

Disclaimer: Tacos Rule! That is all.

Watch

Minerva was sitting in her office doing paperwork when the silence was disturbed by a hesitant knock on the door.

“Come in,” the professor called out.

The door cracked open to reveal her favorite bushy haired Gryffindor.

"Can I speak with you for a moment, Professor?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Of course," Minerva agreed, "come in." She waited until after the girl had settled herself. "What is it, Ms. Granger?"

“It's about Harry and Ron,” Hermione began. She bit her lower lip in distress as she tried to work up the courage to ask her Head of House for advice on how to repair a wounded friendship.

“You're worried about their so called duel right?” the professor suggested with suppressed a smile.

“Ron flung a curse at Harry and Harry put Ron in the hospital wing,” Hermione sobbed, “what am I suppose to do?” And how was she going to get them to reconcile their differences? Fourth year had been one of the worst of her life due both to the dangers of the tournament and the rift that had formed between Harry and Ron before the first task. "What if I can't fix this?"

“Why don't we examine what happened?” Minerva suggested gently.

“What preceded the fight?”

“They were arguing about something or other,” Hermione said, “I'm not sure what.”

“Then Mr. Weasley tried to hex Mr. Potter,” Minerva prompted, “what curse did he use?”

“Double vision hex,” Hermione replied instantly, having spent two hours grilling every witness so as to have as much information as possible before she set out to right things.

“And what spell did Mr. Potter reply with?”

“I'm not sure Professor,” Hermione admitted, “But it caused Ron's hands and feet to grow together and . . .”

“And would it surprise you to learn that Mr. Potter was attempting to cast a clapping hex?”

“But . . .”

“You didn't see the 'fight' did you?” Minerva asked, her lips twitching a bit.

“I was in the library when it happened, Professor,” Hermione agreed, “but the other students told me what happened and it was horrible.”

“Would it surprise you to learn that Mr. Weasley immediately demanded that Mr. Potter teach him that hex?” Minerva asked.

“But . . . the fight . . . I . . .” Hermione sputtered.

“How many similar 'fights' have the Gryffindor boys engaged in this year?” Minerva asked dryly.

“A lot,” Hermione admitted with a blush.

“A lot,” Minerva agreed with a smile, “most of which I turn a blind eye to.”

“But this one is different,” Hermione protested.

“Yes it is,” Minerva agreed, “for one thing Mr. Weasley ended up in the hospital. For another, Mr. Potter has invented what promises to be a useful new spell.”

“But you assigned Harry an indefinite detention,” Hermione said weakly. “Why would you do that if it wasn't serious?”

“I asked Mr. Potter to meet with our Charms Professor after classes so that they could figure out Mr. Potter's new hex,” Minerva corrected with a smile, “I never thought I'd have to tell you about the dangers of putting too much stock in Rumor.”

“Sorry Professor,” Hermione said with a blush. “I thought I'd . . . sorry.”

"Never apologize for asking questions," Minerva said. "Is there anything else, Ms. Granger?"

"Um . . ."

"Would you like to join Mr. Potter's sessions with Professor Flitwick?"

"Yes, Professor," Hermione agreed.

"Alright then." Minerva jotted down a quick note. "Will there be anything else?"

"Just one thing, Professor," the girl agreed.

"Yes, Ms. Granger?" Minerva asked.

"May . . . is it alright if I ask a personal question, Professor?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Of course," Minerva agreed. "So long as you remember to bear in mind that being asked a question does not necessarily mean that I will be willing to answer it."

"I was just wondering . . ." the girl trailed off.

"Yes," the professor prompted gently.

"Who's the uniformed man in the picture on your desk?" Hermione blurted.

“Oh, him.” Minerva giggled. “That's my husband.”

“Your husband?” Hermione said dumbly. “But . . . the uniform . . .”

“My husband was a Tank Commander during the Second World War,” Minerva said wistfully, “he looked so dashing in his uniform.”

“I didn't know you married a muggle, Professor.” The girl examined the photo, unsure how to take the news she'd just heard.

“Who said anything about a muggle?” Minerva asked, “my husband is as pureblood as you can get without growing extra toes.”

“But I thought . . .” Hermione stammered.

“I see,” Minerva sighed, “it's true that the majority of the British magical community was exempted from conscription. It's also true that the ANZAC, Canadian, and American communities were not. And let me tell you that certainly caused some friction, their lads called ours cowards and our lads called theirs idiots who got involved in a muggle war. My husband came here with the Canadian Army and to this day he refuses to set foot on any of the home islands.”

“But . . .”

“Yes, I know if he were to visit me here he would be in Scotland.” Minerva agreed with a sniff of distain at what she saw as the man's willful ignorance. “Unfortunately, my husband refuses to make such distinctions.” Minerva sighed. “Despite all that, some purebloods enlisted anyway - exempted or not, and some of them performed very

well at that, be sure to ask Mr. Longbottom about his maternal grandfather some time, the vast majority of the English magical community sat back and did nothing while London burned. Makes you wonder just who they think they owe allegiance to - if not Queen and Country. I worry sometimes..." she trailed off as old memories came to fore.

"I didn't know any of this, Professor," Hermione confessed.

"That's because it's a recent and shameful enough chapter in our history that most of those in power would like to pretend that nothing happened," Minerva said with pursed lips. "Will that be all, Ms. Granger?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Good. Now, you will have to excuse me, my husband is expecting me home and I hate to keep him waiting."

"What? But I thought you said your husband wouldn't set foot here, Professor?"

"He's not. Magic makes a daily commute from Alberta a bit easier then it would other wise be. You'd be surprised at how adaptable humans can be," Minerva laughed. "We even found a way to make the time difference work for us."

The old woman chuckled to herself as the young girl skipped out of her office. Ah, to be young again. She returned home and resumed her

normal routine for the next two weeks until a note from her favorite student arrived with a request for another meeting.

"You wished to speak with me again, Ms. Granger?" Minerva asked.

"I need your permission to leave school grounds, Professor," Hermione stated in an even voice.

"Alright, why do you wish to leave school grounds, Ms. Granger?" Minerva asked curiously.

"I want to buy Harry a new watch, Professor," Hermione explained, "his old one broke in the Triwizard's second task and he's been without one ever since."

"What prompted this decision?" Minerva was curious to find out what was going through the young girl's mind and wondering if her relationship with her best friend might not be drifting into romantic territory. Might be time to set up another staff pool.

"Christmas is coming up, Professor," Hermione said quickly, refusing to meet the woman's eye.

"In a couple months," Minerva allowed, "and?" She could feel the hint of something intriguing hanging just out of reach.

"And Harry needs a new watch," Hermione said firmly, trying to burry further inquiry in the subject. "So I've decided to get him one since he apparently won't get one for himself."

“Alright,” Minerva agreed. If the girl didn't want to talk, so be it.
“Change into muggle clothing and meet me back here in twenty minutes.”

“I'll need to visit my parents to get some money to pay for it first, Professor,” Hermione added.

“That can be arranged,” Minerva said with a smile.

“Thank you, Professor,” Hermione said as she rushed out of the office.

The young girl returned a few minutes later wearing a rather conservative outfit with matching sensible shoes.

“Come with me, Ms. Granger,” Minerva ordered.

“Yes, Professor,” Hermione agreed, falling into step behind her Head of House.

They came to a halt just outside the ward line and Minerva offered her hand to the young witch.

“Now then,” Minerva said, “hold tight and I will apparate us to your parents' house.”

“They're at number twelve St. James Square,” Hermione interjected.

“They moved?” Minerva asked. “Your school records still list your address as being in the village of Much Matchingham.”

“Matchingham Hall is just the weekend house and summer house, Professor,” Hermione explained. “The London house is at St. James Square.”

“I see.” Minerva resisted the urge to laugh at the thought of the sprawling Granger estate as being 'just' anything. “Shall we go then?”

“Yes Professor,” Hermione agreed.

Minerva kept her face impassive as her student led her to one of the more opulent townhouses and threw open the door.

"Is mother in?" Hermione asked the first servant they ran across.

“No, Ms. Hermione,” the maid replied. “Madame Granger called for the car a few minutes ago and will be arriving shortly.”

“Alright,” Hermione agreed, “could you have her meet us in the library?”

“I can and will, Ms. Hermione,” the maid agreed.

Hermione passed the time by giving her favorite professor a quick tour of what was available in the house's copious reference section.

"Of course the magic section's a bit thin," Hermione said mournfully. "Perhaps . . ." she cut off when the door opened.

“Hermione,” a stately brunette that Minerva knew to be Hermione's mother greeted them. The woman was followed by a large grey haired man with cold predatory eyes.

“Mother,” Hermione said with a smile.

“I hope you don't mind if my driver joins our little meeting,” Hermione's mother stated. “I'm simply lost without him around.”

“Not at all,” Minerva agreed.

“Now then,” she turned to her daughter. “What's this all about?”

“I need to use some of my trust fund, mum,” Hermione said with only the barest hint of nervousness.

“Really?” The stately woman's eyebrows raised a hair. “Whatever for?”

“I want to buy Harry a new watch,” Hermione explained. “It will have to be more than I usually draw for books. Father always says that you can buy quality once or junk a hundred times,” she added after a heartbeat.

“I see.” A smile bloomed on the woman's face. “Shall I make an appointment with our jeweler? I'm sure he'd be happy to open something up for you this afternoon.”

“That won't be necessary, mum,” Hermione said, “Professor McGonagall has already been gracious enough to make arrangements for me.”

“Excellent,” the woman said with a smile, “is there any other business we need to discuss?”

“One more thing,” Minerva spoke up, “I need you to sign a permission slip allowing Ms. Granger to accompany me out of the country.”

“To where?” The woman's eyes flicked from her daughter to the professor.

“Canada,” Minerva said, “that's where the watchmaker, my grandfather in law, lives.”

“Seems like a bit of a trip,” Hermione's mother said doubtfully.

“Magical transportation makes it a bit easier then would otherwise be the case,” Minerva said with a smile. We can be there and back in just a few minutes.”

“Of course.” She signed the paper. “Now if there is nothing else, would you do me the favor of giving me a few minutes alone with my daughter?”

“Of course,” Minerva agreed. Doctor Granger's stone faced driver stood up and gently but forcefully led her out of the room.

“Mrs. Granger wanted me to tell you something,” the man said in a gravelly voice.

“What is that?”

“She would like to have another meeting with you later,” the man replied. “She would prefer it if Miss Granger were not aware of that meeting.”

“Of course,” Minerva agreed quickly, “please tell Mrs. Granger that I will return after Miss Granger and I have concluded our business.”

The driver nodded and the two of them passed the next several minutes in silence, as they waited for mother and daughter to finish catching up.

“Finished?” Minerva asked kindly when the door opened and Hermione came out.

“Yes, Professor,” Hermione agreed.

“Hold on to my robes then,” Minerva ordered.

“I didn't know that it was possible to apparate that far,” Hermione said in wonder.

“It's not,” Minerva said as she activated her portkey. “My robes are the portkey,” she finished on the other side.

“Oh,” Hermione said dumbly.

“It's something I started doing when I had children,” Minerva explained. “My robes and my hair were the only things I could get them to hold onto.” Getting them to let go on the other hand . . .

Hermione filed away that bit of information and followed her professor down a small alley and into a well kept shop.

“Minerva?” the man said with a grin. “Welcome.” He turned to Hermione. “And what can I do for you, young lady?”

“I'd like to buy a watch for my friend Harry,” Hermione replied.

"What sort of watch?" the man asked.

“It will have to be mechanical,” Hermione mused, “other than that . . . well, father likes Patek Philippe, or at least I think he does, the last four or five he's bought have all been Patek Philippe.”

“Any model in particular?” he asked, mentally raising the upper price limit of his recommendations.

“I think his current favorite has a perpetual Calendar and a moon phase,” Hermione replied weakly, “I never took much interest and he's got so many of them that it's hard to keep track.”

"Would you like to take a look at what I have on hand?" the old man offered.

“Only the ones in platinum,” Hermione declared quickly, “father says that gold is too gaudy for a man.”

“Afraid I don't have any in platinum at the moment,” the old man confessed, “I do have a platinum case for a pocket watch movement though.”

“I'll take a look at it,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“Ms. Granger, does your father really insist on platinum cases?”
Minerva asked, wondering if the girl knew how expensive it would be.

“Yes Professor,” Hermione agreed, “mum says that it's because he comes from new money.” Hermione gave a impish smile. “Dad's family made their fortune in guano in the last century and mum says that he's a bit defensive about the whole thing,” Hermione confided. “Course, it might also be because dad is a bit vain about jewelry and clothing.”

"I see." The corners of her mouth twitched.

“Mum prefers to be a bit more sensible about things,” Hermione continued. “But as she's not the one we need to impr . . . um . . .” A panicked look appeared on Hermione's face as she realized that she'd said too much.

“Ms. Granger,” Minerva sighed, “I fear that at my age, the senses start to become dulled. Now what was that last bit again?”

"But since dad has more watches and clothes then I'm going to trust his judgment for now," Hermione squeaked.

“Alright, Ms. Granger,” Minerva agreed, starting to get an idea of what was happening.

“Here we are,” the old man announced his return. He laid a small box on the table. “Take a look.”

Hermione peered into the box with look of intense concentration on her face.

“It's rather big isn't it?”

“Rather standard for a pocket watch,” the old man replied neutrally.

“Where is the rest of it?” Hermione held up the rest of the case.

“The movement, crystal, and dial, need to be picked separately.”

“Can you engrave the back?”

“Of course,” the old man agreed, “I also have a matching chain for that.”

“What kind of movement?” Hermione asked quickly.

“I was thinking of using a customized Hamilton 992b in size sixteen to match the case,” the old man said calmly, “that's the mechanical part of the watch.”

“Why wouldn't you just use a tempus charm or some other spell?”
Hermione shifted into knowledge collecting mode.

“One of the major problems with the tempus charm is that it will not keep standard time,” the old man explained. “That leaves aside the fact that it's not accurate to more than five minutes. Precision wasn't needed when the charm was developed and standard time wouldn't even be considered for another four centuries.”

“Oh.” Hermione's nose wrinkled as she processed the information.

“That's not to say that I didn't use any magic,” the old man continued, “several of the parts have been enchanted. Making this watch as waterproof, fireproof, shockproof, scratch proof, and generally as indestructible as magic allows. That's not to say you shouldn't be careful with it of course.”

“Of course,” Hermione echoed.

“But it should be able to survive any accidents. Internally, the movement is self winding, cleaning, lubricating, etc. Rather than using tritium, the dial has illuminating charms on it that can be set so that they are only visible to the owner or some select group of people. I could go on, but it would take a while and it's all in the manual anyway.”

“Wouldn't you get into trouble for misuse of muggle artifacts?”
Hermione asked intently.

“Doesn't apply to Canada,” the old man laughed.

“I was planning to take this back to the United Kingdom,” Hermione pointed out.

“I figured that when you mentioned the statute. It's illegal to charm muggle items,” he said with a grin, “possession of charmed muggle items is a bit of a grey area. Let's the old families get away with a lot of shady things. Even if it did apply to Canada . . . well, there's more than a

few loopholes in that law.” Overseas trade being lucrative enough to encourage a very close reading of the laws in question.

“What?”

"Doesn't apply to things made by members of a magical society for one," the old man replied, "which covers everything that's got an enchantment. Aside from that, they only apply the statute to any tech more modern than the last war . . . er . . . the one my boy went to I mean."

“They don't?” Hermione asked in shock, a whole new world of research had just opened to her.

"You never wondered about the Hogwarts express, the Knight Bus, or the Wizard Wireless?" he asked with a grin.

“But . . . but, there's nothing in the library . . .”

“Train is run by a Canadian crew, predominately Canadian I should say. Knight Bus has an American mechanic that makes the trip across the pond every now and again, and the Wizard Wireless has maintenance people from any number of places.”

“We use some technology,” Minerva interjected, “but we lack the skills to reproduce or maintain it for the most part. Most purebloods refuse to have anything to do with it and look down on anyone who has the necessary skills.”

"That's why there are no books in the library?" Hermione asked in a small voice.

“That's why,” Minerva agreed, “the Board didn't think it appropriate to waste resources on something so common and frivolous . . . I can help you acquire some books on the subject if you like.”

“Thank you Professor, that would be wonderful,” Hermione gushed.
“And . . . um . . .”

“What is it Ms. Granger?”

“Do you think that you could take Harry out to get some new clothes?” Hermione asked. “It'd be best if you knew someone, Professor, but I could make an appointment with my father's tailor on Bond street if you like.”

“Why don't we discuss that later,” Minerva suggested.

“Alright, Professor,” Hermione agreed.

Minerva saw her charge safely back in the castle before heading to her meeting with the young girl's mother.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me Professor McGonagall,” Hermione's mother began, “I have some concerns that I was hoping you could address.”

“I will do my best, Mrs. Granger,” Minerva said calmly.

“First of all, I was wondering why your school chose not to inform us of all that has happened.” The woman's eyes were cold. “Or about how close we came to losing our daughter.”

“I . . .” Minerva was acutely aware of the woman's 'driver' taking a position behind her. “Wait, you weren't informed?”

“No,” the woman said flatly, her voice like a gunshot. “We weren't.”

“But the charms should have . . .” Minerva trailed off. “Did you put in any wards?”

“We have not,” the woman replied.

“Then . . . I suppose it could be due to the fact that you have two residences,” Minerva said slowly, “or . . . well, any number of things I suppose. I'm afraid we're speaking outside my area of expertise. I will have to get back to you with an answer.”

“Alright,” she agreed. She gave her driver a meaningful look, causing him to take a step back and assume a more neutral position.

“Just like that?”

"Just like that," Hermione's mother agreed, "I pride myself on being able to judge people and I'm sure that now that you know about the problem you'll insure it doesn't crop up again, but it has brought another matter to light which will be a bit more difficult to deal with."

“What matter?”

“My husband and I are no longer confident that the administration will act in our daughter's best interests,” she explained.

“Ms. Granger will be devastated to hear that you're pulling her out of Hogwarts,” Minerva pointed out.

"We haven't decided to pull her out yet," the woman stated. "We are strongly considering the possibility that we may have to at some future date. I would ask that you take a closer interest in her well being. Take that as a personal request if you will."

"Of course," Minerva agreed. The old woman was willing to do almost anything to keep her star pupil. "A question, if I may."

“What is it?”

“If the school failed to notify you, then how did you find out?”

“One of my husband's old school friends is classmate of the father of another of your students,” the woman explained. “Now that we have the unpleasantness out of the way, please call me Anne.”

“Minerva,” McGonagall replied automatically.

“Minerva, then.”

“One thing has been bothering me,” McGonagall began. “I was hoping that you could enlighten me.”

“What is it?”

“I was wondering if you knew why Hermione suddenly became so interested in Mr. Potter's appearance?”

"At a guess, it's because Hermione has been mentioning so much in her letters that we extended an invitation for him to join us this winter." The woman smiled. "We saw him at a distance a few years ago when we were putting Hermione on the train, my husband pronounced him scruffy." Her smile widened. "I'm sure you've noticed the fact that my daughter is prone to over thinking things."

“Yes, I have noticed that,” Minerva said dryly.

“She is likely going to bother the poor boy about his appearance until after we meet,” Anne giggled. She made a 'come here' motion to her driver who handed Minerva a large envelope.

“What's this?” Minerva asked.

"A letter of credit from the goblins and an ebony card," Anne replied. "Please use it to make young Harry presentable and for any projects Hermione decides to take on."

Minerva's eyes bulged at the amount on the Gringotts note. "This is . . ." she choked, unable to bring herself to verbalize the number.

“Don't hesitate to call if you need more,” Anne added cheerfully.

“I . . .”

“With that out of the way.” She leaned forward with an eager smile. “Do you have any embarrassing stories to share about my daughter that I could persuade you to pass on?”

IIIIIIII

Hermione had just settled down to breakfast when a large owl dumped a rectangular package on her lap. Curiously, the girl opened it and was delighted to find a basic primer on technomagic.

“Wa'd'yu'ga'der?” Ron asked between bites.

“It's a book on mixing magic and simple technology,” Hermione replied absently.

“Oh.”

“Did you know that the reason we don't see any Wireless sets around the castle is because the wards interfere with the signal?” Hermione asked with shining eyes.

"Nope," Ron replied. He looked at her and then looked down at his breakfast. The boy was in a quandary. If he stayed then he'd be the unwilling recipient of a lesson on whatever the girl's latest obsession was, but if he left he wouldn't get breakfast.

'Damn it, think Ron think!'

His eyes lit up as he got an idea. "Look at the time," Ron said quickly. He seized two large slabs of bread and made a sandwich out of everything within arms reach. "Later Hermione."

"Bye Ron," Hermione said automatically.

IIIIIIII

Minerva sat in her office with a frown on her face. Now what was the name of that insane house elf that was stalking young Mister Potter again? Started with a 'D' didn't it? Dinky . . . Drippy . . . Doodle . . .

"Dobby?" Minerva ventured.

"Dobby is here and you is calling Dobby, Ms. Professor Kitty?" the deranged house elf said eagerly.

"I need you to get me Mr. Potter's measurements," Minerva began.

"Dobby already has them," the house elf said in excitement, "Dobby likes to remeasure Mister Harry Potter sir every night while Dobby is watching Mister Harry Potter sir sleep." In another part of the castle, Harry felt a chill go up his spine.

"Excellent," Minerva said dully, perhaps it would be best to just pretend she hadn't heard that last bit. "Now if you wouldn't mind sharing them with me?"

"Dobby is happy to help the great Harry Potter sir's Ms. Professor Kitty," the house elf agreed.

Minerva looked at the paper.

"Fourteen centimeters?"

"Yes, Professor Kitty."

"That's an invasion of Mr. Potter's privacy. Stop measuring that."

The elf looked downcast. "Yes, Professor Kitty."

IIIIIIII

Hermione looked up from her book in concern as Harry shivered again. Knowing his luck, Hermione was half convinced that the poor boy had contracted some rare tropical disease.

"Are you feeling alright Harry?" Hermione asked in concern.

"I'm just a bit tired, I'll be fine," Harry assured her. "We've got History first. I'll use that time to catch up on my sleep."

"Um . . ." Concern warred with outrage to see who would get to make the response. "Alright Harry." It wasn't like she was in a position to throw too many stones since she had already decided to read her new book during the lesson.

IIIIIIII

Hermione's father walked into his home and cheerfully kissed his wife, hands dropping to do something that caused her to emit a girlish squeak.

“Welcome home, Philip,” her mother said happily.

"The staff tells me that Hermione decided to drop by?" he said by way of greeting. Shame he hadn't been able to see her while she was in.

“She wanted to make a withdrawal from her trust fund,” Anne explained.

“Whatever for?”

“To purchase a new watch for her friend Harry,” the woman said with a grin. “It seems that she's gotten the idea that you won't like him if he isn't a sharp dresser.”

“Where did she get a silly idea like that?”

“You said he was scruffy once,” Anne replied. “Apparently, that's enough to get her obsessing about the matter.”

“I told her that I would be delighted to meet the boy,” he protested. “I also told her that his economic status didn't bother me in the slightest.” Knowing his daughter, it was unlikely in the extreme that the boy had any idea how wealthy they were. He supposed that was one way of keeping the gold diggers away.

“She ignored all that of course,” his wife said with a shrug, “I gave her professor enough so that the boy will match even your standards.”

“Just because I like to look my best-”

“Doesn't mean that you're gay,” she giggled. “Even though my sisters and friends all thought . . . still think that you are.”

"Fashion is one thing that I refuse to argue with you," he sniffed, "philistine."

"Dandy," she growled, a fire lighting in her eyes.

"Uncultured harridan," he sneered leaning towards her.

"Foppish boor," she accused, as he leaned in, wrapping his arms around her.

"Do you think the boy would like to go riding?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" she asked dully.

"Polo, the hunt club, that sort of thing," he explained. "Hermione may be indifferent but one of her letters mentioned that he was a keen rider."

“Of brooms,” she pointed out, “not horses.”

“Still . . . he might like some variety.”

“True,” she agreed, “it couldn't hurt. Might be a good idea to get him some lessons first, ease into things.”

“Of course,” he agreed. “Now where were we?” He leaned in close.
“Uncultured harridan.”

“You already used that one,” she moaned, “you . . . you . . . ohhhhh.”

IIIIIIII

Minerva was unsurprised to find Hermione waiting outside the transfiguration classroom after the last class for the day.

“What can I do for you Ms. Granger?” Minerva asked with a fond smile.

“Professor, may I . . . I mean, do you think it would be possible if I . . . um . . .”

“Yes Hermione?”

"May I go down to the tracks and inspect the Hogwarts Express?"
Hermione blurted out.

“There's no rule against it,” Minerva replied, “though you may wish to speak with Ms. Lovegood before planning any trips.”

“Why Professor?”

“I believe that she enjoys watching them perform maintenance,”
Minerva said. “It therefore stands to reason that she would know more about how to go about it then I would.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Hermione said in excitement before bolting down the hall to find her odd friend.

Luna was engaged in a staring contest with one of the portraits when Hermione found her. As it was one of the few non-magical portraits in the castle, there was no telling how long the girl had been at it.

“Luna,” Hermione said Hesitantly.

“Hmmm?” Luna broke eye contact. “Oh darn. What is it, Hermione?”

“I was hoping that you would be willing to introduce me to the crew of the Hogwarts Express,” Hermione said quickly, “Professor McGonagall said you liked to watch them maintain the train.”

“Of course, Hermione,” Luna said in delight, “come on.” She grabbed the older girl by the hand and began leading her forcefully out of the castle.

“Right now?” Hermione asked weakly.

“I'm sure they're doing something Interesting at the moment,” Luna agreed. “They usually are.”

“You like trains a lot then?”

“They're so fascinating,” Luna babbled as the two girls walked down to the engine shed that held the Hogwarts Express when it was not in use.

“I'm fairly sure that Minister Fudge is planning to use his imprisoned . . .” It was at this point that Hermione tuned Luna out.

“Why look who's come to visit again boys,” a man in grease stained overalls called out. “How are you doing today Ms. Lovegood?”

“Very well thank you,” Luna said politely.

“I see you've brought a friend.”

“Yes,” Luna agreed, “this is Hermione. She's a year ahead of me at Hogwarts.”

"Pleasure to meet you Hermione," the man said kindly, "there are some doughnuts in the break room. Why don't you go get one for yourself and another for your friend?" he suggested to Luna.

“I normally wouldn't,” Luna said with a dreamy smile. “But the Humdingers here should keep the rotfangs away.”

“Wonderful,” he said with a smile. The large man waited until Luna was out of earshot before turning to Hermione. “Can I speak with you for a bit?” The man in the grease stained overalls asked Hermione.

“Of course,” Hermione agreed, “what is it?”

“That girl you came in with,” he began, “we're not sure why she likes to come here.”

“Alright,” Hermione agreed, unsure of where the conversation was heading.

“It could be that she grew up around a mechanical printing press and sees our shop as a little bit of home thanks to the similar sights, sounds,

and smells,” the burly Engineer said thoughtfully. “Could also be because we don't put up with the sort of behavior that the staff at the castle finds acceptable,” his voice hardened, “understand?”

“Luna really is my friend,” Hermione protested. “We might argue sometimes but . . .”

“What friends don't,” the man agreed, all smiles and good cheer again. “Good to see she has some friend her own age.”

Hermione gave a shy nod, unsure of how to take that bit of wisdom.

“Hermione is interested in the Engines,” Luna announced as she burst back into the room. The girl was holding a half eaten doughnut in one hand and an untouched doughnut in the other.

"You are huh?" he asked.

“She is,” Luna confirmed as she handed the other girl her share of the pastry haul.

“Well, we've got two Clan Class engines that don't get a whole lot of work.” He waved to his left. “But what people tend to think of as the Hogwarts Express is one of our Black Fives. That's a LMS Stanier Class 5 4-6-0 Locomotive.”

“What do you mean one of?” Hermione asked.

“Never put all your eggs in one basket,” he advised, “there's also the fact that we'd never be able to haul all the cargo we do with just one Engine.” He laughed. “Our passenger service isn't all we do you know, also bring

in just about everything the castle needs to stay running.” He turned and began walking to the closest locomotive. “This way.” He led the girls to one of the engines. “This particular one was built in nineteen thirty six by Armstrong Whitworth. It's sixty three feet, seven and three quarters inches long. Weighs seventy three long tons. Uses a Walschaerts valve gear as opposed to a Stephenson Valve Gear. Uh . . . anything else you'd like to know?”

“I'd like to know what all of that means,” Hermione said, eyes shining with excitement.

“You're welcome to poke through our library if you like,” he said with a shrug. A grin appeared when he noticed the girl's reaction. “And to ask as many questions as you like.”

"Thank you," Hermione said with sparkling eyes. The thought of being granted access to a previously unknown source of reading material being almost too much for the girl.

“Would it be possible to go on a trip with you some time?” Luna asked.

“That'd be up to your Professor,” he said easily. “Fore you go asking her I'd like to caution you that it's a filthy job and that you'll be pitch black and covered in soot by the end of the day if you come along.”

IIIIIIII

Flitwick stared down at his fused hands with a look of joy on his face. It had taken quit a bit of effort but they'd finally managed to replicate the boy's accident.

“Wonderful, Harry!” the diminutive Charms Professor shouted.
“Absolutely brilliant!”

“I did it,” Harry mumbled in shock.

“Indeed you did,” the Professor agreed. “Do you think you could do it again?”

“I'm pretty sure I could,” Harry agreed.

“Excellent.” The Professor looked down at his hands. “Do you think you could undo it?”

“Maybe,” Harry said uncertainly.

"Well . . . I dare say that Poppy will be able to undo faster now that she's done it once before, so give it a shot. What's the worst that could happen?"

IIIIIIII

The Engineer watched as the two girls examined every visible part of the locomotive. It did his heart good to see a couple of the Brits take an interest in their heritage and it would be nice to think that they might some day be able to do their own maintenance.

"Fat chance of that," he muttered to himself. Either the girls would lose interest or they'd emigrate to one of the more tolerant nations.

The United Kingdom had a bigger problem then their home grown terrorists, their best and their brightest grew up into a society that stifled innovation, that smothered any attempt to change the world for the better, was it any wonder that so many had chosen to go on to greener pastures?

IIIIIIII

Filius wilted under the Healer's glare. It seemed the school nurse was much less enthused about young Mister Potter's feat of magic than he was.

“Mr. Potter was successful,” he ventured.

“So it seems,” Poppy agreed flatly.

“He was able to get my hands partially undone,” he added hesitantly, eyes flicking to interlocking bone spikes now growing out of his mostly separated knuckles. "I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that it's quite possible that his new spell can be adapted to painlessly regrow missing bones."

“Do tell.” You could cut glass with her voice.

“Something tells me that you're not too pleased with what happened,” Filius observed, his voice raising an octave.

"Why ever would you think that I was displeased with the fact that you were acting as a test dummy for spell experimentation? " she asked sweetly. "Or that you chose to have Mr. Potter attempt a counter curse,

rather than coming straight to the Hospital wing to have things dealt with by professionals."

"It was all Albus's idea!" Filius squealed, throwing the Headmaster under the bus. "I didn't want to do it, but he made me."

He paused to consider something, wouldn't hurt and it might score a few points. "Harry didn't want to do it either but Albus made us both, he's a very very bad man."

"Alright," she agreed.

"What?" he asked in shock.

"Alright," she repeated herself, "I suppose I can accept that explanation."

"Good, I-"

"But."

"Yes," he asked weakly, preparing himself for the worst.

"I think it's likely that Albus might try these sorts of shenanigans again in the future," she stated calmly. "I think it would be best for Mr. Potter to spend a few nights a week in the Hospital wing learning about emergency healing."

"It'll also give you a chance to work on that new medical charm with him," he added.

"It will, won't it?" Poppy agreed with mock innocence. "Why, I hadn't even considered that."

"I see." Wasn't like he owed the kid anything, or at least not enough to go against the school nurse. "Deal."

"Pleasure doing business with you Filius."

"Likewise, Poppy."

IIIIIIII

Meanwhile, Hermione and Luna had submerged themselves in the shop's small library of technical manuals and trade publications.

"Did you know that American Locomotives are too large for British tracks?" Hermione asked.

"I did not," Luna replied, "did you know that there were several unsuccessful attempts to use salamanders as heat generators in the firebox?"

"Pass me that one when you're done with it," Hermione requested excitedly.

"Of course Hermione," Luna happily agreed, thinking how nice it was so nice to finally have a friend who shared a common interest with her.

IIIIIIII

Harry and Professor Flitwick squared off in the latter's classroom. After a bow, both men drew their wands with a flourish.

“Ready Harry?” Flitwick asked.

“I think so sir,” Harry agreed.

“Okay,” the old man said with a grin, “on three. One . . . two . . . three.” The old man cast a spell at Harry and blocked the boy's own spell. “Nice,” the old man said with a grin, “but not nice enough.” His grin deepened as Harry slumped to the ground.

“What happened?” Harry asked dumbly.

“Age, experience, and treachery won again,” the diminutive charms professor explained. “Care to try again?”

“Sure,” Harry agreed gamely.

“Alright, stand up,” Flitwick instructed. The two of them faced each other. “Stretch.”

Harry complied, he also cast a couple small spells.

“What were those?” Flitwick asked curiously.

“Medical charms,” Harry said, “I learned them from Madame Pomfrey.”

“They don't look like healing charms?”

“They're not, Professor.”

“Right then, holster your wand and bow.” Flitwick's smile turned devious. “On three. One . . . two.” He cast a hex at the boy and was shocked to his core that the boy had already moved out of the way, his shock was so profound that Harry's returning hexes ended the fight.

Harry's grin looked ready to split his face as he undid the spells he cast on his Professor.

"Nice reflexes," Flitwick complimented.

“I had a bit of help,” Harry said smugly.

"I've got a tell?" the former dueling champ asked in dismay.

“I cheated,” Harry explained. “The medical charm I cast allowed me to monitor your heart rate.”

“It sped up a bit before I cast didn't it?” Flitwick laughed. “Well done!”

“I didn't expect it to work so well,” Harry admitted.

“Well it did,” Flitwick said gamely. “Would you mind undoing the hex you used on my hands?”

“What hex?” Harry asked dumbly.

“The one you used to transfigure the bones in my hand to remove the joints and . . . that was another accident wasn't it?”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry admitted sheepishly.

"Well . . . I dare say that Minerva will enjoy the opportunity of figuring it out with you," Flitwick said firmly, deciding that he'd pressed his luck with the school healer enough for this quarter.

“I guess so,” Harry agreed glumly. He wasn't sure how he'd get anything done with another extra class added to his schedule.

IIIIIIII

The Engineer got a bit worried when the girls went quiet, something that was rarely a good thing when children were playing, and elected to investigate.

“Everything alright?” he asked.

“We're just putting the finishing touches on our design,” Hermione said proudly.

“Mind if I take a look?”

“Go ahead,” Hermione agreed.

“HmMMM.”

“Is something the matter?” Luna inquired.

“Why don't we turn out a model of this so we can find out?” the Engineer suggested. “Shouldn't take more then a couple hours,” he added.

“And it'll give us a chance to see how all the tools work,” Hermione enthused, “thank you.”

“Happy to help,” the old man said with a grin.

IIIIIIII

The grin that bloomed on Professor McGonagall's face after she heard what had happened with the bones in the Charms Master's hand tripped every warning instinct that Harry possessed.

"It isn't supposed to work like that," Minerva said cheerfully, "looks as if we have a lot of work to do before we'll be able to figure this out, 'eh Mr. Potter."

"Yes, Professor," Harry dolefully agreed.

“I'm glad you're as excited about it as I am.” Minerva ignored Harry's downcast look. “Come along then, Mr. Potter, the sooner we get started, the sooner we can finish the other errands on our list.”

“Other errands?” Harry said in confusion.

“We need to get you some new clothing to make you presentable,” Minerva explained. 'For Ms. Granger's parents, the Charms Conference, and hopefully the Transfiguration Trade Show.' She thought to herself.

IIIIIIII

They set up their model and the Engineer hustled the two girls behind a large steel barricade.

“Must we be so far back?” Hermione asked with an uncharacteristically petulant look on her face. She really wanted to observe the test of the new steam engine up close.

“Safety first,” the Engineer said cheerfully.

“Fine,” Hermione gave her unhappy assent, “but I want to be able to give it a closer inspection the next time we fire it so that I can-”

<BOOOOM!> Her jaw dropped in shock as the engine exploded, scattering pieces over a large portion of the field.

“Oh, that was ever so much fun.” Luna clapped her hands. “May we pretty please do it again?” She batted her eyes lashes at the Engineer.

“I dare say that it'll happen again,” the old man laughed. He turned to Hermione. “That, young lady, is why we stay back when we test out new things.”

“But . . . but . . . but what happened?” Hermione stammered. She'd been so sure that their design was perfect, the thought that such a catastrophic failure could occur had never crossed her mind.

“You forgot to put in a safety valve,” he explained gently. “Bet it's one thing you'll never forget again 'eh?”

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed weakly. “But I was so sure . . .”

“You two did a marvelous job,” the engineer assured her. “Just left out a few things.”

"Which you noticed right away," Hermione noted aloud.

“I have been doing this longer than either of you have been alive,” he said a trifle smugly. “Longer than both of you together have been alive. Come on, we’ll have some lunch and continue the lesson inside.”

"But you could have pointed it out and then we wouldn't have blown this one up," she protested.

"Yes, I could have," the engineer agreed affably. "But then you would be more likely to make the same mistake again. This way you'll never forget about the safety valve or indeed anything with the word safety attached to it while building the next one."

"We learn more from our failures than from our successes," she quoted from memory, remembering one of her mother's lectures.

"That and building the same thing repeatedly," the old man added. He grinned, it was always fun to bring a couple aspiring Engineers into the fold.

"What mistake makes the prettiest explosion?" Luna inquired with a wide grin.

"Lun..." Hermione's voice trailed off as she changed her mind about whatever she had been about to say, "Let's save that for when we know

we've bolloxed up something beyond repair. I'm sure we'll have enough explosions without intentionally causing them."

"That you will," the engineer said cheerfully.

He led the girls to the shed's small kitchen area and pulled a largish pot off one of the shelves.

"Do you know what this is?" he held out an odd looking pot.

"It's a pressure cooker," Hermione replied.

"Yep," the old man agreed, "and do you know what this thing on top is?"

"Safety valve?" Hermione said weakly.

"Yep, pressure gets too high and this bleeds off a bit of steam which in turn lowers the pressure." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I'm telling you this so you don't feel too bad, guy that invented these things forgot the safety valve too."

"I won't in the future," Hermione said in a subdued tone.

"I know ye won't," he agreed. "My experience has shown me that people don't tend to forget practical lessons. Now then, this lesson isn't so much bout steam as it is bout cooking."

"Cooking?"

“You don't think we eat rocks do you?” the old Engineer laughed. “Food is important for morale.”

“Can we blow that up too?” Luna asked hopefully.

“Not unless we overfill it or block the safety valve,” he replied, “which you are not going to do.”

“Awww.” Luna pouted, ramping up her cuteness factor by at least a factor of ten.

“None of that,” he admonished. “So then, do either of you know how to cook?”

"We were taught how to do potions by Professor Snape," Hermione offered.

"That's a no then," he translated with a smile. "Wonderful."

"Wonderful?" Hermione echoed, wondering why he seemed so happy about that fact.

“Yep,” he agreed. “We've got lessons in pressure and in cooking. Multitasking.”

“We're also making lunch for the crew,” Luna pointed out. “Three things at once.”

"Right you are, girl."

IIIIIIII

Harry nervously followed his Head of House into a rather fancy looking haberdasher in an unfamiliar magical district.

"Where are we, Professor?" Harry asked.

"London," Minerva replied. "Ontario," she added upon seeing his skeptical look.

"Oh." Harry took a few moments to absorb the fact that he'd just made his first trip abroad. "Don't I need permission to leave the country?"

"Normally yes," Minerva agreed. "The fact that you're an orphan gives me a certain amount of . . . leeway, shall we say."

"Why didn't you give me permission to visit Hogsmead in third year?" Harry asked curiously.

"It was thought that you had a notorious killer after you," Minerva said reasonably. She decided to refrain from mentioning the fact that Albus had forbidden it.

"Oh. I understand, Professor," Harry said.

"Now then," Minerva's raised her voice, "Andy . . . Andy, are you here?"

"Aunt Minerva?" a woman's voice replied from the back.

“Victoria?” Minerva said in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Dad wanted to spend the day with the grandkids and I wanted some freedom,” the girl replied. “Who's this?” She focused on Harry.

“One of my students,” Minerva replied. “He needs a new wardrobe so I brought him here.”

“Magical or mundane?”

“The whole thing.”

“Just let me grab the tape.” The woman dashed into the back.

"You know her, Professor?" Harry whispered. The eager gleam that had lit the woman's eyes did not inspire confidence.

“She's my niece,” Minerva replied. “Her father is one of my brothers in law.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione would never have admitted it, but she was more than a bit nervous to see the mens' reactions as they tried the soup.

“How is it?” Luna asked with her seemingly endless cheer. A slight intake of breath was the only outward sign that she was anxious about the answer.

“Great,” one of the firemen replied. “Better than usual anyway.”

"Yay!" Luna cheered. "You hear that, Hermione?"

"Yes Luna," Hermione agreed with a smile.

None of the men saw fit to mention that they'd have cheerfully ladled spoons full of bunker oil into their mouths if it would have made the two young girls happy. They had become quite fond of the two children in the short time that they'd started hanging around the shop.

IIIIIIII

Minerva took a few moments to examine her student in the latest outfit that her niece had forced upon the poor boy. What had started as a short trip to buy a couple suits and a few casual outfits had quickly turned into a fashion show.

"How do you feel Mr. Potter?" Minerva asked carefully.

"A bit strange to be wearing a great kilt Professor," Harry replied with a doubtful look on his face. "Are you sure I'm going to need one of these?"

"No," Minerva replied. "I'm equally sure that my niece will not allow you to leave without it."

"What should we dress him in next?" the aforementioned woman asked gleefully. "How about a tuxedo, what do you think Aunt Minnie?"

"At least the air on my bits feels nice," Harry muttered too quiet for anyone, but a cat animagus to hear.

Minerva managed to stifle her laughter, but only just.

IIIIIIII

Ginny approached her slightly older brother with a worried expression on her face. She hadn't seen him in the company of the other members of the trio for quite some time, come to think of it, she hadn't seen any of the members of the so called 'golden trio' spend any time with each other for at least a week and she was worried about how her brother might be holding up.

"Got a minute, Ron?" she asked.

"What's up, Ginny?" Ron asked. "Is something wrong?"

"You tell me," Ginny sighed.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked with a look of befuddlement on his face.

"You, Harry, and Hermione haven't been spending much time together lately," Ginny explained, "I was worried."

"Hermione's become obsessed with something besides 'Hogwarts a History' and Harry keeps fumbling his casting and accidentally inventing new spells," Ron said with a grin. "Meaning he has to go to extra classes with the Professors."

“Oh . . . so, nothing's wrong then?”

“Nope,” Ron said cheerfully. “Not unless you count the new wart on my second toe.”

“Oh. So . . .”

“So . . .”

“Care for a game of chess?” Ginny asked.

“You're on,” Ron agreed. “I'll even spot you a bishop.”

“Hah! A queen,” Ginny countered.

“You must be dreaming,” Ron laughed. “How about a knight and four pawns.”

“Now who's dreaming?” Ginny giggled. “How long has it been since we played a game?”

“Not long enough to forget that you're not nearly as bad as you like to pretend you are,” Ron retorted.

IIIIIIII

Minerva was beginning to get impatient. Harry had been in the changing room for several minutes and showed no sign of coming out.

“Mr. Potter,” she prompted.

“I'm not coming out!” Harry said stubbornly. “Just give me my clothes and-”

“What did she give you?” Minerva sighed.

“Just some swim wear,” her niece said innocently. She flicked her wand and the changing room door popped open. “Oops,” she said insincerely.

Harry's eyes bulged when he saw that his near nakedness was being observed by the two older women.

“Akkkk,” he choked.

“You thought that was appropriate?” Minerva asked dryly.

“Speedos are in,” her niece said with a shrug.

IIIIIIII

The Engineer watched with a proud grin as the two girls went back to redesign their sketches to include safety valves, with a satisfied smile on his face. That was one catastrophic error down, several dozen more to go.

"Ready to build another model then?" he asked.

“I'd like to try out this new design for a safety first,” Luna said brightly.

“Want to make something else explode, do you? he laughed.

“No,” Luna said quickly, “I wish to see if it works.”

“Win, win situation then,” he agreed. “It works, it works. It doesn't . . .”

“Boom!” Luna giggled, throwing her arms out to mimic her new favorite thing in the world.

They threw together another quick model and set it up to watch the results.

Luna was not disappointed as this model also chose to explode and scatter parts of itself over a large area.

“What happened?” Hermione asked in confusion.

“Can you tell us Luna?” the Engineer asked.

Luna ignored the question in favor of giggling and clapping.

“Luna . . .”

“Hmmm?” Luna looked over. “To be honest, I haven't the faintest. If my calculations were correct, it should have worked.”

“And it would have if you'd make these small changes.” He sketched out a quick diagram. “Do you see.”

“I believe so,” Luna agreed, “thank you.”

IIIIIIII

Harry looked at the large pile of clothing with a sense of dawning horror. There was no way . . . she couldn't expect him to . . . why did the universe always seem like it was conspiring against him?

“Do I really need all of that, Professor?” he whispered.

“Do you want to be the one to tell her that you don't?” Minerva asked mildly.

“No, Professor.”

“I thought not,” Minerva said with a grin.

“Where am I going to put it all?”

“I suppose we could pick you up a charmed valise before we head back to Hogwarts,” Minerva mused.

“More shopping?” Harry asked in dismay.

“Just a bit,” Minerva agreed sympathetically. “Buck up, Mr. Potter, Gryffindors don't shrink away from unpleasantness.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed grumbly. This was almost worse than fighting Voldemort.

IIIIIIII

Luna went over one of the conversations she'd had with Hermione. She wasn't sure but there was something about it that was bothering her.

"Hmmm." Luna looked over at her friend. "Hermione?"

"What is it Luna?" Hermione looked up from the drafting table.

"You mentioned that you were planning to have Harry spend a portion of the winter holiday with you," Luna said with a grin.

"Uh huh," Hermione agreed, "why?"

"Does Harry know?" Luna asked. "I ask because I don't recall you telling me that you asked him over, just that you were planning to."

"Oh bugger," Hermione moaned. The girl had a stricken look on her face. "What if he already has plans?"

"Did he tell you he had any?" Luna asked.

"No," Hermione admitted.

"Has he ever had any plans before?"

"Well no, but-"

"Then I wouldn't worry about it," Luna said cheerfully.

“But this year might be different,” Hermione cried. “I can't believe I forgot.”

“Just be sure to ask him when he gets back,” Luna said soothingly. “Everything will be fine Hermione.”

“Thank you, Luna.”

“What are friends for, Hermione.”

“And, Luna.”

“Yes, Hermione?”

“Would you like to spend some time at my house over the holiday?” Hermione asked. “It's fine if you'd rather spend time with your father,” Hermione added quickly, “I just thought . . .”

“That would be wonderful,” Luna squealed, pulling the larger girl into a hug. “Thank you.” It was so nice to finally have friends.

IIIIIIII

Hermione ambushed Harry the moment he walked into the Gryffindor common room.

“Harry,” Hermione squeaked. “Would you like to visit my house during winter holiday?”

“Is it alright with your parents?” Harry asked.

“It was their idea.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed, “thank you.” It sounded much better than spending his time off in a drafty castle in the middle of a Scottish winter.

IIIIIIII

Minerva was surprised, nay shocked to find the Headmaster waiting for her when she got back to her office.

"May I have a moment, Minerva?" the old man asked without his usual cheerfulness.

“What is it, Albus?”

“I hear that you gave Ms. Granger permission to invite Harry to her house over the winter holiday,” Albus began. “Is this true?”

“What if it is?” Minerva challenged. “It's well within my rights to grant permission as his head of house.”

“Just because you can do something, doesn't mean that you should.”

“A lesson that you would do well to learn yourself,” Minerva snipped. “It isn't healthy for children their age to live the sort of life that you've chosen to inflict on poor Mr. Potter.”

“Minerva, listen to reason. You must understand that-”

"No you must understand," Minerva interrupted. "You must understand that I am not content to sit idly by while you trample my responsibilities

in your obsession with Mr. Potter.. I allowed you to place him with those dreadful muggles, I allowed you to keep him confined to the castle, I said nothing when you kept sending him back to those horrible people, I aided you in so many ways that I have no doubt that James and Lily would have hexed me into oblivion if they'd have lived to see what we did to their child. No more Albus, I will not sit by and allow these transgressions to continue any longer."

"Then it seems that we no longer have anything to say to each other on this matter," Albus said sadly when he realized that he really couldn't justify his actions as being what was best for the boy, even to himself. "Good evening, Minerva."

"Good evening, Headmaster."

IIIIIIII

Hermione walked down to the engine shed after classes to find Luna already in the shops' small library, immersed in a large book.

"Good afternoon, Luna." Hermione said politely as she examined the stack to determine which book to take down for herself.

"Hmmm?" Luna looked up with a cute expression of bewilderment on her face. "Hermione, come look at this.

"What is it, Luna?"

"It's a sterling engine," Luna replied, her face alight with excitement. "They were invented to be a safer alternative to steam engines."

“Not very efficient thought,” Hermione mused.

“Not the ones they've built so far,” Luna agreed. “But it says here that they're capable of being almost perfectly efficient in theory.”

“Yeah,” Hermione mumbled thoughtfully. “How are we going to improve it to that point?”

"You mustn't forget the fact that we are witches, Hermione," Luna pointed out. "Meaning we have access to tools and techniques the muggles do not."

"True," Hermione agreed with a slowly growing smile. "Great Idea, Luna. Who knows what we can come up with using solid muggle theory and magical tools?"

“Thank you, Hermione.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 2

IIIIIIII

Anne Granger was going over the latest bit of correspondence she'd received from Minerva when the door to the study opened to admit her husband.

"How was your day, Philip?" Hermione's mother asked.

"Fairly productive," he replied. "Bought a new string of polo ponies."

"Oh?" Anne exclaimed. "Whatever for?"

"For Harry's use when he visits," Philip replied. "Not a one a day under eight years old so they all know more about the game than most of the players."

"Tack?"

"Put an order in yesterday," he said proudly.

"Exactly the sort of behavior I expect to see from the decadent commercial class," she sneered. "How many houses could be built with even a fraction of the funds you chose to waste on frivolities?"

"Better a decadent capitalist than a spoiled blue-blood that's never been a productive member of society, especially one that's chosen to glorify

the noble underclass and their so called struggler against their employers,” he growled back.

“Uncultured pig,” she sighed as she leaned into his embrace.

“Pampered lay-about,” he growled as he tightened his grip.

“Unlettered baboon.”

“So how was your day?” Philip asked in a normal voice.

“I had a particularly difficult extraction that I would be delighted to discuss later,” she huffed. “You know I hate it when you break the mood like that.”

“I know it gets you worked up,” he agreed with a grin. “But I suppose one can not expect too much from a feckless aristo.”

“That's a new one,” she moaned in appreciation, “you . . . ohhh yesssssss.”

IIIIIIII

Luna and Hermione were both getting more and more frustrated as their search of the shops' small library failed to produce much that they'd be able to use in their new engine project.

"It's a shame that we're not in the colonies," Luna sighed. "Or that the biker didn't survive the war."

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed. “Wait, what biker?”

“Father used to tell me stories about a man with a flying motorbike that fought Death Eaters.” Luna explained. “He disappeared at the end of the war so father thinks that he must have been killed because a man like him would never have allowed the Ministry to enslave-”

“Luna,” Hermione interrupted the girl's tale. She was not in the mood to put up with any of her friend's crazy tales at the moment. “Wait, did you say flying motorbike? You did, didn't you?”

“I believe I did, Hermione.” Luna paused. “But perhaps I didn't.” She scratched her chin. “I suppose either is possible.”

“Come on.” Hermione grabbed the other girl by the wrist and began dragging her towards the castle. “We need to talk to someone.”

“We do? Alright, if you say so, Hermione.”

IIIIIIII

It had to be one of the most awkward staff meeting that Albus Dumbledore had ever been in, let alone chaired. Half his staff was glaring at the other half of his staff and while it was far from unusual for them to swap glares with his potions master, they usually had much better relations with each other.

"Look at that," he said suddenly. It took everything the Headmaster had not to wilt when the glares shifted to him. "I'm afraid I must be going to handle something vitally important at the Ministry," he said suddenly.

"Minerva, I'm afraid that I'm going to have to ask you to direct the rest of the meeting."

"Of course, Headmaster."

"Goodbye all," Dumbledore said as he rushed out of the room.

"Well then," Minerva said after her superior had left the room. "I think it's time we got down to business?"

"I have better things to do than to sit here with all of you," Snape announced before standing up and sweeping out of the room.

"I still think he enchants his robes to get them to do that," Minerva muttered. "Back to the matter at hand, what's got all of you in such a snit?"

"We're sick of it," Sinistra growled. "Don't think for a moment that we're willing to stand for it even a second longer."

"Stand for what?" Minerva asked with a frown, honestly mystified.

"The way you've all got exciting research projects with Harry Potter and we don't," Professor Babbling explained hotly. "We want to be a part of it."

"Yeah," Vector agreed. "We want a chance to show what we can do."

"He doesn't even take Runes or Ar-"

“But he does do Quidditch,” Hooch interrupted,.“Don't think there aren't things I can teach him about how to handle a broom.”

“Don't be vulgar, Rolanda.” Sinistra giggled. “At least not while he's still a student.”

“Now who's being vulgar, Aurora?” Hooch retorted.

“Why don't we get back to the issue at hand?” Minerva fighting to bring some semblance of order back into the meeting. "All those interested in taking ownership of some portion of Mr. Potter's free time, please raise your hand."

IIIIIIII

Luna and Hermione literally ran into their Headmaster when they rounded a corner and collided with the old man.

“Are both you girls alright?” Dumbledore asked with a grandfatherly smile.

“We are, Headmaster.” Luna replied after a short inspection. “Or rather, we appear to be.”

"Excellent." He helped the girls to their feet and turned to leave.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione called out, shocking herself with how bold she'd become.

“What is it?”

“May we use the floo?”

“Of course,” he agreed. “Who would you like to contact?”

“Professor Lupin,” Hermione said.

