cup of coffee.

"I think you know me better than that, Jasmine," Abelard said, placing his palms on the table.

"We were living here, mum and I, when Dad died. I missed Dad terribly, but I had it all worked out – you'd marry Mum and then *you'd* be my dad," Jasmine said, suddenly flushed.

"I can think of a number of impediments to that plan, but I'm flattered that you thought of me that way," Abelard said.

"I even talked to mum about it a number of times – she said she'd be willing to convert, so that wouldn't have been a problem," Jasmine said, suddenly wondering if she'd said too much.

"Again, I'm flattered, but as fine a woman as your mother is, I don't think I'm what she was looking for in a husband," Abelard said graciously.

"Don't sell yourself short, mum thought it was a good plan, all except for the love and romance part," Jasmine volunteered.

"Contrary to what you might believe, I *have* been in love before," Abelard said.

"Then why did you never marry?" Jasmine asked.

Abelard laughed. "When I was young, I was foolish and thought that I had all the time in the world. I had my eye on a particular girl who I thought fancied me in return. I thought we had an understanding; I thought she was going to wait for me. There was a major war calling on my attention. We were separated; by the time I found her again, she'd taken the veil," Abelard explained.

Jasmine looked at him incredulously. "Which means what, exactly?"

"She'd become a nun – one of the Daughters of Divine Compassion," Abelard said before sighing and looking out the window into the garden.

"The same order that runs the orphanage in the village?" Jasmine asked, astounded that she'd lived with this man all these years and never known this story. "Why didn't you ask her to leave?"

Abelard chuckled. "I had boxed myself into a corner – I was her *friend* – as her friend, I wanted to be supportive of her decisions. If God had called her to this life, who was I to call her away from it?"

"Is she still in the order?" Jasmine inquired.

"After a fashion – she died before you were born. We had a number of lengthy chats before she passed. She asked that I keep an eye on the orphanage, an obligation that I was only too glad to embrace," Abelard said.

"Did she know?" Jasmine asked. "I mean, did she know how you felt?"

"I think she suspected," Abelard said sadly. "She said she had no regrets."

"What of Molly Prewett?"

Abelard laughed again. "That was when I was *old* and foolish," he replied. "We both acknowledged that there was a certain frisson between us. She was very close to a fellow student at school, but she knew if she went abroad to study, that relationship would probably wither. At this point in my life, I think she chose wisely."

“Harry thinks so,” Jasmine quipped.

“Yes, young Harry has reason to be glad for Molly’s choices, although if Ginny were my daughter I’d certainly be happy to see the two of them together,” Abelard said with a knowing smile. “Which brings us back to Mr. Paprikash. He has received several matrimonial inquiries from the heads of magical families.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” Jasmine said, her voice unsteady.

“I do not regard this as a joking matter,” Abelard said calmly. “The first inquiry was from the head of the Rasman clan.”

“Why are *you* telling me?” Jasmine asked, suddenly changing tack.

“In light of your pledge to me and the fact that you never lived under Judge Paprikash’s roof, he does not think that he is capable to act for you in these negotiations,” Abelard replied with a twinkle.

“So *you’re* acting as my father now?” Jasmine asked before she began to laugh.

“It would seem as such – apparently the world at large believes your juvenile plan had merit,” Abelard replied before joining in the laughter.

“Rasman? Not! Definitely not – I would mutilate myself and become a nun before I would consent to marry any of the eligible Rasman men,” Jasmine said, leaning back in her chair. “What’s next?”

“Sistani,” Abelard replied.

“Abdul Sistani? He’s like what, 60 years old?”

“I’ll have you know he’s a vigorous and virile 58 years old – or so he informed Mr Paprikash. He also wanted to know if you were still a virgin.”

“I bet,” Jasmine said, tossing her braid over her shoulder. “Another not – a definitely not – delivered nicely, of course.”

“Then there was an inquiry from the patriarch of the Pakar family.”

Jasmine lifted one eyebrow.

“Ali Pakar is looking for a second wife,” Abelard said, wincing as he saw Jasmine’s expression change.

“I will *not* be a second wife!” she shrieked. “That one / will deliver in person, with a blade.”

“I don’t think that would be either advisable or necessary. Well, in that case, having rejected all of the other offers, that just leaves one inquiry,” Abelard said.

“Which would be from whom?”

“Ravi,” Abelard replied.

“My brother?” Jasmine asked incredulously.

Abelard nodded. “Ravi says that Beckman is moving to London in a week to become General Manager of the European branch of some company.”

“Beckman’s *married*,” Jasmine said bitterly.

“Not quite. According to your brother, the arranged marriage fell through.”

“Beckman didn’t know what he wanted, I suppose,” Jasmine said coldly.

“He knew exactly what he wanted – unfortunately for you he considered it his duty to honour his father’s wishes, no matter how he felt about you or the other girl. It appears that he was quite happy to be informed that his bride-to-be had a bad case of cold feet,” Abelard said.

Jasmine’s face went through a range of expressions. “When did she tell him?” she asked quietly.

“A fortnight before the wedding,” Abelard replied. He poured another demitasse of coffee, swirling the fluid in the tiny cup. “Well?”

“Well what?” Jasmine replied.

“Aren’t you going to reject him in turn?” Abelard asked.

“What does my mother think?” Jasmine countered.

“Your mother is quite fond of Beckman,” Abelard said.

“That’s not what she said when we were seeing each other.”

"Beckman is not attempting to negotiate a bride contract – he is merely inquiring if you are interested in seeing him again. His intentions are quite clear, however," Abelard explained. "As to your mother, that was then; this is now. Your mother wanted him to honour the bride contract his Father had negotiated. Shall I tell him that you are not interested?"

Jasmine was silent for a long while.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I have no interest in Beckman – I've always been partial to women," Abelard answered drolly.

Jasmine tossed her napkin at Abelard, who turned it into a brightly coloured bird that flew out the window. They sat together in silence again.

"I don't know," she finally said.

"Shall I tell him that you have not rejected his inquiry out of turn?"

"Let me think about it," Jasmine said, pushing away from the table. "Are we done?"

"For now – yes, I believe we're done."

"I'll let you know tomorrow after I sleep on it," Jasmine said, pushing up from the chair. "If I say yes, and if things work out, you know you're going to have to give me away, don't you?"

"That had crossed my mind," Abelard said with an amused expression.

Jasmine leaned forward to kiss his forehead. "Thank you" she whispered before she darted out of the kitchen.

"You are most welcome," he replied to no one in particular.

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Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com

Write to me – I write back.

Author's notes: Well, to all of the fans who have a soft spot in their hearts for a certain young War Witch, I have this advice: act quickly before she's off the market permanently!

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year New Years Day

December 30th, 2:14 a.m.

She was an instant away from screaming in her dreams when she realized she was awake – she was not in her own bed, but then again, she hadn't been sleeping in her own bed for months now, had she? Taking a deep breath, she leaned back against the comforting warmth of her beloved, only to startle again. She was in her human form, and whatever she was leaning up against, it wasn't Harry.

***You are still asleep, Mistress.***

*Tk1ch ?*

***Do you keep another dragon in your mind?***

*Smartyants .*

***I'm sorry to contradict you, but I've never worn pants of any kind.***

*So what's going on?*

***You were asleep, and very disturbed. You had transformed back into your human shape and were about to scream. I did not think your mum would appreciate waking up to find you in bed with your Krulach, although for the life of me I'm not sure that I understand why it is acceptable for you to nestle with him in your feline form and unacceptable for you to do the same in your native form. I took the liberty of steering you here.***

*Where is here?*

***In your mind, but in a place that I have prepared. Do you want to talk about your dream?***

*It was just a nightmare. I have those every now and then.*

***<silence>***

*You want me to talk about it, don't you?*

***I did not bring you here for your amusement.***

Ginny sighed, sat up and then leaned back against the cow-sized coils of white dragon, shifting until she could get comfortable.

"I was somewhere – I don't know quite just where," Ginny began, moving what must be a tail into place as a pillow. "Harry disappeared, which wasn't that unusual, but then I felt cold to my core and I felt something snap and I knew that he was really gone – I mean, I couldn't feel him across the bond, and then I realized that the bond wasn't there either. I began to panic – I mean, I figured that if the bond was gone, it meant that he was dead, or I was dead, or something equally horrible. That's when I transformed, wasn't it?"

***Indeed.***

*It was just a nightmare, right – because I'm worried about losing him?*

***You do have that worry, but it was not a nightmare – it was a glimpse of what is to come.***

*C'mon, divination is a bunch of dung.*

***The People have the ability to see the future. You are of the People. What your kind calls the second sight has been strong in your family for generations. When I became infused in your mind, your latent gifts began to unfold.***

*So, I saw Harry die?*

***Not exactly; the first thing we teach our young about vision is that there is a difference between having a true vision and grasping the proper interpretation.***

*So, illuminate me. What did I see?*

***You saw a part of your Krulach's destiny.***

*Do you care to explain further?*

**No, it is not time yet.**

*So, Harry's going to die killing Voldemort?*

**While that is important to you and yours, the People do not consider the man of darkness to be any more than something that must be overcome along the way to fulfil his destiny.**

*So, what is his destiny?*

**To be the Servant of the Light.**

*And that's going to get him killed?*

**No.**

*Am I going to see him die?*

**No. Relax; let your mind stretch out. Consider this – why were you placed on this planet at this time and place? Think and feel as the People do.**

*It's Harry, isn't it?*

**So, you begin to learn.**

*My purpose in life is to help Harry.*

**<silence>.**

*My purpose is to love Harry?*

**Closer.**

*My purpose is to be Harry's Krulach?*

**And?**

*To raise his children?*

**Indeed.**

*Which means that we live – there's a life on the other side.*

**That is a logical inference.**

*So why did I feel the bond break? That only happens when one of us dies, right?*

**That is the usual means of sundering the bond, but not the only means.**

*Harry breaks it off?*

**That would not be possible.**

*So, Harry doesn't die, he still loves me, but the bond breaks for some reason that you won't tell me about that involves Harry's destiny.*

**That is a reasonable interpretation of the facts.**

*You know, you're a real pain sometimes.*

**I exist to serve, Mistress.**

*I knew you were going to say that. So, what's so important about the Servant of the Light?*

**He is the one who was and who will be.**

*Oh, yeah, perfectly clear.*

**<Silence>**

**The People were not always dragons, Mistress. In the first war after creation – before your kind was created, we were wounded – we became mortal - and we were doomed. The Servant of the Light showed us how to become what we are today. Without him, we would have faded away.**

*What were you before you were dragons?*

***Immortal spirits, Mistress.***

*So Harry's another Servant of the Light?*

***No, there is but one Servant of the Light.***

*Right, but Harry wasn't around at the beginning of creation.*

***That is correct. Harry is here and now.***

*Am I going to remember any of this when I wake up?*

***Do you wish to remember any of this?***

*That dream scared the spit out of me – I'd like to remember that it works out.*

***Then you shall remember. We shall meet here again to talk about your visions. Return to your other form, Mistress Ginny. If you are gone too long, you will wake the Servant of the Light.***

*Oh, we couldn't have that, could we?*

Ginny stretched, and then became smaller and in a wink was in her Tick-tock form again, stretching again before curling into a circle. The mountain of white, scaled flesh dissolved as the room dissolved. She was in Percy's bedroom once again, curled up against Harry's back. This was nice, but not quite right. She began a rhythmic, throaty purr, shifting her paws against Harry's back until he turned over in his sleep, circling his arm around her. The purring continued until she was soundly asleep again.

Now all was right.

She'd sort out the destiny nonsense in the morning.

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New Year's Day

Operating several hours behind India had its advantages; the chief advantage was that if she didn't mind getting up at an ungodly hour of the night, she could put in half-a-day's work on the campus of the Shiva Institute and still have something of her day left back at Abelard's villa.

She'd started looking for her replacement, hoping that she could bring her up to speed before moving to England for her new assignment. She wasn't quite cutting her ties to Abelard, which she didn't mind, but he was going to be releasing her from her pledge by the middle of the month if she could find a guild member to take her place. If Abelard were content to stay at home he wouldn't need security, but he'd become accustomed to guild security, and was sufficiently solvent and set in his ways that he could indulge that luxury.

When the Britons put India under the empire, various factions insinuated that the guild would wither and die, but the need for the very wealthy to obtain nearly perfect security against banditry and assassination didn't change with the change in government. More than one of the British viceroys had retained a War Witch or two, learning from the example of their late predecessors who thought that retaining them was unnecessary.