“You may use the connection in my office if you'd like,” he offered.

“Thank you, sir.”

IIIIIIII

Minerva looked around the room to assure herself that everyone was satisfied with the deal they'd worked out.

“It's agreed then?” she asked sternly. “We will all give Mister Potter extra classes during our normal office hours using a schedule to be agreed upon at a later date.”

“Point of order, Minerva.” Sprout called out. “Will these classes be open to every student that wishes to take them.”

“Of course,” McGonagall said quickly. “Well, within reason.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Just that there are certain students that I would ban from my normal classes if the Headmaster allowed it and that I have no intention of teaching them in my 'copious amounts' of free time.”

IIIIIIII

Harry felt another chill go down his back, a chill he'd last felt when they'd pulled his name out of the cup and forced him into the Triwizard Tournament. Something absolutely horrible had just happened involving him.

"I better ask the Professors if I can have more classes," Harry said regretfully to himself. He'd want to be prepared for whatever Voldemort decided to throw at him. A couple new spells could spell the difference between life and death.

IIIIIIII

Remus stepped through the fireplace into the Headmaster's office and regarded the girls with a fond smile. Thanks to his condition, the werewolf had accepted the fact that he'd never be able to have children of his own so he regarded Harry and his friends as the closest he'd ever get to having a family.

"What can I do for you two?" he asked.

"Well, it's just that . . ." Hermione dithered. "Harry once mentioned something about Snuffles and I thought that it might be helpful for a project we're doing and you knew him better than anyone else and I was hoping that . . ."

"What it it?" Remus prompted gently.

“We wanted to gather information on a flying motorbike,” Luna supplied.

“And to examine it if at all possible,” Hermione added quickly.

“You want to know about Sirius's old bike?” Remus asked in surprise.
“I'm not sure what happened to it.”

“Oh.” Hermione drooped.

“I think his notes are still back at Grimmauld Place,” Remus offered. “I could get them for you if you'd like.”

“Thank you Remus,” Hermione said sweetly.

“Anything for one of Harry's friends,” Remus replied. “Where do you want me to deliver it?”

“Do you know where they keep the Hogwarts Express?”

IIIIIIII

As promised, Remus delivered Sirius' notes on construction, zen, and the art of the maintenance of magical motorbikes along with a large crate containing a number of mysterious items.

“What's all this?” Hermione asked.

“I found an old Motorcycle that Sirius used as his model and the tools he used to disassemble it,” Remus replied, “I'm not sure you want it all though.”

“Why not?”

“The motorcycle is in pieces and the tools have to be at least fifteen years old,” Remus explained. Not to mention the fact that Sirius had probably gotten them used, chances were they were hopelessly out of date by now with the way Muggles were always changing things.

“Wanted to make sure you didn't want any of it before I threw it out.”

“No!” Hermione said quickly. “It's perfect. Thank you Remus.”

“Happy to help.” The werewolf grinned. “I'd also be happy to bring you anything else I find like this if you want.”

“Please,” Hermione agreed.

Hermione decided to do a quick look over Sirius' notes while Luna decided to investigate the parts bin. Two things became quickly apparent as she read over the first couple pages. The first was that Sirius Black had horrible penmanship. The second was the the man was a bloody genius when it came to adapting muggle devices to work on magic.

“Hermione!” Luna called out.

“What is it, Luna?” Hermione reluctantly dragged herself away from her reading material.

“Do you have any idea what this part is?” Luna asked with an inquisitive look on her face.

“I think that's the frame Luna,” Hermione replied after a quick glance at the object in the other girl's hand.

“Hmmm, just how many frames does a motorcycle have?”

“Just one,” Hermione said absently. “Wait, why?”

“Because there are at least six or seven of these frames in the box, Hermione.” Luna peered down into the box. “Maybe more under the pile.”

“Oh . . . I guess it makes sense that Sirius would want to look at more than one Motorcycle before making his own.” Hermione said slowly.

“Do you think Harry would like it if we put them back together?” Luna asked, focusing an intense stare on the other girl while she waited for the answer.

IIIIIIII

Professor Vector favored Harry with a predatory look as walked into her classroom. If his performance in the other classes was any indication, he would help her rewrite the laws of magic and usher in a new age of discovery.

“Do you know why you're here, Mr. Potter?” she drawled.

“No, Professor.”

“You are here because of the research that you've been doing with the other Professors,” she explained.

“Oh? What am I going to be doing with you, Professor?”

“We are going to see if we can figure out why and how your new spells work,” Professor Vector purred. “Wonderful don't you think.”

“Er . . . why . . . why do we need to know how they work?” Harry asked hesitantly.

“Why?!” she barked. “Do you think we should be content to leave things as they are? Do you think that we shouldn't expend the necessary effort to perfect your new spells?!”

“No?” Harry ventured, not sure he agreed with the answer but fairly sure he wouldn't like what happened if he tried to give another.

“Of course not!” she agreed firmly.

“Of course not,” he echoed. Why did his life have to be so bloody complicated? It was like he was the universe's spittoon or something. What he needed was a nice quiet vacation round the world away from all this craziness. 'Better not do it under my own name though,' he thought to himself. 'No telling how many crazies I'd run into. Much safer to do it with an alias like Mr. John Smith, or Mr. Dean Longbottom, or . . .' he had a flash of inspiration. 'Mr. Something Black.' Sirius would have appreciated the thought of Harry using his family name to have a bit of fun.

“I foresee quite a bit of work ahead of us,” she added cheerfully, “I hope you don't mind sixteen hour days.”

“I do have other classes you know,” he pointed out.

“Yes,” she agreed. “But this is your only important class.” The amount of conviction in the woman's voice was nothing short of terrifying.

IIIIIIII

Luna cheered as they got their first engine to start. It wasn't much but they were fairly sure that they'd managed to separate enough parts to reassemble one of the motorcycles. It was fortunate that Sirius has squirreled away a number of maintenance manuals with his notes.

“Nice work, Luna.”

“Nice work, Hermione.”

The two girls smiled at each other.

IIIIIIII

Ron was waiting when Harry finally managed to escape the Professors and stumble back into the Gryffindor Common Room.

“You alright, mate?” Ron asked in concern.

“What day is it?” Harry dodged the question.

“Sunday, why?”

"Cause I've been doing classes all day," Harry sighed. Sure he'd asked for a few extra sessions but he'd never expected them to take it as far as they had. "I'd almost rather be at the Dursley's . . . nah, but a nap in the cupboard under the stairs is sounding bloody attractive." As the one place in the house guaranteed to be and to have always been Dursley free, he was actually rather fond of his first bedroom.

“Bloody hell, mate.” Ron winced. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Maybe if you'd come along,” Harry suggested, “it would distract the Professors away from me.”

“Anything besides that?” Ron asked mildly. “I mean, ask me to go fight a thousand year basilisk by your side, no problem. Extra class, well . . . that's something else isn't it?”

“I saved your life,” Harry protested.

"Only a couple times," Ron said reasonably. "Ask for one of my kidneys or something. Or . . . hey we could go visit the giant spiders in the forest, that'll wash the tired right out of you!"

"Don't think an extra kidney would help," Harry said sourly. "Not in the mood for dealing with spiders bigger than Fluffy either.”

“Well, the offer's on the table if you think of a way they will help.” Ron scratched his chin. “Least you've got Hermione's house to hide out in during hols,” Ron said thoughtfully, “Professors can't get you there.”

"Where all I'll have to put up with is Hermione constantly badgering me to study," Harry said brightly. "That's pretty much the standard all year anyway, that won't be so bad."

"As distracted as she'd been, I'll bet she won't even badger you that much." Ron grinned. "See, it aint so bad mate."

"How much longer till we get out?"

"Just a few more days," Ron assured his friend. Few dozen actually, but he saw no point in being overly negative. "You think you can last that long?"

"If I can't, then promise that you and Hermione will look after Hedwig."

"I promise," Ron agreed solemnly.

IIIIIIII

Minerva was making a few last minute adjustments to her lesson plans when the door opened to admit the Head of Hufflepuff House.

"Minerva, may I have a moment?"

"What can I do for you, Pomona?" Minerva replied.

"I was just wondering if we were pushing Mr. Potter a bit too hard," the other Professor explained. "He's starting to look a bit ragged."

“Yes he is,” Minerva sighed. “You didn't tell him about your concerns did you?”

“Heavens no,” Pomona laughed. “Would you mind explaining to me why you're pushing him so hard?”

“Filius and I talked about it and we agreed that we're going to push Mr. Potter as hard as we can for the foreseeable future,” Minerva began. “On the matter of his health, Poppy has been watching him closer than she usually does and as to why.” She shook her head sadly. “Well, he does have several Dark Wizards out to kill him, doesn't he?”

“Not to mention his horrible luck.”

“Or the fact that Albus has forbidden us to give Mister . . . Harry any extra training or special treatment since, quote; 'it wouldn't be fair to the boy to rob him of his normal childhood or to the other students to miss out on the extra instruction.'”

“But he is willing to allow Mr. Potter to aid us in our research,” Sprout said in understanding.

“And if Mr. Potter happens to get a bit of extra training, well that's just a happy accident.”

“Not our purpose at all, neatly sidestepping the Headmaster's edict against training,” the other Professor agreed. “Thank you for taking me into your confidence like this, Minerva.”

“Not at all, Pomona.”

IIIIIIII

Harry woke up late that morning. Monday meant that he didn't have any morning 'research sessions' with any of the Professors and was able to sleep in till a bit after seven.

A quick check of his schedule confirmed that he had double Potions after breakfast. He frowned, if someone had told him at the beginning of the year that he'd see Potions class as a time to relax then Harry would have laughed in their face.

“Guess it makes sense,” Harry muttered to himself as he walked out of the Common Room. “Worst Snape can do is take points and mark me down when I make a mistake, the other Professors.” Harry shuddered. “Besides, it's not like he can assign detentions anymore, not after the other Professors already divvied up my time among themselves.” Pity he didn't have Divination or History till Wednesday, he really needed a chance to catch up on his sleep.

IIIIIIII

Luna and Hermione met up after classes and rushed down to the train shed to continue their latest project.

“Course I can do it,” one of the old machinists agreed after they had explained to him what they wanted. “Still and all, I think it's a bit of a shame that you girls have moved away from steam and into internal combustion.”

“We just need to confirm something,” Hermione explained.

“Oh yes,” Luna agreed, “it would be best not to attempt to adapt the spells we found to enchant internal combustion to steam or Sterling Engines without a couple tests to make sure that we have a good idea of how they work on internal combustion.”

“Safety first,” Hermione added cheerfully.

“Glad you lasses have that one down,” the old machinist rumbled in approval. “Give me a few and I'll have the parts turned out.”

“Thanks,” Hermione said.

“Yes,” Luna agreed, “we really appreciate what you're doing for us.”

IIIIIIII

Harry watched the other students file out of the Transfiguration Classroom with a forlorn look on his face. Sometimes he wondered what it was like to be normal, to be free, to not have to dodge constant murder attempts from dark wizards and their minions.

“Thank you for staying behind, Mr. Potter.” Minerva smiled. “I understand that it can't be easy to give up so much free time.”

"Yes, Professor." "Like I have a choice." "What are we doing today?"

“You are going to go down to the Quidditch Pitch for a bit of instruction from Madame Hooch,” Minerva said warmly. “Unless you'd rather not do a bit of flying that is.”

“Of course not, Professor.” Harry said quickly. “I mean, of course I'd like to do a bit of flying.”

“On your way.”

“Yes, Professor.” Harry was almost out the door before her voice stopped him.

“And don't think I didn't notice that you transfigured your pillbox into a two headed mouse,” Minerva said with an amused smile. “When Madame Hooch is finished with you, I want you to come back here so we can figure out exactly how you did that.”

“Yes, Professor.” Harry agreed with considerably less enthusiasm.

Minerva looked at the two headed mouse in wonder as one head breathed fire on a fly that got too close and the other head darted forward to eat the fried insect.

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna looked at their new Motorbike with matching grins. Magic made creating things so much easier.

“Okay,” Hermione looked down, “why don't we play with the engine first.”

"Comfort can wait," Luna agreed with sparkling eyes as she set aside the notes on the silencing and warming charms Sirius had used, "and after that we can do the destructive testing."

"We can figure out why Sirius' notes say never to combine a couple of the charms," Hermione corrected, "if that happens to be explosively destructive then so be it. No doing anything to hasten that along."

"Of course not, Hermione." Luna agreed with a mostly innocent look on her face. "I would never dream of hastening things along."

Hermione was not convinced by her friend's apparent sincerity.

IIIIIIII

Harry got down to the Quidditch Pitch and found the flight instructor waiting for him in the broom shed.

"You look like you have a question," she observed.

"Why am I here, Madame Hooch?" Harry asked. The boy looked at his Professor with bleary eyes, he hadn't been getting much sleep lately.

"First of all, you may be a good Quidditch player but don't think that there aren't a few things that I can still teach you about flying."

"Of course not," Harry agreed quickly. "I've read about your time in the league."

"Really?"

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “Most people.” Including nearly every Quidditch Player at Hogwarts. “Say that you're the best chaser the Harpies ever had.”

“I hadn't heard that,” she said in an odd voice. “Back to the point, aside from flying, I'm also a fairly good broom maker.”

"You mean?" Harry perked up like he'd just taken a pepper up potion.

“We're going to craft a broomstick,” she said with a smile.

“Wow,” Harry gasped.

“I'm not up to equaling a Firebolt of course, but it can't hurt to get a better idea of how to craft a broom.”

“Of course not,” Harry agreed.

“We'll start by making you a new wand.”

“A wand?” Harry asked in shock.

"Uses some of the same principals and is much easier to do with a limited amount of tools," she explained. "I'm afraid we're going to have to wait for a large enough lathe to arrive to do the broom." She paused. "This will also allow you to practice over winter holidays, as the monitoring charm they use to track underage magic is something I'll 'forget' to cast on it. I think you can handle the responsibility, but be sure to obey the rules and rule number one is don't get caught."

"I will. How do we make a wand without the lathes?"

"Fortunately, I was able to borrow a couple of small table lathes from my uncle."

"Your uncle, ma'am?"

"I believe you got your wand from him," she replied.

"Olivander is your uncle?"

"My mother's uncle actually," Hooch clarified. "This wand we're going to craft probably won't be as good as the one you purchased . . ."

"But after I make a hundred of them then they might be half as good?" Harry suggested with a cheeky, if tired, grin.

"Hopefully not that many," Hooch laughed. "Now, the first thing we need to do is . . ."

IIIIIIII

Hermione remotely started the engine on their newly constructed test bike and then ducked behind the blast shield to wait with Luna.

"Is it supposed to be smoking like that, Hermione?" Luna asked curiously. "It never did that any of the other times we started it."

"I don't . . ."

BOOOM, the newly constructed bike engine exploded and flung pieces everywhere.

“Ehehehehehe.” Luna clapped her hands. “Let's do it again.”

“And again and again until we figure out just why that bug repelling charm makes it explode like that,” Hermione agreed.

“How did Sirius solve the problem?” Luna asked, still flush from excitement.

“His notes say that he just let the bugs fly into his teeth,” Hermione replied, “I don't think he cared why it didn't work just that it didn't work.” Hermione huffed. “Like any typical wizard he just ignored the whole thing.”

“Us witches are much more sensible,” Luna cheerfully agreed.

Sensibly, Hermione bit her tongue before the traitorous thing could say the comment that popped into her mind.

IIIIIIII

Ron looked up when Harry staggered into the room. His best friend looked like he'd been put through the wringer.

“Let you off early today, mate?” Ron asked.

“Madame Hooch is giving me a break,” Harry replied, “says she wants me to get in a short nap before we do anything else.”

“What's Hooch got you doing?” Ron asked curiously.

“She's going to be teaching me Quidditch moves later,” Harry replied, “right now we're working on making wands and brooms.”

“Quidditch?” Ron asked with a frown. “She was a bloody good chaser but what's she going to teach you about seeking?”

“She's a bloody good seeker too,” Harry laughed. “Showed me a couple things that I didn't know were possible to do on a broom.”

“Makes sense,” Ron agreed slowly. “Couldn't hurt to learn a few chaser moves either.”

“Guess not,” Harry agreed.

“And since you're making brooms anyway,” Ron grinned. “Be sure to make an extra one for me 'eh, mate.”

“Won't be as good as my Firebolt,” Harry cautioned. “Not even half as good as my old Nimbus.”

“But it'll be better than the school brooms I'd wager,” Ron said quickly. “Tell Hooch that I'd be happy to play keeper when you guys are practicing.”

“I will,” Harry promised.

“Get some sleep, mate.” Ron advised. “You look like you need it.”

IIIIIIII

Even with the aid of magic, it took some time to fabricate a new test bike. Not being the sort to lay about while others did their work and lacking the skill to help out, the girls chose to channel their free time into their locomotive design project.

"What do you think of this, Hermione?" Luna called out. "I'm fairly sure I've found a way to give our steam engine a forty percent increase in power."

"It should work, but with that much power we'd have a hard time making it stay on the rails," Hermione complained.

"Well, do we really need rails? I mean, I like trains, but the rails don't really matter to me." They were just bits of metal laying on the ground, hardly exciting at all and dead boring without all the tunnels and bridges. "If we charm the wheels so they act like they are running on rails when there is nothing beneath them we could just take to the air and avoid the whole rail problem."

"Hmmm, I wonder how fast we need to go to leave the Earth."

“Seven miles per second for an unpowered object,” Luna replied cheerfully. “Why do you ask?”

“I've always wanted to visit the moon,” Hermione admitted.

“Um . . .” Luna looked a bit lost.

“What is it, Luna?”

“I can't help but feel that there was a comment I could have made regarding that statement,” Luna admitted. “Seeing that my name means 'moon' in Latin.”

“It'll come to you later,” Hermione giggled. “Be sure to tell me and we'll pretend you thought of it now.”

“It'll make a nice touch when we write our memoirs,” Luna agreed. “A touch or two of humor will make the whole thing much more accessible to the average person.”

IIIIIIII

Harry finished his nap and went returned to the broom shed where he found Madame Hooch waiting for him.

“Have a good nap, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Is there something you'd like to say, Mr. Potter?” years of teaching had made her adept at reading her student's expressions.

“Ron was wondering if he could join us when we practice Quidditch,” Harry said nervously.

“Of course,” she agreed. “You may bring him with you when we meet tomorrow. If he stays late then we should have plenty of time to turn out a couple of blanks for him and he can get started on making his new wand right away.”

“I . . . er, don't think he was planning on doing anything that didn't involve flying.”

“If he doesn't want to show up to one portion of the lesson then he can skip all of it,” Madame Hooch said firmly. “He's welcome to come but he is not welcome to cherry pick the tasks that he wishes to do.”

“I'll tell him,” Harry agreed.

“Was there anything else, Mr. Potter?”

“Well . . .”

“Yes?”

“Would it be possible to make a new wand out of this, Professor?” Harry held out a long piece of wood.

“A piece of your old Nimbus?” Hooch asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes, Professor.”

“I don't know,” she admitted. “I don't believe I've ever heard of anyone attempting it before.”

“Oh.” Harry drooped.

“None of that, Mr. Potter.” She laughed. “What's the best way to find out if something can be done?”

“To try it. Right, Professor.”

“Right,” she agreed. “What were you planning to use for a core?”

“Wing feather of an overprotective mothering owl,” Harry replied.

“Don't recall anyone trying that either,” she said oddly. “Worth a shot . . . though it might be best to try it in a more conventional blank to prove the concept.”

“And to try a more conventional core in one of my Nimbus blanks,” Harry agreed, “I've spent enough time around Hermione to learn how important it is to have a control.”

IIIIIIII

The two girls set up their second test bike and prepared to carry out the experiment.

"I've got it," Luna squealed, "I've got it, Hermione!"

“You've figured out why it keeps exploding?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Luna replied. “I think I figured out a way to make our locomotive fly.”

“Oh?” Hermione pulled out her notebook. “How, adapting the flight charms used on the motorcycle?” Hermione frowned. “I'm fairly sure that the locomotive will be a bit too heavy for them to work reliably.”

“I don't think those are powerful enough either,” Luna said regretfully. “So what if we ignored them all together.” Luna's smile deepened.

“I don't . . . floating tracks?” Hermione ventured.

“We'll charm a bit the air to solidify and form into tracks in front of the train,” Luna said quickly.

“It . . . it might work,” Hermione muttered, her mind conjuring up pictures of a locomotive shooting through the clouds.

“We can look into building a model later,” Luna agreed. “First.”

“We have to blow up another motorbike,” Hermione agreed.

“Yay!” Luna squealed.

IIIIIIII

Harry stumbled into the dorms late that night and collapsed onto his bed.

“Hooch say anything about me doing Quidditch with you?” Ron asked.

“Madame Hooch says that if you want to learn to do Quidditch, then you'll have to come down and make your own broom.” Harry mumbled.

“Sorry mate.”

“How much time do you have to spend with her every week?” Ron asked speculatively.

“Couple hours,” Harry replied. “Depends on what the other Professors want to do.”

“Suppose it couldn't hurt to try it,” Ron mused, “what do you think Harry?” Ron turned to look at his friend. “Harry?” only to find that he was fast asleep.

IIIIIIII

Luna squinted at her parchment for nearly five minutes before deciding to give up and get a second pair of eyes on the problem.

“Do you mind taking a look at this, Hermione?” she asked.

“What's the problem, Luna?” Hermione replied.

“My figures are off and I can't see where I'm making the mistake,” Luna replied. “I know my result can't be true.”

“Hmmmmm.” Hermione went over other girl's parchment three times before she was willing to admit defeat. “I can't find your mistake either, Luna,” she sighed. “But you're right, this can't be correct.”

“Mug of hot chocolate before hitting it again?” Luna suggested.

“Perhaps a bit of time away will help us clear our minds?”

“Sounds good to me, Luna,” Hermione agreed.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 3

IIIIIIII

McGonagall felt a deep sense of satisfaction when her prized research subject managed to duplicate his earlier error to produce several more of the odd creatures.

“Very good, Mr. Potter.” Minerva looked down at the two headed mouse filled cage.

“Does that mean I can stop?” Harry asked hopefully.

“It means that I can replicate your spell and that you can take these mice down to Hagrid for your next lesson,” Minerva replied. “Followed by an hour with Madame Hooch and another with Professor Sinistra.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said in defeat. Perhaps if he studied every lesson before hand, he could avoid making anymore mistakes?

Harry picked up the cage and trudged down to the groundskeeper's hut that served as Hagrid's home.

“Ello, H'arry,” Hagrid said with a grin, “let's see the little darlings.”

“Er, here they are, Hagrid.” Harry handed the cage to the half giant.

“Wonderful looking things aren't they?” One of the mice singed the edge of Hagrid's beard when he got too close. “Now, Perfessor McGonagall tells me that they like to eat flies. You and I are going to find out what else the lovelies like to eat, then we're going to see if we can set up a breeding program fer them.”

“Okay, Hagrid.”

IIIIIIII

Ron considered his options as he ate his evening meal. On the one hand, real professional training would be invaluable if he wanted to get into the pros, could even shave a year or two off his time in the second string. On the other hand, Hooch expected him to do a lot of bloody useless work carving brooms before she'd let him do any flying. Ron sighed, he really had no choice in the matter. The opportunity was just too good to miss.

The boy gathered up his things and walked down to the Quidditch pitch to meet his friend.

IIIIIIII

A grin blossomed on Harry's face when he saw Ron approach. Truth be told, he was starting to feel a bit lonely since he begun spending the majority of his time with the Professors and since Hermione's obsession with mixing technology and magic had precluded her from attending more then the occasional extra class with him.

“Decided to come along then?” Hooch asked mildly.

“Bit of extra work is worth it to get into the pros,” Ron replied seriously.
“Let's get the boring part out of the way first.”

“Boring part?” she raised an eyebrow, a gesture both boys would later regard as one of the most terrifying things they'd ever seen.

“The bloody carving,” Ron explained. “Harry said you wouldn't let me fly without doing that.”

“I see.” An evil grin bloomed on the instructor's face, she'd intended to put them through a couple simple drills, but the little Weasley had inspired her to new levels of sadism. Little snot thought flying was the fun part? Well, let's just see how much he enjoyed flying after one of the Harpies 'lost game' work outs.

“Damn it,” Harry cursed. Harry sometimes wondered why Ron had to be so thick.

“Best get the 'boring part' out of the way first,” Hooch said with a horrific grin. “Don't you think so, Harry?”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry sighed. He really hated his life sometimes. “In fact, I'm suddenly not feeling well, could I be excused from today's flying?”

“A quick run around the field is just the thing to occupy your mind,” she said firmly.

“Understood, Professor,” Harry said glumly. Damn it, why did his friend have to be so bloody thick?!

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna looked down at the motorbike with twin looks of accomplishment. It hadn't been easy, but they'd managed to assemble a complete bike from the jumble of parts that Remus had delivered.

“Do you think Harry will be pleased?” Luna asked eagerly.

“I'm sure he will be,” Hermione agreed, “I already told you that.”

“I know,” Luna agreed. “It's just . . . I'm . . .”

“It's okay, calm down, Luna.” Hermione put an arm on the younger girl's shoulder.

“I've never had friends before and I'm not sure how to act,” Luna confessed.

“I understand,” Hermione assured the nervous girl. “I didn't have any friends before I got to Hogwarts either.”

IIIIIIII

Ron glanced over as Harry leapt to his feet and presented something to Professor Hooch.

“Which one is that?” Hooch asked as Harry proudly held up his mostly completed wand.

“Owl feather core with a Nimbus body,” Harry replied.

The Professor watched as Harry gave the newly constructed wand an experimental wave and for a second, the world seemed to turn inside out and Hooch would have sworn that she could see odor of freshly cut wood, taste the sound the wand made as it cut through the air, and hear the light bouncing off the Weasley boy's hair.

“What in the bloody hell was that?” Ron asked between dry heaves.

“That was a particularly strong reaction to a wand choosing a wizard,” the flight instructor choked.

“Is that bad?” Harry asked nervously.

“Not as such,” Hooch said dryly, “it does mean that my uncle is going to hound you until he figures out what happened though.”

“Another class?” Harry asked sickly.

“I wouldn't worry about it till you get out for summer,” she replied The world had finally stopped spinning and she was beginning to see color again. “He's going to be spending most of his time collecting raw materials and constructing wands until early July.” Though he might persuade himself to make a short side trip after she described what she'd just seen.

“Oh,” Harry sighed in relief, dodged that bullet. Well, put it off for a bit anyway.

“Now let's see yours,” Hooch said to Ron, she held out her hand.

"Er, I'm not quite as far along as Harry is," Ron demurred.

“Let's see what you've got so far,” she ordered.

“Alright,” Ron agreed. He handed her the wand he'd been carving.

“Did you do this free hand?” she asked as she examined the half done wand.

“Couldn't figure out how to get the details right with the lathe,” Ron admitted. Well, he told himself, if it's that bad then maybe she'll just let me skip all this wood carving stuff and go straight to flying.

“Why'd you carve this indent into the handle?” she demanded.

“That's so I have a place to rest my thumb,” Ron replied.

“Doesn't feel very comfortable to me,” she commented.

“Your thumb is smaller then mine,” Ron replied patiently, “I'd have done it different if I were carving it for you.”

“Hmmm.” She pursed her lips and handed the wand back. “Let's get to flying.”

“Right,” Harry agreed as he reached for his Firebolt.

“School brooms for both of you,” she said sharply.

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed with considerably less enthusiasm. Why couldn't she be content to prove her point to Ron and leave him out of it?

The next two hours were grueling. Harry would have laughed if he had enough energy, he'd thought Wood was bad.

“Three more passes!” Hooch ordered. “You have enough energy to smile, you have enough energy to keep going!”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed weakly. Lesson learned, he was never going to smile again.

“Weasley!” Hooch bellowed. “What in the hell do you think you're doing? Cover that bloody goal post!”

“Yes, Professor,” Ron agreed. To think, he'd once thought that Quidditch was fun.

“That's enough!” she bellowed after a few more minutes. “On the ground, both of you!”

“How'd we do?” Ron asked hopefully.

“Gather your things,” Hooch said, ignoring Ron's question. “Harry, I want you to take some sand paper with you to finish up your wand

during the holidays. I want you to get progressively smoother until you get to the ray skin, buff it after that and rub bees wax into it.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed.

“Ron, stay behind a bit. I have something I need to talk to you about.”

“Yes, Professor,” Ron agreed with a sigh. He'd thought he had skills until he had a chance to play against Harry. Even on a school broom and in an unfamiliar position, Harry was still able to fly rings around him. Wasn't it enough that Harry was the greatest seeker Gryffindor had seen in god knows how long, bloody prat had to be a decent chaser too? Bloody unfair.

“Wait for him outside, Harry,” Hooch ordered.

“I . . . yes, Professor.” Harry shot his friend a look of sympathy as he walked out.

“What do you want, Professor?” Ron asked in a defeated tone of voice. He steeled himself for what he knew was coming.

“Kid, I've got good and bad news for you.” Hooch said seriously. “The bad is that you're never going pro, just don't have the reflexes or the drive.”

“But . . .” Ron felt like his whole world had collapsed. This was even worse than what he'd expected.

“The good is that your carving is top notch,” she continued. “Not pro level but the potential is there. If you're willing to devote the time and

effort, then some day people are going to be talking about your brooms in the same breath they use to talk about Firebolt and Nimbus.”

“R . . . really?” Ron looked like a drowning man that had just caught a life preserver.

“I never joke about brooms,” she said seriously.

“I, would it be alright to talk with you about this some more?” Ron asked hopefully.

“When?”

“Tonight if possible,” Ron said quickly. “I . . . I'd like to be able to work on it during holidays.”

Hooch pursed her lips. “Potter!” she called out.

“Yes, Professor?” Harry stuck his head back in the woman's office. He caught a glimpse of Ron's smiling face out of the corner of his eye, maybe Hooch had seen something he hadn't?

“Your friend will be a while, head back to the castle.” She had a couple weeks to try to drill the basics into the boy's thick skull, time to see if he had the followthrough.

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed reluctantly.

The last Potter was deep in thought as he made his way back to the castle for a quick shower before his next 'research session.'

“Harry!” Luna called out. The two girls ambushed their messy haired friend just before he got to the main entrance.

“What is it?” he asked.

“We've got something to show you,” Luna said breathlessly. “Right, Hermione?”

“Right,” Hermione agreed.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“It's a surprise,” Hermione said. “Right, Luna?”

“Right,” Luna agreed. She was practically bouncing up and down in excitement.

“Okay, lead the way.” The two girls each took possession of one of his arms and dragged him down an unfamiliar path and into the shed that housed the Hogwarts express.

“It's over here,” Luna said as she dragged him past one of the massive engines. She flung open the door to reveal a beat up motorbike sitting in the middle of a large empty room.

Harry took several stumbling steps until he was within touching distance of the machine. “Is this?” Harry stared down at the motorcycle with an unreadable look on his face.

“It's not the one he made for himself,” Hermione said softly. She was beginning to get nervous over Harry's lack of reaction. “It's one of the ones he took apart so see how they worked.”

“But it was his, yes?” Harry took a couple steps forward and ran his hand over the tank, letting his fingers find every dent and ding.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed.

“Thank you,” Harry whispered. “I used to have dreams about his motorbike you know,” he continued softly. “I always wanted one of my own, used to fantasize about it taking me away from the Dursleys forever.”

“And now you have one,” Luna said quickly. “Does that make you happy?” She bit her lower lip as she waited for his reply.

“More than you'll ever know, much more than I can ever express,” Harry agreed horsely. “Thank you.”

“You said that, Harry,” Hermione teased.

“So I did,” Harry agreed. His hand reached out to caress the fuel tank again. “Does it run?”

“We haven't gotten to that stage yet,” Hermione demurred. Why in the hell hadn't they thought of that?

“We wanted to show you right away,” Luna added.

“It's wonderful,” Harry said slowly. “Wonderful.” He took one last regretful caress before turning away. “I have to get to my extra classes.”

“You can always come back to it later,” Hermione assured her friend.

With a last smile for each of the girls, Harry turned and walked out of the room..

“I'm glad we were able to do that for him,” Hermione said with a smile. “Well, back to work.”

“Hermione,” Luna said suddenly.

“Yeah, Luna?”

“If one motorcycle made Harry happy, how happy do you think he'll be after we assemble all of them?”

“I . . .” she trailed off when she noticed the look of hopeful expectation in the blonde's eyes. “Why don't we find out?”

“I was hoping you'd say that, Hermione.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 4

IIIIIIII

Harry pulled himself out of bed the next morning and met Ron and Hermione in the common room. The three of them stared dully at each other for a few seconds, until Harry decided to break the silence.

“Why do you two look so tired this morning?” Harry asked his friends. After all, he was the only one being tortured by the Professors.

“I was up all night doing something with Luna,” Hermione replied with a yawn.

“I spent most of the night working on my carving after I finished another talk with Hooch,” Ron replied.

“Breakfast?” Hermione suggested.

“Let's go,” Harry agreed.

“Can't wait,” Ron pitched in.

The 'golden trio' walked into the Great Hall and towards the Gryffindor Tables.

“Save me two seats,” Hermione requested as she broke off from her friends and started walking towards a blonde mop taking a seat towards the end of the Ravenclaw tables.

“Luna, Over here,” Hermione called out.

The blonde cheerfully bounced over to her friend's side. “Yes, Hermione?”

“How can you look so awake?” Hermione demanded.

“I got almost four whole hours of sleep, Hermione. Why wouldn't I look awake?” Luna asked happily.

“That's one less then I got,” Hermione moaned.

“I wanted to get all my packing done before my roommates woke up,” Luna explained. “What is it you wanted, Hermione?”

“Oh, uh, would you like to have breakfast with us today, Luna?”

“I would be delighted to, thank you, Hermione.”

“After that, the four of us can take the carriages to the Hogwarts Express together,” Hermione continued.

“I'm sorry, Hermione. But I was hoping to get down to help them warm up the engine,” Luna said regretfully. “But I would love to sit with you on the train if that's alright with you?”

Hermione noticed the way her friend stiffened up while waiting for the reply. “Of course, Luna. And if you don't mind, I'd like to go with you to help with the Engine.”

“I'll wait for you to finish packing,” Luna agreed.

“I got all that done two days ago,” Hermione said quickly. “Just let me arrange for my trunk to get brought down and I'll join you in a minute.”

“Aren't we going to have breakfast first?” Luna asked innocently.

“Oh . . . right.” Hermione blushed. “I forgot all about that.”

The two girls walked over to the Gryffindor tables and took their places next to Harry on the bench.

“Morning, Luna,” Harry greeted the girl.

“Good morning, Harry,” Luna replied with a dazzling smile.

“Mumph, L'na,” Ron said with a wave.

“Good morning, Ronald,” Luna said. It was so nice to be accepted.

“Thank you for saving us a couple of seats, Harry,” Hermione said.

“Anything for a friend,” Harry replied.

“Hey, Lav. Do you mind doing me a favor?” Hermione asked her roommate across the table.

“What is it?” Lavender replied.

“Could you bring Crookshanks and my trunk down to the common room?” Hermione asked.

“Sure, no problem,” Lavender agreed. “Anything else?”

“That's all, thank you, Lavender.”

“Happy to help.”

“Harry?” Hermione turned to the boy on her left with a hopeful look on her face.

“Yeah, I can get it all on the train for you.”

“Thank you, Harry.”

“What are friends for?”

“If it's not too much trouble, could you find a compartment at the front of the train?” Luna asked nervously, surprising herself with how bold she'd gotten. “As far forward as possible anyway.”

“Sure, why?”

“Hermione and I are going to be in the Engine compartment when the train pulls up to the station and it would be nice to have a short walk,” Luna explained.

“Ah, okay, Luna.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Luna said sweetly.

“Mister Potter.” McGonagall's voice caused the students to jump. “Just the person I wanted to see.”

“Yes, Professor?”

“I was just musing the other day about how it's a shame that you can't practice magic while you're away from the castle,” McGonagall began. “Severely limits the amount of practical assignments I can give you to complete anyway.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed neutrally.

“Happily, I have a solution.”

“I'm going to be permitted to use magic?” Harry asked hopefully. Granted, he had his newly constructed wand that Madame Hooch had 'forgotten' to charm, it would still be nice to be able to do things legally.

“I'm afraid not,” Minerva replied. “This way, please.”

“See you on the train,” Harry said over his shoulder as he followed his head of house out of the Great Hall.

McGonagall led Harry back to her office and handed him a long rectangular wand shaped box. “Here you are, Mr. Potter.”

“What's this, Professor?”

“It's a weighted training wand,” Minerva explained. “Filius tells me that Professional Duelists use them to practice wand movements.”

He opened the box to find a metal object about the same size and shape of his normal wand.

“It's heavy.”

“According to Filius, that the weight helps one train for a normal duel,” Minerva continued. “The tip will light up when you make a successful movement, nothing will happen if you make an unsuccessful movement.”

“Thanks, Professor.”

“You are very welcome, Mr. Potter.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna walked in to find the train shed a hive of activity.

“Dinna expect ta see yew garls 'ere t'day,” one of the firemen said loudly. All activity halted as the men noticed the two girls. “Woulda tha' tha' yewd be wif yer mates.”

“We are,” Luna replied. “Right, Hermione?”

“Right, Luna. And besides, we'll be with our other friends on the ride down. We're just here to say goodbye and help you prepare the Express for the run to London.”

“An' wer happy ta 'ave it,” the fireman replied with a grin. “Why don yew start th' inspection? It'd be a big 'elp.” Granted the Express had already been inspected and re-inspected, but it wouldn't hurt anything to do it again and it would keep the two girls from getting underfoot.

“Right,” Hermione agreed. “Come on, Luna.”

The two girls spent the next few minutes going over every inch of the massive machine, checking and rechecking every critical part to ensure that there would be no problems on the run to London.

“All finished then?” The Engineer asked.

“Neither of us found any critical problems,” Hermione reported. “But you might want to have a close look at the steam gauge siphoning pipe.”

“We couldn't find anything wrong, but there's something off about it,” Luna added.

“Good job,” he said. He tossed each of the girls a bundle of clothing. “Change into these coveralls and stow your good clothes,” he advised. “Gonna get real dirty in a few minutes.”

“Right,” Hermione agreed. The two girls retired to the office to change into their new outfits.

IIIIIIII

Hermione's father sighed in frustration as he put down the phone. Of all the bloody times for something to come up.

“Thomas,” he called out.

“Yes, sir?” The driver replied.

“I'm afraid that we will not be able to pick up Hermione ourselves,” Philip said with a look of distaste. “His fists balled up in frustration. “Please tell her that we have an emergency surgery and that we will see her when she gets home.”

“Yes, sir. Should I take her and her young gentleman to get something to eat on the way here?”

“Take her wherever she likes if she asks. I'd like to have a meal with her, but not if it means she goes without when she's hungry.”

“Yes, sir. Should I tell Mrs. Granger about the change of plans?”

“I'll take care of it myself. Thank you, Thomas, that will be all.”

“Yes, sir.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna watched in fascination as the crew of the Hogwarts Express went about their task of running the engine.

“Nothing exciting from here on,” the Engineer said loudly. He smiled down at the two soot covered girls. “Why don't you two clean up a bit and then go see your friends?”

“Thank you for the ride,” Luna said sweetly.

“It was very educational,” Hermione added.

“Come on,” Hermione said as she dragged the younger girl into the washroom. “Let's get some of this soot off.”

“Alright, Hermione.”

Several through cleaning charms and a bit of soap and water made them presentable enough for polite company and they stepped out to search for their friend's compartment.

IIIIIIII

Thomas went over the necessary changes with the rest of the staff as they prepared to pick up their employer's daughter from the train station.

“No changes for the first half,” he said in a slow measured tone. “I want the first group to be in place and keeping an eye out for trouble four hours before the train comes in.”

IIIIIIII

The snack cart lady was preparing to make her rounds when she saw the two girls walk past.

“Looking for your friends?” She called out.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. “Do you know where they are?”

“The Conductor put them in the second compartment of the first car,” the woman said helpfully.

“Thank you very much,” Hermione said quickly. “Come on, Luna.”

It didn't take long for the two girls to find their friends, but after about fifteen minutes of socializing, the lack of sleep began to catch up with them. Harry and Hermione were both sound asleep and leaning on each other for support and Ron was looking down longingly.

“Would you like to lay down on the bench, Ronald?” Luna asked.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed gratefully. “But where will you go?”

“I shall sit next to Hermione,” Luna replied. She walked to the other side of the car, took a seat, and laid her head on the other girl's shoulder.

“Have a pleasant sleep, Ronald.”

“Night, Luna.”

The four of them slept quietly through the next hundred miles or so until they were discovered by two of Gryffindors' biggest gossips.

“Fetch Colin,” Lavender whispered. “Or at the very least, fetch his camera.”

“Right,” Parvati agreed.

Lavender stifled a giggle as she watched her roommate drool on 'the-boy-who-lived' while the blonde Ravenclaw drooled on her. Oh, they were going to tease Hermione so much.

“Got it,” Parvati whispered. “Rather, got him.”

“Good work,” Lavender whispered back. “Colin, do your stuff.”

“Right,” Colin agreed.

To the dismay of the two gossips, the flashes woke their sleeping classmates before more than a couple pictures could be taken.

“I suggest we leave,” Lavender said as she darted out of the compartment.

“Quickly,” Parvati giggled.

“What was that?” Harry asked with a yawn.

“Couple of gossiping twits,” Hermione replied with a sniff. “Did you get a good rest, Harry?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “How about you, Luna?”

“Marvelous, how was yours, Ronald?”

“Wish it was longer, but I got work to do, 'eh, Hermione?”

“I really should revise my homework schedule,” Hermione mused. Hermione glanced at Harry and Luna out of the corner of her eye. “But I can always do that later,” she said firmly. “Care for a game to pass the time?”

“Sure,” Harry agreed.

“I'd love to,” Luna said happily.

“You guys go ahead,” Ron sighed. “I really do need to take care of this.”

“Plenty of time for you to join us later, Mate,” Harry said quickly.

Ron broke the silence a few minutes later. “Hey, Hermione, could you hold this and tell me how it feels?” He asked hopefully. Ron had what appeared to be a twisted and oddly carved foot long length of broomstick in his hand.

“Sure, Ron,” Hermione agreed. She awkwardly took the stick away from him. “It feels, weird.”

“You're holding it wrong,” Ron said patiently.

“How should I hold it then?” Hermione asked with a huff.

“Follow the twist with your thumb,” Ron advised.

“Ah,” Hermione said happily, “that's much better.”

“What are you trying to do, Ronald?” Luna asked.

“Trying to make a custom grip sample to send to the Harpies,” Ron explained. “Could you try it now, Luna?”

“Of course, Ronald. I'd be happy to help,” Luna agreed. She took the grip expertly for a few seconds. “A bit large for me, but comfortable.”

“Thanks, Luna.”

“What do you mean, send it to the Harpies?” Hermione asked.

“Madame Hooch is using her connections to get it looked at,” Ron explained. “She says that there's big money in doing aftermarket customizations of factory brooms and that most of the players like to have their broomsticks fitted.”

“Isn't there a lot of competition?” Hermione asked with a worried frown.

“Not as much as you'd think,” Ron said cheerfully. “Most of the companies hate to bother with this sort of thing.”

“And where there's a market for something and a lack of competition, there's money to be made,” Hermione agreed. “Let me take a look at your business plan later, okay, Ron?”

“Business plan?”

“Dad taught me a little about them,” Hermione explained. She normally hated to have anything to do with it, but was willing to dirty her hands to help a friend. “Said it was something every Granger had to understand.” Even if it cut into her reading time.

“Errr.”

“I'll help you write one up later, okay?”

“Thanks, Hermione.”

The Children shucked their robes as the train pulled into the Station . “Don't forget to charm them to be lighter before we get off the train,” Hermione advised. She pulled out her wand and hit her trunk with a couple of spells.

“Would you mind too much doing mine as well, Hermione?” Luna asked with a faint blush. “I'm not very proficient with that charm.”

“Of course, Luna.” Hermione cast a couple more charms. “I'm always happy to help.”

They stepped off the train and Harry suddenly found himself enveloped by a pair of Arms. “Harry dear,” Mrs. Weasley said happily.

“Hello, Mrs. Weasley.”

“And Hermione.” Molly released her captive and grabbed another. “I hear you're planning to stay together this holiday.”

“My parents wanted a chance to meet him,” Hermione explained.
“Luna's coming over later too,” she added.

“Well . . . just be sure that you don't do anything scandalous,” Molly advised sternly.

“Yes, Mrs. Weasley.”

“It's not that I don't understand what it's like to be your age,” Molly continued her lecture. “Just remember that you've got plenty of time to explore things later, no need to rush into things.”

“Yes, Mrs. Weasley.” The two red faced teens agreed.

“Leave them alone, Molly,” Arthur said gently. “Unless you want me to tell the story of the second floor classroom.”

“Arthur,” Molly exclaimed. “Not in front of the children.”

“Sorry that had to happen to you guys,” Ron whispered to his friends.
“But now you know what I have to live with.”

“Mum says that embarrassing your children is one of the major benefits of being a parent,” Hermione sighed. “Guess that's one thing that's the same in both worlds.”

Arthur finished his conversation with his wife and turned back to the two children. “Are you two going to be alright? It's no trouble to wait with you until your parents get here.”

“They should be waiting on the other side of the barrier, Mr. Weasley,” Hermione said. “I can call them and wait in the station office if they're not there.”

“If you're sure,” Arthur said slowly.

“It'll be fine, Mr. Weasley,” Harry assured the man. “Hermione and I both grew up in the muggle world.”

“Well . . . if anything happens or your parents aren't there, I want the two of you to come back to the platform and floo me immediately.”

“We will, Mr. Weasley,” Hermione agreed quickly.

“Alright.” He sighed. “Just remember that 'you-know-who' is back and-”

“We understand, Mr. Weasley,” Harry said quickly. “We'll be careful.”

Hermione and Harry said their goodbyes to their friends and walked through the barrier to Kings Cross.

“Thomas,” Hermione squealed. She ran up to an imposing man with close cropped grey hair and threw her arms around him. “Did you miss me?”

“We all did, Ms. Hermione.”

“Harry, this is my mother's driver, Thomas.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Harry said politely.

“Thomas, this is my friend, Harry Potter.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Harry.”

“Where are mum and dad?” Hermione asked.

“Your parents had to do an emergency surgery,” the grey haired driver explained. “They'll meet you at Matchingam Hall.”

“Just leave your trunk here, Harry,” Hermione said to her friend. “The other car will take care of it.”

“Other car?” Harry asked dumbly.

“One for people, the other for the trunks,” Hermione agreed. Actually, there were two other cars one for chase and the other to lead but security was never something that Hermione ever concerned herself with or even noticed the majority of the time.

Hermione grabbed Harry by the wrist and dragged him out of the station. “Where's the car, Thomas?”

“It's the S-Class, Ms. Hermione,” the burly driver replied.

“Daddy bought another one?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, Ms. Hermione.” The driver opened the back door for his charges and helped them into the back seat of the roomy sedan.

“Hermione,” Harry whispered as the car pulled away from the curb.

She shot him an odd look. “What is it?” Hermione whispered back.

“Is he a wizard,” Harry whispered. He fingered his wand.

“I don't think so,” Hermione replied, “why?”

"Cause he's got something hidden up his sleeve," Harry replied.

Hermione was surprised to see her best friend's wand appear in his hand as he focused on a point at the base of the driver's neck.

“Thomas,” Hermione called out.

“Yes, Ms. Hermione?”

"What do you have hidden up your sleeve?"

"You noticed that?" he asked with a grin. He stopped the car and pulled up his sleeve to reveal a wicked looking double edged dagger. "Like to keep it on hand to open letters and such."

“Thank you, Thomas.”

“Not at all, Ms. Hermione.”

“Satisfied?” Hermione whispered.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed sheepishly. “I just noticed that he had something that looked like a wand and I started thinking about Polyjuice and . . . well . . .”

“I understand.” She patted him on the leg. “It must be terrible for you, what with 'you-know-who' back.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 5

IIIIIIII

As they rolled up the driveway to Hermione's house, Harry got his first glimpse of the massive manor house that was to be his home for the winter holiday.

Description of the house

“That's where you live?” Harry murmured in shock.

“On weekends and holidays,” Hermione agreed. “Why, is there something wrong with it?”

“It's huge,” Harry replied. “You never said your house was so big.”

“It isn't,” Hermione corrected him. “My house is in London and it isn't nearly so large.”

“Then what do you call that thing?”

“I told you,” Hermione said in exasperation. “It's the weekend house.”

“Oh,” Harry said faintly.

“I really don't see what the big deal is anyway,” Hermione continued. “It isn't even half the size of Hogwarts.”

“Bit more than a third,” Harry agreed mumbled back. He didn't think it would be productive to point out the fact that Hogwarts was built to house an entire staff and student body, while her 'weekend house' kept only one family.

Hermione was able to contain herself until they came to a stop at the front entrance. “Thomas, did they transfer my library?”

“Of course, Ms. Hermione,” the burly driver agreed. “You don't think we'd be cruel enough to keep your books from you?”

“Sorry, Thomas,” Hermione said contritely. She captured Harry's wrist in an unbreakable grip. “Come on, I wanna show you my books.”

The large driver smiled as the girl he thought of as a daughter dragged her victim into the house. It was good to have her back, if only for a couple weeks.

IIIIIIII

Luna waited patiently until they got home before she asked her father where their search for elusive creatures would take them that year. The answer shocked her to the very core.

“The back garden of course,” her father replied proudly.

“Why not some mysterious land?” Luna asked with a frown.

“Because that's where we'd expect them to be.” Her father gave a knowing wink. “They're eleven steps ahead of us, so . . .”

“We've got to be on a twelve step program,” Luna cheered. “You're brilliant, father.”

“I have my moments,” he said modestly. “This will also let you spend more time with your friends,” he added.

“Oh?” Luna cocked her head. “How so?”

“We can't spend all our time searching,” he said with another knowing wink. “We've got to set some aside to lull them into a false sense of security.”

“Of course,” Luna agreed. “It makes so much sense.”

“That it does.” He winked again.

“But first, there's something we need to do,” Luna said firmly.

“What's that?”

“We need to get you to a healer,” Luna replied seriously. “There's something wrong with your eye.” She gave him a look full of reproach. “You haven't been taking care of yourself without me around to watch you.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione dragged Harry into a large room filled with books and showed him a large comfy looking chair before disappearing into the stacks.

She returned a few moments later with a lithe woman in a modest dress.

“Harry, this is Ms. Jane, the librarian,” Hermione said respectfully. “She was my governess before I went to Hogwarts.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” the woman said kindly.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Harry replied gallantly. Something about the woman put him on guard, he wasn't sure why but it was a feeling he'd gotten from all the servants in the Granger household. “Any friend of Hermione's is a friend of mine.”

“Ms. Jane, this is Harry Potter.” Hermione beamed up at the woman. “He's the one I told you about.”

“Yes,” the woman said thoughtfully. “I believe there were references to him in a couple of the new books.”

“Which ones?” Hermione asked excitedly.

“They're on my desk,” the librarian said with a fond smile.

“I'll be right back,” Hermione announced before darting off.

“Harry.”

“Yes, Ms. Jane?”

“Hermione is very special to me.” The woman looked down at him. “If you let anything happen to her, I’ll kill you,” the woman announced calmly.

Harry couldn't help himself, he burst into laughter.

“You think I'm joking?”

“No.” Harry wiped the tears off his face. “I think the two of us are going to get along very well.”

A look of confusion appeared on the woman's face. “I . . .” Her mouth snapped shut when she heard the sound of returning footsteps.

“You didn't tell me there were so many,” Hermione said as she walked up. She frowned when she noticed the looks on their faces. “Did something happen?”

“We were just surprised to find out how much we had in common,” Harry explained to his friend.

“It's so rare to find someone who can understand you so well,” Ms. Jane agreed.

“I knew you two would get along,” Hermione said in relief.

“Was there anything else you needed?” the librarian asked Hermione with her newly returned smile.

“No thank you,” Hermione said politely.

“Then I shall leave you to your reading.” She gave Harry an appraising nod. “Mr. Potter.”

“Ms. Jane.” Harry's eyes tracked the woman until she was out of sight.

“I found a defense book in the new stack that I thought you might enjoy,” Hermione enthusiastically.

“Thank you.” He took the book from his friend. “Is there another chair in here?”

“We can both fit on this one,” Hermione replied.

IIIIIIII

Phil Granger was waiting outside the operating theater when his wife stepped out. He could tell by the look on her face that it was going to be one of those 'fun' conversations.

“Problem?” He asked gently.

“Why don't we wait until we get into the car before we discuss it,” she suggested. “For that matter, why don't we get to the car right now? I can change into real clothes after we get home.”

“If you like,” he agreed. He nodded to someone further down the hall. “James should have the car waiting for us outside.”

“Thank you,” she sighed.

He waited until they were safely in the car before he breached the subject again. “So what's got you so tense?”

“Bloody fool,” she growled. “I've told him for years that he needed to do some major work, but no, he was too busy. And then now, on the day I was suppose to meet our daughter at the station, the idiot breaks something and absolutely has to get it fixed right away.”

“Should have made him wait,” Phil murmured.

“I would have if I'd known what it looked like before hand,” she sighed. “Bloody fool made it sound like he was dying.”

“Then he'll have no complaints when he sees how large the bill is.” Both official and unofficial. “Emergencies are expensive and dentists with the proper clearances are hard to come by.” Doubly so if they had to be 'socially acceptable' too.

Anne moved across the seat to snuggle up with her husband. “Philistine.”

He raised the privacy screen. “High bred fop.”

IIIIIIII

Harry and Hermione were deeply engrossed in their books when the sound of someone clearing their throat caught their attention.

“Your parents have called and they are on their way,” a man in a distinguished looking suit announced. “You may wish to take the opportunity to freshen up before dinner.”

“Right,” Hermione agreed. “Come on, Harry.”

“Perhaps Mr. Potter would like to freshen up in his own quarters,” the butler suggested delicately.

“Thanks,” Harry said gratefully. “Where are they?”

“I’ll have someone show you to your room,” the butler offered.

“I can show him,” Hermione volunteered. “This way, Harry.”

IIIIIIII

Luna cautiously stalked her prey. Slowly, carefully, she moved closer and closer until she was close enough to make her final lunge. With a cry of triumph, she leapt to her feet and held her prize aloft.

“Look what I found, father,” Luna called out.

The man hurried over. “What is it?”