After looking through the personnel files of the current class next to leave the Institute, she'd concluded that none of them would be a good fit. Protector of the Institute and the Novice Mistress agreed; inviting her to join them in Protector's office. Shaking off the notion that she should be nervous for some infraction she'd committed as a schoolgirl, she pressed her palm against the door. Entering the room silently she bowed to Protector and then to Mistress. Had the meeting been held in Mistress' chambers, the order would have been reversed. Protector hummed for a few measures and then sang the customary greeting to her, which she replied to in kind.

"It is good to see you again, Daughter," Protector said. "Your Patron is well?"

"Yes, sir; thank you for asking, he has made nearly a full recovery from his stroke and wants to resume his travel schedule again," Jasmine replied.

"You have been pleased to be in his service?" he asked in a deep rumbling voice.

"Yes, sir; I would stay there indefinitely if given the opportunity," Jasmine said.

"Yet you are eager to depart before the end of your pledge," Mistress said, her face partially in shadow, making her expression difficult to read.

"I wouldn't describe it as eager," Jasmine said with a small smile. "I will still be in Abelard's employ, but no longer under his roof."

"Was this your request?" Mistress asked.

"Not exactly; Abelard, acting in stead of my late father, received several inquiries for marriage contracts. All but one of them was found wanting for one reason or another," Jasmine said, wondering where this conversation was going.

"Did you wonder as to the timing of the requests?" Mistress asked, moving back a bit until her face was covered completely by shadow.



I did find the timing a bit odd, but I didn't give it a lot of thought beyond that."

"You have been voted in as a full fellow of the Guild of Shiva in the last meeting of the synod," Mistress announced.

"But I won't be eligible until the end of summer," Jasmine protested.

"I believe that is *our* decision to make," Mistress answered coolly.

"Yes, Ma'am," Jasmine replied, finding herself oddly off-balance upon receipt of this news.

"Congratulations," Protector rumbled. "Your actions have been profitable to the Guild, and brought us honour."

Jasmine nodded and bowed her head. "Thank you, sir."

"So," Mistress said cheerfully, moving into the light. "Now that we have that bit of business out of the way, I believe that you are trying to recruit your replacement."

"Yes, Ma'am," Jasmine replied with a sense of relief.

"I believe I have a situation that may allow us to solve one of our problems by solving your problem," Mistress said.

"And that problem might be?" Jasmine asked.

"I have a team that doesn't want to be split up," Mistress said.

"Abelard doesn't *need* a team," Jasmine said without reflection.

"This is not your ordinary Guild team," Mistress said, pulling a portfolio from her bookshelf. She passed the portfolio to Jasmine.

It was indeed not the ordinary team. Opening the portfolio she saw what appeared at first to be duplicate photographs, until she realized that the team consisted of two sisters, identical twins. They were orphans, which was not unusual in the Guild. Year after year, the entering class of the Institute was evenly split between girls who were the daughters of Guild members, and talented witches who had nowhere else to turn. Jasmine read through the transcript and after-action reports. Mary and Martha had received high marks. She repressed a desire to laugh when she read some of the evaluations – they'd received some of the same criticisms (from the same instructors) that she'd received as a student, down to the abysmal marks she'd earned in her Courtesan Studies course. They'd taken solo assignments after leaving the institute and while they'd been proficient at their work, they both had been evaluated for symptoms that pointed to a deep depression and they had almost been pulled from their assignments because of it. Their assignments after that initial assignment had been ones where they could be together, including courier work, personal security and leading a security detachment in a hot zone. Their evaluations from the security assignment had been top notch – the Commander obviously wanted to recruit them into that line of work, but they'd declined the invitation politely. They'd done advanced study in several interesting fields, including a few technologies and communications courses that Jasmine jotted down for future reference.

It was when she turned several pages into the portfolio that she began to smile.

"Before school they wanted to be *nuns*," she said, repressing a chuckle.

"Not entirely surprising, given the fact that they were *raised* by nuns," Protector observed.

"The Daughters of Divine Compassion, however, do not accept minors as novices," Mistress added. "The Mother of their House suggested that they learn a trade and experience the world a bit before entertaining whether or not they were suited to their way of life."

"So they came here – not the first thing I would have suggested to them, but sound advice all the same," Jasmine replied, looking through the rest of the portfolio. "Have they been approached about the possibility of entering into Abelard's service?"

"Yes," Mistress answered after a long pause.

"When can I meet them?" Jasmine asked.

"They will be delivered to Abelard's villa later this morning," Mistress said with a smile.

"You were *that* confident that I'd approve their placement?" Jasmine said, putting one fist to her hip.

"In a word, yes," she replied.

"What are their weaknesses?" Jasmine asked.

"Aside from a desire to see fools suffer, they appear to - er - suffer when separated," Mistress answered.

"I can see that from their file; how long of a separation can they stand? Hours, days, months?" Jasmine asked.

"They can go for weeks without seeing each other. Their first assignment was a test of that; I'd recommended against it, but they insisted that they should be treated as any other novice trying to earn the title of journeyman," Mistress replied.

"Would they protect their principal at the cost of their sibling?"

"I believe that you will find their sense of duty is perhaps as well developed as your own," Protector interjected.

"Well then, perhaps I should return to my station and form my own opinion," Jasmine said, nodding at each in turn before rising.

"Blessings upon you, daughter," Protector intoned.

"And upon you, good sir and madam," Jasmine said, closing the door as she left.

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The twins were in the garden when she arrived, playing with Rosie. They had the good sense to stay away from the inner wards, which would not recognize them as friends. They both stood straight, assuming a formal posture, their hands clasped before them.

"Greetings beloved sister," one twin said.

"And congratulations upon making fellow," the other added.

Jasmine looked at them coolly before bowing. "Thank you sisters, and welcome to Abelard's villa. May your visit be profitable."

Jasmine washed the inner ward with her wand, causing it to pulse briefly with a purple light. She then washed each of her guests in a similar light which flickered and then disappeared.

"You can adjust the wards?" one twin asked.

Jasmine nodded and smiled. "I am mistress of this house, as were my sister and mother in turn before me. Abelard trusts us with his life," she said simply.

"Indeed," the other twin commented.

"Are you free for the day?" Jasmine asked. The twins nodded in reply. "Good – today promises to be a bit busy, but it will give you a taste of operations. I'm sure that Mum has cooked enough to feed you in addition to our guests, although to make sure, I'll tell her first thing. Let's go into the kitchen and have some tea."

"Your mother is still in Abelard's employ?" one twin asked.

"Yes, although she's no longer pledged to him; she cooks and keeps the house. After tea time she's normally back home with her husband. She's here some weekends, but those are the exception, not the rule. So, which of you is which?" she asked.

"I'm Mary," the twin on her left said.

"And I'm Martha," the other echoed.

"You would have to do the twin thing and dress alike today – all except for the earrings," Jasmine observed. "Mary's wearing pearls, Martha's wearing jade."

"Very good," Mary said.

"Most people don't pick up such small details," Martha added.

"Do you always finish each other's sentences?"

"Pretty much," Martha answered.

"Except when we're arguing," Mary qualified.

"Mum!" Jasmine called. "We have guests for the day – do we have enough to feed them?"

Mrs. Paprikash came into the kitchen carrying a large basket of linens and looked at Jasmine with an arched eyebrow.

"Okay, sorry I asked," Jasmine said with a slight flush. "Mary, Martha, this is my mum, Snik Paprikash."

Mrs. Paprikash clasped her hands together and gave a small bow which was returned by each of the sisters and then held out one hand, palm down, which was kissed by each guest in turn. "You honour me with your visit, sisters, may your journey be profitable," she said, selecting her greeting carefully. Turning to Jasmine she said, "You should know better than to ask if I have enough for two more. As of this morning, I should have more than enough for our guests unless they double in number, or are all teenaged boys experiencing their growth spurt. The tea service is in the parlour already," she snapped, returning to her tasks.

Jasmine blinked and then looked back at the women she was preparing to interview. "Thanks, Mum, we'll be in the parlour until about ten o'clock," she said, making a beckoning motion with her hands.

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"So that's it in a nutshell, any questions?" Jasmine concluded.

“Did you really meet with the Ghost Dragons?” Martha asked.

“Professor Hopko said that they were mythical,” Mary added.

“Yes, I did – it was one of the most eerie and beautiful experiences of my life,” Jasmine said. “Anything else?”

“Erm, yes, what’s he like?” Mary asked.

“Who he? Abelard? I’ve been talking about him for almost half an hour!” Jasmine exclaimed.

“Not him,” Martha said, rolling her eyes.

“The ‘chosen one’ as the English papers call him,” Mary said.

Jasmine laughed and then composed her response. “Well, he’s shorter than you’d expect. When you face him in combat it’s hard to believe that he’s just sixteen. He’s very much a quick study; very polite, very quiet, very much in love with his girlfriend, with whom he’s bonded already, thanks to the dragon magic inside his head,” she replied.

“Oh, we weren’t asking for that,” Mary said.

“We already heard that he had a girlfriend,” Martha continued.

“It was written up in *Teen Witch*, after all. Lovely pictures from the ball, I might add,” Mary concluded.

“Does he have a matching dragon tattoo on his back?” Mary asked.

“No – and don’t ask how I know,” Jasmine answered, looking down briefly. “Do you always do the twin-talk thing?” she asked.

“Yes,” Martha said while Mary simultaneously said “No.” All three witches began to laugh.

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“Okay, here’s today’s assignment in a nutshell – the Weasley family, plus a few guests, are coming for dinner. They’ll be arriving after lunchtime, staying for tea and dinner and leaving at a fairly late hour – unless Abelard’s stamina calls for an early conclusion. We’ll be taking the Portal to a known safe location in England and once we determine that the site is safe, we’ll open the Portal at the Weasley residence. Any questions?” Jasmine asked, her face having gone serious in her mission briefing mode.

“How many guests?” Mary asked.

Jasmine pulled a portfolio onto the kitchen table. “Nine Weasleys, significant others or dates for the occasion, and Albus Dumbledore. The Weasleys are easy to spot, they’re all red-haired Englishmen,” Jasmine began.

“What about the women?” Martha interrupted.

“They’re red-haired Englishwomen,” Jasmine said with a smile. She began to pull page-sized photographs from the portfolio. “Molly Weasley, early fifties, she’s the mum, Arthur Weasley, he’s the dad, same age. Ginny Weasley is fifteen going on forty, but you apparently already know what she looks like. She has six brothers ranging in age from sixteen to the early thirties.”

“Who’s the Veela with the older one?” Mary asked.

“Well spotted, she’s a quarter-Veela, actually by the name of Fleur Delacour, engaged to Bill Weasley. They both work for Gringotts – he’s a curse breaker, she’s a charms specialist,” Jasmine replied.

“This one?” Martha asked, pointing to a picture of Charlie.

“Charlie Weasley – works with dragons in Romania. He’ll most likely be bringing this woman along as a date,” Jasmine said, dealing out another picture. “Moey Knight – she’s an Auror with the English Ministry – we worked together last summer when she was on Harry’s security detail.”

“Does she know what she’s about?” Mary asked.

“Well enough. I wouldn’t mind her at my back if things got unpleasant,” Jasmine answered.

“The one who looks like he smells something unpleasant?” Martha inquired.

“That would be Percy – he works for the Ministry – he just ended a lengthy estrangement from the family. We’re not entirely certain of his loyalties, notwithstanding his reconciliation. He may not show for the visit, and if he does, he’s not cleared for any of the business discussions,” Jasmine said curtly.

“And these?” Martha asked, pulling a picture of the twins across the table?”

“Fred and George – don’t ask me which is which – I can’t tell them apart,” Jasmine said.

“Really?” Martha said, raising one eyebrow.

Really – perhaps if I gave them earrings I'd have a better shot at it," Jasmine replied drolly. "Don't underestimate them – they are exceptionally talented and imaginative in anything involving Charms, Potions or Transfiguration – they own a joke shop. Most of the items are either their own invention, or marked improvements on stock items in the trade."

"Which leaves these two," Martha said, pointing to the two remaining pictures.

"Right – the boy in the Quidditch outfit is Harry's roommate from school, a pleasant enough lad. His date, if he brings one, will most likely be this lass," Jasmine said, pulling a picture of Hermione from the portfolio. "She's more or less Harry's sister," Jasmine said, placing the last photograph on the table.

"I thought she was dating Harry," Martha said.

"Until she dropped him for that Krum fellow" Mary added.

"Lesson Number One about Harry: don't believe anything you read in the English Press," Jasmine advised. "When they're not painting him a rake, they're saying he's a madman one day and a liar the other."

"That could get old," Martha said.

"Has it made him bitter?" Mary asked.

"Surprisingly not," Jasmine said, trying to put her impressions into words. "Given how wretched his life has been, he's amazingly hopeful most of the time, although he has been subject to fits of depression in the past."

"Been there," Mary said.

"Done that," Martha added.

"And you share the tee shirt?" Jasmine asked.

"No," Martha answered as Mary said "Yes."

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"State your position," Jasmine said, remembering what she could from her small group tactics course in fourth year, speaking softly into a charmed disk hanging from her neck like a necklace.

"Mary here, I'm on the east side of the property, outside the wards. They appear to be serious about their security. Nothing untoward observed. I detect eleven souls inside," she whispered.

"Martha on the west, also outside the wards. I concur with Mary's count," she murmured.

"On the count of ten I'm bringing the portal in, on twelve I'd like you two to appear at your insertion points," Jasmine replied.

"Got it," two voices replied in unison.

"One, two, three," she counted softly, establishing the tempo for the count. She took the portal back to Abelard's garden and then directed it again to the agreed upon insertion point by the herb garden. Stepping from sunny warmth into overcast chill was disconcerting, but travel by portal was always counterintuitive. She was immediately set upon by Ginny who gave her a hug while Harry looked on with amusement.

"Welcome back to the Burrow," he said before turning to the assembled mass of red-haired wizards. "Come on you lot, I don't fancy waiting here until the freezing rain shows up."

"Always the cheery one, Harry," Fred said, missing the sound of a muted Apparation pop behind him.

Jasmine nodded at the place she supposed Mary to be, flashing a hand signal when the last guest passed the portal. She felt a wisp of breeze as a disillusioned War Witch squeezed past. She stepped through the portal and then closed the door again. Martha was coming by Apparation – it would take her a few minutes to hop the distances required – the shortest path in this instance was not the most expedient, so Martha took a route that would allow her to touchdown and then take-off again without filing border crossing reports.

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Jasmine spent the time watching – but then she always did that when she was on duty. She didn't think that any of the guests posed any threat to her principal, with the exception of Percy, who she couldn't read. If Percy were to make the slightest hostile move towards Abelard, she'd pin him to the wall with the crystal stiletto hidden in her hair. Looking at her principal, she smiled. Abelard was animated, which certainly beat the lassitude that he'd experienced as he was recovering from his stroke. He'd led the group on a tour of the Villa and the grounds, acceding to a request to allow them to play Quidditch on the Meadow after lunch. While the guests were occupied with sports, Abelard had requested an interview with Mary and Martha, who, to Jasmine's great pleasure were nearly invisible as they assisted with the supporting logistics. If she didn't know better, she think that there was only one raven haired Indian girl helping Mum serve lunch rather than two. Watching the eyes of the younger Weasley men, she noted that Fred and George seemed to be paying particular attention to Mary or Martha when they appeared.

Perhaps she'd brush up against one or the other of the Weasley twins to see what they were thinking, but then again, perhaps not.

Lunch was longer than normal, but then again, the table was full of Weasleys, who liked to eat whilst they talked. Percy left before pudding, which was fine with Jasmine, who escorted him to the Portal and then returned to join the guests for pudding. After telling some particularly mortifying stories about Molly when she'd been Molly Prewitt, Abelard began to draw stories from each of the guests in turn, which led to Harry's disclosure that he'd been receiving private tuition from Rowena Ravenclaw's mirror.

"So she does exist after all," Abelard exclaimed.

"You'd heard of her?" Harry asked.

"One of my mentors said that he'd discovered a talking mirror when he was a student at Hogwarts," Abelard said.

"That's impossible," Harry replied. "Rowena said it had been over two hundred years since she'd last spoken to a human."

"How old do you think I am, lad?" Abelard asked.

"You're about as old as Dumbledore, so you're somewhere around a hundred and fifty," Harry replied.

"My mentor is easily twice my age," Abelard said.

"And still alive?" Molly asked.

"He comes from particularly long lived stock and says that his job keeps him young," Abelard replied.

"So, what has the lady been teaching you?" Abelard asked, settling back into his chair, his eyes bright.

"Well, lately, she's been showing me how to take some of the dragon magic and extend it to applications that the dragons never considered," Harry replied, looking around the table.

"Elucidate," Abelard commanded.

"Well, the snow dragons can disappear, which is helpful when you're a predator," Harry began, disappearing and then reappearing behind Bill to make his point. "Quite by accident I discovered that I can make things disappear if I'm touching them. Rowena studied that for a while and then figured out some interesting twists."

"Such as?" Fred asked with interest.

"Making things appear that aren't there," said Harry from the end of the table, joined by another Harry and then another.

"Wicked," Ron exclaimed.

"So which one is the real one?" George asked.

"I think it's the one that's making eyes at our sister," Fred replied.

"They're *all* making eyes at our sister," George said.

"You've got a point there," Fred said, turning to Jasmine. "Can you tell them apart?"

Jasmine flushed. "I've already done that once, I'll let someone else tackle that."

"Like the sisters who are helping your mum?" Fred asked.

"They don't happen to be *your* sisters, do they?" George asked.

"Only in a sorority kind of way," Mary said, summoning the dishes to the kitchen. "None of them are the real Harry – the real one is standing behind your sister."

"There's no one standing behind Ginny," Ron exclaimed, tossing a napkin over her head. The napkin stopped in mid-air and then flew back at Ron. "Crikey, Harry, do you always have to make me look foolish in public?"

"We're not in public, mate, we're just with your family," Harry replied, appearing behind Ginny as the other Harrys disappeared.

"Yeah, *we're* used to you looking foolish," Fred replied. A queer expression passed across his face before he turned into a giant canary.

"Now that's foolish looking," Hermione said with a smug expression.

"Thanks, luv," Ron said earnestly.

Hermione just smirked in reply. "So can you do that too, Ginny?"

Ginny stood up, pushing Harry back into her seat. She did a quick pirouette and then vanished. A dainty glove appeared, floating in the air above the table, wiggling as an invisible hand pushed into it. Another glove appeared, and then a gauzy, peach coloured camisole.

"Hold it right there, young lady, you are not going to perform a reverse strip tease before your family!" Molly exclaimed.

"Why, Mum? Would you rather I do it before strangers instead?" Ginny asked, appearing behind Molly as the gloves pulled the camisole on over an invisible head.

"You know exactly what I was saying, and I'll thank you to not be smart with me," Molly huffed.

"Bravo!" Abelard shouted, clapping his hands weakly together. "Oh, that was marvellous. Mary, come back in here."

"Yes, sir?" Mary said, as she came in from the kitchen, followed promptly by her sister.

"There *are* two of you," Arthur exclaimed.

"Why yes," Mary said.

"There's always been two of us," Martha added.

With a mild puff of feathers, Fred resumed his human form. "Told you," he said to George, who pulled a Sickle from his pocket.

"Do you two play Quidditch?" Abelard asked.

"We've been known to toss a Quaffle or two," Mary said.

"But only when we're not batting Bludgers," Martha corrected.

"True," Mary said.

"Enjoy a scrum or two with our guests, if you would," Abelard suggested. "Dumbledore will be joining us shortly, I'd like to have a brief meeting with him while our guests play Quidditch."

"You'll not be joining us in the game?" Molly asked coyly.

"Not a chance," Abelard retorted. "A century ago, maybe, but these old bones are not suited for sporting endeavours, Molly."

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To Charlie Weasley's chagrin, he was only able to catch the Snitch against Harry one time in three. While taking a break for refreshments, Jasmine came alongside Harry and whispered in his ear, before turning to Ginny.

"Abelard would like you to join him in the meeting," Jasmine announced. "Apparently you're losing your mushroom status."

"Will wonders never cease," Ginny retorted. "So, what's new?"

"I'll be leaving Abelard's staff this month," she said as the two witches walked through the meadow.

"The twins are your replacement?" Ginny asked.

"Most likely," Jasmine replied.

"Gred and Forge are taken with them," Ginny observed.

"I'd wondered about that," Jasmine said. "I thought they were dating girls back in England."

"Overtaken by events. Angelina Johnson's on the road too much with the Harpies, and George's thing with Verity never went anywhere," Ginny said authoritatively. "How about you?"

"Well," Jasmine said, flashing a knowing smile, "it just so happens that there *is* a lad back in my life again."

"I thought you said you couldn't fall in love when you were pledged," Ginny said.

"I did say that, but this is someone I knew from before the time I was pledged with Abelard," Jasmine said.

"Serious?" Ginny asked.

"Serious enough that I'm moving back to England to be close enough to do some courting," Jasmine replied.

"Where's he live?" Ginny asked.

"London," Jasmine said. "I'd rather live somewhere warm and sunny, but weather isn't everything."

"No, but there are other ways of keeping warm," Ginny said knowingly.

"Umm, we'll see," Jasmine said noncommittally.

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Jasmine led them into Abelard's study. The silver tea service was set out on the low table. Dumbledore and Abelard were sitting together, examining a tarnished silver locket. Harry was standing next to the loveseat, waiting for Ginny to sit down.

"Please stay, Jasmine, you are a necessary participant in today's meetings," Abelard said gravely. "Albus, you need to start the story today – the floor is yours."

"Thank you, Abelard, and once again, I thank you for your hospitality," Dumbledore began, setting his tea cup down on the low table. "It has taken me a while to piece together this story, so please bear with me, as there are still gaps in my knowledge, and no doubt errors as well. During the first war, there were rumours that Tom Riddle, the man we now know as Voldemort, had come close to, if not having attained his goal of immortality. We suspected then that the rumours were incomplete, if not flat out wrong, especially after Voldemort died after murdering your parents, Harry. When Voldemort returned to his body a year and a half ago, we had to go back and examine the clues that we'd missed. To that I owe a great debt to you, Miss Weasley."

"What did I do?" Ginny asked.

"You survived being possessed by Tom Riddle during your first year of school. The diary was a most interesting artefact, most interesting indeed, for it contained a segment of Tom Riddle's immortal soul," Dumbledore said.

"What benefit would there be to placing a bit of his soul in a diary?" Harry asked.

"A question that I pondered time and again over the last several months, Harry," Dumbledore answered. "A soul-containing vessel is known as a Horcrux – the diary was the first Horcrux we discovered, although it may not have been the first Horcrux that Tom Riddle created."

"There's more of them?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"Indeed, that is the whole point. The Horcruxes, or Horcruces as my learned friend would say," Dumbledore said, gesturing to Abelard, "are both a means and an end in and of themselves. If you have two or more portions of your soul bound up in material objects, when your body experiences death, the soul remaining in your body does not translate into the spirit realm as is the normal case upon death, but is bound to life as we know it – anchored, if you will, by the other bits of soul bound up in the objects."

"So that's how Voldemort wandered about without a body for all those years before he found Professor Quirrell," Harry said.

"Exactly," Dumbledore replied. "Our task, the task of the Order of the Phoenix and those who will ally themselves to our ends, is to find and destroy Tom Riddle's Horcruces, which will then make it much easier for Harry to dispatch Tom Riddle when the opportunity presents itself."

"Why Harry?" Jasmine asked, speaking for the first time.

"According to prophecy, only Harry can kill Voldemort," Ginny volunteered.

Jasmine raised an eyebrow, but said nothing further.

"So, how many are there?" Harry asked. "You said that there had to be at least two."

"Did I?" Dumbledore asked rhetorically. "I believe that there were six Horcruces, as Tom was most impressed with the powers inherent in the number seven – six Horcruces, plus the remaining soul fragment in his body amounts to a seven-fold split, which he would find most appealing."

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"Seven is the number of divinity, Miss Weasley, and I'm afraid that Tom Riddle has a rather conceited notion of his place in the universe," Dumbledore said, reaching for his tea cup for a swig of tea.

"You said *were*," Ginny said. "How many are there now?"

"Well, your mate destroyed one of them when he rescued you in your first year at Hogwarts, down in the Chamber of Secrets," Dumbledore replied. "Since then I've acquired one more. I thought Miss Kadakia procured another, but I was mistaken."

"Just one," Jasmine said. "The one you sent me after was a fake."

"I do believe that a story is in order," Dumbledore said. Abelard nodded. Jasmine slipped her legs under her and reached for her cup of tea.