“It appears to be a frog,” Luna replied with a smug smile. “I must admit that it had me fooled at first.”

“But not now,” he agreed.

“Nope, not since I had a flash of brilliant inspiration.”

“Of course, it all makes so much sense now. If they're willing to trick us by hiding near our home . . .”

“It stands to reason that they'll try to trick us by pretending to be ordinary creatures,” Luna finished. She glared down at the frog. “And to think, you almost got away with it.”

“Croak,” the confused frog replied.

Luna grinned. “Hah, you aren't gonna fool me now that I know the truth.”

A bead of sweat worked its way down the 'frog's' brow. “Croak?”

IIIIIIII

Hermione allowed Harry five minutes of peace before she started pounding on his door and demanding that he open it.

“Hurry up, Harry,” she called through the door. “My parents will be here any minute now and I want you to meet them.”

“Just a second,” Harry called back. He pulled his pants on and opened the door. “Well?”

Hermione gave him a critical once over, noting every little thing he'd gotten wrong. “Where's your tie?” She demanded.

“I need a tie?”

“I want you to make a good impression,” Hermione said firmly. “So you need a tie.” She brushed past him and began rummaging through his trunk.

“Go right ahead,” Harry muttered. “No, I don't mind. Feel free to look through my trunk, what's mine is yours.”

Hermione showed no sign that she'd heard a word he said. After a few seconds of rummaging, she pulled a scarlet tie out of the trunk with a look of triumph on her face. “Did you say something, Harry?”

“Nothing you'd like to hear,” Harry replied.

“Okay.” Hermione looked around for a moment. “Sit on the bed,” she ordered.

He complied, knowing that it was best just to ride it out until she'd run out of steam and her mood changed. “Fine,” Harry sighed. Sometimes, it wasn't easy being Harry Potter.

“It's a good thing that Ron's such a slob or I'd never have gotten enough practice to do this,” Hermione said conversationally as she tied Harry's tie.

“I'm perfectly capable of tying my own tie,” Harry grumbled. “I do it at school every day.”

“Yes but you seem to favor a Shelby knot while Daddy always seems to wear his tied in a Windsor,” Hermione replied. “Personally, I think the Shelby looks better, but we want to make a good impression on daddy so we're going with the Windsor.”

“Finished?” Harry asked with a much put upon sigh.

“Let me see your teeth,” Hermione ordered. She inspected them for several seconds before giving her grudging approval. “Alright, let's go.” She froze and stared out the window at something in the distance.

“I could have had a nice relaxing holiday at Hogwarts,” Harry grumbled to himself. “Or I could have worked as a slave for the Dursleys, but nooooo. I had to spend the winter with my friend. Who knew she got worse when she was at home?”

“Did you say something, Harry?” Hermione asked absently.

“Nothing important. Why?”

“Because my parents are here,” Hermione squeaked. “Hurry.” She seized his wrist and darted out of the room.

She finally came to a quivering halt in front of the main entrance. She didn't have long to wait before her parents came in.

“Mum,” Hermione squealed. “Daddy.” She threw herself into their arms.

“I missed you too, Pumpkin,” Phil murmured.

“James.” Hermione disengaged herself from her parents and hugged her father's burly driver. “I missed you too.”

“Glad to know that someone does,” the large man said with a pleased grin.

Hermione stepped back and placed herself at Harry's side. “Mum, daddy, James, this is Harry Potter.”

“Pleasure to finally meet the boy that fills so much of our daughter's letters home,” Anne said cheerfully.

“Glad you decided to join us for the winter holidays,” Phil added.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Harry said politely.

Hermione seized him by the wrist again. “Come on, Harry. You can sit next to me.”

Her parents shared a grin as they watched their daughter drag the boy out of the room.

“Do you remember her being that high strung?” Anne asked blandly.

“There's certainly nothing like that on my side of the family,” he replied. “I'd hoped that having good stock on her sire's side would counter the inbreeding on the dam's.”

“Hold that thought till we have a chance to be alone,” Anne said in a husky voice. “Oh, and don't think I've forgotten your crazy uncle Charlie.”

“Great Uncle, and by marriage.”

“Later, darling.”

“Right,” he agreed. Arm in arm they strolled after their daughter.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 6

IIIIIIII

Anne and Phil shared a smile when they entered the dining room and found the two children sitting side by side.

“It's considered customary to sit across from each other, darling,” Phil said with a smile.

“I always sit next to Harry like this,” Hermione said with a slightly raised chin. It also put her in the perfect position to whisper advice to her friend and to make sure he used the proper fork.

“Delightful idea,” Anne cheered, managing to conceal most of the amusement she felt at the situation. “We shall of course sit across from you.”

“An informal atmosphere is best when trying to get to know someone,” Phil agreed.

The food began arriving shortly after everyone took their seats.

“So tell me about this sport of yours, Harry,” Phil began the small talk.

“It's played on brooms, sir.” Harry began. “You got to fly around and dodge bludgers . . . er, balls, while trying to toss a different kind of ball

through a hoop. I'm a seeker so my job is to try to catch a third kind of ball."

"Hard to find this third ball?"

"It's about the size of one of your golf balls, daddy," Hermione interjected. "Harry has one of the best records as a seeker in school history," she boasted.

"How difficult is it to ride a broom?" Phil persisted.

"Er . . ." Harry glanced at Hermione, not wanting to say anything that could remind his friend of one of the few subjects where she was not in the top of the class.

"It's very difficult," Hermione said quickly. "Harry is the best at that in school."

"Hmmmm." A smile appeared on Phil's face. "Ever ridden a horse, Harry?"

"No, sir, but I've ridden a hippogryph and a Thestral."

Hermione's parents glanced at their daughter.

"They're kinds of flying horses," Hermione explained.

Phil gave Harry a speculative look. "I wonder if . . ."

"Not at the table," Anne chastised.

Hermione frowned. “No what at the table, Mum?”

“Your father has become obsessed with polo lately,” she sighed. “I thought he'd gotten over it after you were born.”

“I was focused on other things.” He smiled at Hermione. “Like my lovely new daughter. With you away at school most of the year, I need to do something with my time.”

“Your father is getting old and the doctor says he needs to exercise,” her mother translated.

“And I can only play so much golf before it gets boring,” Phil agreed.

Anne grinned mischievously and leaned across the table to whisper to her daughter. “Personally, I think your father is trying to recapture the faded glory of his youth. Next thing you know, he's going to go out shopping for a young trophy wife.”

“No danger of that,” he quipped. “I've already got one.” He reached under the table and did something that caused Anne to give a surprised squeak. The two adults smiled at each other. “Back to the lovely conversation I was having before I was so rudely interrupted by my trophy wife.” He turned back to Harry. “What is your favorite subject? I was always partial to studying the Tap myself,” he added with a grin, thinking of the long hours he'd spent drinking in Eton's pub.

“Defense is my favorite,” Harry replied. “Even if the teachers aren't always the best.”

“Harry's the top student in our year,” Hermione said proudly. “He's so good at it that students in the upper years come to him for help.”

“Better then you, Pumpkin?” Phil asked with a look of profound innocence on his face.

“In the practical portions,” Hermione allowed. “I have the edge on theory.”

Phil raised a speculative eyebrow after hearing his daughter not just admit, but proudly state that someone else was better then her at something academic.

“And on everything else in the other classes,” Harry added. “She's the top student in our year.” He smirked when he noticed his friend blush a deep red, two could play at this game.

The four of them continued their chat through the meal and beyond until Anne gave a deep yawn.

“Never was much of a night person,” she said with a shrug.

“So we may as well cut things off there,” Phil added. “It was lovely chatting with you, Harry.” He pretended not to notice when Hermione leaned over to whisper something into the boy's ear.

“It was good talking with you too, sir,” Harry said politely. “I look forward to continuing our conversation tomorrow.”

Harry barely managed to suppress his reflexes when the butler suddenly appeared by his elbow. "Would sir like to have a guide back to his rooms?" He asked formally.

"Uh?"

"I'll take him," Hermione chirped.

"Really, Ms. Hermione, it's rather far from your suite."

"I moved him to the free one in my hallway," Hermione explained.

"You did?" The butler said sickly. This new development would make the job of keeping the two teens apart a hundred times more difficult.

Hermione giggled. "I can't believe you were going to put Harry on the other side of the house when the room adjoining mine is still free, you're usually much more efficient than that."

"Yes . . . well, we thought you might like to save that for your other friend," the butler offered. "The girl." Since the staff viewed Hermione's other, yet to arrive guest with much less trepidation.

"Luna can stay with me when she comes here," Hermione said with an unconcerned wave. "I'm used to having roommates, more used to it than I am having the room to myself because of Hogwarts."

"As you say, Ms. Hermione," the butler agreed sourly. He looked down at the boy and waited a few moments until the girl he thought of as the daughter he never had turned her attention away for a moment. "I shall

have one of the staff waiting in the hall in case you need anything,” he said calmly. “Just open the door and they'll see you.” Thank all that was holy for the fact that the two suites weren't connected, he thought to himself.

“Um . . . okay,” Harry agreed. “But I don't want to be a bother.”

“It's no bother,” the butler said firmly, searching the boy's face for any sign of disappointment.

“Thanks, then.” Harry was sure that he was missing something. “I appreciate all the trouble you're going to for me.”

Phil grinned as he watched the butler's defense of his daughter's virtue before the oblivious girl dragged her equally oblivious potential suitor off to their wing of the house. It was so wonderful to see things from the outside for once. He snapped himself back to reality when his wife mumbled something.

“I'm sorry, dear,” Phil said softly. “But I didn't quite catch that.”

“I'm going to bed now that I no longer have to play hostess,” she repeated.

“I'll join you shortly then,” he replied. “I need to speak to Thomas for a moment first.”

“Hurry,” she said in a husky voice. “I've got something I'd like to discuss with you before I drift off.”

“I'll be there as soon as I can,” he promised. Phil spent a few moments admiring the sight of his wife leaving the room before returning to the task at hand.

He found her driver waiting outside the dining room with a massive sandwich in his hands.

“Thank you for waiting, Thomas,” Phil said politely. “Now, if you would be good enough to give me your first impressions of our guest?”

“Seems like a good kid,” the driver said after a moment of thought.

“Seems a bit put out by the way Ms. Hermione likes to hover over him.” He paused for a moment. “Also seems to be a bit shocked by how large the house is.”

“I see, anything else you'd like to add?”

“Mr. Harry noticed my baby Fairbairn,” the driver reported. “Seemed to relax when he noticed it was a knife. Was all set to do violence before that.”

"Probably thought it was a wand," Hermione's father said thoughtfully, "did he notice your pistol?"

“No, sir. I don't believe he did.” The driver scratched his chin for a moment. “Well, might have noticed that I had something hidden but I don't believe he realized what it was.”

“Thank you, Thomas, that will be all.”

“Yes, sir.”

IIIIIIII

Luna adjusted the light so that it bore down on her unfortunate prisoner. With a look of barely repressed fury on her face, she stalked closer and leaned across the table to let her target experience the full weight of her glare.

“Confess!” she said sharply. “We know everything you know and it'll only go harder on you if you don't talk.”

“Luna, calm down. Can't you see you're scaring our guest,” her father chided as he put a glass of water on the table. “Have something to drink,” he addressed the prisoner. “I'm sorry about my daughter's behavior, but she's crazy. You really should talk,” he confided. “I don't know what she's liable to do if she gets all worked up.”

“That's it,” Luna shouted. “I've had it.” She picked up a chair and made to brain their prisoner with it.

“You mustn't,” her father said in alarm. He rushed across the room and attempted to wrestle the chair away from his daughter. “I don't know how long I can hold her off,” he said desperately. “Say something, anything, so I can calm her down.”

“Croak,” the frog offered nervously.

IIIIIIII

Hermione skipped happily down to breakfast the next morning and took her seat at the table across from her parents who'd apparently decided to continue sitting side by side.

“Where's Harry?” Anne asked.

“I thought it best to let him sleep in.” Hermione shot a grateful look to the maid as her breakfast was put on the table.

“How come he gets to sleep in?” Philip grumbled to his wife.

“He's on vacation and not married to me,” Anne replied cheerfully.
“Aside from that, one made you get up.”

“What was it you did this morning then?”

“I just provided a bit of encouragement,” Anne said innocent. She turned to her daughter. “Do you have any plans for today, darling?”

Hermione's eyes widened as a thought occurred to her. “Just one, mum.” She turned to her father, doing her best to look both cute and innocent.

“Yes?” He prompted wearily. Years of parenthood making him all but immune to the girl's attempts to manipulate him in that fashion.

“Daddy,” Hermione began. She twirled her hair around her fingers and batted her eyes cutely.

“What is it, darling?” He said in a tone that conveyed his real meaning.
'What do you want?'

“Is it alright if I store Harry's motorbikes with your cars?” she asked sweetly.

“Of course it is, darling.” He grinned, he hadn't known the boy was a petrolhead. He'd have to remember to have a look to see if the boy had anything interesting. Likely not, but who knew, he might have an old Commando or one of the other classic British bikes.

“May I also use your shop to perform maintenance on them?” Hermione asked sweetly. “And to assemble the ones we haven't got to yet?”

“Of course you may, darling.” He was really going to have to have a word with her daughter's friend, hopefully the boy would be willing to share his secret. The man regarded his wife out of the corner of his eye.

“Was that all, darling?” Anne asked with a smirk to inform her husband that she'd caught his stray thought.

“I'd also like to spend some time with you, mum,” Hermione added with a blush. “There are some things I'd like to ask you.”

“Of course, darling,” Anne agreed. “I wasn't planning on going out today so anytime that's convenient for you.”

“Thank you, mum.” She turned back to her father. “What's your first impression of Harry, Daddy?”

“Seems like a well brought up young man,” he said smoothly.

“Do you think he'd like to learn polo?” she asked shyly.

“I'll be sure to ask him later,” her father promised.

“Thank you, daddy.” She smiled, pleased that her father seemed to approve of her best friend.

IIIIIIII

Luna sighed as she flopped into her favorite chair, the green one with the automatic foot massager.

“Sixteen hours,” she mumbled. “Sixteen hours and he refuses to crack.”

“We'll have everything when he does,” her father said confidently. “The lower levels don't get the kind of training needed to withstand an interrogation like that.”

“What if . . .” Luna trailed off.

“What is it?”

“What if it really is just a frog?” Luna said unsurely.

“Then god help us, god help us all.”

IIIIIIII

Phil was the only person still at the table when Harry made his way down stairs that morning, his wife and daughter having long since deserted him in favor of things he was better off knowing nothing about.

“Harry, a word.” Phil motioned for Harry to join him.

“What is it, sir?” Harry asked.

"How did you get my daughter to assemble and maintain your motorbike collection?" Philip asked intently, hoping that he could use the same method to convince his wife to do the same? His daughter had never shown the slightest interest in mechanical things before, which offered a shred of hope.

"Hermione and Luna thought that I might wish to have them," Harry explained. "They belonged to my godfather," Harry added, "though with the way they play with them it's more along the lines of keeping their toys cleaned and polished for when they want to try out a new enchantment."

“Thank you, Harry.”

“No problem, sir.” Harry looked around. “Is Hermione up yet?”

“Up and eaten. She's with her mother right now, they're having a mysterious conversation about feminine mysteries.” He waved to the staff to prepare the boy's breakfast. “You may not see her for a few hours.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed. A sudden thought occurred to him. “Um, sir?”

“What is it, Harry?” Phil replied.

“I was just wondering . . .” Harry trailed off.

“Yes?” he prompted.

“Why did you forbid Hermione to use magic to fix her teeth?”

“She told you that?” he sighed. This again?

“Yes, sir.”

“We didn't forbid her, we told her that we wanted to research magical healing before we made a decision. You may not have noticed, but my daughter tends to put a lot of faith in books. My wife and I would rather get a look at the effects of magical healing before we commit to anything. Make sense?”

“Perfect sense, sir,” Harry agreed. He made a mental note to check up on the man's worries.

“Now that I've answered your question, do you mind if I ask one of my own?”

“What would you like to know, sir?”

“Tell me, Harry, what do you know about polo?”

“It's got something to do with horses,” Harry said hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“And that's all,” Harry confessed.

“How would you like to learn?” Phil asked eagerly.

“Sure,” Harry agreed. It would give him an excuse to get away from Hermione when she was in full study mode after all.

“Excellent,” Phil cheered. “Now, the first thing you need to know is . . .”

Phil spent an enjoyable morning teaching the attentive boy almost everything he'd need to know to get started on the polo field later, well, he did until his daughter arrived to claim his new polo partner.

“Come on, Harry,” Hermione said, bursting with enthusiasm. “We've still got a bunch more books to read.”

IIIIIIII

Anne strolled into her husband's office with a devilish grin on her face.

“You'll never guess what I just found out.”

“The joys of being a productive member of society?” He asked snidely.

“Hold that thought,” she said quickly. “We can get to the fun stuff later.”

“That good huh?” Phil rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “What is it?”

“The staff has decided that they need to protect Hermione's virtue from Harry's despicable intentions,” she giggled.

“How do they know that Harry had despicable intentions?” Phil asked with an amused grin.

“He's a teenaged boy,” she replied.

“Point,” he agreed. “On the other hand, I'm not sure that Hermione has realized that.”

“She is a bit focused on her studies.”

“And then there's the fact that they've been friends since their first year,” Phil pointed out. “She probably still sees him as a scruffy-”

“Let's stop there,” Anne suggested. “Wouldn't want to get into the habit of calling him that.”

Phil grinned widely. “Not after the way Hermione reacted to my last off handed comment,” he agreed.

“Just the sort of thing I'd have expected to hear from a capitalist pig who made his living off the sweat of the masses,” she sneered.

“I'll have a word with the staff later,” he promised. The expression on his face turned sinister. “Hah. As if a blue blood like you knows anything about the working class.”

IIIIIIII

The patriarch of the tiny Lovegood clan walked into the interrogation room and flopped down on the chair. With a sigh, the man favored the prisoner with a look that mixed sympathy and resigned exasperation just as page seventy five of the manual they'd dug up from the deepest part of the Lovegood library had advised. It was quite fortunate that they'd had an ancestor that had been employed, for a time, with the Keystone police department and even more fortunate that he had written a manual containing everything he had learned during his years on the force.

“She's a good girl,” he said softly. “Just a bit high strung.” The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a large plump cricket. “I don't think she'd do anything to hurt you . . . well, not unless she got disgruntled anyway.” He absently popped the cricket into his mouth and began chewing. “Then she's liable to anything.” He pulled another cricket out of his pocket. “The thing is . . . oh, how rude of me. Would you like one?”

“Croak.” The frog's entire attention was on the struggling insect in the disturbed man's hand.

“Here you go then.” He held out the cricket, allowing the frog to gobble it down. “As I was saying . . .”

“Father!” Luna's voice carried into the room. “Where's my dinner?! You know how I get when I haven't had my dinner! Disgruntled is how I get!”

“Oh dear,” he said in alarm. “She's getting disgruntled, I only hope that I haven't left things too long. But if I have and she doesn't calm down soon.” He shuddered in fear. “Please, just tell me something, anything I can use to distract her.”

“Croak.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione dragged her best friend into the library and loaded his arms with what she considered a minimum amount of books to have at hand for a bit of light reading. The table beside her favorite chair didn't so much as creak under the combined weight of the tomes having been specially constructed for the purpose after its predecessor had begun to show signs of wear.

“That should last us for a couple hours anyway,” Hermione said in a tone of deep satisfaction.

The librarian smiled as her young charge plopped into her favorite chair. “I took the liberty of getting another chair for young Mr. Potter,” Ms. Jane said loudly. “So you won't be forced to use the same one like you did yesterday.”

“We don't mind,” Hermione said obliviously. “But thank you for the thought.”

Harry gave a helpless shrug in reply to the disapproving look on the woman's face. Hermione scooted to one side of the chair to make room and settled her legs on his lap after he sat down. It didn't take long

before Harry had immersed himself in a rather fascinating book on the defensive use of common house hold charms. He was ashamed to admit that he'd never considered how lethal a charm to boil water could be if properly targeted. Voldemort and his merry band of catamites and killers were going to be in for a surprise the next time he had the misfortune of running into them.

“Sorry to disturb the two of you,” Phil said, causing the two teens to jump at the sudden interruption. “But I was wondering if I couldn't have a bit of time with my daughter.”

“What is it, Daddy?” Hermione asked.

“I've got a surprise for you,” Phil said mysteriously. “Harry?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I was planning on going to the stables after lunch and I was wondering if you'd like to accompany me?”

“I'd be delighted to, sir,” Harry agreed.

“Excellent.” He smiled. “And please, call me Phil.” He placed a fatherly arm around his daughter's shoulders and gently led her out of the room.

Hermione was able to contain her curiosity for nearly three minutes as her father led her towards the garage. “What's the surprise, daddy?”

“You'll find out when we get to the garage, darling,” he replied.

“Is it magical?” Hermione asked.

“Some would say that, but it's not your sort of magic,” he replied.

Hermione chewed her lip. “Is it bigger than a bread box?”

“It is,” He agreed. “Smaller than a shipping container and it comes in several colors.” Phil led his daughter into the garage and came to a stop in front of a large crate. “Here it is.” He lifted the lid to allow Hermione a look at the contents.

“What's this?” Hermione asked, fascinated by the mechanical mystery she'd been presented with.

“It's a kit car, darling,” her father replied. “We found several of these unfinished kits in one of the new properties.” He decided not to mention the fact that their existence was the primary reason he'd closed the deal.

“What's this one?”

“It's a sports car,” he replied, “a Lotus 7 to be precise. I thought you might like to put it together.”

“I'm not sure I can without Luna,” Hermione admitted.

“She is still coming here isn't she?” he said with a smile. “I thought you girls might like something to do while you're here and I thought you might wish to receive your first automobile. I did when I was about your age and thought it might be nice to continue the tradition.” His smile

deepened. "If you find that you enjoy it then it would be my pleasure to find a shared hobby."

"You like assembling cars?" Hermione asked in shock.

"I prefer collecting them," he admitted, "but to spend time with my daughter I'm quite willing to get my hands dirty."

Hermione rummaged around the container for a few minutes until she found what she was looking for. Holding up the manual with a look of triumph. She began thumbing through it, detached from the world.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 7

IIIIIIII

Luna slowly walked into the room and made a deliberate show of locking the door behind her. Page sixty seven of the manual had contained several ideas on how to put the prisoner in the proper state of mind for what was on page forty six.

“Father is such a sweet man,” Luna purred. “So innocent, but not the two of us.” She shot the frog a jaded look. “We know how the world works and that's why you're going to tell me everything I want to know.”

“Croak.”

“I'm tired of playing around,” Luna growled. Her left hand focused the light on the frog. “Either you tell me what I want to know or I'll bury you. You got me?!” Luna screamed. “I'll bury you!” She pulled a phonebook out of her pocket and let it drop onto the table in front of her prisoner. “I think you know what I need that for,” she said menacingly. She hoped he did anyway as she wasn't too sure of what use it was supposed to have in an interrogation, maybe she was supposed to read it to him or something? Pity her ancestor hadn't been more detailed with some of the more confusing bits. “Where should we start?” She giggled shrilly. “Or should I just-” Her rant cut off when someone knocked on the door which was odd as her father was supposed to wait for his cue before barging in to save the prisoner. She carefully unlocked the door and peered out.

“We're gonna have to cut him loose,” her father said unhappily.

“Why?” Luna asked with a pout. “The Sedition Act lets us hold him for up to two weeks without being charged.”

“His lawyer's here with a writ ordering us to release him,” her father explained.

Luna opened the door wider, revealing another confused frog, this one in a tiny business suit. “How do you know he's a lawyer?” She asked curiously.

“He's wearing a business suit,” her father explained. It had taken hours to get it to fit right on the tiny amphibian. “I realized after I got the suit onto him.”

“Isn't there anything we can do?” Luna pled.

“Not unless you managed to get him to talk,” her father sighed.

“Woof,” their prisoner barked, the 'frog's' fragile sanity shattered by the latest display. “Woof woof.”

“Croak?” The frog's lawyer inquired.

“Yeah,” Luna agreed. “Get him outta here.” Sometimes it wasn't easy to be a reporter.

“Don't be like that, crabapple,” her father consoled. “It's time for you to pack up to go to your friend's house anyway.”

IIIIIIII

Like Quidditch, Polo wasn't a sport that Hermione had any interest in. Also like Quidditch, there was no power on Earth that would stop her from going anyway to show support for her best friend.

Anne gasped as her houseguest got thrown from his horse and landed on the turf with a sickening thud. “Tough fellow, isn't he?” She commented after the boy got up immediately and remounted his horse. “Getting up like that.”

“Hmmm?” Hermione didn't drag her eyes off the game. “That fall was nothing, you should see some of the situations he gets himself in during a Quidditch game.”

“Bad?”

“Sometimes I think they should ban the bloody sport,” Hermione admitted harshly. “It's bloody awful. Hardly a game goes by that doesn't end with Harry in the hospital wing.”

IIIIIIII

Harry was in his element, in the thick of it all. He'd jumped at the chance to experience a friendly game at the Granger's club, trusting that his previous riding experience would see him through. Probably a mistake, he admitted to himself as he remounted.

A flash of white caught his eye and Harry let his instincts take over. Choking up on the Polo mallet and slid down till his head was only inches away from the ground. A firm wack propelled the small wooden ball through the goal posts, scoring the last point of the game.

“Good show,” one of his teammates called out. “But in the future, try not to show off so much.”

“What do you mean?” Harry squinted in the older man's general direction.

“The business at the end,” he replied. “Where you did that fancy riding.”

“Oh, that. I wasn't trying to show off,” Harry replied. “Lost my glasses when I got thrown and I couldn't see the ball well enough to hit it without getting close.”

“Ah, forgive me then.” He shot the boy a measured look. “Planning to work on your game during your stay with the Grangers?”

“Time permitting,” Harry agreed cheerfully.

IIIIIIII

Hermione sighed in frustration when it became apparent to her that Harry had no intention of leaving the field despite his inability to see and potential injuries.

“He's going to play without his glasses?” Anne exclaimed in surprise.

“He'd try to keep going if he broke both his arms,” Hermione said with a frown. “That dummy.”

“Guess a trip to the optometrist is in order after this then,” Anne commented. She gave a nod to her driver, trusting that the burly man would arrange it. “After all, it's not like you can use magic to fix them.”

“Not during holidays,” Hermione agreed. “How much longer is this game going to be?”

“Should be finishing up any time now,” her mother replied. She smiled as the players dismounted. “A quick shower and we'll be ready to go.”

“Did Harry's team win?” Hermione asked, a bit ashamed to admit that she hadn't been keeping score.

“Don't believe they did,” Anne replied. “Why?”

“Just wondering,” Hermione said.

Hermione was waiting when Harry and her father emerged from the locker room a few minutes later.

“I hope we didn't make you wait long, darling,” Phil said with a smile.

“You didn't, daddy,” Hermione replied. “Come on, mum's waiting in the car.”

“I didn't know we were in a hurry,” Phil said thoughtfully.

“We need to get Harry some new glasses,” Hermione said firmly.

“I'm fine,” Harry pitched in. He held up a pair of taped frames. “The tape will hold for now and we can fix them when we get back to school.”

Hermione frowned. “You listen to me, Harry Potter. You are going to get a new pair of glasses right now and you're going to like it. It's long past time you got a new pair of frames.” And she was sick of the other girls saying bad things about them, needless to say, she kept that last part to herself.

“It's not that I have a problem with getting new glasses,” Harry said reluctantly. “It's just . . . well . . .”

“Just what?”

“I don't really have much money on me,” Harry protested.

“Don't worry about it,” Phil said cheerfully. “You're our guest after all.”

“Still . . .”

IIIIIIII

Luna looked over the disorganized pile of junk on her bed with a sense of pure satisfaction. Sometimes it was best to get everything together before you packed it to make sure you didn't leave anything behind by mistake.

“Father,” she called out. “Where are the spare tools for the printing press?”

“In the ice box,” he called back.

“And my portable offset press?”

“It's under your bed,” he replied. “So is your typewriter.”

“Thank you father.”

“It's what fathers are for, ragweed.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione was starting to become a bit unnerved by the way her friend stared blankly out of the window on the ride back to the house. It was a little creepy, to be honest, not a word she normally associated with Harry Potter.

“What's wrong, Harry?” She finally asked, concern coloring her tone.

“I can see the leaves,” Harry whispered in an awe filled voice.

“What?”

“On that tree.” He pointed down the motorway. “I can see the leaves from here.”

“So?” Hermione asked with a confused frown.

“I've never been able to see that well before,” Harry explained. “I always thought everyone was the same way and that it was impossible to see things far away with that much detail.”

“Oh.” A thought occurred. “How do you see the snitch then?”

“I always look for the sparkle,” he replied absently. A grin formed on his face. “Draco is in for a big surprise in our next game.”

“So . . . getting those glasses was a good thing then?”

“A great thing,” Harry agreed.

Ms. Jane the librarian was waiting for them at the front door with a wide smile on her face when they finally made it home.

“Thought you'd want to know that a new box of books arrived earlier today,” Hermione's old governess reported. “It's in the blue room waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Jane,” Hermione said politely. Unable to restrain herself any longer, the girl darted down the hall and towards her precious precious treasures intent on spending the hours until dinner in uninterrupted bliss.

She was carefully giving the third book a quick flip through when her best friend slipped into the room with an odd expression on his face.

Harry carefully locked the door and, after a few seconds of consideration, calmly propped a chair under the knob. Long experience with the Dursleys had taught him that fights may start with the adults but would quickly spread to him.

“What are you doing?” Hermione asked without looking up from her book.

“Your parents are having a row,” Harry replied. He carefully considered what else to add to his barricade. “Thought it might be a good idea to get out of sight.” Something he thought prudent even if they were nothing like the Dursleys, never hurt to be careful.

“Hmmm?” Hermione looked up from her book.

“Your dad said your mum's class was a feckless drain on society and she replied that bad breeding would tell,” Harry replied.

“Oh.” Hermione stifled a giggle. “They're not fighting.”

“Then what are they doing?” Harry asked with a raised eyebrow, interested to learn how things were in normal families, the Dursleys being anything but despite their attempts to be so. Be hard to find a bigger lot of freaks he thought to himself.

“Mum and dad met when they were in University when they took the same politics class.” Hermione suppressed a smile.

“So?”

“So their politics were diametrically opposed and they spent half the class arguing with each other. The professor got tired of having to listen to it so he made them work on a project together, they've been together ever since.”

“Sounds like you and Ron,” Harry joked, having heard more than one of his housemates speculate on the so called true nature of his two friends' relationship.

“Mum and dad disagreed on politics,” Hermione said with a frown, more then a bit sick at the thought of dating Ron 'Time to Eat' Weasley. “Ron and I disagree on everything.”

“Oh.”

“Besides, daddy later told me that he didn't believe most of the things he used to spout off in class. Just did it to make mum and the other lefties angry.”

“Uh.” Harry's eyes crossed.

Hermione giggled. “There's no heat in it, it's just a game they play. Understand?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “I guess.”

“Come over here and sit next to me,” Hermione demanded. “I've got some new defense books here the you might want a look at.” They were buried somewhere under the engineering books, Harry was lucky to have a friend like her that was thoughtful enough to add reading material that

he'd be interested in to her order, Hermione thought smugly. It was consideration like that, that had convinced her to reward herself with another dozen books for Luna and herself.

IIIIIIII

Anne walked into her husband's office with a look of profound smugness on her face. Looked as if her little girl had realized her friend was a boy after all or vice versa. She wasn't picky.

“You'll never guess what I heard from one of the maids.”

Her husband looked up from his papers to focus his attention on her.
“What is it?”

“Harry took advantage of our . . . er . . . distraction to sneak into our daughter's room and barricade the door.”

“Ah.” Phil sighed. “He did, but not for the reason you're thinking.”

“Why then?” She demanded, a bit put out that things weren't as juicy as she'd been led to believe they were.

“From what I gather, his home life isn't the best.” The man licked his lips, trying to think of the best way to put things.

“So?”

“So he thought it would be prudent to get between us and Hermione,” Phil said bluntly. “Just in case.”

“In case of . . . oh.” She drooped. “Well, it just goes to show what a responsible young man he is,” she said in approval.

“I'm still trying to figure out why Hermione didn't talk to us about Harry's situation,” Phil continued. “I wouldn't have even guessed it, one of the footmen had to tell me.” It was one of the advantages of hiring staff away from their former employer, they were unusually good at ferreting out the odd secret. A skill that had come in handy on numerous previous occasions.

“What are you going to do about it?” Anne asked softly, knowing her husband well enough to know that he wasn't going to leave things as they were.

“Well, I had thought to buy the company the man works for and then fire him.” He smiled coldly. “Then I would continue to do everything in my power to keep him out of work if it meant buying every company in England. With the end result being the bastard starving to death in a ditch somewhere without a so much as a pence to his name.”

“How about we give a couple of the staff a few days off with a strong suggestion that they spend their time at Dursley's residence?” Anne asked. A visit Vernon might even survive even if his ability to eat solid foods did not. “We can do your way after that.”

“We could,” he agreed. “Or I could call my brother in law and asking him for a favor.”

“Well, he does have a few friends in the house of lords but other than that, I'm not sure what he can do, bloody useless fop,” she finished fondly. She loved her brother dearly, but the man had no sense at all. Seemingly content to spend his days in idleness and to be even more useless than their father had been when he had still been active.

“Other side,” Phil laughed. “The judge.”

“I see.” Anne smiled wickedly. “I knew there was a reason I married you.”

“Yep,” he agreed. “For the obscenely massive piles of money you gained access to after we exchanged our vows.”

“Oh? I thought it was so I could pursue my own interests knowing that you had absolutely no desire in women,” she said as she slid into his lap. “Least that's what your sister in law said the night before the wedding.”

“What?” he asked dully.

“She was so angry that I was keeping you from being yourself,” Anne giggled musically. “She said that she only wanted you to be happy and that I was denying you that chance by selfishly trapping you in what would undoubtedly be a loveless marriage.”

“More likely she was angry that I would retain control over the family money and my heirs after me,” he replied. “Gold digging bitch.”

“Divorcing her was the one intelligent thing your brother ever did,” Anne said sympathetically. “Not that he isn't a perfectly lovely man, it's just . . .”

“He's a bit too much like your brother? Interested in wine, women, and more wine.” Well, publicly anyway. He absolutely hated keeping things from his wife but there were some things best kept as quiet as possible.

“Exactly,” she agreed. “The older one anyway, Jack is a bit better, just lazy.”

“He still working as a repairman?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “He has so much potential too, if only he'd apply himself to something.”

It was the biggest scandal that had rocked their family in centuries, someone of the blood doing something so hopelessly common. The only thing that barely excused it, so far as the less pleasant members of her family were concerned, was the fact that he'd been born on the wrong side of the sheets. Didn't he know that he was supposed to live on his remittance rather than doing something so common? Her step mother had whispered that it was proof that even the most noble of blood wasn't always able to overcome the common sort every chance she got. The day she'd seen the back of that woman for the last time was one of her fonder memories.

IIIIIIII

Phil was forcibly awakened early by a loud pounding on the door of his bedchamber. Holidays were supposed to be relaxing, times when you could laze around in bed until noon, he lamented to himself.

“Go see what Hermione wants,” his wife muttered.

“How do you know it's Hermione?” he rejoindered.

“Who else would could it be? Harry wouldn't think to bother us and the staff would have come in if they thought it was important enough to disturb us,” she replied.

“That does not explain why should I be the one to go see what she wants?” he pointed out calmly as the pounding continued, the spaces between the knocks getting shorter and shorter as their daughter's patience grew thinner and thinner.

“Because I'm asleep and you're much too considerate to disturb me,” she said reasonably. “Snore, snore,” she added.

“I blame this on your father for spoiling you so much when you were a child,” he said conversationally as he shrugged into his bathrobe. “I'm going to have to have words with him at our next meeting.”

“Remember to mention the fact that he could have shipped me off to one of those dreadful boarding schools like my step mother suggested rather than hiring private tutors,” she suggested with a yawn. “It was always a sore point with her that I was around to make it difficult to syphon off more than she did.”

Phil yawned as he walked across the room and opened the door. The knocks sounding like machine gun fire at that point.

“What is it, darling?”

“We need to get Luna today,” Hermione explained cheerfully, looking as if she had not in fact spent the previous few minutes pounding on her parents' bedroom door. “Mum said she wanted to wake up early so we could have breakfast together in London.”

“I think she meant early, not still dark outside,” Phil said thoughtfully.

“The sun's been out for almost six minutes, daddy,” Hermione giggled. “I didn't start knocking till it was out you know.”

“Of course it has, six whole minutes, silly me,” he sighed. “It's for you, dear.”

“I heard,” Anne called back. She made eye-contact with her daughter. “Wait downstairs, darling. I'll be with you shortly.”

“Okay, mum,” Hermione agreed. “I can't wait for you to meet Luna,” she added before happily skipping down the stairs.

“Our daughter is skipping,” Phil reported, trying and failing to remember the last time he'd seen his baby girl do that.

“It's nice to see her so excited about something,” Anne replied. “Also good to confirm that she's got at least one close female friend.”

“Just be sure not to say that the girl is scruffy,” he said seriously. “You know how that turned out the last time.”

“How could I forget,” she laughed. “How do I look?” She twirled around.

“Ravishing.”

“Mind doing me a favor?”

“Knowing you? Quite possibly. What do you want?”

“Could you take Harry to the bank and make a quick check of his accounts? Hermione was worried about them.”

“I am going to to the club today and after that I'm going to the bank. I've been meaning to open an account for Hermione so she has a bit of pocket money when she's at school. If Harry wishes to come along with me the I would be happy to have the company.”

“And also happy to give a bit of unsolicited advice,” Anne added.
“Please.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“Not at all. Off with you, wouldn't want to keep our daughter waiting.”

“No telling what sort of ideas she'll get,” she agreed.

Phil took his time getting showed and dressed and was more than a bit surprised to find his house guest waiting for him in the sitting room when he finally emerged.

“Hermione wake you up too?” he asked sympathetically.

“No, sir. I was already up.”

“Wake up early then?”

“Haven't managed to break the habit yet,” Harry admitted. It had only been fear of getting lost in the giant house that had kept him in his room so long the first day.

“You'll get the hang of it some day, I'm sure.” Phil grinned. “I'm going to London today, would you care to accompany me?”

“I don't want to be a bother,” Harry said quickly.

“You won't be,” Phil promised. “I'd consider it a favor if you did accompany me since I always have a bloody time of finding the entrance to Diagon Alley if Hermione isn't along.”

“You're going to Diagon Alley?” Harry asked in surprise.

“To the bank, yes. I have some business to do there, wouldn't mind a chance to poke around the shops without Hermione dragging me towards the book store either.”

“Alright,” Harry agreed. “I'd be happy to come, sir. Thank you.”

“Excellent, glad to have you with me. Just please, remember it's Phil, not sir.”

“Okay, Phil. I'll try to remember.”

“Good. Have you eaten yet, Harry?”

“Not yet.”

“We'll eat at the club then.” Phil decided. “Come along, Harry. The car should be out front.”

IIIIIIII

Anne paid the restaurant staff no notice as they bustled around the table. Choosing instead to focus on her daughter.

“Where and when are we supposed to meet your friend, darling?” the woman asked.

“Luna said she'd meet us at Kings Cross station around ten,” Hermione replied, oblivious to the fact that a portion of the security team had detached itself from the main group to make their preparations.

“Does she have any special needs we need to be aware of?” Anne continued. “Dietary requirements, that sort of thing.”

“No, mum. She's just a little strange,” Hermione said, sipping her tea.

“In what way?”

“She likes to believe in animals that don't exist,” Hermione explained. “I think her dorm-mates like to pick on her because of it.”

“I see.”

“But she's a very nice girl,” Hermione hastened to add. “And she's very smart.”

“I'm glad you've got at least one female friend,” Anne said with a soft smile, repeating her earlier words to her husband. “Wouldn't want to risk poor Harry to get jealous if all you had was boys, would we?”

“Mum!”

Anne giggled at the expression on her daughter's face.

IIIIIIII

The car pulled up to the curb and Phil Granger's imposing driver stepped out, eyes scanning for threats. Assured that there were no immediate dangers, the man opened the door and stepped aside to allow his patron to step out of the vehicle.

“Come along, Harry,” Phil said as they exited the car.

“Where are we going, sir?” Harry asked politely.

Hermione's father made a face. “I thought I told you to call me Phil?”

“Sorry. It's a hard habit to break.”

“Don't worry about it.” Phil waved his hand at an impressive stone building. “We're going to my club for a bit to meet with someone.”

“The Diogenes Club,” Harry read the plaque on side of the building.

“Be sure not to speak with or look at anyone,” Phil said firmly. “Not until I say it's alright to anyway.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed.

“Club rules,” Phil explained. “Keeps the atmosphere relaxed.”

Harry followed the man up the steps and to the front door which was opened by a man in livery just as they arrived.

“New member, sir?” The door man asked with a laugh.

“I'm thinking of sponsoring him in a few years,” Phil agreed.

The doorman's smile vanished and he took a moment to examine Harry. “I look forward to hearing your reasons, sir.”

“I look forward to giving them,” he returned. He stepped into the building. “This way, Harry.”

Harry kept his mouth firmly closed even as his eyes widened in astonishment at the rich furnishings and ornate decorations. After going through a maze of halls, up a flight of stairs and down several more until they finally came to a stop in front of a thick oak door.

“You can talk now, Harry,” Phil told the boy. “Follow me.”

Harry followed Hermione's father through the doorway and into a small room, bare save for a woman sitting behind a desk next to another large door.

“Good afternoon, Sir.” The woman's right hand disappeared below the desk. “What can I do for you today?”

“Is 'M' in?” Phil asked.

“Who may I say is asking for him, sir?” the woman ignored the question.

Harry stepped to one side and edged a hand towards his wand due to the slight tightening in the woman's posture which indicated that trouble is on the way.

“Philip Granger. That's Philip with a P, not an F.”

“Yes, sir.” The woman relaxed and her right hand reappeared. “Sorry for not recognizing you, sir.”

“Not at all,” Phil said calmly. “Well?”

“Go right in, sir.”

Phil crossed the room and threw open the door. As Harry followed, he noticed a name on the door, the letters faded with time. 'Mycroft Holmes,' he read silently. Why in the devil did that sound so familiar.

The office they went into was much richer than the first one. Thick Persian carpets covered the floor and Harry a man that Harry faintly recognized sat behind the desk.

“Got a new pair of glasses, did you?” the man asked with an easy grin. “Look forward to seeing how it affects your game.”

“Still need to practice before I can take advantage of my better sight, sir,” Harry replied cheerfully, finally placing the man as one of his teammates in the Polo Game.

“Not that it isn't always a pleasure, but what prompted the visit, Philip?”

“Problem dealing with security,” Phil replied, taking a seat and waving for Harry to do the same. “You know where my daughter goes to school?”

“I am aware,” the man agreed.

“Happen to know where I can find some of that sort of security?”

“Afraid the ones we've got are all tied up,” the man said regretfully. “I also imagine that your house guest could round some up though.” He'd been more than a bit surprised by the contents of the boy's file.

Phil shot Harry a curious look. “What do you mean by that?”

“You mean you don't know?” The man hit a button on his desk to activate his intercom. “Hold all calls and meetings.”

“Yes, sir,” his secretary's voice agreed.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 8

IIIIIIII

Luna was bouncing up and down in excitement as she waited for her friend to appear. The fact that she had a friend gave her a warm feeling in the pit of her spleen that quickly spread to fill the rest of her body.

“Did you forget anything, crabapple?” her father asked helpfully.

“Loads of things,” Luna agreed. “That way I wouldn't forget anything important.”

Her father nodded, sounded logical to him.

A flash of bushy hair caught Luna's attention and she quickly confirmed that her friend had arrived.

“Hermione,” Luna squealed.

“Luna,” Hermione replied as she rushed over.

The two girls began chattering excitedly in an incomprehensible technobabble.

“Do you understand any of that?” Luna's father ventured cautiously.

“Not a word,” Anne replied.

“Good,” he sighed in relief. “I thought I was the only one. Larry Lovegood.”

“Anne Granger,” she introduced herself. “Pleasure.”

“Pleasure is all mine,” Larry said quickly. His eyes shifted to the menacing looking figures that had surrounded their little gathering. “They with you?”

“I need someone to carry the heavy things for us after we go shopping later,” Anne joked.

“Oh, right. Forgot you couldn't use charms to make things easier,” Larry said, accepting the woman's explanation.

IIIIIIII

Harry was shocked when they were immediately met by an important looking goblin upon their entrance to Gringotts.

“Mr. Granger, a pleasure to see you again.” the goblin said with a show of pointed teeth. “What can Gringotts do for you today?”

“Thank you for seeing us so soon, Hooktooth,” Phil greeted the goblin. “I'd like to establish an account for my daughter and Harry would like a statement, if that's not too much trouble.”

“Not at all,” Hooktooth replied. “Why don't I show you to the lounge while we get the paperwork together.”

“Thank you,” Phil said graciously.

The goblin took them to a richly carpeted room and directed them to sit in two lush looking chairs.

“Please help yourselves to anything in the room with the management's compliments,” Hooktooth said politely. “The paperwork should already be on the table next to you.”

“Here it is,” Phil agreed.

“It shall take us a few minutes to do a quick audit of Mr. Potter's vault,” the goblin said respectfully. And to make a quick notation in the boy's file to insure he got a high level of service. Wouldn't do to offend someone with such powerful friends.

“We aren't in any hurry,” Phil assured the goblin.

“Then I shall take my leave, please pull the bell cord if you need anything,” Hooktooth said as he took his leave.

IIIIIIII

The Lovegoods' eyes were wide in fascination as they stared at the scenery through the car windows. Every second brought something new and exciting.

“I never realized the muggle world was so complicated,” Luna admitted. The little blonde was a bit intimidated by the size of everything. “None of my muggle studies books said it was anything like this.”

“Purebloods,” Hermione snorted. A contrite look immediately appeared on her face. “I’m sorry, Luna, I didn’t mean any offense by that.”

“None taken,” Luna’s father murmured. “It’s a well known fact that there isn’t a pureblood alive that has enough common sense to fill a tea spoon.”

“Where are we going for lunch, mum?” Hermione asked, desperately trying to change the subject.

“Marvelous place Thomas showed me over on the East End,” Anne replied.

“I think you’ll like it, Ms. Hermione,” the large driver rumbled from the front seat.

IIIIIIII

Phil and Harry broke off their conversation when the door to the room opened to admit the oddly polite goblin that had shown them in earlier.

“The preliminary audit of Mr. Potter’s accounts has been completed,” Hooktooth announced as he entered the room. “The board asked me to again express their thanks for the help you’ve given us.”

“Please tell the board that I'll always be happy to turn a profit,” Phil said formally. “The occasions that I'm able to help others make profit as well, I consider myself doubly blessed.”

“I shall pass your words back to my superiors,” Hooktooth agreed.

“Mind if I get my business out of the way first, Harry?” Phil asked.

“Won't take but a minute.”

“No problem, Mr. Granger,” Harry said quickly.

“Have you decided how much you'd like to put into your daughter's account, Mr. Granger?” Hooktooth asked.

“Not much, only about five hundred thousand Galleons,” he replied.

“Please tell me if she runs through it and please extend credit if she needs it.”

“Of course, Mr. Granger,” the goblin agreed quickly.

“Needs, not wants,” he cautioned. “I want her taken care of if there's an emergency in the same way I want her to get my permission before she decides to buy out every bookstore in the country.”

“We will see to it, Mr. Granger,” the goblin assured his customer.

“I've already filled out the paperwork,” Phil said. “Don't believe there was any other business I needed to take care of.”

“Mr. Potter has five hundred and forty thousand two hundred and fifteen galleons, two thousand and thirteen sickles, and five hundred and twelve knuts. In addition to that, he has three sets of silver, two gold cups, twelve silver cups, fifteen golden rings, six emeralds, twenty uncut diamonds, fifteen ounces of gold dust, two thousand dollars in American gold eagles, two hundred dollars in American silver coin, ten thousand dollars of American currency, two thousand Canadian dollars in mixed silver and gold coin, three thousand pounds in gold coin, one hundred thousand Swiss Francs in mixed gold and silver coin, five thousand French francs in silver coin, five hundred dutch guilders in silver coin, one Wilkinson motorbike, fifteen cases of scotch, twelve of gin, and thirteen of rum. Plus three sealed chests, two sealed file cabinets, and assorted closed bags.”

“Was that the face value of the coins or the gold and silver value?” Phil asked.

“Face value,” Hooktooth replied.

“Any idea why there's so much foreign currency in Harry's account?” Phil asked, noticing the confused look on the boy's face.

“It's rumored that the Potter family made most of it's fortune sneaking alcohol into the United States during their 'great experiment' and a bit more of it sneaking things into and out of the continent during the last muggle war. Gringotts has no evidence that any laws were broken and thus has no obligation to investigate or to report anything to the Ministry,” the goblin added with a toothy grin. “We value our customer's confidentiality more than we value our relationship with the current and every past magical government. Something the current

magical government has publicly complained about on numerous occasions.”

“Thank you,” Phil laughed. “Wonderful story about your family, Harry. Wish mine were half as good, you don't want to know what we made the bulk of our family fortune on.”

“What?” Harry asked automatically.

“Guano,” Phil said with a sour look on his face. “Disgusting stuff, even more disgusting was how they mined a lot of it.”

“Oh.” He made a mental note to ask Hermione about it later.

“Would you mind too terribly letting us use the floo on the way out?” Phil asked.

“Of course not,” Hooktooth said quickly. “This way, sir.”

They stopped in front of a large stone fire place and Phil carefully threw a pinch of powder into the fire.

“Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” he called out. “I hate these things,” Phil murmured as he bent down. What followed was a hurried conversation with someone on the other end. “They'd like to speak with you, Harry.”

“Okay.” Harry took the man's place and finished the conversation two minutes later. “Guess they're not too busy today, we've got an appointment right now if we want it.”

Hooktooth escorted the two humans to the banks exit and waited until they were out of sight. Then, in a quick walk, he disappeared through one of the side doors intent on reaching his manager's office as quickly as possible.

To his considerable surprise, he was intercepted and taken deeper and deeper into the bowels of the bank to thick bronze door behind which could only be one goblin, the Clan Chief himself.

Hooktooth's escort threw open the doors and led the goblin through a rich waiting room to a large steel door.

“Wait here,” the escort ordered.

Hooktooth didn't even have time to agree before his escort disappeared. Minutes later, the large doors opened to reveal what was within. The walls were covered in functional and well used weapons covering every era of goblin combat. From the axes and swords of ancient times to the SMLE and the Lewis, of the last, most successful revolt. At the center of the room was a middle aged goblin sitting behind a heavy oak desk.

“Come in,” the goblin ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Hooktooth agreed. He marched in and stopped four paces in front of the desk in a rigid attention.

“Report,” the goblin barked.

“Sir, the Granger wished me to pass on his regards. He told me that he was always happy to turn a profit and was doubly blessed when he was able to turn a profit for others at the same time,” Hooktooth said quickly. “He came to open a vault for the younger Granger.”

“How much did he put into it?”

“Five hundred thousand galleons,” Hooktooth said immediately. “Attached to an unlimited line of credit if there is an emergency, though we are to contact the elder Granger for approval if there is not.”

“Testing his progeny?” the goblin mused.

“Possibly, sir,” Hooktooth replied. “It may have just been an expense account.”

“Pass any duties you may have that could come into conflict with your service to the Granger family. I want you to focus on them and I want you to keep me apprised on what is happening through Sub-chief Bloodrot. See that he knows everything the younger Granger chooses to do with the account and every other scrap of information you come across regarding the Granger family or the Potter,” the goblin ordered. “I want you to also be sure that the counter drones know that the younger Granger is to be treated with the same amount of respect accorded to her sire. Emphasis how displeased I will be with them personally if they forget their place.”

“Yes, sir,” Hooktooth agreed. “Should I do the same with the Potter?”

“Why?”

“I am sure that you are already aware, sir, but the Granger was accompanied by the last Potter.”

“I am. Were you able to find out why?”

“I'm told the last Potter is a close companion of the younger Granger,” Hooktooth said quickly.

“Keep an eye on that one too then,” the Chief said after a moment of thought.

“I will, sir.”

“Was there anything else?”

“No, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

IIIIIIII

Amelia was in the middle of a rather large stack of paperwork when her assistant threw open the door and barged in without warning.

“What is it?” Amelia demanded, more than a bit annoyed at the interruption. “It had better be bloody important.

“Harry Potter to see you, ma'am,” the star-struck assistant said quickly.

“Show him in,” Amelia ordered, slightly confused by the visit.

A few minutes later, the savior of the wizarding world, The-Boy-Who-Lived himself arrived with an unfamiliar man in tow.

“Thank you for seeing me, Madame Bones,” Harry said politely. “I understand how busy your schedule must be.”

“Just what was so important that you needed to see me immediately?” Amelia asked, barely keeping her temper under control at the thought that she'd been interrupted for something that wasn't of vital importance.

“When we flooded , your assistant told us to come over to meet with you right away, Madame Bones,” Harry replied quickly, hoping to defuse the woman.

“I see,” Amelia sighed, her anger disappearing in a flash. “Have a seat.” She waited until her visitors had made themselves comfortable. “What can I do for you, Mister Potter?” Wasn't the boy's fault her normally level headed assistant was a bit of a fangirl.

“As I said before, I flooded your office to ask if you had a list of . . . uh . . .” Harry looked over at Hermione's father.

“Private security contractors,” Phil supplied.

“Your assistant said that I should have a talk with you,” Harry said politely.

“I see.” Amelia leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temple. “Short answer is, there aren't any. Would you like the long answer?”

“Please,” Harry agreed.

“I know of a couple dozen ex-Aurors that would be happy for the work if you don't mind muggle-borns and half-bloods.”

“I don't mind them at all, Madame Bones,” Harry replied. In fact, he preferred them, less chance they'd be tied to the Pureblood factions.

“Good.”

“What would you like in return?” Phil asked smoothly.

“What do you mean by that?” Amelia snapped.

“I'm not asking if you'd like a bribe,” Phil laughed, happy to see a bit of honesty in what his sources had informed him was a pit of corruption.

“I'm asking if there is anything either of us can do to return the favor?”

“Sorry, it's just working around here you get used to people expecting you to act a certain way.” Amelia pursed her lips. “We're doing a benefit for disabled Aurors, widows, and orphans in a few months, an appearance by Mr. Potter would help us meet our goal.”