"Well, I'm not particularly good at telling stories, but here goes," she began.

"Is the locket you were examining when we came in a Horcrux?" Harry interrupted.

"No, *that* locket is a decoy," Abelard said.

"The beginning of the story starts last summer, when your Headmaster retained my employer for a most unusual assignment," Jasmine began, an odd smile on her lips. "It was supposed to be tutoring, tutoring in Occlumency, I believe. We all know where that ended up. When you were in the hospital, Ginny, unknown to me, Albus privately asked Abelard for something more in his usual line of business, trying to find several cursed dark objects; what we now know are Horcruces. As a Seer, Abelard is often tasked with finding lost objects, but as we found out, these Horcruces are so heavily cursed as to be next to impossible to find, but Abelard can do many impossible things, so with a little bit of research, and a lot of Farsight, he located the first Horcrux."

“Where was it?” Harry asked.

“Little Hangleton, a relic from the Gaunt family,” Abelard answered.

“What sort of object?” Ginny asked.

“A signet ring – your brother broke the curse on it for me after Abelard brought it home, which was a good thing. If I’d gone with my first inclination, it would have incinerated my hand,” Jasmine answered. “Abelard started working on finding the second Horcrux when he had his stroke, which set things back a bit. Once he finished rehabilitation, he started back on his regimen of three to four hours of Farsight a day, looking for the trails that would lead him to the next one. All of the leads led to a cave on the coast – not far from Penzance. The cave was Unplottable, so we spent a day or two trying to find it, and then another day to penetrate its defences.”

“We?” Ginny asked pointedly.

“Yes, *we*,” Jasmine replied. “I was working with Mister Beckman Gupta.”

“Your old *boyfriend*?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Bill’s old partner?” Ginny chimed in chorus.

Jasmine smiled broadly. “*Current* boyfriend, we’re back together again; he’s courting me, and yes, Bill’s old partner, but he’s not working for Gringotts any more. He’s the lad I mentioned on the way in today.”

“Which is why Jasmine’s being released from her pledge,” Ginny said.

“Indeed,” Abelard said with a chuckle. “It seems that this pair is well acquainted with the details of your personal life.”

Jasmine stuck her tongue out at Abelard and then gave him a wink. “We had to have *something* to talk about when we were tutoring this summer, and as there’s absolutely nothing interesting to talk about in your life, we had to talk about mine.”

“So,” Ginny purred. “Tell us about your hot date with Beckman.”

“Well, it went about as well as your outing with Harry to Gringotts,” Jasmine replied. She picked up a fat cylinder and began drawing a diagram on a white rectangle on the wall behind her. “The cave is natural, but it was heavily modified – most likely by Tom Riddle himself. Beckman thought it was fascinating, actually,” she said with a hint of pride. “The first hurdle was a blood barrier.”

“Which required a sacrifice of blood on your part?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, we used some from the unfortunate soul who was guarding the cave,” Jasmine said ruthlessly. “He didn’t need any of his blood any more. Beckman really doesn’t like surprises. Once past the barrier at the entrance to the cave, we found a lake. There was an island in the middle of the lake – it was the obvious centre of the magic.”

Dumbledore nodded, his fingers arched in a tent before his lips. “There was a boat hidden nearby, I presume,” he said.

“Yes,” Jasmine said with some disdain. “We didn’t use it, though. The waters of the lake were full of Inferii. We froze the lake and walked to the island. The Inferii were immobilized, and it made the stench a bit more bearable.”

“So, what did you find on the island?” Abelard asked. “I never was able to penetrate the inner veil on the cave when I was using Farsight.”

“Something Beckman called a Stygian Fountain – looked rather like an old-fashioned bird-bath to me,” Jasmine replied. “It was filled with an odd potion – we couldn’t break through the surface to get at the object at the bottom of the fountain.”

“So you drank it?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not hardly,” Jasmine replied. “The potion was toxic and cursed. Beckman tried a number of things to get at the object at the bottom of the fountain, but he cautioned me to not even think of drinking it, even though there was a strong compulsion hex on the fountain that made us think of nothing else.”

“So, what did you do?” Harry asked.

“Conjured a couple of gallons of elemental Mercury, pouring it into the fountain as we conjured it. Because it wasn’t alive, it could penetrate the surface of the potion. As it was much heavier than either the fountain or the object at the bottom, it displaced things until the object floated to the top. The potion made a terrible mess, but at that point we didn’t care much.”

“What then?” Harry asked.

“Well, the lake thawed about this point, so we had to dispatch a few Inferii before freezing it again. We secured the object and scampered out of there,” she said with a smile.

“And the locket was the object?” Harry asked.

“Yes, terrible waste if you ask me – it’s a common piece of costume jewellery. Have a look,” she said, tossing it to Harry.



“So why do you think it’s a decoy?” Harry asked Abelard, looking at the locket as Ginny looked over his shoulder.

“The original locket that I saw when I was scrying for the Horcrux was a filigree locket with a pattern of serpents, forming an ‘S’ on the cover. This locket is plain, and bears no traces of Dark Magic,” Abelard replied.

“Why do you call it a locket if it doesn’t have a hinge or a catch?” Harry asked.

“You give it a twist,” Ginny answered. “Aunt Muriel had one like that. I loved to play with it when she came to visit.”

Harry gave it a twist, nodding when the locket unfolded, dropping a stained and wrinkled bit of parchment to the floor.

“Is this safe to pick up?” Harry asked.

Jasmine flicked her wand over the parchment, which glowed with a faint blue light for an instant. “Yes, but it was prudent of you to ask,” she said, nodding as he picked it up. Harry unfolded the bit of parchment, smoothing it out so as to be able to read the faint script.

“What does it say?” Dumbledore asked impatiently.

Harry stared at the parchment before reading it aloud. “ ‘ To the Dark Lord - I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more. R.A.B.’ ” Harry read carefully. “Who the dickens is ‘R.A.B.’?”

“Someone who was familiar with Tom Riddle, and with his Horcrux project,” Abelard replied.

“Note that he says ‘Horcrux’ in the singular,” Jasmine observed.

There was a long silence, broken by Ginny, clearing her throat.

“Um - uh - I think I know who ‘R.A.B.’ was and where the real Horcrux might be,” Ginny said quietly.

The room exploded in a barrage of questions, most of which had to be asked again, as no one in the room, much less Ginny, could hear when everyone was talking all at once.

“Is Beckman available today?” Ginny asked Jasmine.

“No, he’s back in India, visiting his family,” she replied.

“Then you’d best see if Bill’s willing to go with us back to Harry’s house in London,” Ginny replied. “I think the real locket is at Grimmauld Place.”

~+~

New Year’s Day – for a few more minutes...

Dear Diary,

The academic year is not quite half through, yet I’m almost finished with your ivory coloured pages – what a year it’s been. Well, New Year, new experiences – let’s see if I can list them in no particular order of importance:

- Much to the dismay of my brother Charlie, Harry is still the best Seeker I know – but then I’m probably more than a little biased on that topic. Harry caught the Snitch two out of three times today.
- Jasmine’s leaving Abelard’s house soon and is back together with her old flame. Oddly enough, Harry knows more about this story than I do, but I’ll be sure to remedy this the next time I go out to lunch with Jasmine.
- The Twins are twitterpated – the object of their affections being Abelard’s newest employees, Mary and Martha. I’m not quite sure that the interest is reciprocated, but they are certainly in Gred and Forge’s league as Beaters. I’d read of Beaters being able to Clank the Bludger, but never seen it done. On more than one occasion during our games today, a Bludger hit by Gred or Forge was met by another Bludger launched by Mary or Martha, at the exact speed and spin to cancel the motion of both balls – resulting in a resounding clank before the balls would fall to earth. Impressive bit of marksmanship if you ask me.
- Hermione found out about my Christmas Eve visit to Harry’s room at the Dursley’s house. I think she’s jealous, even though nothing much happened that night beyond an exceptionally good snog. We had a good just-us-girls talk about boundaries, more for her sake than mine, I suspect.
- Having a nearly photographic memory has its benefits. When Abelard described the Slytherin locket he’d been looking for, I remembered the creepy locket we found at Grimmauld Place when we were first attempting to decontaminate it two summers ago. It wasn’t where I thought it would be at Grimmauld Place, but Dobby knew where all of the seriously dark trash was stored, in a heavily warded bin that looked like it had stored potatoes in an earlier life. Bill never knew that House Elves had a warding magic all their own – he was most impressed. It was indeed a Horcrux. Damned thing gave me the creeps just looking at it, and as I got near to it each and every Pyr’g in my head started throwing fits. I never knew that spiders could scream.
- Bill says the Horcrux was rather spectacular when they cracked it open. I’ll take his word for it; that’s one task that I’ll gladly leave up to the boys.

I never did get a chance to discuss that destiny thing with Harry, but there’s always breakfast once we get back to our school schedule. I’m really knackered, and it’s time for me to get feline and start the evening’s power-nap.

TTFN,

GMW

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Author note: Thus begins the serious work of making SFSY into a somewhat HBP compliant tale. Not to worry – I'm not fixing to write a Horcrux hunt – that's JKR's job. We will, of course, see more of Jasmine, and Mary and Martha in the coming chapters. We might even get a chance to meet Beckman.

## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year Storm Clouds (Summer after Sixth Year)

June 15, 1997

Dear Diary,

I'm worried about Harry – which isn't new by any means. This year has been brilliant in so many ways, and then June hit. It's hard to get excited about winning the Quidditch Cup when the Headmaster isn't there to award it. Harry had been dreading the approach of June – he had an uneasy feeling that the usual end-of-year snake-lips-surprise was coming, he just didn't know what it was going to be. When the Giants began to attack Hogsmeade during the last Hogsmeade weekend of the year, Harry was ready – Ron and Hermione organized an evacuation of the younger students while Harry and I made short work of the Giants. The Giants in Hogsmeade were just a diversion, however. Death Eaters had been let into the castle by our good friend Draco Malfoy, who had used the Vanishing Cabinet in the Room of Requirement like an oversized Passbox. As far as we could tell, the raid had two objectives: murdering Dumbledore and kidnapping Harry. Harry didn't get the memo, however, and wasn't where he was supposed to be that day to get kidnapped. When Harry and I returned to the grounds, Draco made the tactical mistake of firing first at Harry, which pretty much confirmed to us what was going on, and more importantly, who was flying the dark flag. Harry stunned him and then stuck his wand hand to the flying boar gatepost. When Snape led the remaining Death Eaters outside the wards in retreat, he had to sever Draco's hand, as the sticking charm was truly unbreakable. Maybe Snake-lips will make Draco a silver hand to match Wormtail's, and then the ferret and the rat could be a matched set.

We had Dumbledore's funeral the next to last day of the term. I could feel Harry's rage boiling off of him during the service, but by the time we left Hogsmeade the next day on the Hogwarts Express, he seemed more or less back to normal – as normal as Harry ever is when going back to Privet Drive. I thought it was a cruel insult to send him back there, but Harry said that he didn't mind, it was something he could do to honour Dumbledore's memory.

So, Harry is back at Azkaban South for the month, riding through Surrey again. He bought me a bicycle over the Christmas hols, so I've been Apparating with the bicycle to a pre-arranged rendezvous point and joining him most every day, playing Muggle tourist and Muggle boyfriend and girlfriend. Harry was supposed to live with the Lupins after two weeks at Privet Drive, but I'm not sure that's going to work, which is odd, because Harry's last day at Privet Drive is tomorrow, but that's how things are.

Tonks made the announcement at the end of May that she was expecting, which took us all by surprise. According to Hermione, Werewolves are normally considered sterile, and Metamorphagus women are more or less barren as well, given the odd effects their shape-shifting magic had on their reproductive equipment. Remus, of course, was in seventh heaven with the notion that he was going to be a father. Tonks' plan was to work through her second trimester of pregnancy and then take an open-ended leave of absence from work. She'd been finishing up a rather routine job in Cornwall and then was reassigned to serve in Madam Bones' security detail, which was normally considered a rather plum assignment. Last night, Tonks dropped Madam Bones off to her flat, started to go back home to Grimmauld Place, but then, following a hunch, went back to Bones' flat. Madam Bones was dead of course by the time she got there, the Death Eater assassins having already made their exit. I don't know exactly what happened, but in all the action, Tonks miscarried.