“If I can get the time off school,” Harry agreed, happy that he could do something to repay his host. “And so long as I wouldn't have to stay too long.” He blushed. “I . . . I really don't like crowds,” he admitted.

“I don't either,” Amelia said with a tight smile. “I'll be in touch.”

“Thank you for your time, Madame Bones.” Phil said, raising to his feet.

“Sorry for the mix up,” Harry added.

“Got me away from my paperwork,” Amelia said with a shrug.

“Something that's rarely a bad thing. Have a good day.”

They left the office and were half way out of the Ministry when Harry heard a familiar voice calling his name.

“Neville!” Harry called back. “What are you doing here?”

“Gran is talking to one of the Politicians,” Neville explained. “You?”

“Meeting with Madame Bones,” Harry replied.

Phil Granger stepped into the background to allow the two boys a bit of time to themselves and was joined a few minutes later by an elderly woman.

“I hadn't realized my Neville was such good friends with The-Boy-Who-Lived,” the old woman said happily.

“Philip Granger,” he introduced himself. “Hermione Granger's father and Harry's host for the Holidays.”

“Dame Augusta Longbottom,” she introduced herself.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Dame Longbottom.”

“The pleasure is mine, Mister Granger.”

“Gran, can Harry come to the party?” Neville asked excitedly.

“Of course,” Augusta agreed. Happy that hers was the first invitation that the Potter accepted.

Harry nudged Neville with his elbow causing the other boy to blush a deep red.

“Uh, he's with Hermione and Luna this winter so . . .”

“So of course three invitations will be delivered to your three guests,” Augusta said smoothly.

“Thank you, Gran.”

“Of course, Neville.”

“I would be happy to extend another for yourself and your wife, Mister Granger.”

“Thank you, Dame Longbottom,” Phil said quickly. “Why don't we let the boys have a bit of time to themselves?”

Augusta made a snap decision. “Neville, we'll just be down the hall if you need us.”

“Okay, Gran,” Neville agreed.

The two adults walked off to gain a bit of privacy.

“What can I do for you, Mister Granger?”

“I'm afraid that our invitation will need to include a few members of our staff,” Phil said with a look of embarrassment. “I hate to impose like this.”

“I trust that they are aware of the fact that magic is real?” Augusta asked.

“Yes,” Phil agreed. “Again, I'm terribly sorry to impose like this, but there are security concerns that I can't ignore.” Wasn't permitted to ignore, the more service he gave his country the more restrictions were placed on his life.

“I was told that you and your wife are dentists?” Augusta asked with a raised eyebrow, wondering what other information might be missing from her files.

“My wife is a practicing dentist,” Phil agreed. “I dabble a bit, mostly assisting her or doing charity, but unfortunately most of my time is taken up dealing with other business these days.”

“I see.” The old woman considered the man for a moment. “Please consider your staff included in the invitation.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Dame Longbottom.”

“Think nothing of it, Mister Granger.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione frowned in confusion when the car took an unexpected turn away from the route that would take them back to her weekend house.

“Are we going to the London House, mum?” she asked cautiously.

“We're making a quick stop before we head home,” Anne said calmly.
“Thomas suggested it.”

“Figured you and your friend might enjoy a quick peek before we go back” the big man rumbled.

“Where are we going, mum?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Covent Garden, I thought you girls might want to get a look at the trains on display at the Transport Museum.”

“You hear that, Luna?” Hermione squealed in excitement.

“I did, Hermione,” Luna agreed. “Shame we couldn't bring Harry with us.”

“This is just a short visit,” Anne pointed out. “You can bring him along later, when we have the time for a proper look around.”

“Yes, mum,” Hermione agreed.

IIIIIIII

Harry and Phil left the bookshop at Diagon Alley laden with packages.

“Thanks for letting me make a couple quick stops,” Harry said gratefully.

“No problem, Harry,” Phil replied. “Still want to make a stop at a normal bookstore on the way back?”

“If it isn't too much trouble,” Harry agreed. “Unless of course, you've already picked up a bunch of engineering manuals for Hermione and Luna.”

“Christmas shopping?”

“It's my first real Christmas,” Harry said simply. Spent with a family and outside of the school, as it was supposed to be. “I want to make it special.”

“We've got about four hours before we need to be back,” Phil said after a quick glance at his watch. “Leaves us an hour or two for shopping.”

“I hope it doesn't take that long,” Harry said quickly.

“Spoken like a true man,” Phil laughed. They walked through the Cauldron and stepped into the waiting car. “Excuse me for a moment, Harry,” Phil said as he opened a compartment and pulled out a handset. “I need to make a quick call.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed.

“It's me,” Phil said into the phone. “Did you get my fax? So soon? Good. Buy it and keep an eye out for more of them. Pulled up the rails huh? Put an option on it. What's your other idea? Get a list, put the ones in Scotland and near my house near the top. Good. Good. Really? Good. I'll talk to you later.” He hung up the phone and carefully closed the compartment. “Sorry about that, Harry.”

“No problem, I know how it can be sometimes.”

“What did you have in mind?” Phil asked.

“Sir?”

“For the girls, what did you want to get them?”

“Figured I'd get a couple engineering texts for Hermione,” Harry replied. “Don't know what for Luna. Was hoping that I could find something in Diagon.”

IIIIIIII

Between them, Hermione and Luna managed to produce several pages of notes in the short time they were in the museum and the girls spent much of the ride home chattering excitedly about what they'd learned.

“Could you drop us off at father's garage?” Hermione requested politely as they pulled onto the family lands. “I wanna show Luna the car father's building with me.”

“No problem, Ms. Hermione,” the large driver agreed after receiving a discrete nod from the girl's mother.

“Thank you, Thomas,” the girl said politely. Hermione turned back to her friend. “Father is also letting me keep Harry's motorcycle collection there.”

“How wonderful,” Luna said with a smile. The car pulled out of a stand of trees, allowing Luna her first look at the impressive Granger residence. “It's very large,” Luna mumbled in shock.

“My great-great-great-Grandfather wanted to show off,” Hermione sniffed at the thought of someone being so vain.

“It's no worse then what your ancestors on the other side did, darling,” Anne laughed, thinking of some of the monstrosity that was her family's ancestral home. “You must remember to judge people by the standards of their day, darling, not your own.”

“Yes, mum,” Hermione agreed.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 9

IIIIIIII

Phil turned to Harry as the car pulled to a stop in front of the stately Granger residence. "I'll go distract the girls, you get everything hidden in your room."

"Alright," Harry agreed.

"Give me fifteen minutes," Phil said as he got out of the car. "Help him with the things, James."

"Yes, sir," the driver agreed.

Phil found the girls tinkering with a motorcycle in his garage. "Hello girls," he said, announcing himself. "Keeping busy?"

"Yes, Daddy," Hermione agreed.

"Yes, Mr. Granger," Luna said shyly.

"Call me Phil," he said with a smile. "I . . ." he froze.

"Is there something wrong, Daddy?" Hermione asked, worried at his sudden change in demeanor.

“Do you know what this is?” Phil gasped, staring at the bike in shocked wonder.

“What is it, Daddy?” Hermione asked.

“It's a Vincent Black Prince,” Phil said in awe. “One of Harry's?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Hermione agreed.

“Why don't you show me the rest of his collection,” Phil suggested, voice catching.

“We've only got maybe a third of it put back together,” Hermione warned as she led him to the part of the garage she'd commandeered.

Phil was dumbstruck, before him were rows upon rows of carefully assembled classic motorcycles. To think he'd hoped the boy would have one interesting piece in his collection. What lay before him exceeded even his wildest dreams.

“I'm gonna need to contact someone I know about this,” Phil mumbled half to to himself as his mind began to catalogue some of the other treasures.

“Why's that, daddy?” Hermione asked.

“Because the value of this may dwarf what Harry already has in his vault,” Phil replied. “The Vincent alone is worth . . .” he shook his head. “Tell me if he decides to sell any of this, I'm not normally interested in Motorbikes but I'd be prepared to make an exception for some of this.”

To rob his favorite brother in law of the chance to purchase them if for no other reason.

“Alright, daddy,” Hermione agreed. “Just so you know, I don't think Harry will be interested in selling any of this.”

“That's fine, darling.”

“Is it really that valuable?” Luna asked shyly.

“I think so,” Phil agreed. “It's not really my field, but they sell motorcycles at some of the auctions I attend so I do have some idea.” He shook his head in shock. “When you'd told me Harry had a motorcycle collection, I'd assumed . . . well, I don't know what I'd assumed but I surely didn't expect something like this.”

“Could you teach us how to ride, daddy?” Hermione asked sweetly and in full knowledge that she had her father wrapped around her finger.

“You want to ride?” he stared at his daughter in shock. It had been surprising enough to find out that his little girl had taken an interest in mechanics.

“I think Harry would,” Hermione replied. “I'd like to at least try it.”

“So would I,” Luna agreed.

“I'll see to it, darling,” he agreed. Phil made a mental note to pick up a couple disposable bikes for the lesson. Knowing what a crime it would

be a crime to let one of Harry's classics get damaged by a beginner's mistake even with magic to make it better.

IIIIIIII

Anne caught Harry as he was walking through the front door with the purchases he'd made in Diagon Alley and later at a more mundane bookshop.

“Christmas Presents?” she asked dryly.

“Yes, Mrs. Granger,” Harry agreed.

“Take the bags from him and make sure they're hidden where my daughter and her guest can't find them,” Anne shot an order at one of the maids. “An owl delivered an envelope for you, Harry. It's in the study.”

“Probably Neville's invitation,” Harry replied. “There should be one for you too.”

IIIIIIII

In a daze, Phil stumbled back into the house and collapsed into his favorite chair. The Vincent had been just the tip of what he now believed would turn out to be one of the better collections of classic motorbikes in the country.

“Under my nose the whole time and I didn't even know it,” he mumbled to himself.

“Something wrong, sir?” the butler asked.

“Sorry?”

“I asked if there was something wrong, sir,” the butler repeated.

“Ah, no. I hadn't realized the extent of Harry's motorbike collection until I had a chance to see it for myself,” Phil said with a laugh. “Please remind me to get someone in to appraise it and remind me to see that it gets insured before the end of the hollidays.”

“I will, sir,” the butler agreed. “Your wife asked me to find you, sir. She wants to have a word about the invitation you accepted earlier today.”

“A good word, or a bad one?”

“I wouldn't care to guess, sir.”

“Of course you wouldn't,” Phil sighed. “Do you happen know where she is right now?”

“In the study with young Mister Harry,” the butler replied.

“Thank you.” Phil rose to his feet. “Best go see what she wants.”

“I've found it best not to put these things off, sir,” the butler agreed with a grin. “James and Thomas would like a word after your wife is finished with you, sir.”

“Tell them that should I survive, I'll meet with them in my office.”

“I shall, good luck, sir.”

When he found her, his wife had an expression of extreme annoyance on her face.

“What have I done now?” he asked calmly.

“Two days doesn't give me a lot of time to prepare for a social event,” she said with a frown. “Especially not our debut in magical society.”

“I hadn't realized it was so soon,” Phil admitted contritely. “Sorry about that, dear. I'd have been sure to call ahead if I had known.”

“It's no big deal,” Anne said with a wave. “Just means we don't have much time to get Hermione and Luna's dresses made.” The woman had been more than a bit relieved to learn that Harry's wardrobe had already taken care of. She'd also been more than a bit impressed by the extent of it, the boy had everything from evening ware to traditional highland dress.

“You've already called your dress maker then?”

“Of course,” Anne agreed. “Why?”

“Because you might have asked the girls first,” Phil pointed out. “For all we know they might want to wear formal robes.”

“You're right,” Anne sighed. “They're in the garage aren't they?”

“Should be,” Phil agreed. “It's where they were a couple minutes ago anyway.”

Anne found the two girls after a couple minutes of searching and was a bit put out by her daughter's admitted ignorance of the matter. She'd told the girl more than once how important it was to at least have some idea of what to wear for a formal event.

“I don't know,” Hermione admitted. “I don't really pay too much attention to that sort of thing.” To be quite frank, she didn't see what the big deal was.

“Darling, your social position means that you have to know these things,” Anne chided gently. “You're going to have to learn these things some day.”

“Hmph,” Hermione sniffed in mock disdain.

“Either one will be fine,” Luna offered shyly after it became clear that Hermione had nothing more to add. “In fact, a dress might be better if the level of quality is high enough.” For a party hosted by the Longbottoms anyway.

“Thank you, Luna,” Anne said with a smile.

“I am happy to help, Anne,” Luna replied, basking in the approval.

IIIIIIII

James made a show of handing Thomas a couple coins when Phil entered his his office to meet with them.

“What was that all about?”

“Just a little wager,” James explained. “Didn't believe you'd get here in one piece, Thomas figured your low class background would see you through.”

“What low class background?” Phil laughed. “Eton followed by Cambridge.”

“Yeah,” James agreed. “But you aren't any sort of Lord, Ms. Anne says that makes you a frightfully low class commoner.”

“Must be feeling frisky tonight if she asked you to put on that show,” Phil said eagerly. “Enough fun, what did you two want to speak with me about?”

“Few names on the list you gave us stood out. Got a couple retired Constables, one guy I knew in the Regiment that was a green grocer last I heard, and a couple that work for your friend at the club.”

“Wonder if he knows about them?” Phil said thoughtfully. “You want to hire them?”

“Be nice,” James agreed. “Also like your permission to talk to a couple people Mr. Harry mentioned.”

“You don't mind werewolves, do you, Mr. Granger?” Thomas asked with a grin. “Mister Harry says that he's an okay blokes that are only out of it a few nights a month. Promises that we aren't in any danger if we take precautions.”

“You're joking?”

“Afraid not, sir,” Thomas replied. “We'll need a secure room for him to lock himself in a few nights a month if you give the go ahead.”

“I hired you two because you had good judgement, not because I wanted you to come to me every time you had a decision to make,” Phil told them with a grin. Use your judgement.”

“Yes, sir,” James agreed.

“I thought he hired us because we were a couple strapping young lads that were easy on the eyes,” Thomas whispered loudly. “Least, that's what his ex-sister in law told us.”

“It's a good thing that Mrs. Granger is understanding about these sorts of things,” James agreed. “Still a shame she's keeping him from living openly though.”

“The more I hear about that gold digging bitch, the gladder I am that my idiot brother divorced her,” Phil sighed.

“We might have had a few contingency plans in place if he didn't,” James admitted happily. “There's a reason the other servants were so attentive every time she came to the house and why Ms. Hermione was

always taking a nap and not to be disturbed whenever that bitch wanted to see her.” Ms. Jane had only had to get nasty about it once, not even the bitch had been stupid enough to try to push things a second time. It was a pity in a way, there would be no chance of her trying anything a third time if she had.

“Fortunately, that never had to happen,” Thomas said in relief.

“Dare I ask?”

“Probably best if you didn't, sir.”

IIIIIIII

Luna took the seat next to Hermione who in turn was seated in her customary spot next to Harry and across from her parents as they sat down at the table and did her best to ape the other girl's movements so as to fit in, in the unfamiliar setting.

“Luna,” Anne called out with a smile. “Hermione isn't the best one to copy. Her knowledge of etiquette wouldn't fill a thimble.”

Luna looked down at her pate with a deep blush. “Oh.”

“Don't be embarrassed, dear. You're doing things exactly the way you're supposed to in an unfamiliar situation. I just thought I'd give you a small warning before you picked up any of my daughter's many bad habits.”

“I still say that none of that matters,” Hermione insisted, chin going up. “It's not like I'm going to go to any of your social events. Those fancy rituals of yours are just ways to set yourself apart from the other classes.”

Phil's booming laugh echoed throughout the room. “Wonderful argument, darling. I recall your mother making a similar argument when-”

“Hush,” Anne cut him off, a deep blush adorned the woman's face as she remembered the incident that had resulted in their only daughter.

“Mum?”

“I agree with you to some extent, darling.” Anne gave an impish smile. “Just be aware of how much of an asset it can be to fit into whatever society you're in.”

“Yes, mum,” Hermione agreed.

Anne gave a satisfied nod before turning to her newest guest. “So, Luna, Hermione tells me that your family is in the newspaper business.”

“Since seventeen sixty nine when my ancestor started printing broadsides,” Luna said, resisting the urge to look down at her lap.

“Do you happen to know how much your father charges for advertising space?” Phil asked absently. “Because I-”

“No business at the table,” Anne cut him off. “Sorry, Luna.”

“I do,” Luna agreed. “We can discuss rates later if you like.”

Harry kept silent throughout the meal, choosing instead to observe his dining companions and to listen to the conversations happening around him. So this is what a normal family is like, he marveled. Before Luna arrived, he hadn't been able to sit back and take it all in and, as much as he cared for them, the Weasleys could never be considered 'normal.'

'Would this be what his parents would have been like?' Harry wondered to himself. 'Would his family have sat around the table seamlessly shifting from conversation to conversation?' Another reason to curse Voldemort, he concluded to himself as the meal came to a close.

Anne caught her husband's eyes and slowly licked her lips. “I'm going to sleep,” she announced.

“I'll join you,” Phil said with a smile of anticipation. “Good night, Harry, girls.”

“Good night, daddy,” Hermione replied automatically. “Come on, Luna, you're sharing my room.”

“Alright, Hermione,” Luna agreed, allowing herself to be dragged out of the room. “Good night, Harry,” she called over her shoulder.

“Good night,” Harry said to the now empty room. He nodded to the maids as they began clearing the table, treasuring every moment of his holiday at the Granger home.

IIIIIIII

Phil was unsurprised to find that Harry had already awoken and eaten when he finally managed to pull himself out of bed. The short time he'd known the boy had already familiarized him with his young guest's habits. A frown appeared on the man's face, really needed to speak to his brother in law to see how things were progressing.

“Morning, Phil,” Harry said cheerfully.

“Harry.” Phil grinned. “Ever play golf?”

“No, sir.”

“Would you care to learn?” Phil asked hopefully. “The girls will be busy getting their dresses fitted so I figured it would be best to get out of the house.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed. “When do we leave?”

“How about now?” Phil suggested.

IIIIIIII

Hermione had to drag herself out of bed the next morning. Having been up half the night chatting with Luna, waking up was a chore.

“I'm sorry, did I wake you?” Luna's chirped. “I've tried to be quiet.”

“How long have you been up, Luna?” Hermione demanded.

“I slept in a bit,” Luna admitted guiltily. “So, five or so hours.”

“It's ten o'clock now,” Hermione groaned. “When did we go to sleep last night?”

“Half past one,” Luna happily supplied the answer. “Which is why I allowed myself to sleep in, I don't usually stay up so late.”

“Have you had breakfast yet?”

“I was afraid to leave the room,” Luna admitted. “I know I'd get lost in this giant house of yours.”

“Good one, Luna,” Hermione giggled. “Come on, let's go get something to eat.”

“Alright,” the confused blonde agreed. She hadn't realized that she had said something funny.

IIIIIIII

Phil was about to make his shot when Harry's hand flashed in front of his face, causing him to abort it in mid stroke.

“Trying to spoil my shot?” he asked with a grin.

“Sorry.” Harry opened his hand and let the golf ball he'd caught fall to the ground. “Didn't think you'd want to get hit.”

“Good reflexes,” Phil commented calmly. “James.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I thought you said my brother in law wasn't playing today?”

“He wasn't supposed to be, sir,” James replied.

“Mind if we cut the game short, Harry?” Phil asked. “I think I've had enough close calls today.”

“Alright,” Harry agreed.

“Come on,” Phil said, turning to walk towards the clubhouse where there was less chance of being hit by an errant shot. “I'll introduce you to Hermione's uncle. I think you'll like him, he's a nice enough chap for a completely useless bastard.”

IIIIIIII

After being forced to endure the horror of being measured and fitted, Hermione and Luna retreated to the safety of the garage to continue their work on Harry's motorbike collection.

“Hermione.” The girl heard her mother's voice. “You have a visitor.”

“Who is . . . Professor Lupin,” she said in delight. “What are you doing here?”

“Found two more boxes of those parts,” Remus replied. “Not sure if you want them, but I put them aside for you like you asked.”

“Thank you, Remus,” Hermione said sweetly. “I’ll tell Harry that you’re the one that’s been finding all this for him.”

“I’m not doing much,” Remus said with a pleased blush. “Just cleaning the place up because I don’t have anything else to do.”

“Please bring any muggle things, books, and notes to me before throwing them out,” Hermione requested. “Everything you’ve found so far has been fascinating.”

“I won’t throw anything out without talking to you and Harry first,” Remus promised. “Not even the dark items, might have to fight Bill for those though.”

“What’s he want with dark items?” Hermione’s lip curled in disgust.

“Says removing the curses helps keep his hand in,” Remus replied.

IIIIIIII

Tears were streaming down Harry’s face and his chest felt like it was going to burst. He hadn’t laughed so hard or so much in . . . maybe ever.

“No more,” he wheezed. “No more jokes, I don’t think I can take it.”

“Suit yourself,” Hermione’s uncle, the man that had introduced himself as Lord Useless the seventh sniffed. “Youth these days have no

endurance.” The man was just over six feet with dark hair and a physique that gave lie to his claims of idleness.

“Nah,” Phil disagreed. “It's like getting exposed to an infectious disease the first time. Kid's got no natural immunity.” He smirked. “I do, and as an expert on infectious diseases, my professional opinion is that your jokes are as bad as your game.”

“Not my fault you weren't standing anywhere near the hole,” Hermione's uncle barked. “We both know that the object of the game is to get the ball anywhere but the hole with extra points if you get it in the rough, the water, or the sand.”

“You've got it backwards again.”

“So you say. I on the other hand maintain that you're position is based on the fact that you're just jealous of my perfect game.” With an upturned chin, he made an obvious show of turning away from his brother in law. “So, Harry, you're staying with my niece are you?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry agreed.

“Call me Jim,” he said easily. “Do I need to make any threats about treating her right? I mean, it goes without saying that I'll break your legs if you make her cry, doesn't it?”

“The staff already took care of that,” Harry replied cheerfully. “I'll tell you the same thing I told them. She's my best friend, if someone hurts her, I'll kill them.”

Both men were taken aback at the sense of certainty in the boy's voice when he'd delivered the statement. There had been no humor, no menace, no more emotion than if he'd been commenting on the weather.

“Good to hear,” Jim replied weakly. What in the hell had the boy endured to forge such steel at such a young age? That thought was quickly followed by another, more terrifying thought, had any of it spilled over onto his niece? He'd have to make a note to request some time off to resolve things personally if so.

“Harry's got a Black Prince,” Phil said suddenly, desperately hoping to change the subject even as his mind whirled with similar thoughts to those of his brother in law.

“My word, really!” Jim stared at Harry for a couple seconds. “Any chance you'd be willing to sell it to me?” he asked hopefully.

“Not at the moment,” Harry replied. “I'll let you know if I change my mind.”

“Wherever did you find it?” Jim persisted.

“My godfather left it to me along with his other motorbikes,” Harry replied.

“What else do you have?” Jim asked eagerly. “Are you willing to part with any of it?”

“They're still going through it,” Harry replied. “And not at this time.”

“Damn,” Jim cursed.

“He's got Hermione going through it and putting it all back together,” Phil laughed. “Turned my perfect little princess into a greasy petrolhead.”

“My niece working with her hands?” Jim gasped. “Doing something productive? The family will never live this latest shame down.”

“You'll just have to be extra useless to balance things out,” Phil suggested.

“There's a thought,” Jim said happily. “Knew I could count on you, Phil. One of the reasons I never minded the fact that my dear sister married down.”

“I thought it was because I had top shelf booze at our wedding and made sure that she invited all her attractive unattached friends,” Phil shot back.

“That too,” Jim agreed. “Well, mostly that.”

IIIIIIII

Remus was on his way out of the spacious Granger home when a hand the size of a shovel blade came to rest on his shoulder. “Got a minute?” The man attached to the massive paw asked.

“What do you need?” Remus asked, coming face to face with a man that had been introduced to him as one of the drivers.

“Why don't you step into my office?” the man suggested with a grin.
“I'm gonna make you an offer you can't refuse.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 10

IIIIIIII

The chance to get a look at Harry's bike collection proved to be irresistible to Hermione's uncle, especially when it was coupled with a chance to spend some time with the girl. At least that was his stated reason as to why he'd chosen to accompany them back to the stately Granger estate.

“Hermione should be in the garage,” Phil said to his brother in law as the car pulled to a stop.

“And you expect me to walk from here?” Jim whined, a look of comical dismay on his face. “It must be at least fifty meters, that's inhuman.”

“That's life,” Phil said nastily. “Shouldn't have mooched a ride.”

“Bastard,” Jim growled. He leapt out of the car and stalked away. “Just for that, I'm writing you out of my will again,” he said over his shoulder.

“Come on, Harry. He'll be back with Hermione in a bit.”

IIIIIIII

Remus was in a daze, he had a job. A job that paid triple what he'd gotten as a Professor at Hogwarts doing something he'd have happily done for free.

“How in the world did I get back to Grimmauld Place without splinching myself?” he wondered to himself. No matter, he had work to do. “First thing's first,” he mumbled to himself. “Have to get things ready to speak with Bill, wards before everything else.”

IIIIIIII

Jim walked through the door and, by habit, stepped to the side. After a short pause to allow his eyes to adjust, he began walking towards the sounds of someone working.

“Where's the prettiest girl in the world?” he bellowed.

“Uncle Jim,” Hermione squealed, throwing herself into the big man's arms, ruining seivile row suit with the grease smeared on her overalls. “I thought you were out of the country again.”

“Accidentally blew up the place I was staying in and had to come back in a hurry,” Jim explained with a much put upon sigh. “You wouldn't think cooking breakfast for yourself was so difficult, but it is. Let my example be a lesson to you that you should leave that sort of thing to the staff.”

Hermione giggled, her uncle was always joking about going to exotic place, meeting interesting people, and accidentally blowing them up. “Did you bring me back anything?”

“Have you been a good girl?” he shot back.

“Been absolutely rotten,” Hermione said proudly. “It's all thanks to Harry too. He's a terrible influence. Just last year we broke into a government building and busted the place up.”

“What have you done lately?”

“Studying up on steam technology. The beginning half of the year is always quiet. I don't expect things to heat up for another few months.”

“Good.” Jim filed that piece of information away into his to look into later file. He reached into his pocket and withdrew an engraved silver cigarette case. “Here you go, my darling, use it in good health.”

“What is it?” Hermione asked curiously, turning the item over in her hand.

“Open it,” he prompted.

The inside of the cigarette case was filled with an assortment of saws, hooks, and other miniaturized tools. “What's the map of?”

“The area around that school of yours on one side and the area around a small island off the coast on the other,” he said easily. “Replaced the one it came with since you'll never go there if you've got any sense. Absolutely dull place.” It also wouldn't be a good idea for anyone related to him to go near for quite some time, even with all the trouble he went to keeping his personal and professional lives separate.

“Why were you there, then?” Hermione chirped.

“Cause I don't have any sense,” he answered with a grin. “Cheeky brat.”

Hermione's cheeks dimpled. “Uncle Jim, I want you to meet my friend, Luna.”

“Hello,” the little blonde said shyly.

“You're the one that's helping our Hermione put together all the motorbikes?”

“I am, sir,” Luna agreed.

“Call me Jim. It's a pleasure to meet you, Luna.” Jim gave the girl a wide grin. “Mind showing them to me?”

The blushing girl just shook her head in reply.

“Come on, Uncle Jim.” Hermione grabbed the man's hand and pulled him towards the garage. “We'll give you the grand tour, right, Luna?”

“Right,” Luna agreed.

He allowed himself to be dragged into the garage and to the skeleton of a partially assembled motorbikes.

“This is the latest one we've been reassembling,” Hermione said proudly.

“A 1932 Brough Superior SS100 by god,” he whispered in awe. “That's the bike T. E. Lawrence managed to kill himself on.” His head turned

violently from side to side, glancing at and identifying several of the shadowy shapes.

“That's good?” Hermione asked.

“It's bloody marvelous,” Jim mumbled. “This whole collection is. It's mostly Triumphs and Nortons, but by god the things he's got mixed in for flavor. Two bloody Vincents, what kind of world just drops two bloody Vincents into his lap. Do you know how hard I had to look to find the one I've got?” he demanded.

“Harry's always had the strangest luck,” Luna spoke up. “Copious amounts of good and bad.”

“Bloody hell,” the man mumbled to himself. “I think you'd better take me back into the house before my poor heart gives out.”

“Would you like the key to wine cellar so you can get something to help recover your wits?” Hermione asked.

“The day I need a key to get into a wine cellar is the day I'm too drunk to open a bottle,” he said with an uplifted chin.

IIIIIIII

Bill nodded his head a few times as Remus explained the problem. It was a sticky one, but not beyond his skill level. Gringotts had spent years and mountains of gold turning him into one of the best at what he did.

“Can you do it?” Remus finished intently.

“Don't normally do this sort of thing,” Bill admitted. “Not to say I can't, just that it'll take me a bit longer to put them up than a professional Warder would. On the other hand, I've run across a few things in my travels that most British Warders have never so much as dreamed of.”

“This place will be safe then?”

“For you and yours,” Bill agreed. “It'll be a Death Eater's worst nightmare. Especially with the little addition I made that targets dark marks, pity Dumbledore won't allow me to add it to the protections at Headquarters and Hogwarts.”

“Pity he thinks Snape is more important than the students,” Remus spat. “Sorry about that,” he added immediately. “It was uncalled for. It's just after hearing about Harry's . . . ah . . . mishaps, I'm just a bit on edge.”

“It wasn't uncalled for,” Bill sighed, wishing things were different. “There's a reason I've been enchanting my sibling's school robes.”

“Oh?”

“They'll shrug off anything short of an unforgivable,” Bill agreed proudly. “There are Aurors that go into battle with less protections.”

“Can you . . .”

“I'll do the same for Harry and the girls as soon as I finish with the house,” Bill promised.

“Thank you.”

IIIIIIII

Harry was in the sitting room with Hermione's Parents when Jim arrived with the girls in tow. The man then proceeded to spend the next several minutes describing the collection of Motorbikes

“God, not another one,” Anne lamented.

“Another what?” Luna chirped.

“I'm afraid that collecting things is a bit of a tradition in our families,” Phil laughed. “I like cars, my father was fond of companies, and my grandfather liked airplanes. Most of which are currently on loan to various museums at the moment.”

“On our side, Hermione had a great-great-grandfather that collected titles, weapons, and medals,” Jim picked up the conversation. “Bloody idiot probably clanked when he moved. My father liked artwork, thought it made him . . . well, it doesn't matter.” Not since the old man's stroke anyway.

“What do you collect?” Harry asked.

“Motorbikes,” Jim replied. “I'm with you on that one, Harry.”

“Also girlfriends and trouble,” Anne interjected. “The stories I could tell.”

“Got a great collection of scars,” Jim agreed. “Motorbike accidents, stupidity, and angry ex-girlfriends all make for an interesting patchwork.” Not to mention on the job injuries, most of which didn't fit the afore mentioned categories. “Got a line of dots across my bum from a pitchfork.” And a woman who was very unhappy to find him with her twin sister, something he still maintained was not his fault since how was he to have known?

“Luna,” Anne sighed dramatically. “It looks as if the two of us are the only sane people here. My husband with his cars, my brother and Harry with their motorbikes, my daughter with her books. It's up to us to keep them from going madder then they already are.”

“Don't listen to her, Luna,” Phil advised. “She's as crazy as the rest of us.”

“Really?”

“My wife has an impressive collection of jewelry,” Phil confided.

“Which is still smaller then yours,” Anne sighed. “Not to mention the fact that I inherited most of it and that you're the one that gave me the rest of it.”

“See how she tries to justify her neuroses?” Phil whispered.

“Best just to humor her,” Jim advised. “She could snap at any moment.”

IIIIIIII

Ron held his breath as the woman looked over the sample. It was a testament to his state of mind that only a small fraction of his attention was captured by the way her hands were sensuously and suggestively caressing the wood he'd given her.

“Bit large,” she said after an eternity of silence.

“Your hands are a bit small,” Ron reposted. A hand reached up to mop the sweat off his brow. “Don't match the tracing I was given at all.”

“She was sick,” the woman explained. “It matters that much?”

“Does it . . .” Ron was so taken aback by the woman's question that he forgot his earlier nervousness. “Give me your hand.” Without waiting for an answer, he seized her by the wrist and dragged the woman to the workbench he'd set up in his father's shed. “Hold still,” Ron commanded. A couple seconds later, he had a rough tracing of the woman's hand. “See?”

“What am I looking at?”

“The one on the left is the tracing I was given.” He dropped it over the one he'd just made. “See how it covers your hand?”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“If you want it to fit then don't send me someone else's measurements. Wouldn't send a friend to get fitted for your robes would you?”

“Suppose not,” she agreed with a grin. “How soon to get a sample in my size?”

“Couple minutes for something rough,” Ron muttered. He got no respect, absolutely no respect at all. “Sit down.”

“What kind of wood are you using?”

“Pine,” Ron replied as he tried to find the right blank.

“The shaft on my broomstick is made out of maple,” she pointed out.

“Then if you want a sample in maple, you can bloody well pay for it. You want a free one, you're getting pine.”

“Alright.” She settled down with a smile. “I hear you play?”

“Good enough to get on a house team but not good enough to go pro,” Ron agreed surprising himself that there wasn't even a hint of bitterness in his voice. “You want to scout, talk to Harry.”

“He has the wrong set of equipment to play for my team,” she giggled.

“Well then your team better hope to Merlin he doesn't decide to turn pro,” Ron laughed back. “If he does, you'll have to get used to the idea of playing to be named number two in the league. Harry Potter doesn't know how to lose.”

“What do you know?” she growled, a bit annoyed by the boy's superior tone.

“Enough to listen to Madame Hooch when she decides to share her opinion.” Ron looked up from his work. “Give me your hand.”

“Really?” she allowed him to seize her by the wrist again.

“She says that he's the finest natural flyer she's ever seen and that he's gotten better every year he's played,” Ron agreed. “Let me see the other.”

“Raw talent won't take you to the top.”

“It will when you add a bunch of private lessons with Madame Hooch,” Ron retorted. “Your hands are different. Injury?”

“Bludger shattered the left and it never healed right,” she agreed. “Is that important?”

“Which hand to you prefer to grip with?”

“The left.”

Ron pursed his lips. “Can't hold a bat with it?”

“No, I grip with my legs and use the left hand for balance.”

“We'll have to do something special for you then,” Ron said slowly. “I'm gonna need you to cast a couple charms for me.”

“Why?”

“Cause I don't feel like taking the time to do it the muggle way,” Ron explained. “Try this.”

“Feels good,” she said in delight. “Fits my hand like a glove.”

“Won't do you a whole lot of good with that hand of yours, which is why we're going to try some other things.”

“Don't worry about it,” she laughed. “I've seen enough to recommend you to the others.”

“Really?” Ron's face lit up. “That's great. I'd still like to try out my ideas with you though.”

“What are you doing tomorrow, kid?”

“Nothing important,” Ron replied. “Come in your gear.”

“Why?”

“So we can get the best fit possible.”

“Oh, I figured it was because you had some twisted fantasy you wanted me to help you with,” she teased.

“I do. Several actually,” Ron admitted with a deep blush. “Best to get the business out of the way first though.”

She stared at the boy in shock for a split second before bursting into laughter. “You're alright.” Looked like getting a new broom would be funner than she thought it would be.

IIIIIIII

After a moment to assure himself that everyone had finished with their meals, Phil nodded to his guests as everyone rose from the table.

“Care to join me in the study for a digestif, Harry, Jim?”

“Alright, sir . . . eh . . . Phil,” Harry agreed.

“You know I never turn down free booze,” Jim announced.

“What about that martini you sent back at my ninth birthday party?” Hermione asked innocently.

“They shook it, something anyone with even an ounce of sense knows not to do. It doesn't count when they've ruined a drink.” He raised his chin. “Only two reasons I would ever lower myself to ordering something like that: The first is if I was doing my best to convince the world that I was an ill bred uncultured lout aping my betters, the second is if for some reason I wanted my drink to be a bit watered down for some ungodly reason. Stir clear drinks, shake the cloudy ones.”

Hermione giggled at the uncharacteristic look of seriousness on her normally completely unserious uncle's face.

“Would you girls care to join me in the conservatory?” Anne asked.

Hermione glanced over at Luna to read her friend's face. "Okay, mum."

Anne smiled. "Wonderful, come along girls."

Jim followed his brother in law to the study and waited until the door was closed to put a shovel sized hand on Harry's shoulder. "Let me tell you something, lad. The truth is, I'm impressed, I honestly am. Fact is, well, fact is that I'd normally applaud a man that was dating two women. Believe me when I say that I understand more then anyone how difficult it can be, bad enough when you're keeping them apart but when they know about each other . . . well, that brings up a whole new set of problems doesn't it?"

He allowed his grip to tighten a hair and his voice dropped a couple of octaves. "Problem I have with your situation is that one of the girls you're dating is my favorite niece, the apple of my eye. Would you like to know what I'd do to someone that hurt her, Harry?" He'd been joking at the course, he was deadly serious now.

"Would you like to know what I've told everyone else?" Harry asked calmly, meeting the man's eyes. No sign at all that he was the least intimidated.

Jim had to admit, if only privately, that the boy had impressed him, there was no trace of fear in Harry's voice. Another sign that he needed to take a serious look at what was going on at his niece's school.

"What?"

“The only way that Hermione will get hurt with me around is if they've got me first,” Harry said firmly. “And even then they're going to have to climb over a pile of their dead friends to get to her.” The boy's voice hardened. “Hermione's good enough to get the ones I miss.”

“Fair enough,” Jim agreed, relaxing.

“And we're not dating,” Harry added, breaking eye contact and blushing.

Jim rocked the room with a great booming laugh. “Whatever you say, Harry.”

IIIIIIII

Molly looked around the table with a satisfied smile on her face. She loved being surrounded with her husband and children. She reached out and ladled another helping of potatoes onto her youngest son's plate and added a slightly smaller one to her sole daughter's.

“I'm going to need your help with the gardening tomorrow, Ronald,” Molly announced. “So-”

“Can't do it tomorrow, mum,” Ron interrupted, shocking the table. “Got a custom fitting to do.”

Molly's eyes flashed.

“Who are you fitting, Ron?” Arthur asked, cutting off his wife's tantrum.

“One of the Harpies' starting beaters,” Ron replied. She's got a bad left hand so I think it'll take most of the day. I'll try to get done early so I can help you later, mum.”

“One of the Harpies?” Molly repeated dumbly. That put a whole new spin on things, he son wasn't slacking off he was preparing for a future career.

“Yeah, mum. Madame Hooch set it up.”

“How well does it pay?” she needed to make sure her baby would have enough to support himself after all.

“I don't know how much it'll be, mum.” He worked out a few figures. “I haven't established myself yet so I have to keep my prices low.”

“Ronald,” her tone had a bit of warning in it.

“Maybe three or four thousand galleons.”

“Three thousand galleons?” she squeaked.

“Not that I'll see much of that since I can't do any of the enchanting myself,” Ron hastened to add. “Not to mention materials. Maybe a hundred for myself after everything is done.” He scratched his chin. “Maybe more, maybe less. Hermione's gonna help me figure it out later.”

“You be sure to thank her properly,” Molly said automatically, still in shock from the numbers her son had thrown out.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 11

IIIIIIII

Neville woke up early and spent the next few hours enduring the preparations for the day's party in better cheer than he usually did. He wouldn't be alone, that thought boosted him immensely. He might even be able to use Harry and the others as an excuse to ignore the usual halfwits that his grandmother's guests brought with them.

He drifted through the rest of the day in a daze until the house elves finally announced the arrival of his friends. Neville flashed a quick smile at Harry and the girls as his Gran made a more formal greeting.

“Neville, why don't you show Mr. Potter and his companions to the veranda while I continue my discussion with Mrs. Granger,” Augusta ordered.

“Yes, Gran,” Neville agreed quickly. “This way, guys.” He hadn't realized that the two women had started a conversation. “I'm glad you came,” Neville added as soon as he was sure they were out of earshot.

IIIIIIII

She squeaked in shock as his hands inadvertently brushed against another sensitive area and again when he grabbed her by the thigh and rearranged things to his satisfaction.

“You know,” she began trying desperately to keep her voice steady. “I usually expect dinner and a drink before letting myself be manhandled like this.”

“What?” Ron glanced up from his work. “You say something?”

“Or at the very least an introduction,” she continued. “Do you even know my name?”

“Mandy Maxwell, starting left side beater. Been in the league for three years, considered a shoe in for the national team in the next world cup,” Ron recited. “Favorite color is red, favorite food is human hearts, enjoys long walks on the beach and beating men to death.”

“Favorite color is green, favorite food is chips with a lot of malt vinegar, I do enjoy long walks on the beach but prefer sitting under trees and listening to nature. Our public relations folks came up with the answers you gave.”

“Guess you can't trust everything you read after all.” Ron developed a wicked grin. “Gonna have to remember to tell a friend of mine.”

“I'm sure.” Mandy smiled at the boy, she wasn't that much older then he was, especially when one considered the average magic user's lifespan.

“Now all we need to do is . . . no, guess that won't work. Maybe if we . . .” Ron frowned in concentration. “Wait here.”

Ron strode out of his workshop and towards the garden in search of his mother.

“Finished already?” Molly asked.

“Need your help with something,” Ron replied. “Can't cast any charms myself yet.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Levitation charms,” Ron explained. “I need you to levitate my blank so that I can make sure my customer gets a good fit.”

“Alright,” Molly agreed. She was curious to see what her baby boy was doing in the shed anyway. “Just give me a couple minutes to clean up.”

IIIIIIII

Harry was awestruck at the view the veranda on Neville's house afforded. Hermione and Luna, less so. Much less so.

“What's that little house down there for?” Hermione demanded. “Is it your guest house?” the girl just couldn't understand why they'd spoil the view with such an eyesore. The ugly thing was just the sort of shack new money would slap together in some pathetic attempt to show how newly important they thought they were.

“That's where Malfoy lives,” Neville said sourly.

“That?” Harry asked incredulously. “That? But . . . but it's so . . . so tiny. Hermione's garden shed is bigger than that thing is.”

“What?” Neville gave his friend an odd look, trying to determine if the other boy was joking or telling the truth.

“Don't listen to him, Neville,” Hermione said quickly. “My garden shed isn't even half the size of Malfoy's house.”

“Yes it is,” Harry argued. Neither teen noticed the sizable crowd of eavesdroppers they'd gathered. “It's not as tall, but it covers a lot more space.”

“Which building are you talking about, Harry?” Hermione bit her lower lip.

“The one behind your father's garage,” Harry replied.

“Those are the old stables, not the garden shed,” Hermione explained. “Sorry about the confusion, Neville,” she said contritely.

“No problem,” Neville said with a wide toothy grin. He couldn't wait until the unintentional slight reached the Malfoy family. “Just how big . . .” he caught himself. “Never mind.”

“Why are the Malfoys so close to you?” Harry asked.

“The Normans invaded and set up a siege camp, the castle didn't fall and they never left.” Pity the sewer no longer drained into their front yard.

“I hadn't realized Malfoy's family was that old,” Hermione said, a bit impressed that the boy's boasts had any substance at all.

“It isn't,” Neville said quickly, a bit embarrassed to have to be the one to explain things. “The current Malfoy family bought the property about a hundred years ago. They claimed to be from the branch of the original Malfoy family that had never left France, but . . .” Neville shrugged.

“You don't think so?”

“I've read some of my ancestors journals dealing with the time,” Neville agreed. “They mention the fact that Altus Malfoy bore a strong resemblance to a Jacques Roux, Beauxbatons class of 1880, muggleborn.”

“That doesn't make any sense,” Hermione said in confusion. “Malfoy's always talking about how pure he is. I . . .” she shook her head.

“The young families are usually the ones that feel they have something to prove,” Neville said gently, hoping he wasn't going to offend one of the guests that were eavesdropping on the conversation he was having with Hermione.

“How long has your family been here, Neville?” Luna asked cautiously.

“My blood's been on this spot since before the Romans got here,” Neville announced proudly.

“So there's been a Longbottom on this spot for more then two thousand years,” Hermione said softly. More than a bit impressed by that bit of trivia.

“No,” Neville said quickly, a bit distressed by the confusion his poor explanations were causing. “The Longbottom family has been here about three hundred years. Um, John Longbottom married Angela Belasis and the family had no sons and that's why I'm a Longbottom. I can't remember what family the Belasises married into.”

IIIIIIII

Molly was more than a bit mystified by everything her youngest son had asked her to do. First he'd had her levitate the stick he'd been carving, then he'd had the woman climb on to it, and now he was asking her to turn the stick upside down.

“Need to make sure she can hold on, mum,” Ron explained quickly. “Give her a couple bounces if she does.”

“Please,” the woman added.

“Alright.” Molly flicked her wand a couple times causing the woman to rotate.

“Faster,” Ron demanded. “And rougher.”

“That's . . .” Mandy bit her tongue before she could add the words 'my line,' probably not the best thing to say in front of his mother. “Perfectly fine,” she covered. “Better to fall off two feet above the ground than two hundred.”

“If you're sure,” Molly agreed.

“How is it?” Ron demanded

“Much better then the broom I've got now,” Mandy enthused. “How soon can you modify the one I've got?”

“Might be better to build a new one from scratch with all the work we gotta do cause of your hand,” Ron demurred. “Freeze it, mum.”

Molly was scandalized by the way her son walked over to the woman and began cavalierly doing things with his hands in places no gentleman had any business.

“Ronald-”

“Could you hand me that pencil by you, mum?” Ron interrupted. “I need to get these marks in so I can make some adjustments.”

“What?” Molly asked dumbly.

“Pretend he's a tailor,” Mandy advised. “You know how it is when you're getting a new robe fitted. It's the same thing here.”

“I suppose,” Molly sighed. The things she put up with for the sake of her children.

IIIIIIII

Augusta watched in amusement as Anne, a woman who showed a surprising amount of decorum for a mere muggle, broke off the conversation to take a quick look around the room.

“Problem?” Augusta asked mildly.

“I seem to have misplaced my husband,” Anne admitted. “I do apologize, he's never been too fond of social gatherings. Probably hiding in some out of the way corner, I'll have security run him down later.”

“His upbringing not prepare him for gatherings of this sort?” Augusta asked cautiously, not wanting to offend.

“It did, it's his nature that's getting in the way here.” She smiled fondly. “He's always been a bit shy around crowds.”

“I see.” Augusta nodded. “I would have never guessed it judging by how he dresses.”

“New money, you understand.”

“Oh?”

“My husband's family were mostly merchants until about two, three hundred years ago,” Anne said with a dismissive wave. “I think my mother traced them back to the sixteen hundreds before she got bored or something like that.”

“Really?” Augusta said in surprise. “Why did she do that?” she hadn't thought that sort of thing was important to muggles.

“My mother, step mother I should say, was a horrible snob and more then a bit disgusted that I was marrying 'below my station' instead of

catching Lord inbred the fifth like she wanted,” Anne giggled.

“Certainly changed her tune when she realized that he could buy and sell our family with pocket change. Then again she always was a bit of a gold digger. I always maintained that daddy never should have married her, not that I was ever asked for my opinion on the matter.”

“I understand,” Augusta laughed. “My elder brother did something similar.”

“I'm just glad that my husband is more sensible then that,” Anne sniffed.

“As was mine. If there was one time he showed good judgement, it was when he chose his wife,” Augusta pronounced severely. The two women maintained their serious expressions for a few seconds before dissolving into laughter. “What about your family?”

“Hmmm?”

“You said your husband comes from a line of merchants and that your mother was a snob,” Augusta prompted.

IIIIIIII

Molly watched in fascination as Ron carved the broomstick blank. She'd never seen this side of her son, never expected him to put much effort into anything until he was hit by reality and forced to become a responsible member of society.

“Interesting, isn't it?”

The other woman's voice brought Molly back to reality. "I'm sorry?"

"Interesting, isn't it?" Mandy repeated. "The way he gets so focused."

"I've never seen him like this," Molly confessed. "Would you like something to drink? Or I suppose I could get you some snacks."

"I'm fine," Mandy said quickly. "My trainer would kill me if I broke her carefully constructed diet."

"You're on a diet?" Molly's face showed disbelief. "As thin as you are?"

"It's more about strength and endurance than it is about losing weight," she explained. "Uh, would you mind if I spent more time here?"

"Take as much time as you'd like, dear," Molly said brightly. "We want your new broomstick to fit perfectly don't we?"

"That's not . . ." Mandy licked her lips. "Do you mind if I continue visiting even after my broomstick is completed?"

Molly smile widened. "Not at all, dear. Not at all."

IIIIIIII

Phil had a smile on his face when he rejoined his wife and daughter. He'd have never thought a magical party could be so potentially profitable, just went to show that people were the same and that magic mattered not a wit.

“Have a good conversation with your friends, darling?” he drawled.

“Yes, daddy,” Hermione agreed. “Did you enjoy yourself, mum?”
Neville had been so shocked when his Gran spent the majority of the party conversing with only one guest.

“I did, darling. Augusta and I have been talking and you'll never guess what we've determined,” Anne said to her daughter.

“What's that, mum?” Hermione asked.

“You and Neville are cousins,” Augusta said with a faint smile. “Well, distant ones anyway.”

“I think we figured it was five hundred years since any of us have had a common ancestor,” Anne added. “I'd have to go through the books to be sure.”

“Still, it's very interesting.” Augusta gave the Grangers a measured look. “Very interesting indeed.”

“You throw a lovely party, Augusta. You simply must allow us to host you some time,” Anne demanded as she shrugged into her coat. “After that, I would love to get a chance to introduce you to society.”

“I would love the chance,” Augusta agreed. “Thank you for the invitation, Anne. Shall we pencil something in after classes resume?”

“We'll work out the details later,” Anne agreed. “Have a good evening, Augusta.”

“Have a good night, Anne.”

IIIIIIII

Remus watched as Bill finished layering the initial wards over the Granger estates. What was supposed to have been a thirty minute job had turned into a grueling six hour endurance test.

“That's the first bit,” Bill gasped. “Be able to add the next bit the day after tomorrow.”

“You said it would take thirty minutes.”

“You didn't say how bloody big this place is,” Bill retorted. “If I'd have known.” Bill shook his head. “Warding a castle is a bloody big job you know.”

“They've got another house in London they'll want done later,” Remus announced. “Not to mention the school robes and the Granger wardrobe.”

“I'm gonna have to take a leave of absence to do all this,” Bill moaned. “Do you know how much the goblins hate it when you take time off?”

“All this warding going to cause you trouble with them?”

“They hired me to break wards, not make them. The goblins could care less how many wards I put up. Be another story if I was taking them down,” he added. “You owe me a beer for this.”

“I'll get you two,” Remus promised.

“I can do this about two months before I have to choose between going back to work and eating my shoes, should be able to get the house secure in that time. Not sure about the grounds.”

“Uh. You do know that you're being paid for this, don't you?”

“Really?” Bill grinned, perking up. “Six months before I have to go back to work or tender my resignation.”

“How much faster would things go if you had some help?”

“Depends on the help,” Bill replied.

“Give me a list of names.”

Both men turned to watch the Granger's car pull up the drive.

“That's another thing I should slap wards on,” Bill said thoughtfully.

“Don't want them to be defenseless when they're on the move.”

“I'll have a talk with their security people,” Remus agreed.

IIIIIIII

Tonks made a quick scan of the room before stepping aside to let her charge through.

“All clear, boss.”

“Are you going to tell me about the offer you got from the Granger security people?” Amelia asked as she took a seat.

“You know about that?”

Amelia smiled. “I know everything, that's why I'm the director.”

“Yes, boss. Was planning to tell you, just not sure how to bring it up.”

“You going to take it?”

“I don't know, boss. I like working for you, but . . .”

“But then there's all the other bastards in the department, eh?”

“Yeah, that.” Tonks sighed. “And the fact that they're offering to double my pay. What do you think I should do, boss?”

“I think you should take the job and let me put you down as working a confidential undercover assignment,” Amelia replied. “Two paychecks for one job.”

“You want me to spy on the Grangers?”

“I want a backchannel to a family that will soon have as many arms-men as the Ministry,” Amelia corrected. “It won't bother me at all if the Grangers know you're still working for me.”

“Makes sense,” Tonks admitted.

“Makes even more sense when you know that the Ministry rejected my latest request to expand,” Amelia growled.

“Even after they've admitted that you-know-who is back?”

“Even then. I can activate a few on the reserve rolls and I can ramp up training. But I am expressly forbidden from inducting new members of the Auror corps than is traditionally authorized.”

“Gonna expand the training class and feed the extras to the Grangers?”

“Something like that,” Amelia agreed with a smirk.

IIIIIIII

Neville came down to breakfast to find his Gran already sitting at the table surrounded by several stacks of parchments.

“You'll never guess what I've found, Neville,” the old woman announced.

“What is it, Gran?”

“Your friend Hermione is descended, on her mother's side, from the Primus Pilus of the Legio XX Valeria who retired with a local wife.” Which her contacts assured her was from a very good family, they were still trying to run down all the details. “A man of that same line stood beside Arthur in the defense of Britannia against the invading Saxons.”

Augusta smiled tightly. “The family's fortunes have ebbed and flowed since then, but the male line has never been broken.”

Neville's eyes were wide in shock. “I didn't know muggles could trace that sort of thing?”

“I had to do a record search with Hogwarts, the Goblins, and the Ministry,” Augusta explained. “A lucky thing her family has produced the odd magic user over the centuries or I may not have been able to discover what I did.” The old woman gave her grandson a measured look. “She would make an excellent bride for you, Neville. Pity the Potter found her first.”

“Gran,” Neville sputtered.

“Still, you did well to befriend her.” The old woman continued, seemingly ignoring her grandson's discomfort. “Very well indeed. Since the girl herself is unavailable, perhaps I could ask Anne to match you with one of Hermione's cousins?”

“Muggle.”

Augusta's smile broke as Neville fled the room with a look of horror on his face. “Still not a bad idea, even if I did mean it in jest,” she mused. It would be good to inject a bit of new blood into the Longbottom line, especially if that blood was of the right sort.

IIIIIIII

Luna's lower lip was quivering as she prepared to leave the Granger estates. It had been so nice to spend every day with friends.

“Goodbye, Hermione.” She threw herself into the other girl's arms. “I will see you after Boxing Day.”

“See you in a couple days, Luna,” Hermione replied.

“Goodbye, Harry.” Luna cautiously hugged the boy. “I will see you soon.”

“Have fun spending Christmas with your father,” Harry replied.