It seems a bit odd, but baby Lupin's death has hit Harry much harder than losing Dumbledore. Remus was quick to point out that this wouldn't change anything for Harry's lodging arrangements, but Harry thinks the Lupins need to be left alone to process their grief. Mum, of course, wouldn't mind having Harry here for the summer, if for no other reason that it would be easier to keep an eye on him (and me) if he's sleeping under her roof. Harry left me a note this morning that he wasn't up to company, so I didn't join him on his ride today. He's pretty much bottled up everything. When I touch our bond all I can feel is a bunch of roiling rage and sadness, but nothing much beyond that; it's hitting him that hard. Snape had been sniffing around the special project, but according to Jasmine, he never got a tumble as to what's going on. The only people read into the story were two Weasleys (me and Bill), Jasmine, Abelard, Harry and Dumbledore. Ron and Hermione don't even know the details of the project.

Well, on to happier subjects.

I can't think of any either – at least not in my life.

Bill and Fleur are going to get married this summer, right between my birthday and Harry's. On the whole, I've got it good – the family is together and everyone is healthy – although things are still a bit patchy with Percy. Hermione's keeping my youngest brother sufficiently busy that he's staying out of my life. I haven't received my OWLs yet, but I'm fairly certain that I'm going to beat Ron's old record. And yet I still worry about things I can't control. Where will Harry be living this summer? What's going on with the rest of the Order? When will the final shoe drop? And most importantly, what am I going to do when Harry finishes Hogwarts and I still have a year to go?

I broached that subject to Mum once – she breezily stated that I'd finish school, of course. I'll be of age by the time I start my seventh year, so I could drop school if I'd like, but long term, I don't see that working out so well. Harry thinks that snake-lips *is* going to try something during the school year, next year. Riddle's losses were pretty high in Hogsmeade, but then again, we lost Dumbledore and Bones too. Riddle has tried, and failed, with the spectacular operations, so now he's going for assassinations. Hermione says that it's like the Muggle civil wars where both the government and the rebels use death squads to take out supporters of the other side. I wasn't at all comforted when she told me that the side that killed the most people usually won.

That's it for now.

GMW

June 30, 1997

Dear Diary,

I can't believe that I haven't written in you for two weeks – but as Harry is so fond of saying 'it is what it is.'

Harry did end up with the Lupins – which I suppose was for the best. He's been helping Dora (who doesn't want to be called 'Tonks' any more)

do a lot of makeovers at Grimmauld Place. She's still out on leave, but that will end soon. The one room that they haven't touched is the room that was supposed to be the nursery. Harry's not so distant now, but just below his calm façade the rage and sadness are still there. He's still the man who marked me, my mate for life, but I'm worried.

I've been training with Abelard – not so much the warrior stuff I did with Jasmine last summer, although I do sparring with Mary and Martha, who have wicked sense of humour that so reminds me of another pair of twins. Jasmine doesn't live there any more, in fact, she's not too far from Grimmauld Place, but she's still popping in and out, reporting in to Abelard and picking up new assignments. She says she went shopping for rings (wedding and engagement) with Beckman last weekend. They weren't happy with the stuff they could find in London, so they went to Brussels instead. She is so smitten with him it's not funny. I haven't caught her practicing 'Jasmine Gupta' as her new signature yet, but I'm sure she's done so. The odd thing is that Beckman hasn't proposed yet. That doesn't seem to bother either one of them, however, and their trajectory seems rather sure. I'd be very surprised if they last through the summer. Two weddings this summer?

Fleur hasn't turned into Bridezilla yet, which is a good thing, but I think that Mum is getting rather tired of Madame Delacour. Fleur rather pointedly asked Mum to arrange the details of her wedding, which hasn't stopped Fleur's mum from dropping in at all hours, armed with rolls and rolls of "suggestions." Some of the stuff is all right, I suppose, but the majority of it is more suited to a garish circus, and the gowns she "suggested" for the bridesmaids – yecch!

Well, Mum's calling again, I'll write more, later.

GMW

August 8th, 1997

Well, The Wedding went off without too many hitches – I shall attempt to memorialize my thoughts on the subject, using as my theme, "the good, the bad, and the unexpected."

The Unexpected:

- Although this should have come as no surprise, there were tonnes of people at The Wedding – Weasleys, of course, as we are a rather prolific lot, most every member of the Order, although I'm sure that there are some members I haven't met yet, a tonne of French wizards and witches, including a sizeable number of Veelas, and an equally sizeable contingent of goblins from Gringotts. It was the last that was unexpected, to me at least.

- I knew that Bill spoke passable Gobbledegook, but Fleur speaks it as well, although when she speaks it, it's elegant, and just a little bit sexy. Who knew that Gobbledegook could sound enticing?

- Gabrielle showed up looking cute, curious, and all of eleven years old, although I'm sure that very few of the eleven year olds in my class ever looked as good as she did. My French is passable, so we could talk, Gabrielle pulling out her French-English dictionary when either one of us got stuck. Gabrielle knew enough Gobbledegook that she asked one of the younger, taller goblins to dance. They were an odd looking couple, but they danced together for most of the faster numbers, and they both seemed to enjoy it immensely.

The Bad:

- Madame Delacour totally lost it the morning of The Wedding, going so far as to retreat into the loo off of the kitchen, where she hogged the toilet while she emptied her stomach of everything she'd eaten over the last year. After that, she was much better, glowing like the other female Veelas in attendance, declaring how much she loved us all. It sort of made up for the mad berk that she'd been in the days prior, but not by much.

- The gowns that Gabrielle and I had to wear were indescribably hideous. Words could not express our gratitude when we were allowed to change out of them, into more normal and more comfortable clothes for the rest of the reception.

- Charlie and Percy got into it an hour or so after dinner. Harry saw it coming and was able to flag Ron's attention, which was a good thing. Ron and Harry separated them before they began duelling on the dance floor. I don't think we've heard the end of this one yet.

The Good:

- Harry seemed to have declared a moratorium on his rage for the day, and was chipper and pleasant. Other than a dance with Fleur, another with Gabrielle, and a somewhat surprising dance with Dora Lupin, we spent every moment together on the dance floor when the music was playing. Dora pulled me aside and expressed her gratitude for all the comfort that Harry's given her after losing the baby. Yea – Harry!

- After the whole shootout in the basement of Gringotts, the goblins opened a vault for me in my name, the first deposit being their reward money for services rendered. I was able to go shopping for a proper gown for the wedding without having to deal with the spending-Harry's-money issue, which was a relief. The gown was stunning, although Mum questioned the wisdom of displaying my "tattoo" for the entire world to see. TK'Ich assured me that he could make it less noticeable, so rather than being a lovely shade of indigo, my marking was pale and spotted, just like the rest of me. TK'Ich thought it was appropriate and quite amusing for a snow dragon to disguise himself in such a fashion.

- About a minute before the service started, Jasmine and Beckman arrived. They'd both been invited, but they were doing something that they said might keep them away, so they'd told us not to expect them. It was good to see them together. Jasmine looked fabulous, of course, giving the assembled Veela a run for their dainty French money, but I'm fairly certain she didn't care – Beckman noticed, and that's all that mattered.

So, there it is: the good, the bad and the unexpected. Eating, dancing, and schmoozing with friends, relatives and allies. If Jasmine ties the knot before the end of the summer, I imagine we'll do it all over again!

TTFN

GMW

August 28, 1997

Dear Diary,

I can hardly believe that the summer is almost over. Harry's been on a retreat with the Grey Friars (he assures me that lifetime vows of celibacy are not contagious) and I've been finishing up my tutoring with Abelard. I won't say what I've been doing, other than saying that many nights when I got home, I couldn't perform the most elementary acts of magic, I was that tapped out. Usually by the morning, however, my levels would replenish. Abelard says that it's good to drain and regenerate in this fashion, as it builds up my capacity and reserves, but I think that's just adult talk about how something is so good for you. It does explain, however, why Abelard's house has Muggle appliances for everything. Jasmine once explained that if Abelard overworks himself, he'll often go for weeks without doing any magic at all while he rebuilds. He hates to have to

rely on others, so thus the completely Muggle alternative. I imagine that I'll probably furnish my house in the future that way too, as it would be a shame to starve in my own kitchen if I couldn't work the magical appliances. Dad, of course, would be over the moon to be able to fiddle with all of that sort of stuff – we had a hard time dragging him away from Abelard's on New Year's day.

It's going to be weird returning to Hogwarts without Dumbledore. McGonagall has been appointed as the new headmistress, which means that we're going to need to have a new Head of Gryffindor House, as well as a new Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor.

Harry's just returned – I'm going to draw this to a close and see if he's game for a fly in the orchard before dinner. If I'm lucky, maybe I can convince him to go star-watching after dinner too. (Hey, I come by these scarlet woman tendencies naturally, I'll have you know.)

TTFN,  
GMW

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## Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year All Good Things . . .

All good things...

Judge Cooper finished the final memorandum in the stack, signing the action page with a flourish. She hated to leave work undone before going on holiday. Looking down at her calendar, she noted an inscription she'd made quite some time earlier. By fate, or by sheer coincidence, her ruminations were interrupted by a gentle tapping on the window, a sound she hadn't heard for years, not since her brother passed away and she no longer had anyone she corresponded with who used Owls. She didn't recognize the owl in question, which wasn't that odd. In the time since she'd left the Wizarding world, she imagined that most of the owls she recognized by sight would have likewise passed away.

She opened the window carefully, allowing the tan and white barn owl entrance into her chambers. The owl appraised her carefully and then stood on one foot, extending the other foot in front of her. Judge Cooper held out her hand under the owl's clenched talons. She felt the cool weight of the cylinder as it fell into the palm of her hand.

The owl exploded in a flurry of beating wings, as if only too happy to leave her chambers and return to her own world. Cooper brought the cylinder back to her desk, turning on the light and retrieving her glasses in order to inspect the cylinder carefully before activating the clasp. When she was convinced that it was genuine, she placed the sharp end against the palm of her left hand, wincing as she felt the pinch of the device. Only she could open the cylinder once it was sealed – blood sealed in this particular instance. The cylinder grew in size and weight, opening one end to expose the tightly rolled bit of parchment inside.

*Still parchment – you'd think that no one had told them that the Dark Ages were over.*

Dear Auntie Madison,

I regret to inform you that the last member of that very select band has passed away. Words cannot express my feeling of loss, a feeling that I hope that you, too, share in some way. As you had made your feelings quite clear, no one attempted to contact you for the memorial service, although I've enclosed a programme from the service, for your scrapbook.

You made a promise to me, long ago, when I was barely of age, that I'm calling upon today. If you wish to visit me in person, I wouldn't mind, but I expect the package within a reasonable time.

I remain ever your devoted 'niece.'

Alba L. Longbottom

Judge Cooper brushed away the tears from her cheek. Receiving a note from Alba reminded her suddenly and savagely that not everything from the old world was unpleasant. She thought momentarily of Apparating to her, but reckoned that she didn't know where Alba lived any more, given that she was a Longbottom and not a Lupin, and she'd not practiced that bit of magic for more than sixty years.

*Perhaps it's time to go back, if only for a visit.*

She shook her head at the thought, and then gathered her things into her bag, which was uncharacteristically light without the usual clutch of briefs and memoranda that she took home every night. Come hell, high water, or messages from her past, she *was* going to go on holiday tomorrow, which meant that work would stay in her chambers – experience taught her that it would still be there when she came back.

~+~

My dearest Alba,

As I remember saying to you years ago, the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. I do not hate the Wizarding world, and indeed I still miss a few individuals, you included, but the ones I loved the most are either now gone, or have decided that I was not worthy of their love. This does not mean, however, that I have forgotten promises made long ago, however imprudently they might have been made.

Enclosed you will find the manuscript. I have checked it over for errors, but could find none. The source documents are sealed, of course, and will not be released until several years after my death. If you survive me, they will go to you; should you predecease me (there I go, sounding like a barrister again) they shall go to the Department of Mysteries.

While Harry and Ginny were alive, we seven would gather each year in June to dine together. After they passed, the remaining members of the seven did not have the heart to gather in that fashion. I propose that we revive that custom this year, if it is convenient to you, and I will visit you at your home or some other place of your choosing for a night of remembering.

I am ever your fond faux aunt,

Madison (Norbeck) Cooper, K.C.

Enclosed in the package was a thick bundle, wrapped in what appeared to be butcher paper, secured with string.

Alba hesitated, thinking for a moment that she should wait until Aunt Madison was here to answer the questions she would no doubt have, but she dismissed that thought in an instant, snipping the string with her ever-present penknife so she could rip open the butcher paper and expose the manuscript beneath. Inside was a cool, spiral bound book with a curious title page, assembled as if for a school assignment.

## The Last Battle

An account of how the second war came to end, compiled from first-hand reports.

M. Norbeck Cooper

My second year at Hogwarts was tumultuous, not only for me, personally, but turbulent in the events that played out at school and in Wizarding Britain as well. As to my personal life, puberty decided to grace me that year; I grew six inches in nine months, nothing seemed to fit, and I almost lost my spot on the Gryffindor Quidditch team because of my growth-spurt induced spell of the clumsies. I was a lumpy pollywog, no longer a sleek tadpole of a girl, and not yet the graceful woman I would become. I would have gone mad that year, apart from my friendship with one of the greatest Witches of my age, Ginevra Potter, known then as Ginny Weasley. In the larger picture, we were in the midst of the Second War; Magical Britain was still reeling from the assassination of the Justice Minister, Madam Bones, and the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore. The Wizengamot finally tossed Fudge, that most wretched excuse for a Minister out, replacing him with one who was only slightly better. Since returning to his new body, Tom Riddle had tried two flashy operations which resulted in losses for his side. As he lacked the raw numbers to overthrow the Magical government by force, his Death Eaters began to wage a hit-and-run campaign of assassination and kidnapping. After the war ended, we discovered that the kidnapping was the primary source of cash for necessary operations, as the Ministry's tardy actions were somewhat successful at drying up Riddle's usual sources of support. As luck would have it, I was present at the first (the creature invasion of Gringotts), involved in the second (the battle of Hogsmeade) and an eyewitness to the third.

Aside from my personal issues, Hogwarts was remarkably different my second year. Professor McGonagall was appointed as Headmistress, a number of students were withdrawn by their parents, who sent them to Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, Salem, or kept them at home for private tutoring. Slytherin house almost closed for lack of students, but Professor McGonagall went to extraordinary ends to insure that Professor Slughorn had every incentive to stay as Potions Professor and Head of House. The snakes had just enough students to field a Quidditch team, but that team was so pathetic that when we played them, we fielded the Gryffindor Reserve team, which was somewhat satisfying, as I beat them twice under the new game rotation as the Gryffindor Reserve Seeker.

Notwithstanding the war, the school year was, for all intents and purposes, fairly normal. Classes were held, students misbehaved, romances flourished and withered at the hot-house pace that was normal to co-ed residential schools, and we managed to learn something despite the distractions of the war that was going on outside our heavily warded and guarded walls.

Because I was small, and a girl, many people didn't take me seriously. I played this to my advantage, learning to move silently in the castle, which afforded me the opportunity to learn a lot of things that weren't on the curriculum by just keeping my ears open. When I wasn't bawling on Ginny Weasley's shoulder, I was reporting to Harry Potter what was happening throughout the castle, a service that he appreciated.

Harry and Ginny, as a couple, were as different from other couples as could be. They weren't constantly groping each other or sucking on each others' faces, nor were they constantly bickering. Instead, they had the steady familiarity of good friends who knew each others' stories, and who could often finish each others' sentences. I wanted what they had, but of course, at the ripe age of 12, I lacked an appropriate, interested consort.

I knew better than to barge in on them unannounced, of course, and I never caught them doing anything in the PDA department that would have raised the ire of any of the more punctilious prefects. This didn't mean, however, that they were totally aboveboard. They led the D.A., and had a lot of contact with people I assumed were in Dumbledore's old group.

After the war I learned about the Order of the Phoenix, and Harry's own group of operatives, who worked alongside the Order, but had their own agenda. Harry and Ginny could make things happen, that's for sure.

Breakfast in the Great Hall was always a time of some trepidation that year, between the fairly uniformly dreary news in the Daily Prophet, and the equally unreliable Owl Post that would be served with our meal. By lunchtime the student gossip mill would be running full tilt, trying to analyze what was *really* happening. Harry and Ginny had their sources, and from time to time would slip away from the school without the permission (as far as I could tell) or the knowledge of the Headmistress. On one of these occasions, they came back into the castle close to the curfew, smelling terribly of smoke, which was not that unusual, with a number of irregular burns in their clothing, burns that I recognized from D.A. sessions. The next morning there was a small article in the Prophet about a warehouse fire in Liverpool. I refrained from mentioning anything about it until I could find them together, alone.

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"Are you two decent?" I called, knowing that I would find them around the corner in one of their favourite chatting spots.

Ginny made a suction breaking sound while crying out in a high falsetto "Oh, Harry, your hands are so cold."

"No, really, are you two carrying on, or can I come and talk to you?" I asked.

"We're kissing," Harry replied. I couldn't see his face, but I knew he was smiling.

"Yeah, tongues and everything," Ginny added before giggling.

"Yeah, right," I said, rounding the corner. Harry was sitting up on the couch and Ginny was lying down, her feet resting on his lap. Ginny was

notorious for making her boyfriend rub her feet at the end of the day, much to the displeasure of many boys at Hogwarts who were asked why they didn't do that. Well, in any event, on this particular instance their hands were in plain view and their clothing wasn't dishevelled.

"What's up, Maddy?" Ginny asked.

"Um, I just wanted to ask about the news," I said, suddenly regretting my notion to pump them for information.

"What news?" Harry asked, boring into me with his jewel green eyes.

"Uh, the fire in Liverpool," I replied.

"What makes you think that we know anything about the fire in Liverpool?" Ginny asked, transfixing me with a particularly carnivorous stare. If I'd been a mouse, I'd have been a goner.

"Well, uh, when you came in the night before, your clothes smelled of smoke and you had singe marks that looked like, well, battle damage," I muttered, taking a sudden fascination with the tops of my shoes.

"Sounds like we're busted, Mr. Potter," Ginny said.

Harry said nothing, but invoked a privacy sphere around us; that always made my ears pop.

"There's a war going on," Harry began.

"And you're the Chosen One," I said, regretting my impulse after the words left my mouth.

"Yes," Harry admitted. "I'm not the only one doing things to make Riddle's life miserable *and* short, but sometimes I'm away from the castle."

"So you *were* involved," I said.

Harry smiled. "You're a very bright girl, Madison."

"When Hermione was my age, she was helping you with the Philosopher's stone," I said impulsively.

"We were in over our heads then," Harry said, changing position as Ginny sat up. He slid his hand over hers.

"I want to help."

"You *do* help, Madison," Ginny said sympathetically. "You tell us things, information that we can't get anywhere else."

"I want to do *more*," I said, trying not to sound like a whinging child.

"Work hard in the D.A., never be without your wand, work on your medical spells," Harry said plainly.

"I'm not afraid," I said with some bravado.

"That's funny," Harry said. "I'm afraid -- every time. I worry about Ginny, she worries about me."

"You're a good dueller, Madison, better than I was at your age, but it's not a sport, and you need to work better with your partner," Ginny said.

"But he's a moron," I blurted out.

"Stephen Borwick is many things," Harry said.

"Including being an insensitive berk," Ginny interrupted.

"But moron is not one of them," Harry concluded. "I paired you with him because your strengths complement each other."

"But he just thinks I'm a little girl," I protested.

"Then show him that you're a *dangerous* little girl," Ginny said with a particularly wicked smile. "Your objective in the D.A. is refining your skills, not getting a date for the dance this summer."

"What dance?" I asked, fairly certain that they were pulling my leg.

"All in due time," Harry said. "It's *supposed* to be a surprise." He then shot Ginny a dirty look.

"Right," Ginny said, letting the dirty look roll off of her.

"So what happened at Liverpool?"

Harry and Ginny shared a look between them.

"Riddle lost some property that he wanted, badly," Ginny said with another wicked smile.



And the fire?" I asked.

"Some things go 'boom' when you break them," Harry replied drolly.

"Right," I said.

"But officially, we don't know anything about that," Ginny said.

"We were working with Hagrid with some Manticores," Harry added.

"You aren't taking Care of Magical Creatures," I objected.

"Independent Study," Harry said.

"Plus, we just like to help," Ginny added.

"Right," I said, trying to keep the disbelief from my face.

"I'm glad we cleared this up," Ginny said.

"So when *do* you kiss?" I asked, changing the subject.

"After you leave," Harry said, cancelling the privacy sphere, "when we're alone."

I recognized my cue.

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And so I kept my ears and eyes open, and worked hard, doubly hard during the D.A., but my opinion of Stephen Borwick didn't change, even after dancing with him that following summer, but that's a different story all together.

Towards the end of the year I started hearing rumblings among the Slytherins. Nothing I could put my finger on, but more than one conversation stopped when I became visible, all of which involved one or more Slytherin prefect, and in each instance there was a word in common: "Malfoy."

I thought it was probably nothing, but I dutifully reported it to Ginny during our regular meeting. Her eyes flared while she was listening, but otherwise her face betrayed nothing.

I put it out of my mind as exams approached, trying to beat the marks I'd earned the year before. I wasn't in Granger's league yet, but I was catching up to her. Although I was from an old Wizarding family, I was Muggleborn and adopted, so I had an itch to prove that I *belonged* in the Wizarding world, unlike my brother, Eoin, who mainly concerned himself with Quidditch and music, but that too is another story. Exams came and went, we had the first leaving feast without Professor Dumbledore, and as the leaving feast drew to a close, I came to the sudden realization that this was Harry's seventh year – he wouldn't be back next year. While we were on the train, this thought kept ringing through my brain like a tantalizing half-forgotten memory. I finally decided that I needed to prank a few of my classmates, including my insensitive berk of a duelling partner, Stephen Borwick, one last time before we scattered. Harry and his closest friends had commandeered the last car on the train, an odd one-off car that was half the length of the usual cars. The normal cars had a hallway running down the middle, with compartments on either side. This car had a doubly wide hallway running on the starboard side and one nicely appointed room resembling a parlour or common room on the other. As Hermione was Head Girl that year, no one questioned her commandeering the car for her last trip from school.

I slipped into this Gryffindor den, whispered a request into Harry's ear to borrow his invisibility cloak (one of the better kept secrets of Gryffindor Tower) and then slipped out, a few moments later, with a small parcel under my arm.

My prank expedition took the better part of two hours, involving a number of subtle and not-so-subtle bits of magic, including my mum's signature "Velcro fly charm" that stuck the fly of certain boys' pants shut. A number of them were still talking about it the next year, but that too is another story.

As I was returning Harry's cloak to him, there was a horrible clank that rang through the train as we turned a bend. I was just entering the last car in the train at the time and some instinct told me that I needed to have Harry's cloak on, rather than having it safely tucked under my arm.

That instinct probably saved my life. After the clank, the car was unnaturally silent – we were slowing down. It didn't take a Ravenclaw to figure out that the last car was no longer attached to the Hogwarts Express. A number of adult Wizards and one Witch became visible, Apparating quietly aboard. They were all wearing half-masks, so I figured they weren't from ScotRail.

My first instinct was to attack, taking as many with me as I could, but Harry's repeated admonitions in the D.A. to assess the situation before acting restrained me from ripping away with the deadliest curses I could imagine. My skin began to crawl as I felt magic erupting along the walls of the train car. Even if I knew how to Apparate, (which I didn't) that option was now off the table, as the Death Eaters had just erected some powerful wards, keeping the intended victims in and the potential rescuers out, I surmised.

I never saw what happened inside the compartment where Harry and his friends were – I was too busy trying to make sure that I knew how many Death Eaters were here and where they were. Once I got inside the compartment, I thought things couldn't be worse. Harry was bound and gagged and everyone else was bound with what looked like steel cables. I started calculating how I could cut the cables while simultaneously launching an attack, when I heard Harry speak in my mind.

*Madison, things are not as they seem*, his voice said serenely.

Harry? I thought back.

*Right in one – now look, I don't have a lot of time – you need to stay hidden, and no matter what happens, you must stay hidden and stay put. Help is on the way and things are going to look terrible, but we're going to end it today.*

I nodded to Harry, who winked in reply.

If I thought that things couldn't get any worse, I was wrong.

Voldemort appeared with a puff of foul-smelling smoke. He was dressed in a very regal scarlet robe, but physically he really looked like hell, chalky white, leathery skin, no nose to speak of, little misshapen lumps where his ears should be and inhuman, red-rimmed eyes.