“Are you sure you don't want us to ride with you?” Hermione asked for the tenth time.

“No, it's not a very long trip to the place father is picking me up.”

IIIIIIII

In later life, Harry would always treasure the memory of his first real Christmas. The first time he could remember feeling like he was part of a family during the holiday season.

'Perhaps I should have accepted the Weasleys invitations to spend Christmas with them,' he thought regretfully. 'Then I'd have been able to experience this earlier.'

Hermione had woken him as the sun was painting the sky red and demanded that he join her under the tree, insisting that she couldn't wait for him to open his gift a minute longer.

The world seemed to spin and the next thing Harry knew, he was seated under the watchful eyes of Hermione's parents as the girl thrust a small green wrapped box into his hands.

“I hope you like it, Harry,” Hermione offered with a shy blush.
“Professor McGonagall helped me pick it out.”

Harry carefully opened the box and his breath caught when he saw what was inside.

“You never replaced the one you broke in the tournament and I thought it was time you had a new one so you didn't have an excuse to be late for class,” Hermione prattled. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “I like it very much. Thank you.”

Hermione's smile lit up the room. “I was hoping you would.”

“Mind if I take a look, Harry?” Phil asked.

“Sure,” Harry agreed.

Mindful of the expectant look on his daughter's face, the head of the Granger family resolved to find something favorable to say no matter what his true opinions may be. He was pleasantly surprised by what he found. “Hamilton?” a smile bloomed on the man's face. “These were

some of the best watches to be had when they made them. Shame digitals took over the market.” Even greater shame the American watch industry had disappeared, be good for the Swiss to have a bit of real competition in the mechanical market.

“It's also charmed to be almost indestructible,” Hermione supplied. “It has to be to survive around Harry.”

Harry opened his mouth but the protest died in his throat before he said a word. Depressing as it was, the girl had made a fair assessment.

“Here.” Harry thrust a wrapped tube shaped package into Hermione's hands. “I hope you like it.”

“Thank you, Harry.” Hermione tore off the paper to reveal a tube of fitted lacquered bamboo slats capped at each end with darkly glazed porcelain figures.

“It's a portable writing desk from China,” Harry explained. “One cap is an inkwell, and the other holds brushes and quills.”

“How does it work?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Pull out the caps,” Harry instructed.

The girl complied, causing her gift to unroll to create a floating platform.

“It'll store five hundred sheets of parchment and hold up to fifty pounds, you can also move it and the caps to wherever you want,” Harry explained. “Oh, and the inkwell is charmed so that it will never spill.”

“How many quills and brushes does it hold?” Hermione was entranced.

“Five brushes, two dozen quills, or seven fountain pens. I had them put a mix in to start with,” Harry replied. “Do you like it?”

“I love it,” Hermione exclaimed, wrapping her friend in a hug. “Thank you so much, Harry.”

“Hedwig will be happy to hear that,” Harry said with a grin. “It took her almost two days to get it.”

“I’ll be sure to thank her then too,” Hermione giggled. “Um, how do I close it up again?”

“Just roll it up.”

They spent the next couple hours opening gifts and marveling over each other's new possessions. Most notable of which was a silver lighter Harry received from Hermione's Uncle Jim along with a note explaining each of the objects eighty two functions and a fancy new fountain pen Hermione got from her former governess which, the woman had explained, was heavily enchanted with tracking and protection charms.

Hermione sat in surrounded by the shattered remains of the packaging and wrapping looking around to see if she had missed anything. The girl was beginning to develop a faintly puzzled look, entirely due to the fact that there wasn't anything left of the pile of gifts and she hadn't yet opened anything from her parents.

"Before we forget," Phil said, "There's one thing left, but it's a bit big for the drawing room."

Harry blinked twice, glancing around the large and decidedly opulent room.

What the...?

"It's just out in the stable yard." Anne said. "Come along now."

Increasingly puzzled, the children followed Hermione's parents out to the manor's courtyard.

Here they were presented by a quite peculiar sight; a low-loader trailer for an articulated lorry, with a tarpaulin-wrapped object the size of a very large car (or small bus) sat upon it and tied up with a red ribbon.

It was Hermione's turn to blink bemusedly.

She cautiously approached the tarps, noted the tag marked, 'To Hermione, Love Mum and Dad', and pulled the edge of one up to peer beneath.

She then promptly froze, her eyes going about the size of Frisbees, and blinked several times.

Phil smirked, and yanked a specific rope; there was a twang, and a couple of sharp tugs on the tarps had them slithering off to reveal a rust-dotted, sooty, oil-streaked metal beast.

It was about the smallest full-sized steam engine Harry had ever seen. About twenty feet long with four chunky wheels and a hefty squared-off water tank (from the top of which a stubby funnel protruded) shrouding it's boiler, it had once been painted royal blue with bright red details here and there, though that was fairly hard to see through the dirt and streaks of rust, and the paint was kinda faded.

"Merry Christmas, Hermione." Phil said.

Hermione, for her part, was still rooted to the spot.

"It's ex Coal Board." Anne provided. "We had a dickens of a time tracking it down."

Hermione was still rooted to the spot.

Her parents were just sharing a concerned was-this-a-mistake look when she produced the most extraordinarily girlish squeak Harry had ever heard from her and went madly scrambling up into the aging engine's cab, wherein she spent nearly a minute poking around before, with another squeak, zooming out and latching onto both her parents at once while gabbling on her gratitude at about a thousand miles a minute.

Harry went over and had a closer look at the engine, in particular the oval brass plate on the side of it's cab.

It had, 'Andrew Barclay Sons & Co' arching over the top, 'Kilmarnock' looping round the bottom, and 'Limited' 'Caledonia Works' No 1836 1924' in descending order in the middle; it didn't make much sense but he figured Hermione would be all too happy to explain it.

Wait, had Hermione's parents just given her a REAL steam engine?

"Does it work?" he asked, frankly not quite believing what he was seeing.

"Of course!" Phil said, sounding like that was a silly question. "The chap who showed me it said it's sorely needing maintenance, but he had it running while I was there."

Hermione let out another delighted squeak. At this point, speech seemed to be completely beyond her.

Harry looked back at the engine, and said the only thing he could think of to say;

"Wow..."

IIIIIIII

Chapter 12

IIIIIIII

It took almost four hours to pry Hermione away from her new engine and to the breakfast table and even then, the soot covered girl kept casting longing gazes out the window at her new treasure, her precious.

“Hermione, stop being rude,” Anne scolded. “I know I had the maids raise you better than that,” she finished with a smile.

"Sorry, mum," Hermione mumbled, "It's just, her right-hand valve gear is sticking, half of her boiler tubes are punctured, and her left-hand big end bearing is shot - and I've only got two weeks before I go back to Hogwarts..."

“Don't worry about that,” Phil laughed. “I've got it all taken care of. Picked up a piece of land, an old coal mine with plenty of track, near that school of yours. Should have a spur line to Hogwarts finished shortly after you get back to school?”

“Thank you, daddy,” Hermione chirped.

“Thank the tax break I was able to arrange and all the good publicity I'm going to get with the locals for bringing in a few jobs,” Phil replied. “Be good and I might even be able to arrange a couple more engines to keep the one outside from getting too lonely.”

“Being good means we clean the soot off before coming to the table,” Anne interjected.

Hermione stood up with her chin in the air. “If you will excuse me, mother, I am in dire need of a bath.”

“We'll wait for you to finish before we start breakfast.” Phil checked his watch. “Make that lunch.”

IIIIIIII

Molly was shocked to the core when she noticed that her youngest son had not come in for lunch. It wasn't like the boy to miss a meal.

“Where's Ronald?” She asked.

“In the shed,” Arthur replied. “Do you want me to get him?”

“I'll do it,” Molly said. She walked outside and was mystified by the odd contraption her boy was fiddling with.

“Mum, good timing,” Ron cheered. “Could you make this spin?”

“What is it?” Molly asked.

“It's a lathe,” Ron replied. “You see, the wood spins here and I can use it to turn a new beaters bat.”

“Finished with the broom, then?”

“It's at Nimbus being enchanted,” Ron agreed. “The Harpies have some sort of deal with the company.” Which was fortunate in that it meant his profit margin was going to be much higher than expected.

“That's nice,” Molly mumbled. “Come inside, I'll enchant your lith after we eat.”

“Lathe, mum,” Ron groaned.

“Whatever it is, we can deal with it after lunch.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione's Uncle Jim arrived shortly after they'd persuaded the girl to clean herself up and shortly before they sat down to eat lunch.

“Never pass up an opportunity for a free meal,” the big man explained. “How'd you like that lighter, Harry?”

“Quite a bit,” Harry replied.

“Good, picked it up from an American chap I sometimes work with and figured that you'd have more use for it than I do.”

“What is your work?” Harry blurted. “If you don't mind my asking.”

“I'm a glorified cleaner,” Hermione's uncle Jim explained. “When there's a mess my employers send me in to take care of it. They also use me as a distraction sometimes, I'm high profile enough that the opposition

focusses on me when I'm in the area and that lets my colleagues do their jobs without too much bother. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious where you got all those gadgets you gave Hermione," Harry replied.

"Friend of mine makes them for me," he laughed. "Different friend than the one that made your new lighter." Someone in his line of work that occasionally worked for the American Government. One of the rare freelancers in the business.

"Oh, I-"

"Uncle Jim, look what Harry got me," Hermione yelled, rushing down the stairs. She demonstrated how to use her new portable desk.

"Interesting," the man agreed. "Anyway you could get more of these, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed dumbly. "You know about magic?"

"I know about a lot of things," Jim said mysteriously.

"Wait here a moment," Harry asked. He rushed up the stairs and came back a few minutes later with a box that looked like it was painted with rainbow vomit. "Merry Christmas."

"Thank you, Harry," Uncle Jim said, taking the box. He carefully opened the box and began to laugh. "What's all this?"

“Magical gadgets,” Harry replied. “Got a couple mates from school that make them. Just read the directions first or you might accidentally turn yourself into something.”

“You're giving him something you got from the twins?” Hermione hissed. “Harry, you know the wouldn't be able to resist booby trapping it.”

“It's me, so they won't do anything,” Harry replied.

“But . . .”

“I've got an agreement with them, trust me,” Harry said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Jim grinned at the way his niece immediately calmed down and unconsciously leaned into her friend. To be young again.

“I trust you, Harry,” Hermione assured him.

“Since that's all settled, let's eat,” Jim said loudly.

IIIIIIII

Ron gulped down his meal and rushed back to the shed. Only to return a few minutes later with a deep blush.

“Uh, mum?”

“I'll be out in a minute, Ron,” Molly agreed.

“Thanks, mum,” Ron replied. “I’ll be waiting.” The boy rushed back out.

“What does he need?” Arthur asked.

“He needs me to enchant a . . . leek, liik, laik, something to spin,” Molly replied. “He’s making a new beater’s bat for his friend.”

“Oh?” Arthur smiled. “He hasn’t grown tired of making Quidditch stuff yet? Good, glad the boy’s found a trade that’ll keep him out of the Ministry.”

“Arthur, the Ministry is-”

“No place for anyone,” Arthur said firmly. “It’s a steady paycheck and that’s all.”

“I suppose,” Molly agreed. She looked over at Fred and George. “That doesn’t mean I don’t still expect you two to do your best and pass your NEWTs. Even if you do decide to keep that joke shop of yours, I want you to have something else to fall back on.”

“Okay, mum-”

“-whatever you say.”

“That means if your scores are high enough I won’t say anything about the ‘research’ you two do in your room,” Molly added. She stood up. “I also expect you two to leave your siblings alone, do that and we won’t have any problems.”

“Deal, mum,” the twins agreed.

Molly walked outside to join her youngest son in the shed. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just make this piece spin, mum,” Ron replied.

“Alright,” Molly agreed. She watched in fascination as the boy used a chisel shape a beater's bat from the chunk of wood.

“Slow it down a bit, mum,” Ron asked.

“Alright,” Molly agreed. “What are you doing now?”

“Sanding it smooth,” Ron replied. “Then I'm going to take it off the lathe and sand it again and again and again till I'm satisfied.”

“After that?” Molly prompted.

“After that, I'm going to free hand the handle, sand it to the right shape if I need to, rub a few coats of boiled linseed oil into onto the bat, wrap the handle with sharkskin and I'll be finished.”

“Why are you using sharkskin?”

“Grip, no one else does it but there's no rule against it.” Ron clapped his hands to remove some of the sawdust. “Madame Hooch says duelers like to use it on their wands, figured I'd try it here.”

“Did you do that on the broom you made?”

“Nah, I checkered grips on the broom. Can't do it on the bat cause of league rules,” Ron explained. “And we're done with the first bit, thanks, mum.”

“Happy to help, Ron,” Molly said with a smile.

IIIIIIII

Hermione spent almost every waking moment of the next day poring over her new toy and chattering excitedly about what she and Luna were going to do with it. Her mother was not amused.

“I am sorry about all this, Harry,” Anne sighed. “I wish I could say she got this madness from her father's side but I'm afraid mine's also been known to get a bit obsessive with things.”

“It's alright,” Harry laughed. “She's the same way at school. I'm just happy she's got something to distract her from dragging me into it.”

“Give it another day and she'll remember you exist again,” Anne replied with a smirk.

“Give it another day and Luna will be here to distract her,” Harry retorted. “They'll feed each other's madness in a never ending loop of insanity and I'll be safe.”

IIIIIIII

True to Harry's prediction, Luna arrived early the next morning and was immediately drawn towards Hermione's newest and favorite possession. The two girls spent the entire morning happily chattering at each other and poking into every one of the engine's many nooks and crannies. They were both covered head to toe in grease when Anne finally managed to drag them away from the locomotive to take lunch.

“Clean and get down here,” Anne said shortly.

“But we'll just get dirty again, mum,” Hermione tried, hoping to get back to the engine as soon as possible. “It'd be more efficient to just get a couple sandwiches to eat outside.”

“You are not just going to get dirty again because you are not going to mess with your train until tomorrow,” the woman said firmly. “And tomorrow, you will be freshly washed and sitting at the table before lunch or you will not be messing with the train for the remainder of the holiday. Do you understand me, Hermione?”

“But, mum, I-”

“It was a simple question,” Anne interrupted. “Do I have to ask it again?”

“No, mum.”

“Well?” She prompted.

“I understand, mum,” Hermione agreed.

“Good, now hurry up and get washed.”

“Yes, mum,” Hermione sighed. “Come on, Luna.”

“Right behind you, Hermione,” Luna agreed. “See you at lunch, Mrs. Granger.”

“Call me, Anne, Luna.”

“Alright,” Luna agreed before falling into step behind Hermione.

“What are we gonna do now, Luna?” Hermione whined. She wanted to get back to her engine, her . . . precious.

“Research,” Luna chirped. “You said we'd have an opportunity to play with the engine after we get back to Hogwarts. On the other hand, your library is not something we'll have access to when we're back at Hogwarts.”

“You're right,” Hermione sighed. “It's just . . .”

“I know,” Luna agreed.

IIIIIIII

Anne walked into the dining room, took her place, closed her eyes, and rubbed her temples.

“Chore to drag Hermione away from her new toy?” Phil asked innocently.

“That girl,” Anne groaned. “This is all your fault you know. She gets the obsessiveness from your side and you were the one to feed it.”

“Both sides, I think.” He turned to Harry. “You've got my sympathies, Harry, having to deal with it all year.”

“She's not usually this bad,” Harry laughed.

“Still, I'm going to have to have a long talk with that girl if this keeps up,” Anne promised.

The three of them made small talk until they were joined by a freshly washed Hermione and Luna.

“Let me see your fingernails,” Anne ordered.

“All clean,” Hermione said. “See.”

“Sparkling,” Anne agreed. “How'd you manage that so fast?”

“Luna brought some soap that works wonders,” Hermione replied.

“Good job, Luna,” Anne said with a grin.

“Thank you.” Luna blushed a deep red. “Father uses it after he has to maintain the press and I figured if it works for father, it should work for us too.”

IIIIIIII

Molly watched as her son carefully shaved sliver after sliver from the handle of the newly made beater's bat.

“Why are you being so careful?” She asked after he'd paused for a moment.

“I want it to fit her hand perfectly,” Ron replied. “The big companies don't bother with this sort of custom work, but I think there's money in it so . . .” he shrugged his shoulders. “Besides, I wanted to do something nice for her.”

“And if that something nice gets you a bit of free advertising, what's the harm in that?” Molly giggled. “Good boy.”

“I try, mum.”

“You get it from your uncles,” Molly said. “My brothers were always looking for an angle.”

Ron cracked his neck. “Good to know.” Pity he hadn't been able to meet them.

“What are you going to do next?”

“Going to rough it up so the sharkskin has something to stick to, then I'm going to wrap it,” Ron replied. “I'll need your help with the sticking charms.”

“Of course,” Molly agreed. “Are there any other charms you need me to cast on it?”

“There's a few,” Ron admitted. “Wasn't going to trouble you with them.”

“Was it because you didn't want to bother me or because you have someone else that could do them better?”

“The first, mum. League doesn't allow anything complicated so each of the charms gets removed and re-cast before each match.”

“Point them out to me so I have time to practice them,” Molly ordered. “It's usually a good idea to test things before letting them out into the world.”

“Sure thing, mum,” Ron agreed.

IIIIIIII

Luna walked into Anne's study with a pensive look on her face. She really hoped that the woman would be willing to help, she so rarely got an opportunity to solicit advice from an adult female.

“What is it, Luna?” Anne asked.

“Can I ask you a few things?” Luna asked hopefully.

“Sure,” Anne agreed. “Have a seat.”

“It's just, I was reading through some of Hermione's books and . . . it's all so confusing.”

“Alright,” Anne prompted.

“Well, is it true that . . .”

IIIIIIII

Phil found Harry hiding in the stables with the horses. It wasn't a surprise that the boy had made himself scarce, not after his prediction about the girls feeding each other's madness had turned out to be accurate.

“Trying to avoid my daughter?” He asked with a grin.

“Trying to get to know the ponies so there's a bit of trust built up before the next polo game,” Harry replied. “The fact that this allows me to coincidentally avoid getting caught up in Hermione's madness is a bonus.”

“Speaking of polo, you up for a game in a day or two?” Phil asked hopefully.

“Sure,” Harry agreed. “Whenever.”

“Wonderful, I'll leave you to it then.” Phil walked out of the stables and back to the house.

IIIIIIII

Anne had a dazed smile as her conversation with Luna wound down. The things the little blonde had wanted to know and the details she'd been curious about were a bit more . . . earthy than she'd expected.

“Let me have a word with your father,” Anne offered. “With his permission, I'll answer every question you have.”

“Okay,” Luna agreed. “Thank you, Anne.”

“Happy to help, Luna,” Anne said warmly. After she was sure the girl was gone, she threw open the door that connected her study with her husband's.

“I just had the most interesting conversation with young Luna,” Anne announced as she walked into Phil's office.

“Oh?”

“She got into Hermione's romances,” Anne said simply.

“I thought those were all for the maids and any that may have slipped into our daughter's stack of reading material got there by accident and not certainly not by intention and that we had best just put them out of our minds and that she would be sure they were correctly filed in the future and there was no need to trouble ourselves about them,” Phil said dryly, repeating his daughter's stuttered excuses. “Because our daughter would never dream of reading something so frightfully common and so completely devoid of literary or educational merit.”

“That's the story we're supposed to believe anyway,” Anne agreed.

“So what did she want to ask you?”

“She wanted to know if it was true that powerful men kept a girl on the side,” Anne replied. “She then asked if Harry was powerful enough.”

“What?” he choked.

“Seems that she's more than a bit terrified that she'll loose her friends and was wondering if becoming his mistress might be a way to keep hold of them,” Anne said softly. “Poor thing got really worked up about it when I talked to her and I got the impression that Harry and Hermione were her only friends in the world.”

“And?”

“And I admitted that my grandfather had a friend on the side, then I pointed out that my grandmother did her very best to pretend that the other woman didn't exist. She said that wasn't how it worked in the book and then the conversation got a bit personal,” Anne giggled. “All I'll say is that she's a very imaginative girl.”

“I trust that things are taken care of,” Phil said hopefully.

“I've convinced her that her friends aren't going anywhere and that any talk of marriage or . . . uh . . . other arrangements should wait until they were all well out of school,” Anne reported. “To be honest I'm fairly sure that she had no idea what a friend on the side did, I'm almost certain

she didn't understand what the books had to say about the matter, just that it would give her a chance to stay with the others.”

“I see.”

“I'm going to have a talk with her father,” Anne continued. “If that pans out the way I hope it does, I'm going to have a long conversation with Luna about the ways of the world.”

“Have fun with that,” Phil laughed.

“Have fun with Harry,” Anne retorted.

“What?”

“I'm going to have a talk with the girls,” Anne explained. “While I do that, you be sure to answer any questions Harry might have.”

“I'll be sure to let him know that I'm here,” Phil promised. “Though I think it'd be in the lad's best interests if I pointed him to your elder brother.”

“Only if you want him to bed all the girls in his school and half the teachers by the end of the year,” Anne giggled.

“I'm not the one that would have to deal with the paternity suits.”

“You are the one that would have to deal with Hermione's broken heart,” Anne retorted.

“I'll take care of things with Harry, you go use the fire to talk with Luna's father,” Phil replied, privately agreeing with his wife's statement.

“I'll let you know how things go.”

“You do that,” he agreed.

Anne walked downstairs, tossed a handful of floo powder into the fire and prepared for what she feared would be a difficult conversation. It wasn't. Luna's father, it turned out, was almost pathetically grateful to have a woman available to steer his daughter through the difficult curves explaining that while he'd done his best, he really had no idea of how to raise a daughter or a son for that matter. Poor man was lost without his dear departed wife.

“Look at the time,” Anne said suddenly, hoping to end a conversation that had gotten much too personal. “I'm afraid I really must go.”

“If you must,” Luna's father agreed. “Again, I must thank you for what you're doing for my little Luna.”

“Happy to help, Luna's almost one of the family at this point.”

“Goodbye,” he said.

“Bye.” The flames flared once before going back to normal. “I am never going to get used to that,” she muttered to herself. Her head swiveled around till she found one of the servants. “Could you please have the girls meet me at the table.”

“Should I announce that dinner is going to be early, ma'am?” The maid asked.

“Give me five minutes alone with the girls and then go ahead,” Anne agreed.

“Yes, ma'am.” It didn't take long for the maid to find the two girls, they were reading books in the library. “Your mother wishes to speak with you and Luna in the dining room, Ms. Hermione.”

“Thank you, Sally.” Hermione yawned. “Come on, Luna.”

“Right behind you, Hermione,” Luna agreed. The two girls walked down the stairs to the dining room and took their seats at the table.

“You wanted to speak with us, mum?” Hermione asked.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I need you to save an hour or two tomorrow afternoon.”

Hermione glanced at Luna. “Okay, mum.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 13

IIIIIIII

It was with no small amount of trepidation that Hermione went to the meeting with her mother the next afternoon. She cast an envious look at her friend, Luna was bouncing along without a care in the world, it must be nice to be so innocent.

“Come in, girls,” Anne said, waving them into her office.

“What's this about, mum?” Hermione asked.

“Luna had some questions for me that I wasn't able to answer the other day,” Anne replied.

“You've spoken with Father?” Luna asked.

“I have, and he's told me that he doesn't mind me giving you this talk,” Anne agreed.

Hermione's eyes widened in fear, she couldn't mean. “What talk, mum?”

“I think we should start with biology,” Anne said thoughtfully. “I presume you've already looked through my medical books?”

“I have, mum,” Hermione squeaked.

“Good. Come over here, Luna.” Anne waved the girl closer. “I’ve got pictures.”

“Okay,” Luna agreed.

“You too, Hermione,” Anne commanded.

“I’ve already read about this, mum,” Hermione said quickly, desperate to find a way out of the situation she’d found herself in.

“That wasn’t a request, darling.”

“Yes, mum,” Hermione sighed.

“Good, you can sit on my other side,” Anne said warmly.

IIIIIIII

Harry was in the library studying his wand movements. He looked up from his book when Phil entered the room.

“Doing a bit of reading?” Hermione’s father asked.

“Practicing a few spells,” Harry replied.

“Thought you kids weren’t supposed to be doing that till after you graduated?”

“We’re not,” Harry laughed. “On the other hand, I just happen to have a wand that can’t be tracked and instructions to test it.”

“Useful.” He scratched his chin. “Could you get more for the girls?”

“Best to wait till after we get back to Hogwarts,” Harry said after a moment of thought. “I made the one I’ve got and one of the teachers checked it out before I used it. Rather not take any chances.”

“Good thought,” Phil agreed. “Get your coat, you’re not going to want to be here for a few hours.”

“Alright.”

IIIIIIII

Luna was fascinated by what she’d learned from Hermione’s mother. And so, in contrast to her friend, Luna was intensely disappointed when the lesson came to an end.

“Would it be alright if I came back with questions?” Luna asked hopefully.

“Of course, dear,” Anne agreed.

Luna seemed to mull it over for a moment. “Would it be alright if I came back with some questions right now?”

“Of course,” Anne agreed. “What do you need to know?”

“I did a bit of supplemental reading after our talk yesterday and wait here,” Luna asked. The girl stood up and darted out of the room.

She returned a few minutes later with a vellum covered book under one arm.

“What's your question?” Anne prompted.

“Well, I just don't see how this would be possible,” Luna said holding out the book to show the engraving. “I don't believe either Harry or Hermione are that flexible and I know that I am not.” Luna flipped a few pages. “This one might be possible, but I'm not sure where we'd find another girl that both Hermione and I would get along with.” She scratched her chin. “Perhaps Ginny. But I am not certain I would enjoy having Mrs. Weasley as a mother in law.”

“Uh . . . Luna,” Hermione squeaked. Doing her best to ignore the way her mother's face was turning red and how the woman's frame was being rocked with suppressed laughter.

“Yes, Hermione?” Luna looked up. “Did you have a suggestion?”

“Where did you find that book?”

“It was under your bed,” Luna replied. “Why?”

“If you girls will excuse me for a moment,” Anne said in a trembling voice. “I have something to take care of. I shall try to be back in a few minutes.” She barely managed to contain her laughter until she was out of the room.

IIIIIIII

Phil rolled up the partition separating the passenger compartment with the driver and turned to Harry with an unreadable look on his face.

“Harry, my wife thinks I should give you the sex talk. Do you want me to give you the sex talk?”

“Already got it from Ron's older brothers,” Harry replied.

“Great, tell me if you have any questions,” Phil laughed. “Oh, and don't be surprised if Hermione or Luna have trouble looking you in the eye for the next few days.”

“Where are we going?”

“Fancy another visit to the club?” Phil asked.

“Sure,” Harry agreed.

They rode in silence for a few moments until Phil could no longer hold in his question. "So... which of Ron's brothers?"

Harry sighed. "All of them, at different times."

"What sort of thing did they have to say?"

"Well for starters Charlie basically said no doing anything anyone involved in wasn't cool with, Bill said the same again and added in that anyone getting pregnant probably counted as something someone wasn't cool with and, um, some charms relating to that, Percy got way way too far into the legalities of all of it but, y'know, that's what I expected since

it's Percy we're talking about and boy are some things about the Wizarding World disturbing, and as for Fred and George they were all about how to not get caught by Filch or some-such, and that basically ran to use a secret passage instead of a broom cupboard or the Astronomy tower, and stuff that's supposed to be fun. Though I'm not sure how that thing with the Marmite and tweezers counts as fun; I think they were probably having me on." He hoped they were having him on anyway.

IIIIIIII

Amelia's eyebrows went up when one of her Aurors barged into her office and began sweeping for bugs.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me, Auror Tonks?" Amelia asked calmly.

"Two things, boss," Tonks agreed.

"Well?"

"Well I'm not going to say a word till I'm sure your office is secure and that you're you, boss," Tonks replied.

"Proceed," Amelia sighed.

Tonks used another dozen charms on the office before raising the privacy wards and throwing a cup full of water into the Director's face.

“You had better have a good reason for doing that, Auror Tonks,” Amelia growled.

“Dispels any active magic on the target,” Tonks explained. “Imperio to Polyjuice.”

“That bad, then?”

“Gringotts slipped it to me along with a bit of info,” Tonks agreed. “Voldemort is planning to hit you this summer. Had planned to do it a few months ago but we got lucky cause something else came up to delay it.”

“That's not entirely unexpected,” Amelia laughed. “Is that all?”

“Looks like Harry Potter and Dumbledore are also on the chopping block and it also looks like there's moles in the Department and at Hogwarts,” Tonks finished. “I've asked Madeye to keep an eye on your niece and her friend and I'm not going to be more than three feet away from you till Voldemort kicks it.”

“You're going to take that undercover assignment with the Granger family,” Amelia corrected. “I can take care of myself.”

“The Granger's head of security wants a sit down with you and I'm not leaving you, boss,” Tonks said firmly. “You kick it and who gets the big chair? I'd really rather not work for that bastard?”

“I have several reasons to want you with the Grangers,” Amelia replied. “That they'll shortly have enough wands to purge the department is only

one of them. Another is because I think having a force outside Hogwarts is a good thing, a third is because it would give me somewhere to run, and a fourth is because I'd rather not lose you if the Ministry goes bad."

"Boss?"

"The fact that you could double for me isn't the only reason you got assigned to my protective detail," Amelia sighed. "How's the recruiting going?"

"Going good, boss," Tonks replied. "Grangers already have almost as many Aurors as the Ministry along with curse breakers and healers. Better quality overall too since they don't have to saddle themselves with any useless nieces and nephews."

"I see."

"Which means there's no reason I should join them," Tonks said quickly. "Being your double might not have been the only reason to keep me around, but it's still a good one."

Amelia pursed her lips. "You say Voldemort's planning to hit me this summer?"

"The goblins did, boss," Tonks agreed.

"Then I have no need of you until then," Amelia replied.

"Boss . . ."

“I'd much rather have you in a place where you can easily keep an eye on my niece,” Amelia interrupted. “You said they were also going to go after Potter and Dumbledore?”

“That's the info I got, boss.”

“They say when?” Amelia asked intently.

“No, boss.”

“Hmmm.” Amelia sighed. “See if you can get me a sit down with the Granger, I've got a few ideas I'd like to bounce off him.”

“Boss?”

“My ideas work and everyone is mostly happy,” Amelia promised.

“Even you, Auror Tonks.”

“Understood, boss.”

“So why did the goblins decide to share information with you?”

“Don't know, boss,” Tonks admitted. “I was at the bank to deposit my pay when a couple of them started having a conversation outside my vault.”

“I didn't know you spoke Gobbledegook,” Amelia commented.

“I don't, boss. The conversation was all in English.” Tonks grinned. “On my way out, they gave me that water, told me what it did, and asked me not to forget it the next time I was there.”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Amelia murmured. “See about that meeting, Auror Tonks.”

“So long as you promise not to leave the office without me, boss,” Tonks said stubbornly.

Amelia's eyes narrowed and she allowed the full focus of her gaze to fall on the Auror.

“Right, boss,” Tonks agreed. “I'll get Susan on my side if I hafta.”

“On your way, Auror Tonks,” Amelia sighed. “I have no reason to leave for the next few hours.”

“On my way, boss.”

IIIIIIII

Philip led Harry into the club and back down the stairs to the richly furnished office belonging to his friend.

“Phil, Harry,” the man called out. “Glad to see you could make it.”

“Wife was having an important talk with the girls,” Phil laughed. “I'm willing to do anything to get away from that, even suffer your company for a bit.”

“Good afternoon, sir,” Harry greeted the man.

“Call me Charlie,” he said easily.

“Charlie?” Harry frowned in confusion. “But the name on your door . . .”

“Was the name of the first man to occupy my office,” Charlie explained. “His successor didn't change it and now we're stuck with the tradition.”

“I see.”

“And please don't discuss anything you see or learn in the club outside the club,” Charlie said with a twinkle in his eye. “We need to keep our secrets, 'eh?’”

“No problem, Charlie,” Harry agreed.

“Thank you, Harry. I will say that you've got a good eye spotting it like you did, most people don't.” The man gave Harry an appraising look. “Ever thought about what you'd like to do after you leave school?”

“Not much,” Harry admitted. “Might see if I can become an Aur . . . uh, policeman.”

“Might not be a bad career for you,” Charlie said thoughtfully. “Then again, maybe we'll have other options for you to explore when the time comes.”

“I'll be sure to explore them,” Harry said with a grin. “When the time comes.”

Charlie gave a booming laugh. “You up for a game of gin, Harry?”

“Up for anything, Charlie,” Harry said.

“Wonderful, have a seat.” Charlie waved at the chairs. “You know how to play?”

“Not really,” Harry admitted. “Think I know the rules.”

“Wonderful, we'll be on an even playing field then and speaking of playing fields . . .”

“Yes?”

“How's your polo game coming along?” Charlie asked.

“I think they're in for a surprise if they expect me to play like I did last time,” Harry boasted.

“Been practicing then?”

“Enough for it to start showing,” Harry said proudly. “Hundred percent better than I was last time which means a bit of time and hard work, maybe I'll be able to say I'm a mediocre Polo player.”

“Good to hear, good to hear.” Charlie turned toward Phil. “You said you had a list for me?”

“Thanks to Harry's connections,” Phil agreed. “Number of people on it already work for you.”

“Which is the only reason you didn't snap them up yourself,” Charlie grunted. “Bet you would have charged through the nose to hire them out to me too.”

“I think you'd have found our rates very reasonable,” Phil laughed.

“As reasonable as the rates you charged in your import business no doubt,” Charlie snorted.

“Not so reasonable as that, I'd have had more of the market cornered this time,” Phil replied.

“Speaking of your import business.” Charlie licked his lips. “Any chance your men could fill another order?”

“Depends on what's being ordered,” Phil replied. “Send me a list later and I'll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” Charlie broke the seal on the deck and began shuffling the cards. “Mind doing me a favor, Harry?”

“Depends on the favor,” Harry replied.

“And how much you're willing to pay,” Phil interjected.

“Mercenary bastard.” Charlie shot his friend a glare. “Hoping you could use those connections of yours to get me a few things.”

“What do you need?” Harry asked.

“Couple sets of what you gave Hermione's uncle for Christmas,” Charlie replied.

“You know Hermione's uncle Jim?”

“We work together” Charlie said sourly. “Bastard is responsible for my ulcers.”

“Charlie is Jim's boss,” Phil explained. “You can understand how fun that must be.”

“You have my sympathy,” Harry laughed.

“So is it possible?” Charlie asked intently.

“Very possible,” Harry agreed. “I'm friends with the inventors.”

“Think you could get me an introduction then?”

“I think I probably could,” Harry replied.

“Great.” Charlie began dealing.

“We'll discuss Harry's rates, later,” Phil said as he took his cards. “Bleed the bastard as much as you can, Harry.”

IIIIIIII

Molly was in the kitchen when the sound of a dog barking drew her attention. She walked outside, no dog, and the barking resumed the moment she walked back into the house.

“Those boys,” the moaned. Now was it an invisible dog or just a sound? She cast a couple quick detection charms and followed them to the source which turned out to be a large bull frog chewing on an old soup bone. “What in the world?”

The frog began growling as soon as she got too close. This wasn't something her sons would do. Her eyes flicked in the direction of her neighbor's house. And they'd wondered why the land had been so cheap when they'd bought it shortly after they'd gotten married.

“Peaceful place in the country, two sets of magical neighbors,” she mimicked the real estate agent. “Perfect place for a magical family my ass,” she muttered under her breath.

IIIIIIII

Phil threw down his cards in disgust, that was the third game in a row. It had been a long time since he's suffered such a long string of defeats at the card table.

“That's another game you win, Harry,” he sighed.

“What about me?” Charlie demanded. “Beating you was a team effort. And don't forget, this win means that's twenty pounds you owe us.”

“What about you?” Phil replied. He looked up at the clock. “I’m afraid I’ve got a meeting to go to for an hour or so. You mind staying at the club for a bit, Harry?”

“I don’t mind,” Harry agreed.

“Good, terribly sorry to do this to you.” Phil stood up. “Be back as soon as I can.”

IIIIIIII

Luna shifted closer to Hermione’s mother, basking in the attention. Things were better than they had been in a long time, if only father and Harry were with them, then Luna Lovegood’s life would be almost perfect.

“What was it like to go on dates with Mr. Granger?” Luna asked curiously.

“Knowing daddy, he showed up to the date in a flashy car and took you to a meal that cost as much as a house,” Hermione giggled. “Then, he took you home, kissed you on the cheek, and you stayed with him to spite step-grandma.”

“That’s mostly accurate. But you shouldn’t be so quick to dismiss your father,” Anne advised. “He once broke your uncle Jim’s nose in a bar fight, you know.”

“Daddy got into a bar fight?” Hermione asked in disbelief, eyes sparkling with interest. “Wait-daddy broke uncle Jim’s nose?”

“It was our first date,” Anne giggled. “I thought he was a frightfully stuffy bore and had no intention of dating him again.”

“I thought you said you got together after the teacher made you?” Hermione asked.

“That's what started it,” Anne agreed.

“So what happened?” Hermione demanded.

“Your uncle Jim was still in the Navy in those days,” Anne began.

“So?”

“So your father came back from the loo to see to find his date being harassed by an uncouth uniformed lout and demanded your uncle Jim apologize and leave us in peace,” Anne replied. “Your uncle Jim refused.”

“And daddy punched him in the nose?” Exclaimed in shock.

“They growled at each other first but you have the basics of it,” Anne agreed. “I called your father a bloody idiot and said that he'd just punched my brother. Your father apologized and offered to let your uncle Jim break his nose so they'd be even.”

“Then what happened?”

“Your uncle Jim took him up on his offer,” Anne said with a smile.

“Then the bloody idiots left me behind with the cheque to go on a pub crawl.” She giggled. “That made me so angry that I promised myself I'd never so much as give your father the time of day again.”

“How'd he get you to forgive him?” Hermione asked quickly.

“He didn't. Your uncle Jim stumbled into to my apartment at five the next morning, dumped me out of bed onto the floor, and announced that he approved of my boyfriend and that I would be a fool to let him go.”

“Uncle Jim said that?”

“Then he vomited on my floor and passed out,” Anne finished, smiling at the memory. “Your father showed up in class that day covered in bruises and acting as if nothing had happened. I found out later that he and your uncle Jim had picked another fight in another pub after leaving me. Then . . .” Anne dissolved into laughter. “He plops down in the seat next to me and asks what I have planned for our next date. The bastard.”

“And you've been together ever since,” Hermione sighed.

“We have,” Anne agreed. She turned back to Luna. “With luck, neither of your first dates will end like that. I had a devil of a time getting that vomit out of my carpet.”

“You cleaned your own carpet?” Hermione asked in shocked horror.

“I was going through my solidarity with the working class phase,” Anne explained. “Getting the vomit out of that carpet cured me of it nicely.”

IIIIIIII

Charlie put down his cards when the intercom buzzed and hit the reply button.

“Yes?”

“Someone to see your guest, sir. She has a wand.”

“Show me a picture,” he ordered. He turned his screen to Harry. “Do you know her?”

“That's Tonks,” Harry agreed. “She's an Au . . . uh, Police Woman and she's also a friend.”

“Show her in,” Charlie ordered.

Tonks walked into the room with a smile. “Wotcher, Harry.” After a quick glance around the room, she carefully placed herself between Harry and the other man in the room.

“Is there a problem?” the man asked.

“I noticed that you were armed,” Tonks replied.

“It's alright, Tonks,” Harry put a comforting hand on her off shoulder. “Charlie is a friend.”

“I'm also on first name terms with your boss,” Charlie added. “Would it make you feel better if I told you that the lion and the unicorn were the best of friends?”

“It would,” Tonks agreed, relaxing.

“It would make me feel better if you did the nose trick,” Harry interjected.

“You've been spending too much time around Madeye,” Tonks said with a smile, morphing her nose into a snout. “Satisfied?”

“Partly,” Harry agreed pompously. “I'm now fairly sure you aren't an impostor, which leaves a staggering array of compulsions you could be under.”

“Brat.” Tonks reached out and tried to muss his hair.

“What can I do for you, Auror Tonks?” Charlie asked.

“Was looking for Harry and Mr. Granger,” Tonks replied. “Got a bit nervous when I found Harry without Mr. Granger.”

“You can track them?”

“I can track one of Harry's wands,” Tonks agreed. “I can't track the other one and I didn't notice you hide it up your left sleeve so stop frowning, Harry.”

“I see.”

“We've also restricted the trace to the Director's office,” Tonks added.
“That means me and Madame Bones.”

“Would you be so kind as to do me a favor, Auror Tonks?” Charlie asked.

“Just call me Tonks, and it depends on the favor.”

“I would like you to check my office for magic and to put up something to ensure privacy.”

“I can do that,” Tonks agreed. “Won't be as good as what the Grangers have, but it'll be something.” She waved her wand, frowned, and waved it again. “I take that back.”

“Something wrong?”

“This place is almost as tight as the Director's office,” Tonks replied.
“Looks like it hasn't been maintained or upgraded for a while though.”

“Thank you, Tonks,” Charlie replied.

“Talk to Mr. Granger to get things modernized,” Tonks advised. “They should be able to arrange some top shelf stuff, even better than what Madame Bones is supposed to have around her office.” But not necessarily as good as what had been put in unofficially.

“I shall,” Charlie agreed.

“Which reminds me.” Tonks turned to Harry and pasted on her best hopeful look.

“What is it?”

“All I want is to assign you a bodyguard or two,” Tonks replied. “And I promise that it's because I've got an ulterior motive and not because I don't think that you can take care of yourself.” Well, not just because she thought he couldn't take care of himself.

“What is it?”

“The boss thinks something bad might happen, I want to be prepared,” Tonks said.

“Has she shared any details?” Charlie asked eagerly.

“Nope, she hasn't really even flat out told me. But it's obvious if you spend as much time around her as I do.”

Charlie wrote out a quick letter and sealed it in an envelope. “Be so good as to pass that along the next time you see Director Bones.”

“Sure,” Tonks agreed.

IIIIIIII

Phil stepped out of his car and took a seat at the cafe. He was joined a few minutes later by a man in an expensive suit.

“You'll like this,” the man began.

“I'm sure I will,” Phil agreed. “What do you have for me?”

“An even dozen BMW R65/5s, still in their crates,” he announced proudly. “Along with two dozen 75/5s with the long wheel base, also still in their crates.”

“Very nice,” Phil agreed. “But I asked for three good beginner bikes.”

“I got you those too,” the man replied. “Three dozen Honda Cubs in crates, they came in a lot with the other bikes and didn't even scratch the budget you gave me to play with.”

“I see, legal I trust?”

“Since when have you cared about the law?”

“Since when have I not?” Phil replied.

“That air force you had me get you a few years ago along with all those tanks.”

“Let me rephrase that, legal in countries I care about, I trust?”

“Nothing but,” the man agreed. “Speaking of that air force.”

“Hmmm?”

“Got another contact in Russia, might be able to get a few more interesting things.”

“Wonderful timing,” Phil said. “I was getting ready to make another order.”

“What do you need?”

“Give me your list and I’ll give you mine,” Phil said after a moment of thought. “Anyone selling special munitions?”

“I don’t touch that stuff,” the man said quickly.

“I wouldn’t use you if you did,” Phil said bluntly. “But I do wish to know if anyone is making offers.”

“Gonna pass it along to the same chaps you got the air force for?”

Phil just gave the man a bland look.

“Right,” he agreed. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Likewise,” Phil agreed.

IIIIIIII

Molly stepped back to admire her handiwork. Sitting in a corner of her garden was a miniature white dog . . . er, frog house with spike written above the door in red letters. To one side was a small pond and on the other were food and water dishes.

“Well, how do you like it?” Molly asked.

“Woof,” the frog replied.

“Good.” She scratched him under the chin. She'd gotten so lonely with the children out of the house and her husband at work. It was nice to have a pet.

IIIIIIII

Mandy's eyes were locked on the Death Eaters in the doorway, what a time to be caught without her wand. Her heart sunk when she realized that the other players wands were also safely secured in their lockers.

“Purebloods on one side, trash on the other,” one of the Death Eaters barked.

“What are you going to do to my players?” the coach demanded.

“We're going to use them to send a message to the league,” the Death Eater sneered. “Trained animals have no place in a wizard's game. Quidditch is for people.”

Mandy felt like she was floating outside her body, like she was a spectator watching her own actions. She was the product of a hundred generations of pureblood breeding, the perfect woman according to the Dark Lord's twisted ideology.

“Anything you do to my teammates, you do to me first. I'm a muggle born,” Mandy announced proudly.

“So am I,” the seeker cheered. “To hell with you lot.”

The other players rumbled their agreement.

“So be it,” the Death Eater growled. “We kill them al . . .” the man crumbled to the ground, revealing an annoyed looking Ron holding a beater's bat.

Ron smashed another Death Eater across the face with the bat in his right hand and drove his left into a third's stomach. Three seconds had passed since the first Death Eater fell and the Harpies had used the time their captors were distracted to their advantage, the remaining Death Eaters soon learned why the Harpies goal keeper spent so much time blocking penalty shots.

“You okay, Ron?” Mandy asked, bosom heaving from the excitement. “Ron?” her breath caught when she noticed that his left fist was covered in blood.

“Yeah, why?”

“Your hand.” Mandy took a step closer.

“It's not mine.” He loosened his grip to reveal a carving knife resting on his palm. “Hope I didn't ruin the edge on his ribs.”

“Oh.”

Ron wiped the blade off on one of the fallen death eater's robes and returned the knife to its place in his pocket after a quick inspection to assure himself that it hadn't suffered any serious damage. "Came here to give you your new bat, Merry Christmas."

"Christmas was last week," she said automatically.

"Your bat wasn't finished till today," Ron retorted. "Suppose I could keep it till your birthday if you'd rather."

"No! I mean, thank you, Ron." She snatched the bat out of his hands and held it to her chest.

"You're welcome." He looked down at the shattered Death Eaters. "This sort of thing happen to you often?"

"First time," she giggled. "You?"

"Quit a bit," Ron sighed. "Always figured it was Harry that attracted this sort of thing, now I'm wondering if it's me." He scratched his chin. "Or maybe if it's contagious."

"It was a very brave thing you did, rescuing us," Mandy cooed. "My hero." She leaned in and gave Ron a soft kiss.

"Mine too!" one of the chasers agreed enthusiastically, giving Ron a much deeper kiss before passing him off to another of her teammates.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 14

IIIIIIII

Tonks was fidgeting rather badly by the time Phil returned. She did not like the idea of leaving her boss alone for such a large amount of time, who knew what trouble Madame Bones could get herself into without proper adult supervision?

"Madame Bones would like a sit down with you as soon as possible!" Tonks blurted as soon as the man entered the room.

"What, now?"

"If possible," Tonks agreed. "If not, tell me when, quickly . . . please."

"Is something wrong?" Phil asked nervously.

"I made the boss promise not to leave her office without me," Tonks explained nervously.

"You're worried that you've been gone long enough that she might allow herself to forget?" Charlie asked.

"Something like that," Tonks agreed.

"Bodyguard?"

"Chief of close security and body double," Tonks explained. She turned back to Phil. "Your decision, sir?"

"Up for it, Harry?" Phil asked.

"I think we'd better," Harry agreed.

"We'll take my car," Phil decided. "You are welcome to accompany us or go ahead."

"I'll go ahead," Tonks said. "Thank you, sir." The woman rushed out to find some place she could apperate from.

"Very impressive to have someone so loyal," Charlie said approvingly.

"It is," Phil agreed. He handed an envelope to his friend. "That's what I can arrange for quickly. Figure ten percent for my troubles, I'm still waiting on the rest."

"Thank you."

"Always happy to make a pound or two in service to the crown," Phil laughed. "After you, Harry."

"Bye, Charlie."

IIIIIIII

Molly glanced at the clock again. Her youngest son was late and every minute was making her more and more annoyed that the boy hadn't been

considerate enough to call ahead first to let them know he'd been delayed.

“Mum, can we have dinner now?” Ginny whined.

"Not until your brother gets back," Molly replied.

“But what if he stays out all night?”

“I'll give him another hour and then we'll eat if he's not here,” Molly said. Another glance at the clock caused her to sigh. “He's on his way back now. It shouldn't be long.”

“I'll set the table,” Ginny agreed.

“Thank you, dear.”

The front door opened and Molly's fury disappeared in a flash the second she got a look at the boy. His face was covered in lip marks, marks from several different women judging from the different shades and sizes.

“What happened to you, Ron?”

“Mandy really liked her new bat,” Ron replied, still dazed. “Her teammates liked it too, I've got a pocket full of orders.”

“That's m'boy,” Arthur announced proudly, but quietly. Years of married life had taught him which boasts were best kept from the wife.

"I see." Molly wiped away a tear, her little Ronny was growing up.

Ginny's jaw had dropped, mind unable to process the thought of the slobbiest of her brothers being a ladies man.

The twins were in a similar bind, a quick nod to each other and they'd made their decision. They weren't going to tease their youngest brother, they weren't going to play pranks on him, they were going to ask for pointers when he'd regained his senses.

IIIIIIII

Phil and Harry arrived at the Director's office only to be met by three burly humorless Aurors. Grins appeared after three sets of eyes flicked to the scar on Harry's forehead and they stepped aside to allow the two to enter.

“Go right in,” one of the Aurors said with a friendly grin.

“Phil, Harry, good of you to join us,” Amelia said with a smile.

“Good of you to invite us, Amelia,” Phil replied.

“That benefit I twisted your arm into agreeing to attend looks like it's going to be postponed indefinitely, Harry. So you're off the hook.”

“Anything I can do for you instead?” Harry asked. “A deal is a deal. You held up your part of it, only fair that I hold up mine.”

“Maybe an ad in the wireless,” Amelia said thoughtfully. “We can work out the details later, after the current emergency blows over.”

“Sure.”

“Thank you, Harry.” She motioned for them to take their seats. “You may speak and turn around for the duration of the meeting, Auror Tonks.”

“Thank you, boss,” Tonks said from her place in the corner.

"Auror Tonks is on time-out for locking me in my office," Amelia explained.

“You promised not to leave, boss. So I don't see that it mattered.”

“I had assumed that the loo was one of the places I was permitted to visit,” Amelia explained with a glare. “Be happy you got back before I wet myself or I'd have done more than make you stand in the corner and think about what you did.”

“Yes, boss.” Something told Tonks that it was an inopportune time to point out that there was a perfectly good and presumably water tight waste pail in the office. Combine it with a vanishing charm and everything would be set.

“What did you wish to speak with us about?” Phil asked, doing his best to hide his amusement.

“I was hoping that I could persuade you to move your family into my estate,” Amelia replied. “Then, I got a report on your living

arrangements. How in the world do you manage to take care of something so large?"

"An veritable army of servants," he laughed. "Wanted to simplify the protection scheme and to pool resources?"

"On the nose. I've also received a bit of intelligence, via Auror Tonks' contacts at Gringotts, that Voldemort is planning to hit Mr. Potter this year and me this summer. My offer to you is one of the things I'm using to persuade Auror Tonks to leave my side during the year."

"You'd assign her to my daughter?" Phil blurted in delight before wincing. "Sorry, Harry, forgot you were the target."

"It's a safe bet that Hermione is too and I'd much rather have any guards looking after her and Luna than me," Harry said softly.

"There's also the fact that Hermione is never too far from your side and any guards watching her would be in a good place to help you," Tonks giggled.

"There is that," Harry agreed. "But I'm more concerned with my friends being safe than I am with my own safety. If this keeps Hermione and Luna safe, I'm all for it."

"It also keeps my niece and her friends safe if there is a large force at Hogwarts," Amelia admitted. "That was one of my primary concerns. I'd love to assign Aurors to watch over the castle but I don't have the budget to do it."

"Sounds like we have the beginnings of a deal," Phil said cheerfully. "I'll put a dozen or so guards around Hogwarts under the command of Ms. Tonks under the understanding that they're they're to protect a few named individuals, not the castle as a whole."

"Agreed," Amelia said immediately. "Bugger the castle."

"Anything you'd like to add, Harry?" Phil asked.

"Just a list of people I don't want anywhere near any of the girls," Harry said.

"Why?!" Amelia barked.

"Because I got a good look at several Death Eaters and I suspect several more."

"Names?" Amelia asked eagerly.

Harry dug around his pocket for a few moments before emerging with a grubby list which he handed to Madame Bones.

"You carry a list of possible Death Eaters around with you?" Tonks asked incredulously. Not even Mad-Eye walked around with an enemy list. Well, she didn't think he did anyway. Never could tell with that crazy bastard.

"I somehow linked my pockets to my trunk," Harry replied. "Well, I think it's my trunk. It doesn't matter which clothes I'm wearing and only

seems to work when I'm wearing them." The boy didn't like the gleam that appeared in the Director's eye.

"Would you be willing to teach me that incredibly useful sounding charm?" Amelia purred.

"I would if I knew what I did," Harry said cautiously.

"Auror Tonks."

"Yes, boss?"

"Who do we have that can research this issue with Mr. Potter?"

"Auror Stickle in spell research, Auror Watts in spell research, and Auror Pinch on the retirement rolls, who used to be in spell research and who's wife's offered me 20 galleons if I could find him something to do that would get him out of the house and out from under foot."

"Any objection to any of them, Harry?" Amelia asked, glancing at the list she'd been given.

"I don't even know any of them," Harry sighed, resigned to the fact that the remaining days of his vacation would not be as carefree as he'd hoped.

"Good. What we're going to do is grant you a special dispensation to do magic outside of school and we'll see if one of our researchers can't figure out what you did."

“How about you give special dispensation to my friends to do magic outside of school, you agree to let Professor Flitwick take the lead in researching it, and you agree to only teach it with my permission,” Harry offered.

“Lovegood, Granger, and Weasley?”

“Put Bones, Longbottom, and Abbot on my list of friends, please,” Harry said after a moment of thought.

“Buttering me up or do you really have a close relationship with my niece?”

"A little of the first and a whole lot of the second if your plans with Mr. Granger work out," Harry replied.

“I think we have a deal, Mr. Potter.”

“Or rather, you will after we discuss what you're going to pay him,” Phil interjected smoothly. “I assure you that his rates are quite reasonable and by quite reasonable I mean obscenely high.”

“Alright,” Amelia laughed. “How would you like a chance to poke through the property room, Harry? You can have what you can carry so long as it isn't needed as evidence for a current case. I'll even include paperwork to keep restricted items.”

Harry gave the man a small nod.

"He can have what we can carry. The 'we' includes Auror Tonks who will come along to make sure that we do not accidentally take something that will harm us," Phil countered.