Voldemort yakked for a while, but I wasn't really paying attention, as I was still trying to cobble together an attack plan, generating and rejecting any number of ideas, but nothing miraculous came to me. When Voldemort stopped talking, the witch released the coils holding Neville and then lashed him with Cruciatius. Neville screamed terribly until he collapsed. One of the male Death Eaters checked him, saying that he had no pulse, but I wasn't sure. Then they started in on Luna, then Ron, then Hermione, and finally Ginny. Each time the screaming continued until the target went limp. I never knew Cruciatius to be fatal, but then again, this was Bellatrix Lestrange we were talking about, so perhaps the normal rules didn't apply.

"Thank you, Bellatrix" Voldemort said, as if he were complementing a particularly helpful store clerk.

"I live to serve, Master," she said, bowing deeply.

"I hope you enjoyed the entertainment, Harry, but we cannot put things off any more – there's no Mudblood mother to die for you this time, no Headmaster to rescue you today; it's time to die, Harry," he said matter-of-factly.

"I don't think so," Harry replied, shucking off his bonds and gag like so many threads.

There were curses of surprise from the Death Eaters. Voldemort assumed an attack stance, his wand pointed at Harry's heart.

Harry's eyes never left Voldemort. He raised one hand, palm up, until it was between them.

A pearl appeared in Harry's hand, a pearl of blindingly beautiful light. One of the taller male Death Eaters shot a blast of green light at Harry only to see the curse consumed by the ball of light in his hand.

"Maybe you're right, Tom, it is time to die, but you're the one to do the dying; you've had more practice," Harry said with a hint of a smile.

Moving quick as a striking cobra, Harry grabbed the wrist of Voldemort's wand hand with his free hand and then plunged the fiery ball of light into Voldemort's chest. There was a sizzle, several screams and then the two of them disappeared in a blinding flash of light accompanied by a deafening clap of thunder.

We were all dazed by the blast.

The Death Eaters began shouting and darting about the room. The tall man, pointing to an angry red blotch on his arm, said something to the effect that the Dark Lord was gone, and it was time for them to make themselves scarce. He then called to the Death Eater serving as sentry at the back of the car, asking him to remove any trace of their being there.

That Death Eater replied, "Yes, Father."

While there were many Father-Son pairs in the service of Voldemort, Draco Malfoy's oily voice was quite memorable, even though I'd only heard it a few times in the prior school year. The Death Eaters left the parlour, heading towards the front of the car, where they'd Apparated in. Draco began straightening up, shooting a red, scattering light on surfaces the other Death Eaters might have touched. Then he approached my friends, my dead friends, kicking Neville in the head before picking up Ginny Weasley's limp body and draping it face down over one of the cushioned chairs. Any doubt I had as to his intentions vanished when he flipped her skirt up and then ripped her knickers off.

Promise or no promise to Harry, I wasn't going to let Draco Malfoy violate Ginny's lifeless body.

As he was unzipping his fly I landed a running leap onto his crotch. I learned later that the impact broke his thumb in two places and cracked his pelvis. I then stunned him, twice, and wrapped him in conjured ropes. My only regret about that transaction was that I didn't think of cutting him and leaving him to bleed to death until after the Aurors arrived, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Ginny's knickers were pretty well shot, and I was no great shakes then at transfiguring clothing (the Velcro fly charm, notwithstanding), so there wasn't much I could do for her apart from laying her down on the floor and arranging her skirt so that she was covered up. Her body was limp, and beginning to get cold.

Out of habit, more than anything else, I checked her airway, which wasn't blocked, looked for signs of breathing, which weren't there, and then checked for a pulse, which was non-existent. The last step in that procedure was casting the *Viatika* charm, which I dutifully did, remembering Harry's admonition to practice my medical charms. I was absolutely gob smacked when the charm lit up a cheery yellow glow about her body. I repeated the charm, producing the same cheery yellow glow. For reasons unknown, a body that wasn't breathing and had no pulse was sufficiently alive to test positive with *Viatika*, not just *alive*, but with fairly strong life strength.

I repeated the test on Hermione, Luna, Ron and then Neville, all with the same result. Five seemingly dead bodies were being kept alive by

*something*. I kicked Draco a good one in the head and then sat down in a different overstuffed chair to think, still wrapped in the Invisibility Cloak, just in case.

I should have been relieved then, even happy, but all I could do was cry, having watched my friends, some of my best friends in the whole world, tortured and murdered before my eyes, watch the Chosen One dispatch the worst excuse for a human being from existence, and then find out that, as Harry promised, *'things are not as they seem.'* There were only so many traumas a twelve-year-old witch could absorb in one day, and I'd reached my limit about an hour ago. As things turned out, I had another two hours to wait, which is when Draco started stirring. I stunned him again and then sat down. I'd found a wooden doorstop in the hallway, and I'd been carving it with my penknife. I wasn't as good as Eoin, but I had a good shape going over the next hour; it was a duck.

The windows to the railcar were spelled shut and opaque. I didn't particularly want to fool with them for fear of tripping some nasty curses left behind by the Death Eaters, who, it seemed, were remarkably unconcerned about the whereabouts of Draco Malfoy. About an hour after I'd stunned Draco I heard a low hum that rattled my insides. It sounded like a far-off freight train, but when I put my ear to the front and back doors to the railcar, I figured that whatever was making the noise, it wasn't coming from outside. The hum got louder and higher in pitch until a flash of light burst into the parlour and Harry Potter stepped in – without his wand, without his glasses, without his trademark scar, completely hairless and naked as the day he was born.

"Hello, Madison, it's good to see you again," he said, nodding at me.

I ripped off his Invisibility Cloak and ran to hug him, not thinking for the moment that he was naked.

That was rather irrelevant at the time; he was back!

After holding me and cooing comfort into my ears for a few minutes, Harry let go of me and surveyed the damage in the room. There was a nice circular scorch mark where he'd left with Riddle a few hours ago, and the still forms of our friends. Then he spied Malfoy.

"So what happened to Draco?" he asked.

"Uh, he tried to do something to Ginny's body, so I blasted him," I stammered.

"Good on you," Harry said.

"Uh, Harry, could you do something about clothes? I grew up with a brother, but this is starting to freak me out," I said.

Harry looked down at his naked limbs and laughed.

"Sure Madison," he replied, conjuring a scarlet knee-length pair of shorts with a matching tee-shirt, and then frowning while he conjured some slippers. Sitting down to put on the slippers, he asked, "Is that better?"

"Much," I replied.

Harry ran his hand over his now-shining scalp, seemingly surprised by the lack of hair. He bent down, placing his head between his knees before he shook like a dog. When he finished, he had hair again, as dishevelled as ever.

"C'mon over here, I'm going to need your help," he said, kneeling down to examine Ginny's body.

"They're still alive," I said.

"Yup," he replied.

"But they're not breathing, and they don't have a pulse," I added.

"Yup," he said, continuing with his examination.

"Do you know how to revive them?" I asked.

"Yup," he said, giving me a large grin.

"So, what can I do to help?" I asked, clueing into the notion that he was having me on.

"You're going to kiss Neville and Ron for me," he said drolly.

"I beg your pardon," I replied.

"You need to breathe into their mouths," Harry countered, "it's how the spell works."

"What spell?"

"It's based on *fa'czhng*, with a twist," Harry replied. "Look, I'd love to chat with you about this, but right now, I really want to get them back into the land of the living."

"Right, what do I need to do?" I asked earnestly.

"Open their lips a bit and then breathe into their mouth," he said, leaning down to kiss Ginny. The first kiss was rather short. Ginny's colour began

to return and Harry kissed her again. It was a long kiss, quite a long kiss. I didn't know whether to be embarrassed or jealous.

"Do I have to do it like that, or is the tongue bit optional?" I asked when he came up for air.

"That would depend upon how you want them to remember you, Madison," he replied.

That did it for my indecision; I could feel my cheeks burning when I bent down to kiss Neville.

By the time I kissed Ron, I'm sure I was Weasley red down past my shirt collar. After that, Ron kissed Hermione (something I'd seen a time or two before) and Neville kissed Luna, who reached up, grabbing the back of his neck, and wrestled him back to the ground for a second, longer kiss.

After a tumultuous round of hugging, kissing and crying, Hermione brought down the wards that had been left on the railcar and Ron shot off a most impressive magical beacon. Within a few minutes, the car was swarming with Aurors, who, to a man, looked at Harry, examining the forehead that now had no scar, and then looked at the scorch mark before breaking into wide grins. They carried Draco out of the car like so much trash, accidentally-on-purpose banging his head against the doorframe on their way out.

Ron broke the silence first. "You guys hungry? I'd kill for a pizza about now."

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Alba Longbottom smiled as she turned the last page. The report was incomplete, of course, but she figured that she'd worm the rest out of Aunt Madison when she came by next week for dinner. Speaking of which, she needed to lay in some supplies, things she hadn't thought of in nearly fifty years. After drafting the list, she wandered over to the fireplace, tossing a pinch of Floo powder into the flames.

"Grimmauld Place," she called out. "Mum? Are you there?"

She heard a plate drop, followed by a muffled curse. It was Mum all right.

"Wotcher, sweetie, whadja need?" she called out, sticking her head into the flames.

"Madison Cooper – you knew her, didn't you?" Alba asked.

"Of course I knew her, she baby-sat for you a time or two," Dora replied.

"I didn't know that," Alba said, taken aback. "Why did she leave our world?"

"You don't know? I thought you two were thick as thieves at one time?"

"We were, but we never talked about that – we knew each other through Ginny," Alba explained.

"Let me come on over, we'll talk about it over tea," Dora said, drawing her head out of the fire while she clanked in the kitchen before stepping through the flames.

"Do you want the short version or the long version?" Dora asked, once her tea cup was filled.

"The short version will do," Alba said, hoping that her mum could keep it together long enough to finish the tale once she started.

"Well, the short version is that she got torqued off about the whole blood-purity nonsense, and then she got her heart broken, over pretty much the same thing. She concluded that we could rot in our own sewage and she'd make her way in the Muggle world; I'd say she did fairly well. University, law school, admission to the bar, a brilliant career as a barrister, and then appointment to the bench, getting bumped up to the Circuit Court last year. She didn't fare too well in the affairs of the heart though; she married another barrister and then became a widow," Dora said, looking vacantly into space.

"Who broke her heart?" Alba asked after a decent interval of silence.

"Eli McIlwain," Dora replied quickly, looking over her teacup at her daughter.

"*The* Eli McIlwain? Highest scoring chaser in the league for five years running, starting with his rookie year?" Alba asked incredulously.

"Yes, that McIlwain – they went to school together – she was Gryffindor Quidditch Captain for her last two years, he was Captain for Ravenclaw," Dora said with a sly smile.

"What happened?"

"They fell in love, and then their fathers negotiated a betrothal contract that fell through," Dora said, looking out the window again.

"What? Why?" Alba asked, getting incensed at the notion.

"Madison was from a pureblood family, but she was adopted. When Mr. McIlwain asked for her genealogy, Mr. Norbeck produced a family tree of her biological kin, who were all Muggles," Dora said.

"She was Muggleborn?" Alba asked.

"Muggleborn, but Magic-raised," Dora said. "When the Norbecks adopted her, they went through the Muggle system. Had they bothered to re-

adopt her through the Wizarding courts, her claim to pureblood status would be good as your husband's claim."

"And derailed the engagement?" Alba squeaked.

"Madison had been encountering the usual pureblood bullshite on the job, being denied assignments, not getting interviews, the usual song and dance; this was just the last straw. She had a rather high-volume discussion with her beau to the effect that he had to choose between her and this pureblood bullshite," Dora paused to take a long draw from her teacup. "If Eli had chosen her under those terms, he'd have been disinherited. Instead, he honoured his father's wishes and drowned his sorrows on the pitch. I thought he was heartbroken, but a year later he's married off to a sweet but stupid pureblood broodmare who popped off a half-dozen or so empty-headed pureblood offspring before dying in childbirth on bambino number seven. He never remarried."

"Sounds like a bad wireless drama," Alba said.

"Doesn't it? Madison didn't want to live in a world where she'd see her lover's face emblazoned on the sports page nearly every day, so she up and left," Dora said. "I've missed her something awful, but I understand her motivation."

"I'm having dinner with her next week," Alba volunteered.

"How lovely! Make sure she feels welcome," Dora advised.

"But of course."