IIIIIIII

Fred and George took a moment to digest the tale their youngest brother had told before they moved on to the question and answer section.

"So all you have to do is rescue them from a bunch of Death Eaters?" Fred asked firmly.

"I think so," Ron agreed.

The twins shared a glance until George broke the silence. "Are you pondering, what I'm pondering, twin o'mine?"

"We ask Harry for pointers on Death Eater stomping and stake out everywhere witches congregate that might also be subject to Death Eater attack?"

"Exactly," George agreed. "Thank you, Ron. You've been most helpful on continuing the Weasley line."

"We couldn't be prouder to have you as a brother," Fred agreed firmly.

"Can't wait to tell Bill that his advice is rubbish too," George added. "Be yourself, hah! Should have known that was a bunch of bull."

"Would probably work if we were Harry," Fred mused. "Explains why he's made a hobby out of beating Voldemort."

"Selfish bastard could have told us," George grumbled.

"Don't think he realizes what he's doing," Ron said quickly, trying to protect his friend. "He's kinda clueless."

"A point, little brother, a point," George conceded.

"Wait till we tell the rest of the guys what we learned," Fred giggled.

"And by tell I mean sell the information about what we've learned to the rest of the guys."

"Dark Lord will be toast in a week," George agreed.

IIIIIIII

Tonks had to suppress a giggle as yet another box disappeared into Harry's seemingly bottomless pockets.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"I think the boss forgot about your pockets," Tonks replied.

"I don't think this is linked to my trunk like I thought it was," Harry sighed. "Even with expansion charms, there's no way it should be able to hold all this."

"Might have burst open and spilled over the room," Phil suggested.

"Maybe, but I don't believe for a second that I'm that lucky," Harry replied. "Anything else you think I should grab, Tonks?"

"Don't see anything," the Auror replied. "You've pretty much cleared out everything un-cursed."

"Anything you want?" Harry prompted.

"Nothing cursed."

"What about what we've already grabbed?" Harry asked.

"Couple things," she agreed. "Let me poke through it later."

"Done," Harry agreed. He quickly smothered a grin as a thought hit him. "Step over here for a second, please."

"What are you gonna do?" Tonks demanded, suspicious of the expression on the boy's face."

"Something funny," Harry replied as he swept the woman into his arms. "Open the door please, Phil."

The man complied and Harry stepped out of the room and walked down the hall to the Director's office with the struggling Auror in his arms.

"Stop that," Harry laughed. "I don't want to drop you."

"Lemme go," Tonks grumbled.

“In a minute,” Harry replied.

Phil rushed ahead to open the door to the Director's office to allow Harry an easy entry.

“Finished?” Amelia asked, looking up from her paperwork. “Why are you carrying my Auror?”

“My Auror,” Harry corrected. “Deal was I could have anything in the room that I could carry out of the property room.”

“True,” Amelia sighed. “Teach me to look at the fine print. Well, a deal is a deal. Enjoy your new life, Auror Tonks. I suppose I'll just have to find a new bodyguard, perhaps one that won't lock me in my office.”

“Boss!” Tonks whined. She squirmed out of Harry's arms.

“Care to come to dinner tonight, Amelia? I think it best to have you along to help Harry settle his new Auror,” Phil asked with a grin. “Your niece is of course welcome to join us.”

“I would love to,” Amelia agreed. “If it is alright with Auror Tonks.” She shot the woman a mocking grin.

“I'd have to ask Harry if I'm permitted to look after your security,” Tonks sniffed.

“I insist on it,” Harry said. “Along with the other girls and yourself. I don't want any of you to get hurt.”

IIIIIIII

Anne was in the library when one of the maids walked up and cleared her throat to draw attention to herself.

“What is is?” Anne asked, looking up from her book.

"One of Ms. Hermione's friend's here for dinner along with her security detail, says Mr. Granger invited her to come along with a few others."

“Did she tell you how many people she expects to come?”

“Yes, Mrs. Granger.”

“Tell the cooks the number and tell my daughter that she has a guest, where did you put the friend and what is the name?”

“Susan Bones, Mrs. Granger, in the blue room.”

“Susan!” both women heard the faint echo of Hermione's voice.

“It appears that you will not need to inform my daughter,” Anne said dryly. “Thank you, that will be all.” Anne rose to her feet and walked out of the room.

IIIIIIII

Susan was a bit overwhelmed by the level of enthusiasm in Hermione's greeting. She hadn't realized that she was so close to the other girl, or

perhaps it was more a case that Hermione got lonely stuck in her giant house during the holidays?

“Hi, Hermione,” Susan replied. “Hi, Luna.”

“Hello, Susan,” Luna said.

“What are you doing here?” Hermione asked, taking the other girl by the hand and dragging her towards a set of chairs.

“Your father invited me and my Aunt Amelia to dinner,” Susan replied.

“I'm so glad you came, I was hoping to get a chance to talk to another girl before we got back on the express,” Hermione continued.

“Um?” Susan glanced towards Luna. “Another girl?”

“I'm afraid that my father's repertoire of cosmetic charms is rather limited,” Luna explained.

“Cosmetic charms?” Susan said dumbly. “Who do you want to learn them for?” She leaned forward to get the good gossip.

“Harry of course,” Luna replied. “Hermione got the idea that we could modify cosmetic charms to help us restore Harry's collection of motorcycles.”

“Oh,” Susan sighed. “Of course that's what you want to learn them for.” Unless they were just using that as an excuse to avoid being teased, she

thought suddenly. "I'd be happy to share all the ones I know, but Lavender and the Patil twins are the ones you need to talk to about this."

"We'll do that too," Hermione assured the girl. "We just wanted a couple now so we could tear them apart and get a general idea how they worked."

"I see." Or maybe they actually were being genuine about wanting them for motorcycle maintenance. Bloody confusing it was.

"So glad you could join us, Susan, right?" Anne said as she swept into the room.

"Yes, Mrs. Granger," Susan agreed. "Thank you for the invitation."

IIIIIIII

Anne was waiting at the door when Phil's car arrived with the remainder the guests for their impromptu dinner party.

"You must be Amelia," Anne said with a wide smile. "I'm Anne, Hermione's mother."

"A pleasure to meet you," Madame Bones replied. "Please allow me to introduce Auror Tonks. She'll be commanding the protection detail at Hogwarts."

"A pleasure." Anne gave the Auror a once over.

"The pleasure is mine, Mrs. Granger," Tonks replied.

“This way,” Anne said, waving for her guests to follow her. “I’ll show you where you can wash before dinner.”

IIIIIIII

Harry eyed the three girls across the table in much the same way one would eye a pile of angry cobras. They were all leaned in close together, whispering to each other, until suddenly they'd stop and look at him before bursting into giggles. It was enough to put anyone off and the only things that made it bearable was the facts that Susan would be leaving in a few hours, hopefully prompting Hermione and Luna's return to as normal as they ever were, and the fact that Hermione had never acted in that way before so her current behavior was likely to be a one off. Well, he hoped so anyway, heaven help him if he turned out to be wrong.

“God help me if she starts doing it at Hogwarts,” Harry mumbled, giving voice to his thoughts.

“What was that, Harry?” Phil asked.

“Nothing,” Harry replied.

“We were hoping to get your opinion on something, Mr. Potter,” Amelia said smoothly.

“Yes?” Harry asked. “What can I do for you?”

"We were speculating on the cause of Hermione's petrification in your second year," Amelia explained. "Since we were never given an official explanation. I told them that it could be a number of things and we were going down the list."

"Bloody big basilisk," Harry replied.

"We've already ruled that one out since there were no deaths," Anne said. "Any other ideas?"

"No, it was a basilisk," Harry said firmly. "Didn't kill her because she got hit indirectly. She'd just figured out what it was and was using a mirror."

Harry was the recipient of a number of horrified gazes.

"It's okay," he assured the adults. "I killed it."

"You killed a basilisk?" Amelia persisted.

"Had a load of help from Fawkes the Phoenix, but yes," Harry agreed. He pulled up his sleeve. "Almost got me, but I got it," his tone dripped with smug satisfaction. "Even if Fawks hadn't saved me, I'd have taken the bastard with me."

"Gave you another scar for the collection, 'eh, Harry?" Phil asked with a grin, hoping it hid how horrified he was. "Bet the girls love them."

"I bloody hate them!" Hermione jumped into the conversation. "Just means that Harry got himself hurt again."

“You really should be more careful, Harry,” Susan admonished.

“It's not his fault that trouble finds him,” Luna said quickly, trying to defend her friend, hoping to head off the conflict she feared was coming.

“What a bloody mess,” Amelia groaned, she was going to have to have a very long talk with Dumbledore about the fact that need to know included the DMLE when there was a threat to the students and her personally when there was a threat to her niece. “Ms. Granger, would you mind doing a favor for me?”

“What is it, Madame Bones?” Hermione asked.

“I'm going to drop off a pad of after action reports, I'd appreciate it if you'd badger Harry into filling them out for me.” They'd make a nice addition to the boy's application packet to the Auror corps. “Mr. Potter, I'd be more than willing to make it worth your while to not put up too much of a fuss and fill them out.”

“What have you been telling her about us, Susan?” Hermione demanded. She kept up a stern glare for a few seconds before bursting into another fit of giggles. “I'll help Harry fill them out, Madame Bones, we can discuss our fee later.”

“That's my girl, never do anything for free,” Phil said proudly.

“Adventures aside, are you kids looking forward to going back to class?”

“Of course,” Hermione agreed. “Luna and I don't have the facilities here that we can get at Hogwarts. It's not that you don't have a lovely shop, daddy . . . um . . .”

“It's more focused on internal combustion while Hermione and I are currently focused on external combustion,” Luna said quickly, hoping to cover her friend's faux pas. One never criticized another's capabilities.

“How about you, Susan?” Phil prompted.

“It'll be nice to see my friends every day again,” Amelia's niece replied. “I feel sorry for Harry, though.”

"Oh?" The adults turned their attention back on the boy.

“Professors don't let me have a minute to myself,” the boy grumbled.

“It's your own fault for creating such fascinating spells,” Hermione laughed. “Harry makes mistakes that everyone else would kill to duplicate.”

IIIIIIII

Hedwig swooped into the room to land on Fred's head and, after taking a moment to make herself comfortable, proudly presented her leg to George.

“It's a letter from Harry,” George announced.

“What'd he say?” Fred asked not trying to dislodge the bird from her perch, well remembering well remembering what had happened the one and only time he had. On the plus side, the school healer had been able to reattach his scalp in such a way that it wasn't visibly evident that it had ever been torn off. Neither twin would have been happy to be marked in a way that made it easy for the lay public to easily distinguish them from each other.

“Says he has a potential customer for us, friend of Hermione's father,” George replied. “Set up a meeting for us and everything.”

“Smashing, good sport, and all that rot,” Fred laughed, he'd known something would pop up to save them. “And you said we were in trouble.”

“We are,” George said firmly. “Demand isn't quite what we'd hoped it would be.”

“It's increasing.”

“But not fast enough,” George sighed, the should have started out with at least double the amount of funds they had. “Who knew starting a business would be so bloody hard?”

“We should have, Percy told us enough times,” Fred admitted.

“Bah, who ever listens to a word that windbag says?”

IIIIIIII

Harry awoke to the sensation of someone sitting on his chest and opened his eyes to find Hermione staring down at him with an odd expression on her face along with Luna who was staring intently at the left side of his face.

"What?" he groaned. "Why did you decide to wake me up at . . ." He glanced at the clock. "Five in the morning?"

"When were you going to tell us that you enslaved Tonks?!" Hermione demanded, bouncing a bit for emphasis.

"Did she tell you that?" Harry mumbled, trying to drag himself awake.

"No, Daddy did," Hermione replied. Several hours before. They'd figured Harry would be easier to take advantage of when he was severely sleep deprived.

"It's all a joke," Harry explained. "Happy?"

"We know that," Luna spoke up. "I believe you will find that any annoyance on our part stems from the fact that you did not offer to carry either or both of us around which was quite thoughtless of you since it sound like it would be quite fun."

Hermione's blush confirmed Luna's statement.

"Fine," Harry sighed. "I'll give both of you rides around the house. Happy?"

"I believe that I speak for Hermione when I say that I'm going to have to insist on adding a large penalty, since you did not do this for us earlier and due to the fact that you did not immediately tell us about this new source of recreation," Luna replied. "If anyone should be riding you it should be us! Am I correct in my speculation, Hermione?"

"Yes, Luna," the blushing girl agreed. Her eyes widened, a deep blush colored her features, and she was both vexed and relieved that the innuendo seemed to go straight over Harry and, surprisingly after the talk they'd endured with the Lady of the Granger house, Luna's heads. Or perhaps not, she amended after seeing a hint of a smirk forming on her best female friend's mouth.

"Fine," Harry said, pulling the pillow over his face to block out the light. "Now will you let me get back to sleep?"

IIIIIIII

The doorman looked down at the two gingers with a frown. It was his job to keep the riff raff out of the club, his job to act as the first line of security, and it was his job on the line if he made a mistake. There was no way in hell either of the pair was getting through.

"Is there something you gentlemen need?" he demanded in a decidedly unfriendly tone that usually worked to clear off all but the most determined.

"We're supposed to meet with someone named, um," he glanced down a piece of paper in his hand. "Charlie at the club," the left ginger replied uncertainly.

“Might be a couple hours early,” the right ginger added.

“What are your names?” the doorman demanded, thinking it unlikely that either of the pair actually had an appointment and a bit vexed they knew the name of the club's most prominent, and secretive, member.

“Weasley,” the left ginger said. “I'm Fred-”

“-and I'm George.”

“And you're sure this is the club that you're supposed to go to?” the doorman persisted, stalling for time as the plain clothes security guards began to converge.

“This is the club, isn't it, George?” Fred demanded.

“It's the one Harry told us to go to,” George agreed.

“That wouldn't be Harry Potter, would it?” the doorman asked intently.

“It would be,” Fred agreed. “Does that make a difference?”

"A very big one," the doorman agreed, suddenly very accommodating, and signaling for the rest of the security force to break off. "In the future, be sure to state from the beginning that you're here on behalf of Mr. Potter to avoid any possibility of there being a misunderstanding. Wait one moment, I'll have someone escort you to your meeting." He tapped a hidden button and the trio was soon joined by a large serious looking man in a dark suit.

"What is it?" the large humorless man growled, seeing the two and figuring he was being called in too scare off some undesirables, having seen the alert signal and the all clear that meant the potential security threat had been downgraded.

"They say they have a meeting here in a couple hours," the doorman replied.

"What's in the case?" the large man demanded, glaring down at the twins.

"Product samples," Fred said helpfully.

"They say that Mr. Potter sent them," the doorman said helpfully.

"Then they won't mind if I call Mr. Potter to confirm this," the humorless man stated firmly. "Will they?"

"Not at all," George said quickly, more than intimidated by the reception they'd gotten so far.

"In fact, we insist on it," Fred agreed, similar thoughts dancing through his head.

"Wait here," the large man ordered.

IIIIIIII

Harry was just sitting down to breakfast when the butler arrived with an antique looking telephone on a silver tray.

“Phone for you, sir.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. Trying to pin down who had both the technical ability and the desire that wasn't already in the house. “Harry, here.” He listened for a few moments. “Yes, but the meeting I arranged isn't for a couple hours.” He paused to think. “Put them in a waiting room and tell Charlie that I would suggest sending for one of my sort to make sure that they twins are not impostors.” He listened to the phone for a bit.

“Actually, a quick way you can do it is to ask them where they got the money to start their shop. My Triwizard winnings is the answer.” Harry listened to the reply. “No problem, happy to help, bye.”

IIIIIIII

Fred and George jumped when the large humorless man placed a ham sized hand on each of their shoulders.

“Mr. Potter says that you two are early,” the man announced. “Why don't you two tell me how you got the money to start your business?”

“Harry gave it to us,” Fred said quickly.

“It's the money he got from being forced to compete in a tournament,” George added. “One thousand . . . uh . . . total.”

“Name of the tournament?” the man persisted.

The twins shared a glance. “Triwizard.”

“Come with me,” the man ordered. “I’ll show you to a room you can wait in until your meeting. There is a connected bathroom, pull the cord if you need anything, do not leave the room under any circumstances without an escort.”

“Seems clear enough,” Fred replied.

“Simple enough,” George agreed. Privately, both boys were wondering what in the hell Harry had gotten them into.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 15

IIIIIIII

The twins hadn't been waiting for long when the door swung open to admit a white haired man with a slightly unkempt handlebar mustache and a face marked by years of stress.

“Harry sent you?” the man asked.

“He did,” George agreed.

“Great, I'm Charlie, your potential customer.”

“Pleased to meet you, Charlie,” Fred said, holding out his hand to be shaken. “I'm Fred and this is my twin-”

“-George.”

“To start with, how do you two know Harry?” Charlie asked with a grin.

“From school,” Fred replied.

“He's also our business partner,” George added.

“Business partner?” Charlie burst into laughter. “He charges me ten thousand pounds and a ten percent finders fee for everything we get

from you and he's your business partner? Boy's spending way too much time around Phil.”

“If it helps-” Fred began.

“-we may have neglected to mention the fact that he owns a third of the company to him,” George finished.

“Even better,” Charlie laughed. “The fact that you two are Harry's partners changes things considerably.”

“Is that good or bad?” Fred asked cautiously.

“Very good. Now, I understand that you two are inventors?”

“We are,” George agreed.

“I've had a chance to go over several of your inventions and I like them. What's more, I like the idea of modifying them to better suit my purposes. What I'd like to do is license your designs for my company's use.”

The twins shared a look. “I think we might be able to do business,” they offered.

“Great, when can we start?”

“After we have a chance to speak with Harry,” Fred said quickly but firmly. Hoping to stall for time to figure things out.

“We'd be happy to leave our samples here and to set up the basics,” George said quickly. “We came prepared to give a demonstration, not to work out a deal right here and now.”

“Harry's the brains when it comes to that stuff,” Fred sighed, realizing that it was true and that he and his brother were in way over their head.

“We're just the inventors,” George agreed cheerfully, deliriously happy at the prospect of dumping the hard boring stuff into someone else's lap.

“He's the brains behind your business and you didn't tell him that either?” Charlie chuckled. “How bout you two come back here with him later?”

“Deal!” Fred said quickly.

“Would you like us to demonstrate our samples first?” George said quickly.

“Why don't we save that till Harry gets here,” Charlie suggested. “It will also give me a chance to wrestle my tech people away from whatever they're doing.”

“We'll have Harry set something up,” Fred agreed. “Thank you, Charlie.”

“Anything for Harry's business partners,” Charlie said. He opened the door and stuck his head out. “Get them a car to wherever they want to go, I suspect that where they'll want to go is the Granger family's country house.”

“Sir!” the twins heard the guards agreed.

“You two have breakfast yet?” Charlie asked.

“Not-”

“-yet.”

“See if you can get them something to eat too,” Charlie ordered. “Now if you two will excuse me, I really must get back to work.”

“We'll be back-”

“-as soon as we can,” Fred promised.

“Whenever works for Harry works for me,” Charlie replied, appearing to be supremely unconcerned by the whole thing. “Thank you for stopping by, I look forward to your next visit.” Hopefully it would at least be half as amusing as this one had been.

The twins exchanged a glance, looked like things weren't looking quite so bad after all. They'd thought partnering with Harry would lead them to good things. Nice to have themselves proven correct so quickly.

IIIIIIII

Phil watched in shock as a much put upon Harry walked past his office with Luna in his arms being trailed by his daughter.

“Faster!” Luna demanded.

“It's my turn on Harry in another four minutes,” Hermione reminded the two.

“Let's find another stair case!” Luna giggled.

He carefully closed the door and turned to his wife, hoping by all that was holy that she could shed some light on the situation.

“The surprised him in the middle of the night and told him that they were the only ones that were allowed to ride him,” Anne giggled.

“What?” he asked dumbly.

“They heard about his little joke with Ms. Tonks and got jealous,” Anne explained. “Then, they woke him from a sound sleep and made him promise to give them rides. I heard it from one of the maids that heard it from the footman that was outside the door listening in to make sure that Hermione's virtue was safe.” The man had nearly kicked down the door when he'd heard the subject that was being discussed.

“They're still doing that?” Phil chuckled. “Sounds like it's Harry's that's in the most danger.”

“True. But that's not what kept him from bursting in. He couldn't believe our little Hermione could be so vulgar and was sure that there had to be an innocent explanation for what was being discussed,” Anne agreed.

IIIIIIII

Harry staggered into the main entrance way with Hermione on his shoulders, demanding that he go faster and threatening to flog him if he didn't. Well, he thought to himself, at least they were enjoying themselves. Though he did wish that they weren't quite so enthusiastic about getting into the spirit of things.

“Fetch me my riding crop!” Hermione ordered imperiously. “Please, Mr. Johnson,” she added addressing the man who'd treated her first skinned knee, with a smile.

“I think the three of you are a bit young to take things that far,” the valet said with a poorly concealed grin.

“Urk.” Hermione blushed a deep red. “I . . . that wasn't . . . um . . . I didn't . . . that is to say . . .” the girl sputtered.

“My turn again!” Luna cheered.

“Visitors for Mr. Harry,” the butler announced, drawing attention to the two gaping Weasley twins who'd seen and heard just enough to get the wrong, or perhaps right, conclusion.

“Cor, he makes it look so easy,” Fred said, eyes shining with envy.

“We know the secret now,” George assured his twin. “That'll be us soon.”

“Soon,” Fred agreed, eyes shining.

“What do you two need?” Harry asked.

“Your help,” Fred said bluntly.

“We may have given you a third of our company,” George admitted.

“We also might be a bit out of our league when it comes to this business stuff.”

“That's why we decided to make that your responsibility,” Fred added.

“We'll invent things, test things, and build things. You deal with the business.”

“Right.” Harry carefully lifted Hermione off his shoulders and put her on the ground. “Hermione, could you tell your father what's happening and that I'd like his advice if he has a moment.”

“Alright, Harry,” the girl agreed. “Coming, Luna?”

“Right behind you, Hermione,” Luna agreed.

Harry turned to the butler. “Is there some place nearby that we can use to have a quick business meeting?”

“Right this way, Mr. Harry,” the butler agreed.

“Thank you,” Harry replied. He gestured for the twins to follow him.

“How'd you arrange to stay in such a big house, Harry?” Fred asked, awed by the size of the place. It was absolutely massive.

“It belongs to Hermione's parents, they're letting me stay with them over the winter holidays,” Harry replied.

The butler opened a large ornately carved oak door and motioned for them to enter the room.

“Do you gentlemen require any refreshments?” the butler asked.

“Not at this time, thank you,” Harry said after a quick confirming glance at the twins.

“Ring the bell if you need anything,” the butler instructed as he closed the door.

“So what's this about?” Harry asked.

The twins spent a few minutes telling their business partner about their meeting and the fact that it had made them realize that they were over their heads.

“We'll talk to Hermione's father about it, he'll know what to do,” Harry decided. “Was there anything else you needed?”

“You know that Ron's started a custom broom shop?” Fred asked.

“I know that he was thinking about it,” Harry replied.

“He's been contracted to supply brooms for the Harpies, beater bats too,” George said.

“Good for him,” Harry commented with a smile. “I knew he could do it.”

“He can't,” Fred said softly. “At least, we don't think he can.”

“Why not?”

“He's got a bit more business sense than we do, but that's not saying a whole lot,” George admitted cheerfully.

“He doesn't have a good source of seasoned wood, he doesn't have professional tools,” Fred listed a couple more things.

“He also needs a bit of ready cash to get started,” Fred said slowly.

“We'd like to set him up with our backer,” George agreed.

“Who's your . . . oh.” Harry blinked. “Tell him to send his business proposal to Hermione. When she thinks it looks good, I'll meet with Ron.”

“We'd also like to toss in a few galleons,” Fred added. “We can't spare much, well, unless this contract you set up goes through, but-”

“We really think our little brother is on to something,” George explained.

“Hermione thinks the proposal looks good, I'll sit down with him. After I sit down with him, I'll make a decision.”

“No problem,” Fred agreed. “Harpies adore him so they're willing to wait. Other customers don't and won't.”

“Tell him to stall for now,” Harry ordered. “Have him mention that he's got a big custom order for the Harpies and that the best he can do is put them on a waiting list.”

“Right-”

“-thanks, Harry,” George said in relief, glad that the boy at least gave the appearance of knowing what he was doing.

The door opened and Phil strolled in with the girls closely on his heels. “I understand you had a business problem?”

“We do,” Harry agreed. “I was hoping you'd let me pick your brain on ways to screw Charlie out of more money.”

“Something I'm always happy to see happen and even happier to help make happen,” Phil agreed, grinning at the three boys. “Have a seat, Darling,” he said, stopping Hermione from sneaking out of the room.

“But daddy, business is boring.”

“True, but it allows me to make enough money to buy you those books you like so much so I expect you to know enough to do it yourself after I'm gone,” he retorted. “You can stay or leave as the mood takes you, Luna.”

“I'll stay.” Luna grabbed Hermione by the wrist and dragged the other girl to Harry's chair and onto the boy's lap.

Fred and George watched as the girls made themselves comfortable. Voldemort was so screwed and they were going to be so rich.

IIIIIIII

Amelia looked up when the door flung open and someone wearing her face burst into the room, turned, and began layering dozens of security charms on the door after closing it and carefully engaging every one of the locks.

“What's this about, Auror Tonks?” Amelia demanded, fingering her wand.

“Wards at your place, tripped, Susan's fine with the Grangers,” Tonks replied. “Get into the panic room!”

“I'm sure I'm . . .” her jaw dropped in astonishment when Tonks bodily lifted her from her chair. The Auror then peeled back the carpet to reveal a trap door.

“Boss, you're either going to go in on your own or I can put you in. I believe that someone is testing your security, I don't know that. If they're gonna hit you, they're going to have to work at it, I refuse to make it easy for them.” Tonks was breathing hard. “Now are you going to go in willingly or am I going to have to throw you in?”

“You may have fifteen minutes, Auror Tonks,” Amelia said coldly.
“Then, the two of us are going to have words. Very hard words about your conduct today.”

“I don't mind you yelling at me, boss, so long as you're not a ghost that is. Now get in!” She carefully dragged the carpet back over the concealed trap door and replaced the chair. A slow count to ten brought her heart beat under control. Time to see what she could see.

IIIIIIII

The meeting was just winding down when the door opened to admit one of the Granger family's burly drivers.

“Susan Bones just arrived with her security detail, sir, they say the wards got tripped by something,” the driver reported.

“How are ours doing?” Phil asked.

“They say they're doing alright,” the driver replied.

“If I may,” Harry interjected.

“Please,” Phil agreed.

“Have Susan and the detail checked by your magical people to make sure that they're them and that they're free of compulsions,” Harry ordered. “If they are, Have Susan brought to the green room and have the guards sent back to the Ministry if they'll go. Send someone to tell Madame Bones that her niece is safe if they aren't.”

“Right,” the driver agreed. “Anything else?”

“Nothing I can think of,” Phil replied. “Anyone else?” he glanced around the room. “Thank you, Thomas.”

“No problem, sir,” the driver replied.

“Must be trying to make up for what happened with the Harpies,” George murmured, thinking aloud as he tried to process what was happening.

“What happened with the Harpies?” Hermione prompted.

“Death Eaters surprised them in the locker room and were going to kill all the muggle born and half blood players. Purebloods wouldn't leave their teammates so the Death Eaters decided to kill them all,” Fred began.

“Then our baby brother showed up to save the day,” George finished proudly. “Walked up right behind them when they weren't looking and provided a big enough distraction for the Harpies to close the distance and take out the rest.”

“Is Ron okay?” Hermione gasped.

“Fine,” Fred agreed.

“Better than fine,” George laughed. “Harpies were very thankful for the save.”

“Why wasn't this in the Prophet?” Hermione demanded.

“Either the Ministry is leaning on them to keep it quiet-” Fred said.

“-or it's because it just happened last night and they haven't had time to print it,” George mused.

“May I use your floo, please?” Luna asked. “I'm sure this is something Father would like to add to tomorrow's edition of the Quibbler.”

“Go ahead,” Phil replied. “I'm going to go meet with Madame Bones.”

“I'll go with you,” Harry said. “If nothing else, fame is useful for getting past secretaries.” He turned to Hermione. “Would you mind sitting with Susan while we're gone? I can't imagine that this is easy for her.”

“Of course,” Hermione agreed. “Care to join me after you're finished speaking with your father, Luna?”

“I'd be delighted to,” the little blonde agreed.

“What do you want us to do-”

“-Harry?”

“Wait here if you can,” Harry asked. “We'll all go extort money from Charlie later today if we have enough time and his schedule is open.”

“Right!” George agreed.

“We've got some things Ron told us that your father might want to include in his article, Luna,” Fred added.

“Come along then,” the little blonde commanded.

IIIIIIII

Hannah was in the middle of a nasty potions essay when her mother burst into the room and grabbed her by the arm.

“What's wrong, mum?” Hannah asked.

“Grab your bug out bag,” the woman commanded.

“Mum?”

“Something happened at Susan's house, we need to leave and we don't have a lot of time to talk about it first,” the woman explained.

“Right.” Hannah felt sick as she grabbed the pack she'd prepared for the occasion and followed her mother out of the room. “Where are we going, mum?”

“You're going some place safe, I'm going to St. Mungos,” the woman replied.

“Mum?”

"They're going to need healers if something's happened," she explained. The woman threw a handful of floo into the fireplace. "Safe house!" She didn't know where it went, just that Amelia had assured her it was a secure place. "Go, I'll join you later."

"Goodbye, mum," Hannah said, hugging the woman.

"I'll see you later, now go!"

Hannah flew out of the floo and into the arms of a very surprised Luna Lovegood.

"What are you doing here, Hannah?" Luna demanded.

Neither girl paid the slightest amount of notice to the dozen or so security people in the room as the conversed.

"Susan's house got attacked and mum made me come here to be safe," Hannah said in a rush. "I didn't know I'd be coming to your house."

"You didn't, you're in Hermione's," Luna replied. "Could you please get off me? I was just finishing a conversation with father. I'll take you to Susan when I'm finished."

"Alright," Hannah agreed, letting her heart slow down. "Do you know what happened?"

"Just that Susan is okay and that Harry is going to rescue her aunt," Luna said, tossing a pinch of dust into the fire. "Lovegood shack!"

"Luna?" Her father's head appeared. "What happened?"

"Someone arrived through the floo and cut us off," the little blonde replied. "I did not wish to end out conversation without saying farewell."

"Farewell, Luna. Be sure to read the Quibbler tomorrow, your story about the harpies will be on the front page."

"Thank you, father," Luna replied as the connection cut. "Come this way, Hannah."

Hannah followed the other girl out of the room and down what seemed like a dozen halls and staircases.

"This is Hermione's house?" Hannah gasped.

"She says it's only her weekend and vacation house," Luna replied. "I understand that she has another in London."

"Two houses?" Hannah squeaked. "How rich is she?"

"Rich enough to buy and sell the Malfoy family a dozen times without noticing it I suspect," Luna said, scratching her chin. "I wouldn't advise asking her."

"She wouldn't like it?"

"She wouldn't know. Ask her father if you want something accurate. Hermione has absolutely no interest in business."

“Oh.”

Luna came to a stop in front of a large door and took a deep breath.

“This is Hermione's room. Harry's is the one next to it.”

“Okay?”

“Have you calmed down?” Luna asked softly.

“What?”

“Susan was quite distraught when she arrived here earlier, I dare say that Hermione will not have changed that in the short time they were alone together. If you are calm and I am calm and Hermione is calm, it will be much easier to calm Susan than if you were not calm. Panic is very contagious, calm is also, but less so. Do you understand?” Luna stared at the other girl for a few seconds, waiting patiently for an answer.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, letting out a breath. “I'll be okay. I was mostly worried about Susan. She's okay so I am too.”

“Good.” Luna threw open the door to reveal Hermione doing her best to console a sobbing Susan.

“Sue,” Hannah cried, rushing to the other girl's side. “I'm so glad you're okay.”

“What about Aunt Amelia?” Susan sobbed.

"Your aunt will be fine," Luna assured the older girl. "Harry's there to look after her and Harry Potter always comes through. Who else can say they defeated Vol-Voldemort?" she winced slightly at the way she stuttered the name.

"Yeah," Susan agreed softly. "Too bad he couldn't save Cedric."

"That was after he'd won a deadly tournament and got ambushed," Luna replied. "He went expecting trouble this time, Harry can't lose." The girl's eyes were shining, it was clear that she believed every word she was saying. "He doesn't know how to."

"He's also got your Aunt Amelia to help him," Hermione added, doing her best to hide her nervousness.

"And all your Aunt's Aurors," Luna giggled. "Not even Volde-" she gulped "-him is stupid enough to tangle with all that."

"I guess so," Susan said despondently.

"They're right, Sue," Hannah assured her friend. "Everything will be fine. Your aunt will be here before you know it."

IIIIIIII

It had been almost an hour since she'd set herself in the big chair, it seemed like a year. Every second she was waiting for the door to burst open to admit a dozen masked killers, every minute could be her last. She nearly wet herself when a knock on the door disturbed her reverie.

“What is it?” she demanded.

“Potter and Granger here to see you,” one of the Aurors on her detail called back.

“Send them in,” she ordered, trying not to start cheering.

'Amelia' had a look of intense relief on her face when Phil and Harry walked into 'her' office.

“Who does Auror Tonks belong to?” 'Amelia' demanded.

“Me,” Harry replied firmly.

“How many men do you have with you right now?” she demanded.

“Ten magical and my non-magical driver,” Phil replied instantly.

“Are they in the office?” she asked hopefully.

“Right outside with yours,” Phil agreed. “I take it that something happened?”

“You could say that,” Tonks agreed, allowing her features to return to what passed for normal. “Be good enough to tell them to be on their guard please.”

While Phil relayed the instructions to his men, Tonks was opening the panic room to let her boss out.

“I said fifteen minutes, Auror Tonks!” Amelia shouted. “One five which I’m sure you will note is a much smaller number than six bloody zero. What in the hell gave you the notion that it would be a good idea to lock me in there for an hour?”

“The fact that we’ve got moles in your security detail,” Tonks replied. “I don’t know what you’re complaining about, boss. Your shiny new hidey hole comes equipped with food, water, and a toilet. Posh it is.”

“You forgot to add an exit,” Amelia said sourly.

“That would have appeared two hours after my death or removal from the office, which would amount to the same thing thanks to the new wards,” Tonks said, feeling almost giddy now that it looked like she was going to live to the end of the day. “Later if your office was occupied.”

“What’s this about the new wards killing you?” Amelia demanded, eyes narrowing. And why hadn’t anyone told her about that little detail.

“They’ll scramble my brains if you’re hiding and I’m removed from the office,” Tonks admitted. “We didn’t have the time or the skill to finesse it and I didn’t want to chance betraying you with a loose tongue.”

“I see.” Amelia glared at her Auror. “We will have words about that later. What makes you think that my security detail has been compromised?”

“Because it has been, boss,” Tonks replied. “We caught two of our own tampering with the wards, s’what caused me to burst in here. They broke after one of the retirees did something to them that you don’t want to

know about and I really wish I didn't know about and the two faced bastards spilled everything.”

“Why were they tampering with the wards?” Amelia felt faint, her security was made up of her most trusted Aurors. If she couldn't trust them . . . her chances of surviving to the end of the year had just taken a major hit.

“Either to prepare for the hit on your or to grab Susan to work as a lever on you,” Tonks replied. “Not sure, boss.”

“Who can we trust?”

“Close security for you and Susan is all muggleborn, half blood, and retired, pretty sure they're safe. It's the perimeter security that our traitors came from and now they're all tainted so far as I'm concerned,” Tonks answered. “Got ten here, five with Susan not counting Moody, and another six off duty. Mr. Granger brought ten more, plus his muggle bodyguard, plus Harry.”

“Thank you for that and for looking after Susan, Phil,” Amelia sighed.

“Happy to help,” Phil replied easily. “Also happy to suggest that you and she move in with us indefinitely.”

“She'll take you up on that,” Tonks interjected, not giving her boss a chance to reply. “Sooner than we'd planned, but better now than never.”

“Auror Tonks, I-”

“I'm the boss when it comes to your health and safety along with Healer Rage,” Tonks interrupted. “You're the boss when it comes to everything else. If you have a problem with the way I do my job, you always have the option of firing me, boss.”

“True,” Amelia agreed. “Keep the perimeter going around my house and set the wards to record daily portkeys from here to there. Let's let our friends think that I won't run and see what happens,” she suggested. “I also want you . . . damn, you'll be at Hogwarts. Pick someone to poke through the perimeter, leave the bad apples and pull out anyone trustworthy. I'd rather not throw good Aurors away when the balloon goes up.”

“No problem, boss. I'd also like your permission to trap the hell out of the place. If the bastards are going to hit your house, I wanna make them bleed for it, even if the place is going to be empty,” Tonks said with a savage grin.

“Something Harry's company is happy to help with at depressingly reasonable rates,” Phil interjected. “Assuming of course that they aren't too busy with their other contracts.”

“You have a company, Harry?” Tonks blurted.

“We'll talk about it later,” Harry promised. “For now, let me be the first one to congratulate you on making Voldemort's hit list. It's always nice to have company.”

“I hear it gets lonely at the top,” Amelia commiserated with the boy. “Here's hoping I don't take your place.”

“Here's hoping you don't lose yours either,” Harry replied with a wide grin. “How likely do you think it is that Voldemort's purebloods would be able to track you if you used muggle transportation to get to and from the Ministry?”

“I can set it up so it looks like you're still coming and going by portkey everyday, boss,” Tonks volunteered. “Would actually make your scheme with the wards easier to pull off if I didn't have to hide the extra trails.”

“Make it so,” Amelia agreed. “Any other business?”

“One piece,” Phil agreed. “Hogwarts is being a bit difficult with security. I've managed to suborn their Defense Professor, but the Headmaster absolutely refuses to allow private security on school grounds except in an emergency.”

“I'll have a talk with him about that,” Amelia promised. “Might take a few weeks to pressure him into it.”

“Might take less time if something happens,” Tonks said sourly. “I want more men. Two thirds awake at all times, one third geared up and ready to leave at a moment's notice, one third ready to go in a few minutes, one third asleep.”

“Done,” Phil agreed. “I'm going to assume that Charlie is going to want to meet with you concerning this. We'll be by his office later today if you'd like a lift.”

“Please,” Amelia said. “One more thing. Could you have someone tell Susan that I’m alright? She worries about me.”

“We can call home from the car and you can tell her yourself,” Phil replied.

Tonks let her features shift back into her boss' face. “Let's go.”

“You've got my face again, Auror Tonks,” Amelia pointed out.

“Gives the bastards an extra thing to think about if they try to cause trouble,” she replied.

“In that case, I'd prefer it if you looked like Harry,” Amelia replied.

“I'd prefer it if you didn't,” Harry said quickly, not wanting to throw away something he recognized to be a potential advantage in the event that things turned nasty. “They expect you to be here, they don't expect me.”

“So?”

“So there's a good chance they won't even see me if they decide to make a move,” Harry explained. “Bloody hard to explain but I have trouble noticing things that my brain doesn't think are important when I get into a fight.”

“Tunnel vision. He's right, boss,” Tonks agreed.

“Fine,” Amelia sighed. “But if you get hurt, Harry, I'm going to make both your and Auror Tonks' lives a living hell.”

“So long as we're all alive, you can do whatever you want,” Harry agreed, unconsciously echoing Tonks' earlier statement.

IIIIIIII

The girls all looked up when they heard a soft knock on the door. The minutes had felt like centuries as they waited for some word on the fate of their loved ones.

“Come in!” Hermione yelled.

“Phone call for Ms. Susan, it is her aunt Amelia,” the butler replied, holding out the tray with the antique phone.

Susan snatched the device and stared at it, trying to divine its secrets.

“Hold this end up to your ear and talk in a normal voice,” Hermione explained. She turned to the butler. “Thank you for bringing this, she was worried sick.”

“Understandable,” the man replied. “Will you be requiring anything else?”

“Some snacks would be good,” Hermione replied after a moment of thought.

“I'll have them sent up shortly,” the man agreed.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 16

IIIIIIII

Amelia put down the phone with a relieved smile. Both Susan and Hannah were as safe as they were likely to be without leaving the country. Personal matters completed, it was time to get back to business.

“I need to have a meeting with M, if you please,” Amelia announced.

“Of course,” Phil agreed. “To the club,” he ordered.

"Yes, sir," the driver replied promptly.

“Would you like us to wait or for me to send another car to pick you up?” Phil asked.

“A car would be lovely,” Amelia replied.

IIIIIIII

Ron had worked hard on the essay in front of him, harder than he had on anything else in the past. Five times he'd gone over it to check the spelling, ten times he'd changed bits of it, and fifteen times he'd thrown earlier drafts away to start with a fresh piece of parchment.

“Mum,” he said nervously. “Would you mind checking this for me?”

“Of course, dear,” Molly agreed. “What class is it for?”

“It's for Harry,” Ron replied. “The twins said that he's the best businessman they know and told me that he agreed to give me some advice if I'd give him a business plan.”

“That was nice of him,” Molly mumbled. She took the parchment out of his hand and began going over it.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “Twins say they might have a big new client thanks to Harry and that they just need Harry to negotiate the deal.”

“They're not taking advantage of him are they?” Molly asked.

"No, mum, they told me that they let him have a third of their company in exchange for his help." Ron grinned. "Not sure they told him that last bit though."

“Those boys.” Molly shook her head in exasperation. “At least it's looking like their dreams might succeed.”

IIIIIIII

Amelia glanced at her shadow as they stepped into her colleague's outer office. Time for a bit of alone time.

“Wait here, Auror Tonks,” Amelia ordered.

“Boss?”

“I'm going to have a quiet meeting with one of my counterparts in the muggle government, I shall not need you with me,” Amelia explained.

“One of your armed counterparts,” Tonks said flatly. “Best if I'm there to keep an eye on the situation, boss.”

“Best if you do what you're told,” Amelia growled.

“Yes, boss,” Tonks sighed. She walked over to one of the seats and collapsed into it.

“Always the way, isn't it?” the secretary sighed. “We do our best to take care of them and they don't listen.”

“How she even lived a week without me, I'll never know,” Tonks agreed. “I'm Tonks.”

“Jane,” the woman introduced herself. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Pleasure is all mine,” Tonks said automatically.

IIIIIIII

Amelia walked into the office and went through the normal formalities while taking a seat across from the other man.

“Pleased to see me?” she asked.

“Pleased to see you in one piece,” Charlie agreed. “Though it would have simplified things if you weren't.”

“Bastard,” Amelia laughed.

“Always on the look out for that mythical silver lining,” he countered.

“Cards on the table, Amelia, we're both hoping to recruit young Mr. Potter in a few years. I see no reason why we can't work out a deal now to save us all a bit of trouble later,” Charlie said with a grin. “Forgive my rudeness, would you care for a cigar and something to drink?”

"Please," Amelia said approvingly.

"Gin alright with you?"

"As long as it's not watered down too much," she teased.

Charlie opened a cabinet to reveal an assortment of bottles and carefully selected one. "Navy Gin?" he asked, holding it up for the woman's inspection.

"It's fine," Amelia replied.

"Care to mix it with anything, tonic, bitters?"

"Straight," Amelia said.

“Right you are,” he agreed, pouring two tumblers. “Started drinking the stuff on my midshipman's cruse and never gave it up.” He walked back to his desk and slid one of the tumblers across to his guest. Then, he opened his humidor and took out two massive cigars. “My best man

managed to steal several cases from Castro.” Did a bit to make up for all the bloody headaches the bastard had caused over the years.

“Why not buy them?” Amelia asked, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “I’m sure I saw a nice little shop down the street that might carry them.”

“Now where’s the fun in that?” he retorted.

“Regarding young Mr. Potter.” Amelia took a sip. “The main problem that I foresee is that you are focused mainly on dealing with external threats, while I am focused on dealing with internal.” Another sip.

“Your Minister has made it quite clear on a number of occasions that he sees his reports to the PM as a formality,” Charlie pointed out. “Leaving that aside, my duty is to deal with threats to the realm no matter where they originate.”

“True,” Amelia agreed. “There’s also the fact that my department has been bitten by forces from overseas before. We do not have much capability to strike outside, but it is supposed to be one of the duties assigned to the DMLE. One of my predecessors snagged it, and the budget, when they were going through another round of reorganization.” “What’s the budget?”

“Enough to pay one full time employee to have lunch three times a week,” Amelia sighed. “It got cut in the same round of reorganizations that brought it to my department.”

“We've got a few years before he leaves school to work that out.”
Charlie took a draw from his cigar. “All I'm hoping for now is for us to come to some sort of agreement that we'll reach an agreement in the future.”

"How about that we'll reach an agreement about reaching an agreement to reach an agreement?" Amelia joked.

“That too.”

“I have no problem with the concept of sharing young Mr. Potter if we manage to coax him into our line of work,” Amelia offered.

“Smashing. Now that we've got that out of the way, I may be able to offer a bit of assistance with your loyalty problem.”

“How much?”

“Three of my agents are magical, I know of fifteen more in various branches of the military, six in the police, and eight more in some sort of government service. Being from my world, they're unlikely to be compromised by your 'dark lord' Voldemort.”

“I'd appreciate any help I can get,” Amelia said gratefully.

“All else fails we can talk to the Americans and the Commonwealth. Though that's something I'd rather like to avoid, be a bit like dealing with a rat infestation by introducing dozens of snakes.” Charlie flicked a bit of ash off of his cigar. “I'm also willing to provide a bit of non-magical assistance if you'd care for it.”

IIIIIIII

All four girls were waiting eagerly at the door when Phil and Harry arrived back at the house from their outing.

“Where's aunty Amelia?” Susan demanded.

“Having a business meeting with Hermione's godfather,” Phil replied. “She's got Auror Tonks with her and one of our drivers is meeting her.”

“Oh.” Susan relaxed a touch. “Do you know what happened?”

“Someone was testing your security,” Harry said. “We're working with your Aunt to make sure you'll all stay safe.”

“Okay,” Susan sighed. “Thank you, Harry.”

“Ron sent a letter to you by way of me, Harry,” Hermione announced.

“Oh?” he prompted.

“It's his business plan, I took a look at it and it looks alright to me,” she said. “I did make a couple corrections, but nothing major.”

“Meaning the spelling and grammar isn't too bad,” Phil sighed. “How did the business aspect look, darling?”

Hermione gave a disinterested shrug in reply. “I think it's okay, daddy, his sums were correct anyway.”

Harry took the letter from his friend and gave it a quick read through. “I see two major problems that Ron's facing. The cost of materials and his lack of skill”

“Neither is insurmountable,” Phil replied. “May I?”

“Sure,” Harry agreed, handing over the parchment.

“Unless there's something I'm missing, his material's cost is monstrous,” Phil agreed. “Did you have any ideas on how to approach the lack of skill, Harry?”

“Thinking of pointing him in the direction of a furniture maker or something,” Harry replied.

"I have a friend at Holland & Holland that may be able to help with the skill issue," Phil mused. "Bastard had better, considering the amount of money the family has given his company over the years. Mind if I make a few calls, Harry?"

“Please do,” Harry agreed.

IIIIIIII

Amelia walked out of the meeting and into the outer office to collect her Auror with a new sense of confidence. For the first time, she felt like they had a chance of winning things without having to pay a horrific cost.

“Come along, Tonks,” Amelia said as she walked across the room.
“We'd best be getting back to Susan before she worries too much.”

“Jane had a thought, boss,” Tonks said as she fell into step behind Amelia. “Dumbledore won't let me put security in the school, but we've got a few researchers we could offer up to help with all the new spells Harry is inventing.”

“Do it,” Amelia agreed. “Good work, Tonks.”

“Mostly Jane's idea,” Tonks said modestly.

“Activate anyone on the retired rolls that we can legitimately claim to be a researcher of some sort,” Amelia ordered. “See if we can get Healer Rage in the Hospital wing.”

“Boss?”

“Something bad happens in the Department, I want rally points ready, see if you can move the Abbots to the Granger house too. Speak with the Grangers first, point out the benefits of having fully trained healers around.”

“Don't think there'll be any problems there, boss,” Tonks replied.

“Good.”

IIIIIIII

Ron was waiting with his mother in the kitchen when Harry's owl arrived. With baited breath, he took the letter, slit the envelope open with his index finger and read the short note. His shoulders sagged as the tension left his frame. Should have known his best mate would know what to do.

“What did Harry say?” Molly asked. She was rather enjoying being a part of her son's new business venture.

“Harry says I have two big problems to take care of,” Ron replied. “Says that he's going to see what he can do about finding a solution.”

“What problems?” Molly prompted.

“Says I'm paying too much for the wood,” Ron said. “Which I am, but I couldn't get it any cheaper from the broom company and couldn't get the right grade anywhere else. Says he has a few ideas that might work there.”

“What was the other problem?”

“Says I'm good but need to be better, which is true,” he admitted.

“Harry's going to try to arrange something through his muggle contacts.”

“Well . . . be sure to thank him for all the help he's giving you,” Molly said after a moment of thought. Once again blessing the fact that her children had been able to make such good friends during their time at Hogwarts.

“Gonna do more than that, mum, gonna give him part of the company,” Ron replied with a grin. “That way he has more motivation to keep helping me.”

“Did the twins suggest that?” Molly demanded.

“It's a good idea, mum,” Ron defended his older brothers.

“It is,” Molly agreed. “Remind me to do something nice for them.”

IIIIIIII

Amelia was immediately ambushed by her niece the second she walked through the front door, grunting as the girl threw herself at the only parent figure she'd ever known.

“I was so worried,” Susan sobbed into her aunt's chest.

“So was Auror Tonks,” Amelia murmured. “Can you believe that she locked me in a safe room for two hours?”

“Good for her,” Susan replied firmly. “She's just doing her job.”

“You tell her, kid,” Tonks agreed loudly. Always nice to have influence with people that had influence with her charge. Maybe they could get the woman to take her security more seriously if they worked together. Tonks gave a mental snort, and maybe they'd get a Minister that could pour piss from a boot without the help of a dozen aides and a hefty bribe some day. May as well hope for a manor house on the moon while she was at it.

“What did I tell you about ganging up on me, Auror Tonks?” Amelia demanded in a low voice that warned all of a possible explosion.

“Can't chat now, boss, gotta walk the grounds and check the wards,” Tonks said, making a hasty exit.

“What do you think about staying here the rest of the holiday?” Amelia asked.

“I'd rather stay with you, Aunt Amelia,” Susan replied.

“What if I were to stay here too?”

“It'd be great, Aunt Amelia,” Susan replied. “Hermione suggested having Hannah and I stay with her and Luna in her room.”

“How big is it?” Amelia asked with a grin.

“Bigger than the entrance hall at home and it has a closet that's bigger than my room and it has a bathroom that's bigger than the closet and an attached library that's bigger than everything else put together,” Susan giggled. “Hermione was terribly embarrassed that she didn't have another bedroom in her hall to give us without kicking Harry out and wouldn't stop apologizing at how cramped things were going to be.”

Wasn't till Hannah had pointed out the fact that their rooms at Hogwarts didn't afford half as much personal space that the other girl had finally settled down. Susan's statement that she felt better being around other people had finished the matter.

IIIIIIII

Phil found Harry meeting with his business associates regarding their plan to screw Harry's polo buddy out of large quantities of money.

“Charlie is coming here later today,” Phil announced.

“Oh?” Harry looked up.

“He's bringing Hermione's Uncle Jim and someone else from the office,” Phil continued. “I've also spoken with Holland & Holland and they tell me that they'd be delighted to have Ron over at our convenience.”

“Tomorrow work for you?” Harry asked.

“Perfectly,” Phil agreed.

Harry jotted down a quick note and handed it to George. “Pass that on to Ron please, just asking him to drop by tomorrow.”

“No problem, Harry,” George agreed.

“We'll see that he gets it,” Fred agreed.

“Good.” Harry grinned. “Let's talk strategy. Goal is to bilk as much money out of our friend Charlie as possible without alienating him so we can bilk him again in the future. Keeping in mind the fact that no plan survives first contact with the enemy, here's what I was thinking we should do . . .”

IIIIIIII

Anne motioned for Amelia to take a seat as they walked into her office. Much as she might wish otherwise, there were scores of men in the world that wished to do harm to her and her loved ones. It was time to see what she could do about that.

“I'm told that Dumbledore has decided to be a problem,” Anne said, starting the meeting and setting the initial tone.

“He refuses to allow private security to enter the school and I'm unable to assign Aurors without causing trouble with the Minister,” Amelia agreed.

“Have you spoken with Augusta Longbottom?” Anne asked.

“No,” Amelia admitted. “But I should have since she's on the Board of Governors and likely to be sympathetic to our position.”

“Do you mind if I arrange a meeting for the three of us?”

“Please do,” Amelia replied.

Anne made a note in her memo book. “Do you happen to know what the foundation of Dumbledore's objections are?”

“He says that if he allows one student to have private security, he has to allow all of them to,” Amelia sighed. “Considering the fact that a

number of students are the children of known or suspected Death Eaters . . .”

“Yes, I see,” Anne sighed. “Would it help to have the non-magical government apply pressure?”

“Not with the Dumbledore situation, could possibly help with our troubles with the Ministry,” Amelia said after a moment of thought.

“Something else to discuss when we meet with Augusta.”

IIIIIIII

Tonks was trying to find her way around the massive Granger Manor when she was accosted by a frowning maid.

“There you are,” the woman huffed. “We've been looking all over for you.”

“Been a bit lost,” Tonks admitted. “What's up?”

“Mr. Thomas wanted to introduce you and Ms. Jane and the team you're taking to Hogwarts,” the maid replied.

“Who's Ms. Jane?” Tonks asked as she followed the maid down the hall. “Not the same one from the club?”

“No. This one is your new boss,” the Maid replied. “She's in charge of Ms. Hermione's safety.”

IIIIIIII

Harry was waiting at the door for his guests when they arrived for the meeting about the twins' inventions.

“Harry,” Charlie said with a grin. “Brought a new face with me. Meet my good friend Geoffrey Boothroyd.” He waved to a short grey haired gentleman.

“Hermione calls me Uncle Geoffrey,” the man said, holding out his hand. “Please call me Geoffrey, a pleasure, Mr. Potter.”

"The pleasure is mine, Geoffrey, please call me Harry," he replied.
"When would you gentlemen like to see our little demonstration?"

“As soon as we get a chance to raid Phil's humidor and liquor cabinet for the good stuff,” Charlie replied.