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Some friendships wither and die with prolonged separation, others remain vital, picking up where they last left off, notwithstanding a separation of years or decades. Dinner with Alba and Franklin Longbottom was like that. Once they got past the obligatory inquiries into occupations (Franklin wrote children's books while Alba owned an apothecary, specializing in certain hard to brew, very fussy potions) and the health of parents and siblings (Dora and Remus were doing quite well, thank you for asking) the friendship between Madison and Alba reignited, to their mutual delight and surprise.

Franklin cleared the table and returned from the kitchen with a plate of speckled fudge and a bowl of peanuts. Madison looked at the offering and burst out laughing.

"I don't believe that you've remembered that after all these years!" Madison exclaimed, taking a square of fudge and mashing it into the bowl of peanuts. She popped the conglomerate into her mouth. She was silent for a moment, the only sound being the crunching of the nuts as she chewed. "Still good," she pronounced, pushing the plate away from her.

"Surely you're not going to just have one?" Alba asked.

"Just one to begin, and don't call me Shirley," Madison replied.

The two witches broke out in another burst of laughter.

Franklin cleared his throat, reminding them that they were not alone in the room. "Ladies, while it's been a night to remember, I have an editor Owling me daily, asking where the next chapter is, so I must immure myself in my study to get my beloved editor off of my back," he said, bowing as he shut the doors leading into the dining room.

Alba reached for a square of fudge, giggling as she smashed it into the peanuts. "Do you remember when you corrupted me with this confection?" she asked.

"Of course, you were, what, a fifth year at Hogwarts, home for the Christmas hols, and you came over to Ginny's house to drown your romantic sorrows, only to find me there doing much the same thing," Madison replied.

"You were living with the Muggles then," Alba replied.

"Yes, I'd finished school and was recently admitted to chambers, Lincoln's Inn. Harry and Ginny saw us and snuck out, leaving the two of us in their parlour for the evening. That's when you read me Ginny's letter about kisses," Madison said, reaching for another square of fudge before stopping herself.

"Did you really kiss my father-in-law on the lips?" Alba asked.

"Oh yes, but I'm sure that he enjoyed the kiss with your future mother-in-law more," Madison replied with a grin.

"Your narrative is maddeningly incomplete," Alba declared.

"So I've been told," Madison said. "The Ministry considered Obliviating me, declaring that all of this was some sort of State Secret."

"I'm sure that went over well," Alba retorted.

"That was the one and only time I ever heard Harry raise his voice to the Chief Auror," Madison said, again with a smile.

"So what really happened?" Alba asked conspiratorially.

Well, you know about the Horcruxes, don't you?" Madison countered.

"They called them Horcruxes at Hogwarts in History of Magic," Alba said. "Harry and his friends were destroying them during his seventh year."

"Well, that's another thing they got wrong," Madison replied, "the plural form, I mean. The Horcrux team was a limited, need-to-know operation – even Ron and Hermione were in the dark on bits of that, until afterwards, of course. Once the Horcruxes were gone, Riddle could be killed without coming back like a bad cheque. I'd told Ginny about what I was hearing about Malfoy pressuring the Slytherin prefects – it turned out that he was trying to find out information on the security codes for the Hogwarts Express."

"Which would let the Death Eaters onto the train," Alba observed.

"Exactly, so Harry pulled some strings and arranged to have the VIP car added onto the Express, limiting the risk to the rest of the students," Madison said, finally reaching for another square of fudge. "It was a set up."

"Harry knew that the Death Eaters were coming?" Alba queried.

"Yeah, he knew, or at least he thought it was pretty likely – he considered it an ambush-in-reverse," Madison said. "It was a gamble, a lucky gamble, like many things during the war. This one paid off nicely."

"So, what happened to the others?" Alba asked.

"Harry had little threads of magic attached to them for most of the last year at Hogwarts – kind of a keep-your-friends-close move, because he figured that they'd be special targets. You've got to remember that the biggest risks during that year were kidnapping and assassination. He still had those threads attached when they were in the parlour car. The Dragons had a technique for eating pain, which Harry invoked when they were receiving the Cruciatus curse," Madison said.

"But you said that they were screaming," Alba said.

"And they were – it was still painful, but most of what they were doing was just for show" Madison said with a wan smile.

"And the coma?" Alba asked.

"Another Dragon trick – the *fa'czhng* ended up transferring energy from the five to Harry – life energy. When they reached a certain low energy level, they went into a protective stasis. For all intents and purposes, they appeared to be dead, but they could be revived later," Madison said.

"And if Harry hadn't come back?"

"They could still be revived. If I'd been a better little mediwitch-in-training, I would have started CPR on them, which would have revived them. Thankfully, though, I just sat there because they had such a strong life signal in them after I did the *Viatika* charm. I would not have enjoyed being there if Ginny discovered that Harry was gone for several hours," Madison said emphatically.

"So, where did Harry go?" Alba asked.

"You can't tell anyone," Madison said hesitatingly.

"Not even Franklin?" Alba pleaded.

"Harry said I could tell you, after they were dead. Use your own judgement," Madison said cryptically.

"So, where did he go?" Alba asked again.

"The proper question would be *when* did he go," Madison explained. "The ball of light in Harry's hand was the Lesser Wrath – it was an odd bit of magic that was drawing on Harry's life force."

"Sounds expensive," Alba quipped.

"Oh, it was," Madison said. "Harry was drawing against not only his own life force, but that of the other five as well – he was all charged up like a capacitor."

"A what?" Alba asked quizzically.

"Sorry, that's a Muggle term – let's just say that Harry was full-to-the-brim with life force when he grabbed hold of Riddle. He used a sticking charm with one hand and shoved the Lesser Wrath into him with the other. It should have just destroyed Riddle – consuming his body, his magic, and what was left of his soul," Madison said. "But nothing is ever simple, or without cost. Riddle had a little bit of foreign magic stuck to him that would only come into play if he was in mortal peril, the magic was supposed to throw him back in time – it also served to hold his soul together, so in effect he was truly the seventh horcrux. The Lesser Wrath began to destroy Riddle's body, along with his soul and his magic, which triggered the time magic. Harry was stuck to Riddle, so the two of them went back in time."

"How far back?"

"All the way back. Riddle had one potent bit of magic on him – it took Hermione almost a year to reverse engineer how it was done. Well, anyway, you know how in Genesis it says that God says 'Let there be light?' Well, Harry was there when it happened. He said it was 'very impressive.' The time magic should have killed Harry, and if that hadn't killed Harry, the explosion at the beginning of space-time should have done the trick,"

Madison said, pausing to rub temples. "That's where the luck comes in – although Harry always said that luck was the will of God – the same magic that was supposed to hold Riddle's soul together is now holding Harry's soul together. The explosion knocked Harry back to Earth – Harry said it was sometime after the fifth day of creation – there were plants and animals, but no people yet."

"So, was it all done in twenty-four-hour days?" Alba asked.

"Harry never said one way or another," Madison replied with a smile. "He was found by an Angel, who asked him to help out with a problem they had on hand, you know how Harry was always a sucker for saving people, and then he was sent back to his own time, recreating a new body for him."

"Which is why he came back naked, without any hair, without the scar," Alba said.

"You catch on quickly," Madison replied.

"So, what was the problem?" Alba asked.

"That one I'm not at liberty to share," Madison replied. "Some secrets still remain. If you ever have the occasion to meet a Snow Dragon, however, you might ask them about the Servant of the Light."

Alba pondered all of this, looking as if she wanted to contest this last secret, but then appeared to think better of it.

"And the cost?" Alba asked.

"You don't miss much, do you?" Madison countered.

"I learned from the best, Auntie," Alba said, striking a pure-as-the-driven-snow-little-girl pose.

"Destroying Riddle took years off of their lives, all of them. My only regret is that I didn't give some of my life," Madison said wistfully, "they'd have been with us longer if I had."

"But you weren't given that option, were you?" Alba asked.

"No, but I can still regret it, can't I?" Madison asked in reply. "I miss them all, but most of all, I miss Ginny."

"Me too," Alba replied, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "It's been what, forty-five years now?"

"Forty-six in August," Madison replied. "Were they happy together after Ron and Ginny died? It always seemed like a marriage of convenience, looking at it from the outside."

"You'd been long gone from the Wizarding world by that time, if memory serves me correctly?" Alba asked.

"Yeah, I only came back for the banquets in June, and after Ginny died, we stopped having those," Madison replied.

"I thought we were going to lose them both," Alba said. "After losing their spouses, each of them seemed so – lost. Their children were worried most of all." Alba poured coffee for both of them from the carafe that Franklin had left on the table. "I was living in Hogsmeade then, so I saw Hermione often enough that year, she lost about a stone or more in weight and looked like she wasn't getting much sleep. Then she turned a corner and started looking better. That's when I started hearing that she was attending services with Harry on Sunday mornings. A lot of us made the decision that we would mind our own business and let them work things out – or not. After they'd been together for a couple of years I relaxed – both of them were back to – well, being themselves, so yes, they were happy – it wasn't like the first time around, but I don't think anyone expected that."

"It's been lovely, Alba, but I really need to be going," Madison declared.

"Can I talk you into staying the night? There's no husband to go back to, no dog waiting to be let out, is there?" Alba countered.

Madison shook her head. "No, none of those, but I'm old enough that I find that I sleep better in my own bed, and tomorrow, alas, is a working day, and Motions day at that."

"Well, far be it from me to keep the King's Counsel from performing her duties on the Circuit Court," Alba said, waving her hand dramatically. "Can I talk you into coming back, or lacking that, visiting more often?"

"I don't think His Majesty is ready for a witch on the Circuit Bench, Alba," Madison replied.

"But none-the-less, he appointed one, didn't he?" Alba countered.

"I'll be back – to visit," Madison said.

"That's a start," Alba said. "Goodnight, Madison, I've missed you."

"And I you, give my love to your husband," Madison said, concentrating on something before she disappeared with a crack. A scrap of yellow paper appeared in the middle of the table, bearing Madison's unmistakable handwriting. "See, I still remember how," it proclaimed, before disappearing in a flash of cold fire, leaving what appeared to be rose petals on the table.

Alba laughed.

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Authors Note: Thus ends the saga that began in 2003 when I began writing The Letters of Summer. That story, as originally planned, was supposed to end with the turning point in Harry and Ginny's relationship:

*Ginny stopped as they entered the herb garden. Harry stood still. She was still holding his hand, but she was facing him now, until she dipped her head, resting it again on his chest. She shivered slightly, then looked up, staring into his eyes. "You said you'd like to get to know me better," she said softly.*

*"Yeah, I did."*

*"I'd like that," she said, "I'd like that a lot." She gave him a brief hug before she peeled away to dart into The Burrows kitchen door.*

But by the time I reached that point in the story, I knew that there was a lot more to tell, so the story grew, and grew, and grew. I knew then how everything would end, but simply finishing TLOS was a large effort, the largest piece of fiction I'd ever written. When I finished TLOS, I realized that there were a lot of loose ends to tie up, which is why I wrote "Kisses" and "Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year."

Then I started writing other stories, and took up the mantle of Beta, etc. Stories from Sixth Year had a lot of things I wanted to write about, but I didn't want to write another 200,000 word story, so I tried the tack of making each chapter a stand-alone short story – or nearly so.

With the date for HPDH announced, it became clear to me that it was time to close out the books on the TLOS universe, or at least the H-G portion of that saga.

The details of what happens after All Good Things: Harry and Ginny get married, as do Ron and Hermione. Things go swimmingly for about twenty-five years, with the usual milestones of kids, careers, etc. Then Ron and Ginny die (violently) on the same day. Yes, I kill off Ron and Ginny and then push Harry and Hermione together – something that infuriates my H-G purist readers, and doesn't sufficiently atone for my sins with the H-Hr crowd. Harry and Hermione sort things out between themselves and get married (to each other) and live as man and wife for about forty some years. The story of how they come together is called Ever After.

News of this story (that I was even *thinking* about it), of course, caused gnashing of teeth in certain quarters. Too bad – it's my story – I never claimed to be either a shipper or a purist. I also have a big thing about second chances.

I have other stories that I want to write, so it will be a long, long time before I start to write Ever After (if I ever do get there). If you happen to have enough money to let me retire to a life of full-time writing, I could be persuaded to change that order of priorities, but until then, expect shorter stuff from my keyboard.

Questions as to the details left unanswered by this story (like whatever happens to Draco, anyway?) may be posed on my LiveJournal:  
<http://kokopelli20878.livejournal.com/>

I'm not done with the TLOS universe, not by a long shot – there are shorter standalone stories and drabbles that may come bubbling out, but all good things must come to an end someday, and today is that day for Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year.