“Jokes on you, my wastrel brother in law's already cleaned me out,” Phil replied.

“Meaning you hid the good stuff so well that even James couldn't find it,” Geoffrey interpreted. “No mean feat.”

“The chairs have been set up behind the stables and refreshments have been arranged, sir,” the butler announced.

“Thank you,” Phil said. “Harry, it's your show, lead the way.”

IIIIIIII

Tonks' grin was so wide it threatened to split her face when she walked into the meeting room and saw how many familiar faces it contained. Many of which, she'd never expected to see again. Four were housemates that had graduated within a year of her own, five were former colleagues, and two were cousins on her father's side of the family. The last was someone special.

"Flint you worthless bitch, I thought you'd been run out of the magical world?" Tonks squealed, pulling the other woman into a hug.

"Thought it prudent to avoid my family after shaming them with my marriage to a muggleborn," the woman replied.

"You got married and didn't invite me?"

"We didn't invite anyone," she corrected. "Steven wanted me to pass on his regrets that he couldn't be here to see you again."

"What's the bastard doing right now?" Tonks asked eagerly.

"Lt. McLain's ship should be docking in Gibraltar where he'll receive orders to get on a plane and come home," Thomas announced as he strode confidently into the room. "I see you have met your new team?"

"Lot's of familiar faces," Tonks replied. "Flint . . . uh, Ms. McLain was a prefect when I was a firsty."

"And her field training officer when she became an Auror," the woman said with a grin. "Means I got quite a few embarrassing stories for blackmail if I need 'em."

“It gonna be a problem taking orders from an old subordinate?” Thomas' voice was so calm it was almost emotionless.

“I was a field Auror, Tonks handles the Director's security,” she grinned. “I'd have a problem giving her orders, not taking them.”

The door opened again to admit the Granger family librarian.

“Which one of you is Tonks?” the woman demanded.

“I am,” Tonks replied.

“I've read your record but I don't know you,” the woman began. “We need to have a long meeting tomorrow.”

“Alright,” Tonks agreed. “I need to spend some time getting reacquainted with my new team, but I guess I can spare a few hours.”

"That's reasonable," the woman conceded. Her eyes flicked around the room once more before she took her leave.

"So, McLain, why don't you start by telling me how soft you've let yourself get since you left the department."

"You can stick with Flint, Tonkey, best avoid any confusion," Lt. McLain's wife announced cheerfully.

IIIIIIII

Harry suppressed a grin when he noticed the looks on the faces of Charlie and his retinue. He had them hooked, now all that remained was to set it and reel them in.

“So what do you think?” he asked casually.

"We might have some use for some of it," Charlie said, pasting a look of boredom on his face. "What's say you license us the designs for..." He wrote a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Harry. "I think you'll find that more than reasonable."

"It's a good offer," Harry said, glancing at the number. "Only thing I can see wrong with it is the fact that you forgot to add a few zeros onto the end."

"I didn't," Charlie replied.

"I see," Harry laughed. "Phil said you were a joker, I didn't see it till now." He wrote another number on the paper. "I think you'll find this one much more realistic. That does not, of course, include royalties or my own fee."

George glanced over Harry's shoulder and his eyes bulged at the amount.

A frown appeared on Charlie's face when he saw the number and he handed the paper to Geoffrey who bore a look of disinterest on his own.

"Pay up," Hermione's Uncle Jim advised. "Unless you can find another source, he's got the market tied up."

“I shall require your two inventors to make themselves available for consultations I may further require them to make time for priority custom orders if the situation requires it,” Geoffrey stated. “I shall also require you to provide me with a preliminary order of five thousand of each unit for testing purposes,” he added firmly. “If you are willing to agree to that, I believe that we may have the beginnings of a deal.”

“Can you make five thousand of each?” Harry asked the twins.

“If we can get some help, we can have them ready in two weeks,” George said after a moment of thought.

“Call it a month and we'll do our best to beat the deadline,” Fred corrected.

“How much help?” Harry demanded.

“Lee and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team would be a good start,” Fred replied.

“Alright,” Harry agreed. He turned back to his guests. “A month work for you?”

“I would prefer to have it sooner,” Geoffrey replied. “What additional costs would it require to guarantee the two week deadline?”

“A bigger labor pool to draw from,” Harry replied. “We'll try, but I'm not willing to make promises I don't know I can keep.”

“It will have to do,” Geoffrey sighed.

“I think we have a deal,” Charlie said with a grin. “Pleasure, Harry.”

“Anytime, Charlie.”

“You know he'd have gone higher, don't you?” Hermione's Uncle asked.

“I prefer not to bleed him out all at once,” Harry explained. “You've heard the story of the goose that laid the golden egg, haven't you?”

“Spent far too much time around Phil,” Charlie laughed.

“Mind if we duck out, Harry?” George asked.

“We really need to get started on this order,” Fred agreed.

“Whatever you want,” Harry said. “Call me if you have any delays or you even think you might have a delay and I'll see what I can do to fix it.”

“We will-”

“-Harry.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 17

IIIIIIII

The twins arrived home looking both drained and exuberant just as Molly was setting food on the table for their evening meal.

“What took you boys so long?” she asked, giving them the benefit of doubt.

“There was an emergency at the Ministry that Harry had to deal with before he could meet with our newest customer,” George replied.

“Netted us a big order,” Fred added.

“How big?” Molly asked.

“Big enough that we aren't going to be able to do anything but work and eat for the next couple weeks,” George said with a grin.

“Gonna need to bring in a lot of help to complete it,” Fred added. “But it'll bring in more money than either of us have seen in our lives, even after paying off our expenses and giving Harry his share,” he finished excitedly.

“Might be a better idea to reinvest most of it back into the business,” Molly said, shocking herself. “What do you think, Arthur?”

“Depends on if this order is a one time thing or if it has a chance of happening again,” he replied.

“Shouldn't be just a one time thing, dad,” Fred replied.

“Invest a portion of it into the business, save a bit of it, and celebrate with a very small piece of it,” Arthur advised.

“I'll let you slack off on studying for a bit so you can do your work, but I expect you two to make up for it later,” Molly said sternly.

“No problem-”

“-mum.” George turned to his younger brother. “Harry wanted us to deliver this to you.” He handed the boy an envelope. “Should say something about meeting with him tomorrow if you can make it. I'd do everything I could to make it if I were you.”

“Harry has a way of turning dreams and half-formed plans into reality,” Fred agreed.

“Thanks,” Ron replied. He opened it and gave the note a quick read.

“Won't be here for lunch tomorrow, mum.”

“Alright,” Molly agreed.

“You say there was an emergency at the Ministry?” Arthur asked.

“Yeah, dad-”

“-don't think we're supposed to talk about it thought.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione awoke the next morning and was mildly surprised to see Hannah and Susan sharing a bed, she hadn't realized they were that close.

“Susan had a nightmare last night,” Hannah explained, noticing the other girl's interest.

“Oh.” Hermione nodded. “Wake me up if it happens again and I'll join you . . . um, if you think that would help, Susan.”

“Thanks, Hermione,” Susan croaked.

“Myself as well,” Luna agreed. “We're all friends here.” She paused, enjoying the warm feeling the truth of that statement brought. “So I think I speak for Hermione when I say that we'll be willing to do anything to make you feel better.”

“You're doing enough,” Susan said with a weak smile. “I had a dream last night that Aunty Amelia . . .” her voice caught.

“I'm sure that'll never happen,” Luna said firmly. “Not with Harry helping her.” It was clear from the blonde's tone that she had absolute faith in the boy-who-lived.

“Yeah,” Susan agreed.

The four girls sat in silence for a few moments until Hermione decided to break it.

“Would anyone like breakfast?” Hermione asked. “I could have some brought up if you don't want to get out of bed.”

A firm knock on the door interrupted any of the possible responses.

“Yes?” Hermione asked.

The door opened and Amelia walked in, shadowed as always by Tonks.

"They told me you were up and I wanted to stop in before I left," Amelia explained.

"You're going to work after what happened?!" Susan cried out in dismay.

“Someone has to do my job and the danger won't disappear if I quit,” Amelia replied.

“It'll get worse,” Tonks predicted. “Your Aunt Amelia's possible replacements range from bad to terrible.”

“Main thing I wanted to tell you is that Auror Tonks is going to be in charge of your security from now on,” Amelia continued.

“What about you?” Susan demanded.

"I'm sicking Mad Eye on her," Tonks chirped. "You thought I was paranoid," she giggled. "I'm taking your new detail, Mad Eye and your old detail get lumped into your Aunt's. There'll be more wands looking after the Director than there ever was in the past."

"More looking after you and your friends too, Susan," Amelia added. "I'm also going to be staying here with the Grangers so we can pool our resources."

"Keep quiet about that if you would, kids," Tonks interrupted. "I'm hoping to use your house to ambush anyone stupid enough to try to attack your Aunt. Got a tentative contract with Harry to booby-trap the hell out of the place."

"Feeling better about this?" Amelia asked gently. "It's still dangerous, nothing in life is truly safe, but this is as safe as we can make it given the circumstances."

"Okay," Susan agreed.

"Now that everyone is on the same page, you lot have an appointment later today with Ms. Jane," Tonks continued. "She said you could do it before or after lunch."

"What's the appointment about?" Hermione asked.

"Your friends are going to learn the dog pile game and you're going to get a refresher course," Tonks replied.

“She yells down, you drop to the ground, and then she jumps on top of you and tickles you,” Hermione explained. “Why are we going to do that again?” She rather thought that she'd outgrown it to be honest. Still, she didn't really have the heart to say know if the woman wanted to relive the past. The woman had been a constant presence in her life for her whole life after all.

“I'll let her deal with that question,” Tonks said, amused by the girl's obliviousness. She couldn't blame the kid, if you grew up surrounded by security, things like that were normal. It was the world that was strange. “Questions?” There were none. “Good. Now then, I was outside the door earlier and I heard someone say something about breakfast in bed?”

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed. “I figured it might be a good idea this morning.”

“It's a good idea every morning,” Tonks said, kicking off her shoes. “Budge over.” She hopped into bed next to Hermione. “Tell 'em to give me a double serving.”

“Alright,” Hermione agreed, amused by the older woman's antics. “Anyone else want two servings?”

“Better not,” Tonks advised. “You lot don't live the active life I do, you'll swell up like balloons if you eat as like me.”

“As fun as that sounds, I think we'll put that off for now,” Hannah said dryly.

“Looks like Auror Tonks has everything in hand,” Amelia observed. She walked over to the bed to give her niece a hug. “I’ll see you later today, Susan.”

“Bye, Aunt Amelia,” Susan replied. “I’ll miss you.”

“I will miss you too,” Amelia said, giving her niece one last squeeze.

IIIIIIII

Ron stumbled through the fireplace and onto the thickest softest carpet he'd seen in his life. It was like someone had thrown a giant mattress onto the floor and, in hindsight at least, was the perfect thing to put in front of a fireplace to catch people coming out.

“What're you doing here, Ron?” a familiar voice asked.

“Here to meet with Harry, what're you doing here, Bill?” Ron replied.

“Helping set up the wards,” Bill said. “I think Harry's having breakfast. I could have someone show you the way.”

“Just point me in the right direction, I can find him myself,” Ron said.

“No you can't,” Bill laughed. “Not in this place.”

“What?”

“Ron, I've been coming here for the last couple weeks and I still get lost. Think back to when you first got to Hogwarts.”

“Bloody hell,” Ron gasped, head swiveling as he processed the sheer size of the room. “There are houses that big? How did Harry get to live in one?”

“It's Hermione's,” Bill explained.

“Bloody hell,” Ron repeated. “No wonder she can afford so many books.”

“Explains a few things,” Bill agreed. He reached over and pulled a bell rope. “She doesn't see what the big deal is since her real house in London is much smaller.”

“How big is her house in London?”

“Big, but nothing like this place,” Bill said. The door opened to admit a smiling servant. “This is my younger brother, Ron, he's here to have a meeting with Harry.”

“Follow me, Mr. Ron,” the servant ordered.

“Later, Bill,” Ron mumbled.

“Later, Ron,” Bill replied.

Ron followed the man down a bewildering set of halls to a table where Harry was having breakfast with Hermione's parents.

“Have a seat, Ron,” Harry called out. “You know Hermione's parents, don't you?”

“We've met a couple times,” Ron agreed.

“Have you had breakfast yet?” Anne asked. “Can we offer you anything?”

“I'm fine,” Ron said. “Thank you.”

“Shall we get started on business?” Harry asked.

“Sure,” Ron agreed.

“The twins have asked me to give you a bit of money to help you get started.” Harry held up a hand to stall the coming explosion. “They also told me that they'd like to toss in some of their own, Hermione is also interested in providing a bit of backing.” Though in her case it was more to help out a friend and less in hopes of sharing in future profits.

“You don't have to give me any money, Harry,” Ron muttered. “If I fail, I'd rather not drag anyone else down with me.”

“It's because I think you'll succeed that I'm willing to put up money,” Harry laughed. “I'd still help if I thought you might fail, but I wouldn't give you a pence . . . uh, knut.”

“Oh.”

“As I said in my letter, the two main problems that immediately came to mind when I looked over your business plan yesterday were that you were being charged too much on materials and that you need to improve your skill level. After thinking about it, I'm going to add that you probably need a better set of tools.” Harry raised a finger as he listed each thing. “Phil has managed to track down a number of possible sources for wood that you'll have to inspect before you decide if any of them will be suitable. Says they're considered high grade in the muggle world but neither of us knows enough to be able to say if they're good enough to carve a broom out of.” Harry was more than a bit ashamed to have to admit that last particular bit of information. “If they are, you should be able to cut your expenses by at least sixty percent.”

“That'd be great,” Ron said brightly. “Thanks, Harry.”

“As for the other two issues, Phil has arranged a tour of a company that works with wood,” Harry continued.

“And steel,” Phil interjected. “It's a gunmaker, the wood is for the stocks.”

“Gonne?” Ron asked.

Phil waved one of the servants forward. The man placed a long leather wrapped case on the table and opened it up to reveal the velvet lined interior.

“Bought this about one year ago,” Phil said, carefully lifting a beautifully made double barrel over under shotgun out of its equally well

made protective case. “Thought you might want to get a look at the woodwork before we go.”

“It's incredible,” Ron whispered. A thousand times better than anything he could turn out. “How did they manage to make something so beautiful?”

“I'm hoping that the tour will give you an idea,” Phil replied. “If so, we can arrange for you to spend a bit of time there learning the trade.”

“That'd be wizard,” Ron replied with a grin. “Merlin, I don't know how to thank you.”

“Anything for one of Hermione's friends,” Phil replied. He replaced the gun in its case and handed the case back to the servant. “Be able to get a set of tools or at the very least a lead on where we can get tools during the tour. That done, you can start focusing on your business.”

“When do we leave?” Ron asked eagerly.

“After we finish eating,” Harry replied.

“Hurry up,” Ron demanded with a grin. “We've places to be and got things to do.”

“I think I liked you better when you were a lazy unmotivated git,” Harry said thoughtfully, regarding his friend the same way he'd regard an insect in his soup.

“I think I liked you better when you were an ignorant well rested buffoon,” Ron retorted, chin in the air, looking for all the world like an offended Malfoy.

IIIIIIII

Hermione and the other girls emerged a couple hours after lunch and set about searching for their green eyed classmate.

“Where's Harry?” Hermione asked one of the servants.

“Mr. Harry is off with your father and Mr. Ron to tour Holland & Holland,” the maid replied.

“And he didn't say goodbye to us first?” Susan sniffed.

“We'll make him pay for that,” Hannah promised with a frown. She managed to keep her expression for almost three seconds before dissolving into a fit of giggles with the other girls.

“I guess we could go meet with Ms. Jane now since Harry isn't around,” Hermione suggested.

IIIIIIII

Phil poured himself a glass of orange juice as the driver slowed the car. Traffic was an unpleasant fact of life in London, he pitied the poor buggers that were stuck behind the wheel driving themselves on days like this.

“Feel free to make yourself something if you'd like,” Phil said.

Both boys poured themselves a glass of juice. The confused look on Ron's face when he took the first sip was priceless.

“I've spoken to a contact at Purdey and they'd also be delighted to give a tour,” Phil continued. “I have no doubt that the other gunmakers would be just as delighted.” They would be if they knew what was good for them anyway.

“How long before we get there?” Ron asked. “I've been in cars before, but they never stopped in the road like this.”

“Not everyone has magic to get around traffic,” Harry laughed.

“There's such a thing?” Phil asked eagerly. “How much for you to arrange it for my cars?”

“Fifty million pounds or your first born,” Harry retorted.

“Cheap at half the price,” he laughed. “Let's see, you've already got my first born, why don't we say I paid in advance?” Phil suggested. He smiled at the deep blush that appeared on Harry's face. “To answer your question, Ron. It all depends, shouldn't be more than an hour.”

“Okay,” Ron agreed. “Any advice?”

“Do you have a sample of your work?” Phil asked.

Ron reached into his pocket and pulled out a half completed wooden chain. "It's one of the exercises Madame Hooch suggested," he explained. "Got a couple more little pieces in my pockets that I'm working on."

IIIIIIII

Bill walked into the staff break room with a confused look on his face and collapsed into the nearest chair.

"Problem?" Remus asked.

"I got called back to Gringotts regarding the work I've been doing here," Bill replied.

"Are we going to have to find a new warder?"

"No, we're getting another dozen curse breakers and I'm getting half pay from Gringotts to supervise," Bill said. "I don't understand it, I've never seen them act like this before."

"Harry is a very influential wizard," Remus pointed out.

"I don't think he's the reason for all the odd behavior," Bill said.

"There'll also be a tailor coming later today."

"What for?"

"Gringotts is hoping to sell us new clothing," Bill replied.

“I take it there's something special about it?” Remus prompted.

“Without being charmed, it'll take anything up to the killing curse,” Bill agreed. “With charms . . .” he trailed off. “I don't think they've tested it.”

“We're not that lucky,” Remus stated. “I'll go have a word with Thomas and James,” he said after a moment of thought. “If nothing else, I'm sure they'll be interested to hear if it's better than what they're already using.”

IIIIIIII

Ron's eyes were shining as he watched the craftsmen work their magic. This was what he needed to learn, this was what would allow him to live up to his potential and accomplish his dream of becoming the premiere broommaker in the United Kingdom.

“I understand that you do a bit of woodwork yourself,” the stock maker that was conducting the tour said as the tour ended.

“A bit,” Ron admitted. “Nothing like this.”

“Got any of your work with you?”

“Some,” Ron agreed.

“Let's have a look.” The man held out his hand with an expectant look on his face.

Ron reached into his pocket and pulled out the first thing his fingers closed on. It was a small, almost perfectly spherical, wooden ball.

“Steady hand,” the stock maker said, examining the object. “Any reason you used pine?”

“Pine is cheap,” Ron replied.

“It is,” the stock maker agreed. “It's also soft, better to practice on hardwood if you can. I'll see that you get a box of scraps on your way out.”

“Thank you,” Ron said with a grin.

“If it's not too much trouble, please see that he gets a list of tools too, please,” Harry interjected. “A supplier would help also.”

“I'll include a spare set with the wood scraps,” the stock maker promised. He turned back to Ron. “Any chance you could spend more time here to pick up a few things?”

“I don't know,” Ron replied. “I'm supposed to be at school till June. Think you can arrange something, Harry?”

“Should be able to,” Harry agreed.

IIIIIIII

Moody stormed into the Director's office, collapsed into a chair, and propped his foot and peg up onto her desk. From his expression, Amelia could see that this was not going to be a fun meeting. As it happened, she was right.

“Well?” she prompted.

“Well we're completely and totally buggered,” he barked. “You've got moles, you've got corruption, and you've got incompetence. Quite a bit of cross over in those three categories and the numbers of them are much higher than the numbers of good reliable Aurors.”

“Segregate the good Aurors, have them assigned to my security detail, Hogsmead, and St. Mungoes. Put the rest into places they can do the least amount of Harm like guarding the Minister. Find something relatively safe for the merely incompetent where they won't get in our way,” she ordered. Damn it.

“Already done,” Moody laughed. “Going to go through the other Departments under your command next. Also need to find an excuse to get you out of this bloody death trap.”

“Healer Rage wants to put me on medical leave for just that reason,” Amelia admitted. “Unfortunately, that would give Fudge the run of the place.”

“Something that's looking more and more tempting if we can get the good people out first,” Moody retorted.

“Been abusing the confidential undercover assignment idea as much as possible,” Amelia sighed. “Let us hide a number of our best.”

“Idea about sending our Healers and Researchers to Hogwarts wasn't a bad one either,” Moody agreed. “Let us put Rage at Hogwarts

permanently and the others on a temp bases shared with St. Mungoes and Hogsmead.”

“I'm operating under the assumption that the Ministry can't be held, not when Fudge is the Minister and half the employees are working for the other side.”

“A third,” Moody corrected. “With another third of quislings.”

“Lovely.”

“Isn't it just?”

“Suggestions?” Amelia asked.

“Azkaban guard force is fairly reliable, swap 'em out with the corrupt,” Moody replied. “Use the guard force to set up a separate, secret prison somewhere else.”

“How am I going to explain that to the Minister without letting him in on what we're actually doing?” Amelia demanded.

“There's a disease hitting the island pretty hard at the moment,” Moody said softly, leaning in so he could be understood. “Several prisoners have succumb and all the guards are sick. Healer Rage, our Chief Healer, recommended putting them all on an extended sick leave and insisted on quarantining them and their families at an undisclosed location.”

“Which prisoners?” Amelia asked.

“Oddly enough, they were all captured Death Eaters,” Moody replied.

“To be expected when one considered the fact that they're in the deepest level of the prison with the most time around the dementors. Completely buggers their immune system it does.”

“I don't like that.”

"I don't like any of this, bloody needs must!" Moody barked.

“I didn't say it wasn't necessary, I said I didn't like it,” Amelia growled.

“Bugger the idea of a second prison, I don't want to spare the men for it.”

“You suggesting we stop taking prisoners?” Moody asked carefully.

“And miss out on the valuable intel they're all carrying around in their heads?” Amelia laughed. “No, I'm not suggesting we off them after we find everything out or that we just hand them into Azkaban where a well placed bribe will get them out.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Auror Tonks put a new ward around my office that will scramble her brains if she's removed and I'm in my panic room,” Amelia began.

“Loyal little bint, isn't she?” Moody commented with what passed for warmth.

“She is,” Amelia agreed. “I was thinking we either remove every one of their memories before handing them over. Not like we can't replace them if we come out on top, is it?”

“And bugger the lot of them if we don't,” Moody agreed. “I'd suggest we also key them into the prison's wards, they leave without getting keyed out and they leave in pieces.” He amused himself for a moment imagining the look on the chief bugger's face when he realized what they'd done. Might have the side bonus of discouraging more break out attempts or causing the bastards to waste time figuring out counters to boot.

“Can you do that?” Amelia asked.

“Close acquaintance of one of Gringotts' curse breakers,” Moody explained. “We got to talking shop and he mentioned a few things he'd do if he were in your seat.”

“Grab him, throw Galleons at him, and get it done,” Amelia ordered.

“I would, but he's a bit busy with warding the Granger properties,” Moody replied. “One of Arthur's boys.”

“Damn. See if he can recommend someone else if he can't spare the time to do it himself.” She considered the matter. “Actually, see if he's willing and I'll talk to the Granger family about buying some of his time if he is.”

“Will do,” Moody agreed.

IIIIIIII

Phil yawned as the car pulled up the drive to his weekend abode. It had been a long but hopefully productive day, he'd have to see if he could help Harry with more business ventures. Perhaps if the boy got a taste for it, he could be pointed at Oxford after he left Hogwarts. If nothing else, Hermione could use a friend with business sense to help manage her affairs.

He dragged himself back to reality as the car came to a halt.

“Care to stay for dinner, Ron?” he asked.

“Mind if I postpone that?” Ron asked. “I promised mum that I'd come right back and tell her about how things went.”

“Feel free to drop by anytime,” Phil agreed. He stepped out of the car and was immediately confronted by his daughter and her retinue. “Hello, darling.”

“Hello, daddy,” Hermione replied. She brushed him aside and greeted the next one out of the car. “Hi, Ron, how was your trip?”

“Pretty good,” Ron replied brightly. “I learned a lot. Can't wait to get home to try out some of the things I saw.”

“Good.” Hermione hugged him. “Glad things are working out for you, don't let us keep you.”

“Bye, Hermione.” Ron waved at the rest of the group. “Bye, girls.” He didn't know what was going on, but he did know it was time to leave while he still could.

“You come out of that car, Harry Potter!” Hermione ordered. “We were all terribly bored without you here to keep us company.”

“That means you have to entertain us extra hard to make up for it,” Luna agreed.

“I don't think he's in there,” Susan said, peering through one of the tinted windows into the seemingly empty interior of the car.

“He's not,” Phil agreed. “He got called away to deal with a last minute issue regarding the deal he worked out with your godfather.”

“Daddy, Harry's our friend, no fair stealing him,” Hermione huffed. “Stop working him so hard, it's not good for him.”

“I'm sorry, darling,” Phil replied. “If it helps, he was quite annoyed by it and expressed his wish to come home to you girls.”

“Isn't that just the sort of unthinkingly sweet statement you expect to hear from Harry Potter,” Hannah giggled.

“Do you know when he'll get back?” Hermione asked.

“He was planning to ride back with Susan's Aunt,” Phil replied.

“No more all day business meetings, daddy,” Hermione demanded. “We only have a few more days of vacation left.”

“I’ll see what can be done, darling,” Phil agreed.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 18

IIIIIIII

It was dark and they were nearly worn out by the time Harry and Amelia finally managed to get back to the stately Granger Manor. Harry's meetings had gone over long and while Amelia was no stranger to late nights, the accumulated stress was making her feel her age more than ever.

Upon walking through the front door, Harry was immediately beset by four frowning faces.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Hermione asked in concern, seeing the state her friend was in. She took a couple steps closer for a quick inspection to assure herself that he didn't need medical attention, cursing the fact that she couldn't use her wand to cast a few diagnostic charms.

“Just tired,” Harry replied. “Had to talk with Charlie about some things regarding the contract with the twins and some other things, then I had to talk to some other places on Ron's behalf.”

“Okay,” Hermione sighed. She nodded to the other girls, let the games begin.

“About time you got back!” Susan snipped, fighting down the grin that threatened to split her face. “Do you know how bored we were?”

“It's your job to keep us entertained,” Luna agreed, grabbing his arm.
“We get so lonely without you around.”

“We expect you to make up for your rudeness by being extra entertaining in the future,” Hanna giggled.

“I'll keep that in mind,” Harry said dryly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out four packages. “Wear them in good health. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to get something to eat and then collapse into a chair.”

“What are these?” Susan asked curiously.

“Mind if I give the explanation, Harry?” Amelia asked.

“Aunty Amelia?” Susan squeaked.

“Please,” Harry said. “Now if you lot will excuse me, I must be going.”

Hermione shot one of the servants a meaningful look, causing the man to fall into step behind Harry. It wasn't that she didn't trust that he'd be able to get back to his room without injuring himself, it was that she was more than slightly convinced that he couldn't do anything without somehow managing to put himself into mortal peril.

Amelia smiled down at her niece. “Didn't even notice me? I guess it's to be expected that you'd be focused on boys at your age.”

“Um . . .” the girl blushed a deep red.

“But that's neither here nor there,” Amelia continued. “As part of a favor he did for me, Harry managed to acquire a number of magical artifacts.”

The girls opened the packages to reveal four finely made silver chains, each with a matching wire bracelet.

“What do they do?” Hermione asked curiously.

“You can store items in the bracelet, they'll appear as miniature dangling decorations. The necklaces will protect you against several minor hexes and physical injuries.” She'd suggested giving them to the girls after Phil had called with a warning about the planned ambush. “I wouldn't suggest storing your wand in the bracelet, it takes a few seconds to retrieve any items you put into it and that is not a good thing in a fight.”

The girls put the jewelry on and spent a few seconds admiring each other.

“I think we're going to have to cut Harry some slack this time,” Susan offered.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed.

Amelia grinned, glad that she'd managed to do something for the boy to take the heat off. She owed it to him after all.

IIIIIIII

Ron was relieved to find a car waiting for him when he stumbled out of the Cauldron early the next morning. It wasn't that he couldn't make his

way in the muggle world, it was that the muggle world was a complete mystery, so alien that all sense of normalcy was lost.

OK, maybe it was a little difficult for him to make his way in the muggle world, just a tad.

The driver opened the door and motioned for him to take a seat in the back.

"Where are we going today?" Ron asked curiously.

"Purdey today, Mr. Ron. Mr. Harry told me to ask you if you wanted to look at a few more gunmakers," the driver replied. "Also mentioned that it would be possible for you to spend some time with a musical instrument maker if you'd like."

"I'd like," Ron agreed. "Might be best to focus on the gunmakers first though."

"Can't hurt to take a look at how others do things," the driver offered.

"Right," Ron agreed. "Thanks for taking the time to drive me around like this, especially since we should both be asleep right now."

"It's my job, happy to do it."

IIIIIIII

Harry was dragged awake by a cold sensation that told him some inconsiderate soul had pulled off all his blankets.

“You're lucky I wear something to bed,” he groaned, not opening his eyes.

"Lucky isn't the word I would use," a feminine voice giggled.

Harry's eyes shot open to reveal that he was surrounded by girls, not a bad place to be but the look of frank appraisal on Hannah's face was more than a bit unnerving.

“Do you have anything to do today, Harry?” Hermione asked, hoping the answer was no. She did not like how hard her friend was pushing himself.

"Charlie wanted me to speak with the goblins on his behalf," Harry replied. "But . . ." He held up a hand to silence her before she could interrupt. "I told him I wouldn't have time to do that until after we returned to classes."

“Okay,” the girl chirped, relieved by his answer.

“So what would you four like to do?” Harry asked.

“Daddy told me that Thomas is qualified to instruct us on the proper way of how to ride motorbikes,” Hermione offered, she'd already read several books to prepare. “We could do that if everyone wants to?”

“Works for us,” Hannah said.

“Myself as well,” Luna agreed.

"Something I've always wanted to learn to do," Harry said with a pleased smile.

"It's settled," Hermione declared. "We'll learn to ride motorbikes."

"Great, now if you will give me a bit of privacy?" Harry hinted.

"Right." Hermione blushed. "Sorry, Harry."

Harry smiled as he the four girls march out of his room. It was good for Hermione and Luna to have other female friends even if it did make it easier for them to conspire against him.

IIIIIIII

Ron held his breath as Purdey's master stock maker inspected his work. It was times like this, after seeing the man's work and comparing it to his own, that really drove home how far he had to go.

"Adequate," the man pronounced. "I'm told you're planning to spend a bit of time at Holland & Holland learning the ropes?"

"Yes, sir," Ron agreed.

"Spend a bit of time here too," the man ordered. "I'm also told that you're starting a small custom shop supplying bespoke items to a very exclusive clientele?"

"I am, sir," Ron said, unsure of how much he should admit.

“Keep at it,” the man advised. “I look forward to seeing how you do in a few years when you have a chance to get in some real practice.”

“I will, thank you, sir.”

Ron left the gunmakers with another bag of scraps and another set of tools thanks largely to the management's desire to stay on the right side of the powerful Granger family. He was still on cloud nine when he got home and itching to try out everything he'd learned.

IIIIIIII

Mandy walked into the Coach's office with an expression of profound confusion. She was fairly sure she hadn't done anything she shouldn't have lately and she knew she hadn't broken her diet, so what did the bitch want?

“You called for me, Coach?” she asked.

“Have a seat, Maxwell,” the Coach ordered. She stared at her player for a few moments. “Just how close are you to Ron Weasley?”

“Isn't that question a bit personal?!” Mandy demanded, rising to her feet. “Who I associate with in my free time is my business and you can't make me stop seeing him!”

“Sit!” the Coach barked. “Sit,” she sighed. “I'm hoping you have a very close relationship for the sake of the team.”

“What?” She dropped into her seat. “What's going on, Coach?”

“The owners have decided that we need security in case of another Death Eater attack,” the Coach replied.

“So?”

“So the labor pool's dry, we found three ex-Aurors that weren't fired for gross incompetence.” You didn't want to be anywhere near Aurors that had been fired for incompetence, not with the lax standards foisted on the Department of Magical Law Enforcement by the Fudge Administration anyway. “Do you know what they told us when we approached with an offer?”

“Not a clue, Coach.”

“They told us that they'd already signed on with Harry Potter, he's grabbed everyone the Department of Magical Law Enforcement hasn't,” the Coach explained. “So how close are you with Ron Weasley?”

“Um, we're just starting to get to know each other,” Mandy admitted.

“Let me rephrase that, are you close enough to use your relationship with him to get a meeting with Harry Potter?” The Coach shook her head. “We're also going to try to get to him through Hooch at Hogwarts, but . . .” she shrugged.

“Might be better coming from his best mate,” Mandy sighed. “I'll talk to Ron, tell him what I want and why. What should I say to Harry Potter if Ron introduces us?”

“Tell him that we'd like to hire some of his wands,” the Coach replied.
“Find out how much it will cost us.”

“Alright,” Mandy agreed.

“Here.” The Coach slid an envelope across her desk. “Season tickets for one of the private boxes. Present these to Potter with our compliments before you ask for anything.”

“Nothing for Ron?” Mandy asked innocently.

“He's already got a standing invitation to sit in the owner's box. What you think he'd like, you let me know right away,” the Coach said seriously. “Owners are set on getting you lot protected. Price is still an object but not a large one.”

“Can I get back to you on that?” Mandy asked.

“You may,” the Coach agreed. “Take the rest of the day off, see your boyfriend, have fun.”

“I will, Coach,” Mandy agreed.

IIIIIIII

Ron was in the shed doing his best to turn out another beater's bat with one of the larger scraps when he became aware that he was not alone. The boy turned away from his work to lose himself in a worried set of blue eyes.

“Hi, Ron,” Mandy whispered.

“Mandy,” Ron replied. “Your bat and broom alright?”

“Best set I've ever had,” she said quickly.

“What's wrong?” He patted the place on the bench to his right.

“The team wants me to use you to get a meeting with Harry Potter,” she confessed.

“Oh, why?”

“They want to hire some of his guards to protect the team from Death Eaters,” she replied.

“Okay,” he agreed, wondering when Harry had gotten guards. “I'll floo Harry and see if he's willing to meet with you.”

“Thank you, Ron.”

“No problem.” The boy grinned, the expression on his face looking a lot like the ones that perpetually adorned Fred and George. “Few things you should know before you meet with Harry.”

“What's that?”

“He likes to be referred to in the third person . . . uh, never turn your back on him, and if you're taller than he is, which nearly everyone is,

you should be sure to slouch or stoop down so you don't tower over him. He hates that. And . . . uh . . . you should probably refer to yourself in the third person too and end every sentence with a preposition.”

“Really?” she exclaimed, thinking about some of the odd demands her fellow players had after they let fame get to their heads.

“Nah, he's a pretty normal guy. Don't stare at his scar or ask him about how he got it and you'll be fine,” Ron laughed.

“You prat!” she squealed, giving him a playful slap on the arm.

IIIIIIII

Anne stepped into the car just in time to see her husband put down the phone. The man had an odd but intriguing look on his face.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“Hmmm?”

“You've got the same expression on your face that you had the night Hermione was born,” she explained.

“One of the professional magic sports teams has need of some physical security and they're hoping to hire some of ours away,” he explained.

“Can we spare any?”

“Oh yes, that shouldn't be a problem,” he replied.

“So why are you looking so smug?”

“They think that everything belongs to Harry,” he replied with a grin.
“So naturally I asked him to work out a deal for me since I'm not there to do it myself.”

“Why?”

“I haven't given up the idea of teaching Hermione how to handle herself in the business world, but I have decided that it would be best to find someone that knows what they're doing to keep an eye on her.”

“Harry's going to be your someone that knows what they're doing?” she asked dryly.

“That's my hope,” he agreed. “Wouldn't hurt to have an agent in the magical world anyway.”

“He's just a boy,” she protested.

“He's tremendously influential,” he replied. “That aside, I'm just laying the foundation now for Hermione's future.”

She frowned at him. “Seems as if you're using the poor boy.”

So long as they at least remain friends, he'll look after her. I'm merely insuring that he has the proper tools to look after her finances as well as her physical safety,” he defended himself. “I'm helping him do a better job of what he would do anyway.”

“Does he know about your plans for him?” Anne demanded.

“Some of them,” he replied.

“Tell him all of them,” she ordered.

“I'm quite happy to do so,” he agreed easily. “I'd always planned to, just never seemed to find the right time.”

“Good.” She leaned into him. “Your plan is just the sort of thing that I expect from the heartless mercantile class, treating people like chess pieces.”

“I recognize value and seek to increase it,” he replied. “You recognize nothing of value since everything in your life has been handed to you thanks to an accident of birth.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione frowned when she noticed that Harry had pulled to the side of the track and was speaking with the butler. He was acting just like her father did before he disappeared on business.

“What are you doing, Harry?” she asked as she rolled to stop beside him.

“Harpies want to meet with me about hiring some of my many bodyguards,” Harry replied with an amused grin.

“You have bodyguards?” Hermione asked in confusion.

“Not even one,” Harry replied. “Your father has hired several wizards and witches, the Harpies think it was me for some reason.”

“Oh.”

“Just means that Ron's going to come over for lunch with one of the Harpy's starting beaters,” Harry explained. “The butler just came to tell me that your father is wrapped up with something else and wanted me to give them a quote for him later.”

“Okay, Harry,” Hermione agreed.

“It's not a big deal. We have lunch with Ron, I give his friend a piece of paper covered in numbers, and we get on with our day. Easy.”

“One more lap before we go in?” Hermione suggested hopefully.

“Race you,” Harry laughed, pulling away from the curb.

"No fair," Hermione squealed. Pushing her little Honda for all it was worth.

IIIIIIII

Fred rose from his work to stretch and take a chance to inspect what their employees were putting out. It was good, looked like they might beat their deadline after all.

“Everyone take five!” George yelled.

The owners of two dozen sets of hands stowed their wand and cracked their necks.

“How's production going, anyone falling behind?” Fred asked.

“By a bit,” Alicia admitted. “Sorry.”

“We expected that, don't worry,” George assured the girl.

“If you expected us to fall behind, why'd you give us such horrid quotas?” Angelina demanded hotly. She'd never thought she'd find someone worse than bloody Wood before a game.

“Customer wants this stuff as soon as possible,” Fred explained. “So we're doing our best to get them to them as soon as we can.”

“This is all for an order?” Lee exclaimed.

“Yeah-”

“-why'd you think we were doing this?”

“Kinda thought you were just building up stock for your shop,” Lee replied.

“Already paid for-”

“-S'why we were able to pay you so well.”

“We're getting paid?” Katie exclaimed in surprise, eyes lighting up in delight.

“Yeah,” George agreed with an odd look on his face. “You didn't think we expected you to do all this for free did you?”

The girl shrugged, an embarrassed look on her face.

“You're all getting paid,” George said firmly. “Big bonuses for things like getting it out quicker and everything.”

“Let's get back to work, then,” Lee said with a grin.

“After our break,” Fred said firmly.

“We don't want people making mistakes because they get tired,” George agreed.

IIIIIIII

Harry raised an eyebrow when Hermione fell into step behind him. He'd assumed that she would have gone off with the other girls to do whatever they did to prepare for lunch.

“Susan, Hannah, and Luna will join us after they get a chance to change their outfits,” Hermione explained. “Luna managed to get herself covered in oil and the other two are more comfortable wearing robes.”

“Makes sense,” Harry agreed. “Have you shown them your new engine yet?”

“We would, but we can't at the moment, she's on her way to Scotland so we can work on her during the school year,” Hermione replied. And the puny little internal combustion engines they had access to just weren't doing it for them.

“I see.” Which explained why they'd remembered he existed again, Harry reflected.

“Don't be like that, Harry,” Hermione huffed.

“What?”

“I've told you, I can read you like a book,” she explained.

“I was just thinking that the fact that your train is gone explains why you and Luna remembered that I existed,” Harry said with a grin.

“It's just . . . she needs a lot of work before she's whole again,” Hermione said with a blush.

“I'm not annoyed that you're ignoring me. Getting obsessive about things is what you do.” He patted her on the shoulder. “You acted any differently and you wouldn't be you anymore.”

“Thanks for understanding, Harry,” Hermione murmured.

“It's only fair, you don't get mad at me for all the life threatening situations I drag you into,” Harry replied with a shrug.

“I'll try to spend more time with you when we get back at Hogwarts,” she promised. “Even if I have to fight the Professors for it.”

"I wouldn't, Flitwick is an ex-champion dueler and McGonagall can be pretty nasty when she puts her mind to it," Harry advised. "Not to mention the odds are good that the new DA instructor is going to meet his end at my wand with the way things usually go."

Hermione giggled. “Only you, Harry.”

IIIIIIII

Amelia looked up when there was a knock on her door. Her expression quickly turned to one of annoyance when a figure walked in, his hood up, cloaking his face in shadows.

“Cut the theatrics, Algie,” Amelia said. “Everyone knows that it's you under there.”

“Not everyone, I trust?” the man asked, pulling down his hood to reveal an aged face.

“Worst kept secret in the Ministry,” Amelia laughed. “What do you want?”

“This can't be a social call?” he asked innocently.

“No, it can't,” she said firmly.

“You're getting ready to bug out,” he said bluntly. “Obvious to anyone with two brain cells to rub together. I want in, there are things in my Department that can't be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.”

“So what do you want me to do about it?” Amelia demanded.

"Talk to Potter and tell him we want to throw our lot behind him too," Algie replied.

“Alright,” Amelia agreed. “What should I say is in it for him?”

“Access to our researchers, access to our archives, access to our artifacts,” he replied.

“Wait a minute, you're not just doing this because you want a look at the new spells he's developing, are you?” Amelia demanded. “You're hoping that he'll make even stranger mistakes after getting a look at your rubbish!” she accused.

The man had the good grace to blush. “That's not the only reason.”

“I saw him first,” Amelia growled.

“Don't be like that, Amelia,” he said smoothly. “There's no need to be selfish.”

IIIIIIII

Ron stepped through the fireplace with Mandy on his arm and nearly ran into the largest wizard he'd ever seen.

“Ron Weasley and guest?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Ron agreed.

“This way please.” The man motioned for them to follow. “Everyone's just sitting down for lunch.”

“Relax,” Ron whispered to Mandy. “Harry's just a normal guy.”

“Normal guys don't live in houses like this,” Mandy whispered back.

“It's not his, he's staying with our friend Hermione over the holidays,” Ron assured her. He broke off when they walked into the dining room and he caught sight of his best friends. “Harry, Hermione.”

“Ron,” Hermione replied.

“Hey, mate,” Harry waved. “Have a seat.”

“This is Mandy,” Ron introduced her. “Starting beater with the Harpies. Mandy, this is my friend Harry.”

“Pleasure.” Harry nodded.

“Pleasure is all mine, Mr. Potter,” Mandy squeaked.

“Call me Harry.” He pasted a smile on his face, trying to put her at ease.

“And my other friend, Hermione.” Ron waved at the girl.

“Nice to meet you, Hermione,” Mandy said with a grin.

“Nice to meet you too, Mandy,” Hermione replied.

“Ron tells me your team wants to set up some security?” Harry began.

"Because of the Death Eater attack the other day," Mandy agreed. "We can't always rely on Ron to be there, he still has to graduate from Hogwarts."

"It was just a small group," Ron waved it off. "Less trouble than we usually deal with in school."

“I think that might be possible,” Harry agreed. “You able to make agreements?”

“No,” she said. “I was only sent because I know Ron and Ron knows you.”

“Makes this lunch easier,” Harry laughed. He pulled a pen and pad of paper out of his pocket and jotted down a quick note. “Here's some price estimates and a floo address. They can either contact me at Hogwarts after the term starts in a couple days or they can call the floo address right now.”

"Thank you, Mr . . . ah, Harry." She tucked the note into her pocket. "I'm also supposed to give you some tickets." She thrust the envelope at him.

The door opened to admit the other three girls.

“Mandy, meet: Susan, Hannah, and Luna,” Harry said, pointing to each girl. “Three very good friends of mine.”

“Nice to meet you; Susan, Hannah, Luna,” Mandy said automatically.

"You're Mandy Maxwell!" Susan blurted.

“We saw you play the Wasps last year,” Hannah added. “You were amazing.”

“Thanks,” Mandy said, pleased to be back on familiar ground. “I think that must have been the game that got me moved off the bench and onto the first string. Always happy to meet fans.”

IIIIIIII

The first thing that Phil did after he and his wife got home that day was search out Harry for what was potentially a very difficult conversation. He was not surprised to find the boy in the library, sharing a seat with the four girls.

“Hi, daddy,” Hermione said brightly.

“Hello, darling, do you mind if I borrow Harry for a bit?” he asked.

“What do you need?” Harry asked, rising to his feet.

“Quick conversation and then you can get back to your reading,” Phil replied.

“Alright,” Harry agreed. “Be right back,” he told the girls.

Harry followed Phil down the hall to the older man's office and took a seat.

“How'd the meeting go?” Phil asked, starting things off.

“It didn't, woman who came didn't have the power to make agreements. I gave her a list of estimates plus ten percent and a floo address they can contact, also told her they could contact me once I got back to Hogwarts.”

“Alright,” Phil agreed. He took a deep breath. “You may have been wondering why I've given you so much help and why I had you work out that deal with the sports team for me,” Phil began.

“I'd assumed that it was because I was Hermione's friend,” Harry said.

“It is, but there's more to it than that,” he sighed. “I love my daughter, Harry. I've loved her more than life itself since the moment I first held her in my hands. You look after her when you're at school, don't you?”

“I do,” Harry agreed.

“I'm sure she's a very capable girl, but I still worry,” Phil continued. “I can't help you become a better fighter, I know nothing of magic spells. What I know is business, it's the one thing I can do for you that makes you better able to look after my baby girl.”

“I think I understand,” Harry said. “The more you help me now, the better able I am to help Hermione in the future.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“You told me that the best business deals were ones that made a profit for everyone,” Harry said. “I profit because I get new skills, you profit because I might use those skills to help Hermione. We both win.”

“I hope so,” Phil agreed.

“So what's the problem?”

“Anne told me that my plan sounded like I was using you when I told it to her,” Phil replied.

“You can assure her that I am not being used, that I am comfortable with what happened, and that I will look after Hermione,” Harry said.

“Thank you, Harry.”

“Happy to be of service, Phil.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 19

IIIIIIII

A few minutes later, Harry and Phil were just wrapping up their meeting when one of their security people appeared to report the arrival of a rather odd guest.

“What do you mean by odd?” Phil asked.

The security person was gently moved out of the way to allow the butler to enter.

“Representative from the goblin nation here to meet with you, sir,” the butler announced.

“Thank you, show our guest to our office, please,” Phil ordered.

“Yes, sir,” the butler agreed.

“Care to sit in, Harry?” Phil asked.

“I would,” Harry hedged reluctantly.

“But?”

“But the girls are feeling a bit neglected now that Hermione's train is gone and they've remembered I exist,” Harry explained.

“Best go back to them,” Phil agreed. “I did promise to give you back after a couple minutes.”

“Glad you understand,” Harry said, rising from his chair.

“Personal matters before business,” Phil advised. “Never forget that.”

“I won't,” Harry agreed as he stepped out the door. Passing the butler who was on the way in.

“Sub-Chief Chainmake, Representative of the Goblin Nation here to see you, sir,” the butler announced.

“Send him in,” Phil ordered. He rose from his chair and held out his hand as the goblin entered into the room. “What can I do for you Sub-Chief Chainmake?” Phil asked.

“It is what I can do for you,” Chainmake replied, giving Phil's hand a single firm shake while careful to keep his nails from scratching his fragile human skin.

“Oh?” Phil's eyebrows rose. “Please, have a seat. Would you care for something to drink or a cigar?”

“Later,” the goblin replied. “I would prefer to conduct business before enjoying your hospitality.”

“Of course,” Phil agreed.

“The goblin nation has decided to offer access to goblin werk maille and goblin werk wards to protect yourself, your family, your staff, and your allies,” Chainmake said.

“I accept,” Phil said with a grin. “Thank you. May I ask why your people have extended such a generous offer?”

"Your aid has netted us a considerable amount of profit in the past. It would be a shame for your life to be cut short when you could potentially aid us in achieving even greater profit in the future," the goblin explained. "Aiding you in protecting your offspring benefits us in two ways: firstly, it makes you predisposed to view us in a positive manner. Secondly, it insures that there is the possibility that our people can enjoy good relations with your family line in the future."

“The best deals are those that make a profit for everyone,” Phil agreed. “My first deal with you made me several million pounds and, I hope, considerably more for you. May our future dealings be even more profitable. Thank you for helping me protect those I love the most.”

“Could we expect a similar amount of help in our relations with the human government?” the goblin asked delicately.

“Against the magical, in a heartbeat. Against the legitimate government, no.”

“More than we had hoped,” the goblin said with a toothy grin. “Many of your race seem to be loyal only to your race.”

“I am loyal to my family first, my nation second, my business partners third, and the magicals not at all.” He pursed his lips. “Not as a group anyway, several of them also fall into the three categories as individuals.”

“Clan first,” the goblin agreed. “May your enemies suffer, may your coffers fill, may your family prosper.”

"May your foes die penniless, may your clan grow, may you be forced to dig a thousand more miles of tunnel for a place to keep your gold," Phil replied, getting into the spirit of things.

“Now that business is out of the way, I believe you said something about cigars?” the goblin asked hopefully, licking its lips.

“Of course,” Phil said, opening his desk top humidior. “Please, help yourself.”

The goblin selected a cigar and ran it under its nose. “Exquisite scent.” It licked the tip and then took a tentative bite. “Cuban?”

“Nicaraguan with Cuban seed,” he replied. “Quality control was a bit off in the last batch of Cubans.”

“Real quality matters more than perceptions of quality,” the goblin agreed, taking another bite. “Wonderful.”

“Would you like a case or two to take back to your clan?” Phil asked.

“Please,” the goblin agreed. “I hate to impose, but such a delicacy is rare in the tunnels.”

Phil rang a bell, summoning his butler.

“You rang, sir?”

“Set aside a few cases of cigars for our guest to take back to Gringotts,” Phil ordered. Making a mental note to give Harry the suggestion that he might find profit importing luxury goods to the Goblin Nation.

IIIIIIII

Harry marveled at the way Hermione and Luna automatically made a spot for him on the crowded couch upon his return to the library. It was so nice to have friends. He sat and both Luna and Hermione shifted onto his lap.

“Here's your book back, Harry.” Hermione thrust the object into his hands. “What did daddy want?”

“Just wanted to make sure that I'd keep an eye on you for him,” Harry replied.

“He thinks I need a minder?” Hermione asked, unsure if she should be outraged at the idea or delighted that he'd choose her best friend for the job.

“Do go easy on him,” Luna giggled. “He's a father so of course he's worry about you.”

“Aunty Amelia had half the seventh year Hufflepuffs watching out for us our first year,” Susan offered with a snort.

“Every other year too,” Hannah added.

“Just accept that he wants you to be safe,” Harry suggested, hoping to avoid angering his friend. “Less stressful for everyone that way.”

“Okay, Harry,” Hermione agreed.

IIIIIIII

Charlie raised an eyebrow when he found his car already occupied. Not that it wasn't a pleasant surprise to see Amelia, just unexpected.

“I think you might want to sit in on the Granger family dinner tonight,” Amelia said.

“Oh?”

“My sources tell me that Gringotts sent a representative to meet with Phil, I had a meeting with the Head of the Department of Mysteries, it promises to be a very enlightening meal.”

“That does promise to be an enlightening meal,” Charlie agreed.

IIIIIIII

Mandy didn't know what to think when she was called in for another meeting in the coach's office. She'd given him Harry's note, what else could they want with her?

“Was told to ask a couple questions about your meeting with Harry Potter,” the Coach explained. “Nothing bad, we're just hoping you can clear a few things up for us.”

“Shoot.”

“You mentioned the size of the house he was in; was it his?”

“Nope, belonged to one of his girls,” she replied.

“One of them?” the Coach asked with a grin. Seemed the-boy-who-lived was a bit of a Lothario, to think she'd written the rumors off as the normal garbage put out by the gossip mags.

“He had four of them with him, not sure if they were involved romantically or not.” Mandy grinned back, reading the older woman's thoughts. “Not that most witches wouldn't be happy to snag 'the-boy-who-lived,' just wasn't clear.”

“Was one of the girls named Susan?” the Coach asked intently, her smile dropping as she remembered another, more credible rumor the owners had passed on.

“Why?” Mandy demanded.

“Because we believe that one of his girls is Amelia Bones' niece.”

“So?”

“So she's a big fan, we do something nice for her and maybe we can get Potter to agree to another meeting.”

“But he did,” Mandy said with a frown. “Said any time after he goes back to school.”

“That wasn't just a personal invitation to you?”

“Don't think so, Coach.” She looked at the older woman. “Something wrong with the price list he gave?”

“They tell me that it's a bit too low,” the Coach replied.

“So send someone to Hogwarts to talk to him that knows what they're doing,” Mandy said with a shrug. “Easy.”

“Just waltz in and talk with him?” the Coach laughed.

“Might be best to floo the castle first,” Mandy amended. “I don't think Harry would mind, he gave the impression of being just a normal guy.”

“A normal guy who commands a private security force as large as the Auror Corps and who's defeated 'he-who-must-not-be-named' several times in single combat,” the Coach said sarcastically.

“Not to mention a bunch of other things,” Mandy agreed. “Ron says that Harry's a normal guy who has too much luck. Bad gets him into the

crazy situations and the good gets him out. Oh, and that trying to cross him would be the worst mistake the owners could ever make.”

The Coach snorted. “What's say we do this, we have the team sign one of our game snitches and have you go to Hogwarts to present it to his girl Susan. You sound him out to confirm that he's willing to speak with one of the owners.”

“He's got four girls, Coach, at least two of them were fans.”

“We can sign four snitches as easily as we can sign one,” the Coach replied.

“True, but I really don't think we need to go to all this trouble, Coach.”

“Need to or not, we're going to do it.” The Coach rubbed her eyes. “We need protection and we need to deal with Potter to get it. Best do everything we can to stay on his good side, 'eh?’”

IIIIIIII

Due to the horror that is London traffic, Charlie and Amelia arrived just as everyone was finishing their evening meal.

“I trust we've got something we need to discuss?” Phil asked.

“We do,” Charlie agreed.

“I'll have the staff send something for you to to chew on to my office, I'll meet you there.” He turned and was pleased to find his daughter standing beside him.

“You're going to have a talk about politics, aren't you?” Hermione asked.

“We are,” Charlie agreed. “Specifically magical, normal, and goblin and how we're dealing with them to resolve the Voldemort situation.”

“Care to join us, darling?” Phil asked hopefully.

“I wish I could, daddy,” Hermione replied. “It sounds like it would be very educational. But I promised Luna that I'd help her chase down the oil leak on her motorbike. I, um . . . I think she'd agree to postpone it, I also think it would hurt her terribly if I asked even if she didn't say anything.” It tore her up to see how vulnerable her friend was sometimes.

“If that's the case, by all means, stay with your friend,” Phil said quickly.

“Thanks for understanding, daddy.” Hermione gave her father a hug.

“I'll badger Harry for the details later.”

“Alright, darling,” he agreed, making a mental note that his daughter's apathy towards all matters business did not apply to all matters political.

“Perhaps next time.”

“Okay, daddy,” Hermione agreed. “Bye, Uncle Charlie.”

“Goodbye, squirt,” Charlie said fondly.

They waited until Amelia had managed to extricate herself from her niece's concerned embrace and the three of them retired to Phil's office.

“Harry going to be joining us?” Charlie asked.

“Should be,” Phil replied.

“Sorry I'm late,” Harry said as he walked in with Tonks, “just going over some things about Hogwarts.”

“Harry's got an absolutely brilliant map that we're going to have to try to duplicate,” Tonks reported.

“Who'd like to start things off?” Phil asked.

“I will,” Amelia offered.

“Amelia has the floor,” Phil said with a grin.

“The Department of Mysteries is under the impression that we're all rallying under Harry's banner,” Amelia said.

“In gods name why?” Charlie asked. “No offense, Harry, but you haven't even left school yet.”

“He's 'the-boy-who-lived,' the one who's faced Voldemort the most times and lived, the hero of the magical world,” Tonks explained, listing off a few of Harry's accomplishments. “Hermione and Luna were only

able to calm Susan the other day by invoking his name and telling her that Harry had gone to the Ministry to rescue her Aunt.”

“Magical world has a lot of faith in Harry,” Amelia agreed, lending her weight to the explanation. “Especially now that Voldemort is back.”

“Just wish they didn't use that as an excuse to set around doing nothing,” Harry grumbled. “Lazy buggers seem to think that they can just leave everything to me. War would be over in a day if half the bloody idiots picked up their wand and joined the fight.”

“On our side, I trust,” Charlie said dryly.

“That would be ideal,” Harry agreed. “My point stands either way.”

“Quite,” Charlie sighed. “What does everyone propose we do about this offer from the Department of Mysteries?”

“I recommend we accept it,” Amelia offered, “if for no other reason than to deny access to our enemies.”

“Anyone have an objection?” Charlie asked. “Motion carries, I suppose.”

“On to the next bit of business,” Amelia prompted. “What's this I hear about the goblins coming here?”

“They offered to put a set of their own wards over the set we've already got on the house. Also offered access to body armor for my family, my staff, and a few close associates. I accepted.”

“Any chance I could persuade them to include my Aurors?” Amelia asked hopefully.

“I'll see what I can find out,” Phil promised.

“Thank you,” Amelia said. “What's this about Harry's map?”

“My father and his friends made it when they were at Hogwarts, shows all the secret passages and the locations of everyone,” Harry said.

“Anyone who made it still alive?” Amelia asked. Her expression turned contrite. “I'm sorry, I hadn't meant for it to come out that way.”

“Two are still alive,” Harry said. “I'm going to make that one at my earliest opportunity by removing one of the bastards from this earth.” His eyes were blazing.

“And the other?” Phil prompted, coming to a sudden understanding about why so many were willing to throw their lot behind a 'mere boy' so long as that boy was Harry Potter.

“Works for you, Remus Lupin,” Harry replied.

“Supervising the ward team at the London house at the moment,” Tonks supplied.

“I'll make a note to speak with him about the map later,” Phil said. “Any other business we need to discuss?” He looked around. “How about the

fact that we've managed to drain most of the talent pool in the United Kingdom.”

“Suggesting we look outside our nation's borders?” Charlie asked with an expression of distaste.

“Private individuals don't come with the same strings that they would if they were supplied by foreign governments,” Phil pointed out.

“I know a few we might look into,” Amelia offered, “and I'd bet that Moody knows a few more.”

“It's something we should look into,” Harry spoke up. “Give us people with different backgrounds and different perspective which could be useful to have around.”

IIIIIIII

They'd just managed to disassemble the engine when Luna mustered up enough courage to ask the question that had been eating away at her self confidence since they'd began.

“Would you have rather sat in on your father's meeting?” she asked hesitantly.

“Not if it meant breaking my promise to you or leaving you to do this alone, Luna,” Hermione said firmly. You're my best female friend, just like Harry's my best male friend.”

“Thank you, Hermione,” Luna's voice caught, “it's very nice to have you as a friend.”

“It's very nice to have you as a friend too, Luna,” Hermione replied, hugging the blonde.

Luna went limp for a moment before hugging the older girl back with all her might. She'd been so very alone before and she felt so very warm at the moment.

IIIIIIII

It was just a bit creepy, Harry reflected moments after opening his eyes the next morning, to wake up and find four girls staring at you.

“We decided to let you sleep in this morning,” Hermione explained. Luna was right, his expression was priceless.

“Wonderful,” Harry said. “What can I do for you?”

“We just wanted to make sure you remembered to pack,” Luna said innocently.

“It would be awful if we missed the train because you forgot,” Susan agreed.

“I wouldn't mind,” Hannah assured him.

“Alright,” Harry sighed. He lifted one of his wands off the bedside table and gave it a flick, causing all his loose possessions to leap into his trunk. “There, all packed.”

“Harry, you're going to get in trouble with the Ministry,” Hermione hissed.

“Aunt Amelia can probably take care of it,” Susan offered hesitantly, a trace of worry coloring her voice.

“This house is now so heavily warded that there's at least a ninety percent chance that they wouldn't have noticed this,” Harry said with a wave. “Then there's the fact that there are a number of adult magic users present which adds a whole new level of difficulty for the people in the underage magic office. Finally, to top things off, I'm sure you all remember the fact that I worked out a deal with Susan's aunt to give us a bit of leeway when it comes to underaged restrictions. Even if none of that were true, this wand is unregistered and untraceable.”

“Oh.” Hermione seemed to consider the matter. “Do you mind helping us pack?”

“Sure,” Harry agreed.

“Good, because none of us have even started,” Hannah admitted.

“You do know that my deal with Amelia included you four, don't you?” Harry asked.

“We do, Harry,” Hermione agreed. “It's just . . .” her eyes flicked to Susan.

“Just because we can do something, doesn't mean we should,” Susan sighed. “I'm not supposed to know this but Fudge is looking for an excuse to have Auntie sacked or to take control of the Aurors away from her.”

“We're trying to avoid giving him any ammunition to use,” Hannah explained.

“Fair enough,” Harry agreed. “Do you think it would help to let slip that acting against Amelia would be the same as acting against me?”

“I'll ask Auntie,” Susan promised. Though she doubted it would, at least not with the Minister, Fudge seemed to hate Harry almost as much as he hated her poor aunt.

“Good, let's get you girls packed up,” Harry said. He rose from his feet. “Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get changed.”

Three of the girls got up while the fourth, Hannah, licked her lips.

“That means I'd like you to leave, Hannah,” Harry prompted.

“Fine,” the girl said with a pout.

Thanks to the wonders of magic, packing did not take long. The group moved down to breakfast, trusting that the servants would see to their

luggage. After their morning meal, Harry found himself being hustled into one of the cloak rooms by his favorite pink haired Auror.

“What's up?”

“Briefing you on the security plan for the express.” Tonks handed Harry a potion vial. “Open this or smash it if there's anything wrong, it'll alert us and we'll get to you as soon as we can.”

“How much time do I need to buy?” Harry asked calmly.

“Hopefully not more than five minutes,” Tonks said, “we'll have teams waiting along the route and another on brooms flying above the express.”

“Nothing on the train?”

“Afraid not,” Tonks said mournfully. Damn Dumbledore to hell for how much more difficult he was making her job. She'd personally tear the man apart if anything happened to the kids because he wouldn't allow them to maintain a close watch over their charges.

“Care to take a suggestion?”

“Shoot?”

“Go to the crew, tell them who you are and who you're trying to protect. Five will get you ten that they sneak you aboard.”

“Yeah?” Tonks perked up.

“Be sure to stress that you're there to protect Luna and Hermione,” Harry advised, “crew absolutely adores them.”

“I'll try it, thanks, Harry.”

“Don't mention it. Having you close makes me very happy,” Harry replied.

“Having me close would make anyone happy.”

“True,” he laughed. “I'll refrain from pointing out that my ass is one of the ones you'd be pulling out of the fire if the worst happens.”

“Such a cute ass too,” Tonks mused.

“Thank you. I'm quite fond of yours as well,” Harry stated, shocking the Auror by retorting rather than blushing or stammering. “Care to continue the banter or should we head out?”

“Let's go,” Tonks agreed cheerfully, always happy to have her attributes complimented. “You know the plan we're using to get to the station?”

“Nope, no reason I should either,” Harry replied cheerfully. They walked out of the cloak room and rejoined the main group.

“Everyone here?” Amelia made a quick head count. “Come on.”

They walked out through the main doors.

Three identical black limos with tinted windows preceded by two black windowed SUVs and followed by two identical black SUVs pulled to a stop in front of the Granger residence.

“Everyone in the first car,” Phil ordered.

“Why are we taking so many, daddy?” Hermione asked.

“If you've got it, flaunt it,” he replied with a grin. One of these days he was going to have to sit her down and explain the security arrangements and why they were so important to have for people in their position. Or perhaps, it would be better to have her friends do it. He reflected to himself as he noted Susan's easy acceptance and Harry's careful evaluation.

They got into the cars and spent the ride chatting about what the next half of the year would bring. Consensus was that Harry would accidentally rewrite the rules of magic and that they'd all be thrown into another life threatening situation in the last couple weeks of the year. Hermione did not appreciate it when Harry expressed his hope that it would allow him to avoid sitting the end of year exams again. Not even after he'd said he was joking.

The convoy stopped at the station and the security people immediately dismounted to clear a path through the crowds, making the trip to the platform a breeze.

They walked through the barrier and Luna squealed when she saw her father waiting on the other side. She'd been afraid that she wouldn't be

able to see him again before going back to school. The blonde bounded over to throw herself into the man's arms.

“I'm going to go find us a compartment at the front of the train,” Harry said, giving Tonks the eye. “You guys say goodbye to your families.”

“Okay, Harry,” Hermione agreed.

“I'll help you with your trunk,” Tonks offered. She continued as soon as she was sure that she was out of earshot. “How sure are you that the crew will let me put people on board?”

“Fairly, don't know them too well myself, but like I said, they adore Luna and Hermione.” Harry grinned. “All else fails I'll arrange an accident for Malfoy and you can take the place of your dear cousin.”

“Ug, last resort,” Tonks said with a look of distaste.

“The accident or looking like a Malfoy?”

“Harry, I spent a week undercover as a hag, I spent two undercover as a hunchback, I'm not sure my stomach could take even fifteen minutes as a Malfoy. There are just some things not even Duty will force me to do,” she said firmly.

“Had to polyjuice myself as one of his goons once, can't say I enjoyed the experience,” Harry agreed. “Might be fun to be Malfoy for an hour though.”

“How do you figure?”

“I figure that there are three types of fun: there's fun now that's also fun when you think about it later, there's fun now that's not fun later, there's not fun now that's fun later. Being a Malfoy would suck now, but it'd be hilarious to see the fallout of what happened after I did my best to ruin his fortune and reputation.”

“True,” Tonks laughed.

They stepped onto the train and quickly found the conductor. A short man with a white beard who gave them the eye as they approached.

“Do you remember me?” Harry asked.

“Sure,” the man agreed in a gravelly voice, “you're Luna and Hermione's friend.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed, “I'd like to introduce you to Tonks, the head of their bodyguard.”

“Pleasure.” The conductor nodded.

“Pleasure is all mine, Mister Conductor,” Tonks replied.

“What can I do for you two?” he prompted.

“Dumbledore doesn't like the idea of allowing private security into Hogwarts, I don't like the idea of having them too far from the girls to do any good if something happens,” Harry explained.

“He doesn't want you on the train either, does he?” the conductor asked.

“He doesn't,” Tonks agreed.

“Bugger 'im, what happens on the train is my responsibility, he doesn't like it, let him talk to the company. They're welcome to fire me if they think they can find a replacement,” he laughed. “Come on, we already reserved a compartment for the Luna and Hermione's group at the front of the train. Can't see any harm in giving the rest of the car to the people keeping them safe.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 20

IIIIIIII

Crabbe was bored. It was the same every time they got onto the train, he and his partner followed the twit to antagonize Potter, a wizard powerful enough to go through the three of them without breaking a sweat.

The boy sighed, least Potter was good enough to have his followers respond with mostly low level hexes concentrated on the twit, though often a few managed to slip by to hit his partner and himself. He couldn't blame them for that of course. Accidents happened after all. Rest of the train ride was always fairly relaxing, all they had to do was pick the twit up, dump him in the compartment, wait for him to wake up, and watch him sulk for the rest of the journey to Hogwarts. Easy money.

Unpleasant, but at least the power disparity meant their contract with the twits family allowed them to let the little bastard take his lumps and ignore his demands to get revenge. The boy snorted, as if they'd have a chance against Potter. May as well ask them to take on a dragon armed with a teaspoon, the results would be the same.

He noticed something was off when his partner nudged him. Things had just gotten from bad to worse, much much worse. It seemed the rumors about the Granger family were true, they weren't just poking a dragon, they were walking up to one and repeatedly kicking it in its reproductive

organs. Both he and his partner went still, doing their best to avoid making any actions that could conceivably be mistaken for provocation.

He grunted when he was hit by a couple stinging hexes, inevitable that a couple of them missed the twit to hit the not so innocent bystanders. He nodded to his partner who set about the task of scraping their principal off the floor while he backed up to the cracked door.

“I'd like to apologize for anything that either my associate or myself have ever done to get on your principal's bad side,” Crabbe said calmly, he swallowed. “I'd also like to state that the personal protection contract his family has with ours will be up shortly, I am going to recommend that we do not agree to a renewal.” No matter how good the money was, it had just become too dangerous to take it; what good was gold if you weren't around to spend it?

“Smart,” a feminine voice commented.

“Please contact me after that, the confidentiality agreement expires with my employment contract and I would like nothing better than to dish a bit of dirt on the whole damn inbred family.” He grinned at the thought. “Should be able to say something without losing my magic some time after June sixth of this year.”

“Appreciate it, what would you like in return?” the unseen woman asked.

“Either a job for our families or help relocating to some place far away from here, dealer's choice,” Crabbe replied instantly.

“I'll pass that along, pleasure.”

“Thank you.” Crabbe stepped back to help his partner carry the twit out of the car and back to their own compartment.

“Well?” Goyle prompted.

“The girl's security didn't seem too annoyed with us,” Crabbe replied.

“What about long term?”

“Told 'em we'd spill everything after the non-disclosure expired in exchange for new jobs or assistance in relocating,” Crabbe said.

"Good, can't wait to get away from the twit." He glanced around to make sure they were alone and planted the toe of his boot in Draco's side. One of the few good things about following the twit to bother Potter every year was the chance it gave them to add a few lumps while the twit was out. He glanced around again before kicking the twit again.

“Neither can I,” he said, planting his toe in the twit's other side.

“What happened?” Draco groaned an hour later. Damn, he felt like someone had repeatedly hexed him before spending five minutes kicking him in the stomach.

“Der?” Crabbe replied.

“We got on train,” Goyle agreed.

“Should have known better than to expect an intelligent answer from you idiots,” Draco mumbled. “Get me back to our compartment.”

“D'okay, Draco,” Crabbe said.

“Der?” Goyle added.

"Why did father have to contract with a bunch of morons?" Draco lamented. He was definitely going to recommend against renewing the contract with these idiot's families.

IIIIIIII

It wasn't long after they'd ejected Draco, that they got their second set of visitors when Dean poked his head into the compartment.

“Ron, what's this I hear about you dating the Harpies?” he demanded.

Seamus elbowed his friend out of the way. “How'd you do it?”

“Owl the twins a Galleon each and you'll get the whole story,” Ron replied without looking up, “and if you act now, you'll also get the guide on getting the girl for free. Tell all your friends about this limited time offer and you'll get your money back after ten referrals, double your money after twenty, and triple after thirty. For every five referrals you get, you'll also be entered to win one of a number of exciting prizes. Act now, don't delay.” He squinted at the block of wood in his hand, with luck, he'd managed to recite the spiel the twins had made him memorize without making too many errors. Well, he'd gotten most of it right away, that was good enough.

“You're charging us?” Dean demanded. “But, we're roommates.”

“If I tell you for free I get on the twin's bad side,” Ron gave his prepared excuse, focus still on what his hands were doing. “So do both of you. You don't want that.”

“What can they do?” Seamus demanded. “They've already left school.”

“Worked out a deal with mum to take their NEWTs,” Ron explained, “means they'll be dropping in at different parts of the year.” He held his carving up to the light, the Harpies' crest was just starting to take shape. “Also means they'll be able to come and show their displeasure to anyone that gets on their bad side. You want me to tell you and get us all on their bad side?”

“No, Ron,” Seamus said quickly.

“Thanks, mate,” Dean agreed. “You said one galleon each, right?”

“Yup,” Ron agreed.

Harry burst into laughter as soon as the door to the compartment closed, setting off the girls.

“That all true, mate?” Harry asked, wiping tears out of his eyes.

“Yup,” Ron agreed, “I tell them what they want to know and that'll get me on the twin's bad side so they won't give me my cut.”

“How'd you get the idea to charge for the information?” Susan asked.

"I didn't," Ron replied, "the twins worked out a deal with Luna's da to put out a newsletter and a few pamphlets."

“Isn't a galleon each a bit steep?” Hermione asked.

"I believe that I can answer that, Hermione," Luna said, "the job is so small that economy of scale didn't lower the price."

“Twins say that even charging a galleon, no one's making a whole lot on this. Main reason they're doing it is so they can charge for their catalog.” He carved in another detail. “They're also putting out a free catalog without the articles.”

The group spent the next couple hours conversing about an astonishingly wide array of topics until Harry and Ron were ejected from the compartment so the girls could change into their robes.

“It's good for Hermione to have more girlfriends,” Ron commented.

“She seems happier for it,” Harry agreed.

“We've got our robes, what's say we change in the corridor?” Ron suggested.

“Not unless you feel like giving Tonks a show,” Harry replied.

“Damn it,” they heard the Auror's muffled curse.

“What's she doing here?”

“Looking after Hermione and the other girls,” Harry replied, “can't be too careful with Death Eaters about.”

“True,” Ron agreed.

IIIIIIII

The Professors were giddy when they sat down with the spell researchers sent by the Departments of Magical Law Enforcement and Mysteries. Not only was their favorite test subject returning, but he'd brought them extra help? They'd have to remember to do something nice for the boy, maybe assign him extra lessons or something.

“First things first,” Auror Pinch began. The old man had a smile on his face that would have required surgery to remove, it was good to get back to work and be useful again. “I trust everyone's heard about our subject's new storage spell?”

“Enlighten us,” one of the hooded figures sent by the Department of Mysteries asked.

“Watts, if you would,” Auror Pinch prompted.

"Boy's somehow enchanted himself so he can draw anything he owns from his pockets," Auror Watts began, "it was first thought that he was summoning objects from his trunk. That proved to be false when he filled his pockets with nearly everything we had in the evidence room. We now believe that he's created a storage area outside normal space

and is also accessing objects covered in his magical signature through it."

"It's what we're going to focus on first," Auror Pinch said, scratching a deep scar on his left cheek. "Who wants to join us?"

"I'd be delighted to until he manages to accidentally create another charm," Flitwick offered instantly. "It sounds absolutely fascinating."

"As would we," the lead figure from the Department of Mysteries stated.

"Be sure to remember that Filius and I are going to commandeer him for our respective trade shows," Minerva said sharply, "we saw him first and we're graciously allowing you to share him so long as it does not interfere with our plans."

"Want to rub him in the faces of the premiere minds in your fields, huh?" Pinch asked. "Can't say I blame you. Bunch of stuck up snooks."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Minerva said primly. "But if it so happens that having him there allows me to better show that arrogant ass Ogden Wernstrom that his proper place in the world is on the floor groveling before his betters." Along with two or three dozen unnamed individuals. "I shall certainly not shed a tear."

"Of course you won't," Pinch laughed, "what about you, Filius?"

"While I don't have quite so many . . . ah." Enemies was probably not the right word to use, despite the fact that it was the most accurate.

"Professional rivalries as my esteemed colleague, there are a few individuals that I wouldn't mind showing Mr. Potter off to."

"Regarding young Mr. Potter's time, my colleagues and I may have something we can offer to aid in that." The hooded figure held up a time turner.

IIIIIIII

Harry felt a familiar sinking sensation as the train pulled into Hogwarts station. Gone were his carefree days at the Granger house, he was back in the hands of his Professors, back in a place where sleep was considered a barrier to working out his latest mistake. Oh well, maybe the new researchers Amelia had sent would distract them? Odds were they'd make things worse, but a boy could hope, couldn't he? Probably not, he decided.

The sight of his Head of House, Professor Minerva McGonagall standing on the platform with an inappropriately wide smile on her face caused the boy to break out in a cold sweat. When he identified the object in her hand, he felt an almost overwhelming urge to flee. His life had been difficult enough before, the addition of a time turner would increase the level of suckage by at least an order of magnitude. An idle part of his mind wondered for a moment if Voldemort's offer to join him was still good?

Minerva leapt onto the train the second it stopped moving and burst into their compartment a few seconds later.

“Mr. Potter!” Minerva bounced into the room. “I just got the news and I had to be the first to tell you.”

“What is it, Professor?” He didn't like her smile, it promised all manner of horrors in his future.

“We've been nominated for the Puddocky Transfiguration Prize,” Minerva said.

“Congratulations, Harry!” Hermione squeaked, throwing her arms around him.

“Good on you, mate!” Ron agreed, eyes shining. He slapped his friend on the back. “Knew you had it in you!”

"Wait till I tell Aunt Amelia," Susan said as she stepped over to give Harry a squeeze.

“Wait till we tell the other Puffs,” Hannah agreed, joining Susan.

“Do you mind if I notify father?” Luna asked before boldly giving Harry a hug of her own. “I'm sure he's going to want to put out a special issue right away after he hears the news.”

“I don't, do you, Mr. Potter?” Minerva asked.

“No, Professor,” Harry said, wondering what the big deal was. “Feel free, Luna.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Luna replied.

“Winners will be announced at the Transfiguration Trade Show next week,” Minerva continued. “Just being nominated is a great honor, you don't know how proud I am of you for this, Mr. Potter. Well done.”

“Happy to be of service, Professor,” Harry replied.

“I suppose I'd better notify Albus,” Minerva continued looking more excited than any of the students could remember seeing her before.

“Three former students have won the prize and seven more have been nominated, but never a current student. He'll be so proud, he'll burst.”

Harry waited until he was sure the Professor was gone to turn back to his friends to get a few answers. Hopefully without making himself look too ignorant.

“Um?” He gave Hermione a helpless look.

“Honestly, Harry,” she huffed, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “It's like a magical Nobel Prize for Transfiguration.”

“Oh.” Harry blinked a few times. “Wow.”

“We shall have to make a note to get a matching one for ourselves in the future, Hermione,” Luna giggled. “I'm sure you will win, Harry.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Luna.”

The group retired to the castle and took their places at their house tables. The biggest subject of gossip was the presence of several new places at the staff table along with the witches and wizards occupying them.

“You're all wrong,” Ron belched after hearing a crazy rumor that the new people were there to improve school health and safety or something else equally unlikely. “They're here to make Harry's life miserable. Nothing us normal students have to worry about.”

“Thanks, Ron,” Harry grumbled.

“You think I'm wrong?” Ron challenged.

“I think I would have liked a few more minutes with my delusions,” Harry replied.

“They're spell researchers,” one of the female firstys said firmly.

“How do you know?” her neighbor asked.

“My grandpa is up there and he's a spell researcher and so is the lady next to him,” the firsty replied, squinting at the table and identifying several of her grandfather's friends as well. “So are all the ones on the left.”

Harry sighed, looked like Ron was right after all. Damn it!

Seeing his chance, Neville took a deep breath, mustered his courage, and acted.

“Hermione!” the boy called out.

“Yes, Neville?” the girl asked, turning her attention away from Harry pounding his head on the table. Hopefully he wouldn't damage anything too important.

“Gran wanted me to tell you right off that we're more closely related than she and your mum thought,” he continued. “My . . . um . . . I forget how many greats, grandmother was your however many greats grandfather's younger sister.”

“How long ago was that?” the girl asked, not noticing the curious looks directed at her by some of the purebloods at the table.

“Bit less than two hundred years ago,” Neville replied. “I was supposed to tell you on the train. Don't tell gran that I forgot.”

“I won't.” Hermione grinned. “You can count on me, Cousin Neville.”

“Thank you, Cousin Hermione.” The boy flushed with pleasure at the way she instantly acknowledged their, admittedly distant, familial relationship. “She also told me that she wanted to tell your mum herself so don't spoil it.”

“Okay, Neville,” Hermione agreed, “I know that mum and your gran were planning to meet after we all got back to Hogwarts.”

Surprisingly, the first day of class went almost without incident. The only thing of note happened when Neville ended up running into a bit of potential trouble on his way back from a late night at the greenhouses.

“Not so pure as you thought 'eh, Logbottom?” Malfoy sneered, blocking the corridor with his goons. Time to give the squib a little lesson.

"Something you new money families never realized was that my purity comes from the blood in my veins. Quality has nothing to do with my ancestors' magic or lack thereof and everything to do with their nobility," Neville replied calmly, noticing something that Draco did not, namely that half a dozen of his house mates were standing behind the slimy git including an annoyed looking Hermione and a completely impassive Harry Potter. "That is what makes my blood pure. Using the same logic, yours is filthier than a sewer." Neville stepped closer, invading Draco's personal space. "Yield to your betters, mudblood, step aside, or I shall be forced to dirty my wand in dealing with you."

“How dare you. How dare you!” Draco was trembling with rage. The boy's attention was caught by a snicker turned cough behind him and he turned to berate his bodyguards before putting the Longbottom in his place and froze, finally realizing the danger he was in.

“You know, I'm starting to come around to your point of view, Draco,” Harry said calmly, “well, when mixed with Neville's,” he amended.

“I'm not sure I can agree with that, Harry,” Hermione said loudly. “Mum always told me that one of the most important things to remember about coming from one of the traditionally important families was that you never lorded it over your social inferiors.” She favored the scion of the Malfoy family with a look so condescending that even her step-grandmother would approve.

“You are of course correct, cousin,” Neville sighed. “Forgive me for the shameful display I put on in your presence.”

“Of course, cousin Neville,” Hermione replied, playing along. “Though I'm sure that there must be an exception for dealing with people as trying as Malfoy.”

“Exception or not, I'm sorry you had to see that side of me.” Neville turned back to Draco. “Please forgive me for my earlier rudeness. I'm afraid my cousin is correct, those of us fortunate enough to come from quality should behave in such a way as to set a good example for people of lesser backgrounds such as yourself. Now if you will excuse me, I have business with my kinswoman.” He strode away from the sputtering boy and into the group of his housemates.

“I'm so glad we ran into you, Neville,” Hermione said quickly. “Mum sent me a letter telling me that your gran wanted her to introduce you to some of my female cousins.”

“She hasn't given up that idea?” Neville asked faintly.

“Apparently not,” Hermione agreed. “I wanted to warn you that my cousin Elizabeth is absolutely horrid, despite how charming she can act if she thinks it will get her something. My cousin Juliet is very sweet, but also very shy. And my cousin Annabel is . . . um . . . she has a very good personality,” Hermione finished lamely.

“I see,” Neville said, trying not to show any reaction.

"It's not that she's hideously ugly or anything," Hermione continued, showing that Neville wasn't as successful as he'd have liked to have been. "She's actually quite pretty, it's just that . . . well . . . um . . ." The girl's shoulders dropped. "She's as dumb as a dray horse."

"Nearly everyone is an idiot compared to you, Hermione," Harry laughed.

"She really is as dumb as a dray horse," Hermione repeated. "Lovely girl, pleasant personality, nothing between her ears but air. Although." Hermione shot Neville a look of frank appraisal. "It might be best to find someone nice to look after her."

"Having gran do it is bad enough, I don't need you doing it too," Neville said firmly.

"Alright, Neville," Hermione agreed, "a quick letter or two to your gran and I'll stay out of your love life unless they ask for my opinion or for more details."

"I . . . fine," Neville agreed, figuring it was as good as he could get.

IIIIIIII

The crew of the Hogwarts express were preparing one of the engines for the weekly cargo run to London when their two favorite students arrived for a visit.

"Um . . ." Hermione was unusually hesitant that morning.

“We would like to ask for your help in restoring Hermione's new locomotive,” Luna said, taking the initiative.

“Andrew Barclay Sons 0-4-0 saddle tank number 1836 made in 1924,” Hermione said, happy to talk about her favorite subject. “She's in really rough shape but she still runs.”

“Happy to help,” the engineer agreed, “where is she?”

“Either on the back of a truck on her way to Scotland or waiting for us at an old coal mine,” Hermione replied.

“Any chance you could have her transported to the Hogwarts line?” he asked, “be easier if we could bring her back here to work on. More convenient for everyone too.”

“It shouldn't be a problem,” Hermione mused, “I can ask my father.”

“You do that,” he agreed.

IIIIIIII

Minerva looked up when there was a firm knock on the door. She wasn't expecting anyone, but it wasn't unusual for students to drop by to speak with her about things.

“Come in!” she called out.

“Good afternoon, Professor,” Harry said.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Potter, what can I do for you?” Minerva asked.

“Two things, thought I'd give you a heads up that Snape tried to give me detention today,” Harry began.

“Oh, What for?”

"I'm not sure," Harry admitted, "I think he was annoyed that I charmed my vial to be unbreakable. He sometimes likes to drop them and mark me down as not completing the assignment."

“Did you check to make sure that the charm would not interfere with the potion?” She made a mental note to look into his remark about her colleague.

“I did, Professor,” Harry agreed, “the charm was in the potions manual along with a strong suggestion to use it.”

“And he tried to give you detention,” she persisted.

“He did, seemed pretty annoyed when I reminded him that I was busy and couldn't spare the time.” Harry choked down a laugh.

“I'll remind Severus that I've decided to handle all of your issues personally,” Minerva promised. She'd also ream him out if he was still insisting on being unprofessional and petty. “What else did you want to discuss with me?”

"I need to schedule a couple of business meetings. At least one for Hermione's father with the Harpies and at least one more with the

goblins on behalf of Hermione's godfather. I'd also like to attend a couple of the Harpies games. You're welcome to come along for those if you wish, Professor, they gave me season tickets for one of the private boxes."

"I'd be delighted to, Mr. Potter, thank you," Minerva said, pleased at the thought.

"No problem Professor." Harry paused to think. "Also pretty sure that Hermione and the other girls have a few things they want me to do for them, but I don't know any details."

"I'll speak with the others and emphasize how lucky they are for you to be willing to grant them so much of your time," Minerva agreed.

"Speaking of time, you're not feeling overwhelmed by the amount of research and training you're doing, are you?"

"Ask me in a week or two," Harry answered honestly. "I know what I'm doing is important and I know that I need all the help I can get since I've got all sorts of nasty people after my head, it's just a bit difficult sometimes."

"Use your time turner whenever you need to take a kip," Minerva advised, "don't think the only reason I gave it to you was so you could spend more time studying."

"Will do, Professor," Harry agreed.

"I'll also have a chat with the other Professors to have your homework load reduced, I see no reason why the time you spend researching can't

replace it." One less essay to grade every week would be welcomed by all.

"Thanks, Professor."

"Not at all," Minerva replied with a smile.

IIIIIIII

Hermione was waiting when Harry returned to the Gryffindor Common Room. The girl had an enormous book on her lap and a hopeful expression on her face.

"Can I help you with something, Hermione?" he asked.

"You don't have to if you're too busy," Hermione blurted.

"I'm never too busy to do something for you, Hermione," Harry assured the girl.

"Would you mind going with me when I do a couple things this weekend?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"Not at all," Harry said.

"That's it, you don't even want to know what they are?"

"I'd like to know what they are, but I don't have to," Harry explained. "I trust you completely, all I need to know is that you'd like me to go with you."

“Harry.” The girl flushed with pleasure. “Daddy wants me to give a speech at the coal mine he bought for me and Luna to play with. I was hoping that you'd help me write it and go with us. I'm also moving my locomotive to Hogwarts and I was hoping that you'd go with us for that too.”

“Luna going?”

“Yes, and Hannah and Susan are also going to the speech,” Hermione agreed.

“Sounds like it'll be a fun outing,” he murmured. Harry sat down next to her. “What are you reading?”

“A complete illustrated history of the Hogwarts Express,” Hermione replied. “Did you know that there's a canal to Hogwarts that was used before the express line was finished?”

“Hadn't a clue,” Harry replied, “is it still there?”

“I think so, but it hasn't been used in so long that it must be in awful disrepair.”

“Might be something to look into later,” Harry mused.

“Why?” Hermione asked.

“I thought you'd jump at a chance to explore a hidden part of our forgotten industrial heritage,” Harry laughed.

"Harry, that's perfect! Thank you!" Hermione squealed. "I absolutely must be sure to write that down for my speech."

"I'd stress that and job creation," Harry agreed, "don't mention anything about why the mines were closed. It was all before our time, no sense tearing off scabs." He pursed his lips. "In fact, don't say anything negative about anyone if you can help it."

"Okay, Harry," Hermione agreed, "what else do you think I should say?"

IIIIIIII

Tonks supervised as Bill put up another set of wards over their safe house. While not as extensive as the ones over the Granger homes, the principle was the same. The wards were like an onion, layer after layer, each placed by different contractors meaning that any hostile forces had to do more than just capture one warder to compromise the defenses.

"Done," Bill reported, "anything else you want me to do?"

"Few more places that you're not going to get to keep your memories of," Tonks agreed, "nothing personal, but what you don't know, you can't spill under torture."

"So long as whoever takes the memories doesn't take too much," Bill agreed.

"We've got professionals working on it," Tonks assured the man.

Professionals who would then lose any memory of the day's work. It was best to be through about these things.

“Fine,” Bill agreed.

IIIIIIII

Harry was privately amazed that he woke up late the next Saturday morning. He'd have laid good odds that Hermione would have been overcome with excitement at the thought of being reunited with her 'Precious' and woken him up. As it was, he'd managed to get a bit of well needed rest after spending half the night trying to figure out one of his mistakes.

For once, it seemed that the universe wasn't actively out to get him. Sure, it was probably just trying to lull him into a false sense of security before the other shoe dropped, but he was more than happy to take what he could get.

Hermione was waiting for him in the Common Room when he came down and she immediately latched onto his wrist and dragged him out of the Gryffindor tower.

"Come on, the others are already waiting," Hermione said excitedly.

They found the other girls were clustered around a table in the Great Hall, and they immediately set out at Hermione's insistence.

“Thought you two weren't coming?” Harry said to Susan and Hannah.

“We'd never think of leaving our friends to do hard work without offering to help,” Susan said, scandalized by the very notion.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, not mentioning the fact that Susan had been having nightmares again and that it was hoped that spending a bit of time around Harry would quell them.

Harry had to stop for a moment to get a good look at the train when they got to the station, it looked quite different from the normal Hogwarts express. To start with, the engine was different. While the livery was the same, it was larger and the lines were obviously different, even to his untrained eye. Following that was the usual coal car, behind that was one passenger car, followed by a flat wagon, and a giant steam powered crane.

After taking in the train, the boy took a quick glance around to confirm that the security people had already taken their positions on board. After that, they boarded and made themselves comfortable in the one passenger car where they were soon joined by Tonks and the snack cart lady.

“It'll take a few hours before we get to the section of track we'll be meeting up with the truck,” the snack cart lady said, “so just make yourselves comfortable till then.”

“Anyone up for a game of cards to pass the time?” Tonks asked, holding up a deck.

IIIIIIII

The truck was waiting for them when the train pulled to a stop and, true to the precept that anything that could go wrong would, they were unable to proceed due to a problem with a vital piece of equipment.

“Harry, they say that it'll take them at least a day to repair the crane,” Hermione said, working herself up to tell her friend that he didn't have to stay with them, she hated to see him go but his time had become so valuable that she thought it selfish to monopolize so much of it.

“No problem,” Harry laughed, “all you had to do was ask.”

“Ask?” Hermione murmured in confusion.

The boy drew his wand and concentrated on Hermione's small locomotive for a few seconds. The crew watched in silent awe as the engine lifted off the back of the truck and onto the heavy capacity flat wagon that had been prepared for it.

“Harry,” Hermione whispered in shock.

“Really takes it out of you to lift something so large,” Harry panted.

“Tell me if you need me to get it off again when we get to Hogwarts. I should be rested enough by then.”

“Okay,” Hermione said numbly, her mind racing to calculate the amount of magical power needed to lift something so large.

“Wake me up in a few minutes,” he asked, yawning, “I'm gonna go take a nap.”

“We'll wake up up when we get back underway,” Luna agreed.

“Thanks,” Harry mumbled as he got back onto the train.

“Your young man has a lot of power,” the engineer commented, startling the four girls.

"He's Harry Potter," Luna replied proudly. "He can do anything. Right, Hermione?" her voice was filled with absolute confidence.

“I'm beginning to think so,” Hermione agreed faintly.

“Never seen someone that had enough power in 'em to lift a fifty ton locomotive,” the fireman added, “maybe Dumbledore could do it, but not anyone else.”

“You see, I told you he could keep us safe,” Hannah said to her best friend with supreme confidence, “like Luna says, he's Harry Potter, he can do anything.”

“Yeah,” Susan agreed, perking up. Feeling immensely better after seeing tangible evidence of the boy's power level.

“Hate to break this up, but how much longer are we going to be here?” Tonks asked.

“You're not amazed by what Harry did?” Susan asked.

“Not yet, I'm saving it till I get off the clock,” Tonks explained, “then I'm going to spend at least fifteen minutes gibbering in shock followed

by several hours of heavy drinking. Now, I'm busy looking after you lot and it would be unprofessional.”

They secured the locomotive and woke Harry as they started the trip back to Hogwarts. Susan and Hannah were a lot more bubbly and full of life on the return journey, Tonks was as professional as ever, while Luna and Hermione spent the whole ride back chattering at each other in incomprehensible technobabble over a parchment covered in incomprehensible equations.

Unloading the engine had to be postponed for a few hours since the crane had yet to be repaired and the girls absolutely refused to permit Harry to stress himself by unloading it.

“You said you wanted to relax today, so relax,” Susan said firmly.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, “why don't we all just spend the day with each other in the library or something like we did at Hermione's house?” Susan was glowing after spending a few hours with their savior so Hannah was intent on getting as much group Harry time as possible.

“Sure, why not,” Harry agreed. McGonagall had arranged for him to have the weekend to himself.

“We'll meet you in the library,” Hermione said.

“We have an errand we need to run first,” Luna agreed.

“See you there,” Hannah said.

Hermione and Luna rushed through the corridors to Professor Vector's quarters and impatiently pounded on the door.

“What?” the woman demanded. “You do know it's my day off, don't you?”

“Sorry, Professor, but we thought you needed to see this,” Luna said, thrusting the parchment into the woman's hands.

“What am I looking at?” Vector sighed.

“Do you see any mistakes?” Hermione asked intently.

“No, why?”

“Please look again, Professor, we want to be absolutely sure,” Hermione said firmly.

“Fine,” she sighed, squinting at the parchment.

“It looks correct but I don't see why you'd bother calculating the amount of magical power needed to lift fifty tons of steel and move it ten meters, it's not like anyone could do it,” Vector said.

“Harry did,” Luna blurted.

“What?!” Vector demanded, she leveled an intense stare at the two girls. “I want you to repeat that.”

“We saw Harry Potter use magic to lift a small locomotive from the back of a lorry onto a flat wagon,” Hermione repeated.

“We fudged the numbers a bit because we aren't sure of the exact weight of the locomotive, it's also not one hundred percent steel, but the distances are absolutely correct.”

“Merlin,” Vector gasped. She went over the equations again. “Merlin!”

“That was our reaction too, Professor,” Luna said happily.

“May I keep this parchment?” the Professor asked.

“You may, Professor,” Hermione agreed.

“Thank you, please tell the Hogwarts express crew that I don't want the engine Harry moved touched until after we get a chance to accurately weigh it,” Vector commanded. “We're also going to need to go through it and classify every part by weight and metallurgy. Merlin, I . . . damn, this is going to change everything.”

“We're going to be taking her apart for repair and restoration, Professor, would you like to join us so you can do your measurements?” Hermione asked.

“Please,” Vector agreed, the woman couldn't tear her eyes away from the parchment. “If you girls will excuse me, I have some people to floo.”

“We'll probably be in the library for the rest of the day if you need us, Professor,” Hermione said to the closing door.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 21

IIIIIIII

Tonks had just gotten back to her room and poured herself a stiff drink to calm her nerves when a knock on the door disturbed the fragile peace she'd managed to build.

“Unlocked!” she called out.

“Security plan for the event just changed again,” one of her underlings reported.

“Damn it,” Tonks sighed, “I'm off the clock, I was planning to start gibbering in stupefied shock at the display Harry put on today.”

“Bloody glad he's on our side after seeing that,” the former Auror agreed, “would hate to see what he could do to us if he was properly motivated.”

“I think we'd be able to do our duty, I also think that there wouldn't be many of us left at the end of the day,” Tonks agreed. Your ability to fight was based on a mixture of speed, power, skill, and endurance. She wasn't sure how Harry rated in the other three categories, but his power level was frighteningly high.

“Yeah,” he agreed. The man handed over a file. “Big house is sending up a dozen people to infiltrate the crowd and Bones says that we're to do

anything necessary save the unforgivables. Says we can always wipe memories if we have to."

"My orders are to use everything we have to including the unforgivables. Bit harder to cover them up than it is to wipe memories . . ."

"But it's easier than coming back to life," her colleague agreed. "Just as soon not use 'em myself. Though I will admit that it's hilarious to see one of your foes turn on his mates."

"When did you see that?" Tonks demanded.

"When Aurors broke up a raid on my house the summer of my third year," he replied, "s'what made me want to join the force."

IIIIIIII

Vector was still frantically going over equations when Minerva arrived the next morning, having heard about Harry's display from her favorite student. The woman was at her wits end, none of it made any sense.

"Minerva?" Vector mumbled.

"Get any sleep at all last night, Septima?" McGonagall asked.

"It's morning?"

"Were you able to figure anything out, Septima?"

“Harry Potter shouldn't be alive after channeling that much magic,” Vector replied, “which leaves us with a couple possibilities: the first is that he's dead, the second is that the event didn't happen, the third is that he's special, and the fourth is that he didn't.” She yawned. “There are several others, but those are the important ones for now. We can explore the rest later.”

“Go on,” Minerva prompted.

“I haven't spoken with Poppy, but I do not believe that Mr. Potter is dead, so until I learn differently I'm discarding that. There were a number of witnesses to the effect and it is possible that their memories were tampered with, so we'll place that in the maybe. It is conceivable that Mr. Potter is special in some way that gives him more magical power and more ability to channel it than anyone else, but again, without consulting Poppy . . .”

“Poppy says that Mr. Potter is a normal, if extraordinarily powerful, wizard,” Minerva volunteered.

“So we'll put that in the maybe basket too,” Septima agreed, “that leaves the last and in my opinion most likely answer. Mr. Potter did not channel the level of power conventional wisdom says is needed to lift a fifty ton chunk of mostly steel.”

“What did he do?”

“Something else,” Septima shrugged. “I don't know. Maybe he found a more efficient way to use his power, maybe there's something about the

location, maybe there's something about the object, maybe Mr. Potter uses his magical power differently.”

“What do you think?” Minerva asked.

“I think he's using his power differently than most magic users do,” Vector replied, “failing that, I think that everything we think we know about magic is wrong.” She shrugged. “In any case, I'm going to spend every waking moment of the next few months measuring and recording everything I can about the event. I'm going to write a friend at another institution that works in the High Energy Magic Department for his input. I'm going to ask Mr. Potter to try to replicate the event. But before I do all that, I'm going to get some sleep.”

“Good night, Septima.”

“Good morning, Minerva.” The woman slumped forward and fell asleep on her desk.

IIIIIIII

The boy walked through the Slytherin Common room with his head held high and passed by the idiots without a second glance, purists a pox on society all of them. With only a quick glance around, he entered one of the private floo rooms, raised the wards, and then carefully cast a dozen well rehearsed privacy charms.

A pinch of powder went into the fire and an address was called out and he settled back into the plush provided chair to wait for an answer.

“What do you have for me, son?” the face in the fire asked. It was hard and drawn, a hooklike nose sat below two beady black eyes and above a cruel slit of a mouth.

"Greetings to you too, father," the boy said. "Why yes, I'm doing well in my studies, thank you for asking."

“Business before pleasure, I've told you that before.” The eyes narrowed as the eyebrows knit together.

“You have, father, and I've always replied that a few social niceties will often lubricate the later business discussions.”

“Fine. Your mother is doing well, your sister is excited about Hogwarts, and your elder brother is still a drunken wastrel and a disappointment to me and everyone else in the family. Now what have you got for me?”

"Granger and Longbottom have publicly claimed kinship. Seems that Granger is from the aristocratic class on her mother's side and the ultra rich on her father's," he said, making himself comfortable.

“Any chance you could get close enough to her to secure an alliance between our families?” his father asked, avarice and speculation lighting up the man's eyes.

“Not if you want me to try to seal it in the usual way,” the boy said quickly, his life flashing before his eyes.

“Why not, I thought you had quite a bit of success with witches?”

“She belongs to Potter. She's in his circle if she didn't,” he explained.

“So?”

“So you'd have to produce a new spare if I tried to do it in the usual way,” the boy continued. “Even assuming they didn't detect the potion, Potter would suspect something.” And then, if past behavior was any indication, the younger boy'd kill everyone that might be responsible including him.

“So remove him.” His father flicked his hand.

“The Dark Lord has tried, yet Potter is still around. Do you imagine that I'd have more success?”

“I've spent quite a bit of gold having you trained over the summer and-” the man tried to work himself into a tantrum.

“You have. Could my instructor beat Flitwick?” he interrupted.

“Your instructor managed to last five minutes more than ninety percent of your Professor's other competitors.”

“How long did the duel last?”

“Five minutes,” his father admitted.

"Potter sent him to the hospital wing." It had taken quite a bit to get that piece of trivia. "Used an unknown hex to do it too. Still think I could take him on and win?"

“There's always outside contractors,” his father muttered.

“Or we could wait and see if the Dark Lord prevails, he does we can reexamine the situation. But so long as Potter is around, so long as Potter could be around, I'm not even going to consider enriching our family by taking Granger. The risk is not worth the reward.”

Even with Potter out of the picture, there were still Bones, the Longbottoms, the Weasleys, and the girl's own family to contend with. It wasn't just playing with fire, it was juggling bottles of unstable and highly explosive potion after covering your hands with butter. He wanted no part of it, no potential reward was worth that amount of risk.

"Even as rich as you say her family is?" The man drooped, he could see the gold slipping through his fingers.

“All the money in the world means nothing if you're dead,” the boy said simply. “We'll both be dead if we use the usual tactics. We'd be stealing from a powerful wizard with no objections to taking the lives of those who stand against him.” He rather respected that about the younger boy.

“Quit using ten galleon words when knut words will work just as well,” his father grumbled. “You're sure he'd get violent?”

"Am I sure that Potter would... He's killed at least one teacher while he's been here!" the boy barked. "And you're the one that paid my ten galleon word instructors. What's the use of all that gold if I don't use it?"

“What about business relations of the less romantic sort?” his father persisted.

“I wouldn't suggest we risk it. A close relationship would give them a closer look at how we do things and something tells me that they would be less than enthused by what we consider normal business.” And then Potter would kill him for being what he was around the other boy's girls. It's what he would have done in the other boy's place anyway.

“Feh, weak,” his father spat.

"Yet her fortune dwarfs ours," the boy replied, doing his best to hide the relief he felt at his father losing grip on his position. "Perhaps it's just that they've gotten to the point where it's more profitable to be respectable. Look how much the Malfoy family spends trying to buy respectability, there's got to be something there."

“Lucius is as dirty as he's ever been,” his father spat.

“Yet he's spending heaps of gold to look clean,” the boy replied, “why?”

“Because Azkaban is a horrible place to spend a holiday.”

“You'd know better than I would.” The boy shrugged. He had no desire to find out for himself, his father's stories had been quite enough. “Just think about it, I will.”

“Fine. Do you have any other targets lined up?”

"No one worth more than a quick tumble," he said with a grin. "Any International prospects?"

IIIIIIII

Harry was relaxing in his favorite chair and giving serious consideration to a quick nap when the portrait opened to admit his Head of House, dashing his plans for a nap.

"Professor." Harry nodded. It wasn't unusual to see their Head of House in the Common Room, what was unusual was her appearance when the other students were out as she liked to address them as a group.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said with a wide smile. "Just who I was looking for."

"What can I do for you, Professor?" he asked.

"I'm here to escort you to the Transfiguration Trade Show," McGonagall replied.

"I thought we were leaving in," Harry checked his new pocket watch, "an hour?"

"We are, I came early so I could get a chance to inspect your attire," Minerva explained.

"School robes no good?" he asked.

"It requires something a bit more formal," Minerva agreed.

“Be right back,” Harry said. He rose to his feet and darted up the stairs, coming down a few minutes later in a set of formal robes. “How's this?” he asked, fingering the rich blue silk.

“I don't know.” The woman frowned. “It lacks a certain something, doesn't it? Don't forget, we are going to be representing Hogwarts while we're there.”

“Should I add a school crest to the robes?” he suggested, fingering his wand.

“No . . . no I don't believe that will have the effect we're looking for,” Minerva said slowly. “You do have other sets of formal clothing, do you not, Mr. Potter?”

“I do, Professor,” Harry agreed.

“Why don't change into one of them,” Minerva suggested.

“Yes, Professor.”

Again Harry went up the stairs and again he came down in a set of robes which were again rejected by McGonagall. Over the next hour, Harry tried on four sets of formal robes, a tuxedo, and six business suits. Each in turn was given the thumbs down by his Head of House for one reason or another. None of them solid.

“Try again, Mr. Potter,” Minerva ordered.

“I don't have any more sets of formal clothes,” Harry said. “All I have is . . . is . . .” His eyes widened in alarm at the way his Professor's grin deepened. “Please, Professor, not that.”

“I believe you said you had one thing left to try?” Minerva asked, but it wouldn't melt in her mouth.

“But . . . but, Professor . . .”

“Let's have a look at it,” she said firmly. “Who knows, it could have exactly the effect we're hoping to achieve.”

“Yes, Professor.” Harry's last trip up the stairs rather resembled a condemned man going to the gallows. He came down fifteen minutes later draped in the plaid of the great kilt she'd had him purchase earlier that year, a garment he'd rather hoped would never emerge from his trunk to see the light of day, at least not to adorn his body.

“Hmmm.” McGonagall flicked her wand, causing the fabric to shift. “Much better, I think you've managed to find just the effect we were looking for. Good job, Mr. Potter, take twenty points to Gryffindor for good fashion sense.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry sighed, resigned to his fate. He should have known, he really should have known.

“Now come along, I appreciate the fact that you wish to present the best appearance but your fashion show means that we have to leave now if we do not wish to be late,” McGonagall said, motioning for him to follow.

“Of course it does,” Harry sighed. Why couldn't it have been something easy like a Death Eater attack? He knew how to deal with one of those. Well, he thought to himself, at least it gave him an excuse to carry a dirk. Never hurt to be armed with more than just a wand.

Hermione walked into the empty Common Room seconds after Harry and McGonagall vacated it.

“Did you get them?” she demanded. She'd have to remember to do something nice for her Head of House for telling her what was going to happen.

“I think so,” one of the corners replied. A hand appeared out of nowhere and pulled down the hood of an invisibility cloak to reveal Colin's smiling face. “Right angle to get some great shots, just have to develop them to be sure.”

"Good." She grinned widely. "Just remember our deal."

"A galleon for every good photo, you get the only copies, anything you don't want gets destroyed, I don't get to keep copies, I break the deal and I'll be very very sorry because if need be you will make me very, very sorry," Colin repeated.

“Right,” Hermione said brightly. “I also want a chance to poke through all the photos you took in the past and right of refusal over any you take in the future,” Hermione added.

“I think we can do that,” Colin agreed.

“I'd also suggest that you give Harry a chance to go through them and tell you the ones he'd rather be destroyed,” Hermione continued. “Agree to that and I'll talk to him about not having all of them destroyed.”

"You'd do that for me?" Colin asked brightly.

“I would,” Hermione agreed.

“Thanks, Hermione. Do you want to look over them before or after Harry does?”

“Oh, Colin,” Hermione laughed. “Before of course.”

“Of course,” he sighed. She'd want copies of the ones Harry wanted gone too as well he supposed. Ah well, he supposed it was still better than what he already had.

IIIIIIII

Harry rather enjoyed the Transfiguration Trade Show, it was surprisingly interesting and filled with the most . . . ah . . . unique people. Chief among them was his Head of House, who showed a very different side of herself when dealing with some of her colleagues.

“Ogden,” she said with a grin. “So good of you to see you here. To be honest, I'd rather thought you wouldn't have the nerve to show up. Just goes to show that not all Frenchmen are cheese eating surrender monkeys, I guess, just most of them.” She turned to Harry. “That's why it's important to take people as individuals, Mr. Potter.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed, jaw dropped in stupefied shock at how the woman was treating her colleague.

“Minerva,” he said tightly. “Congratulations on you and your student here taking this years medal. Just goes to show that a good student can flourish even under an average-”

"What was that?" McGonagall interrupted, cupping a hand behind her ear. "Did you say that one of my protégés is rewriting the way we understand Transfiguration while you're still stuck at a second rate institution? Perhaps you should think about taking a step up the career ladder and get a job slopping pigs."

"I've never-" the Frenchman sputtered.

“Maybe you should try,” Minerva goaded.

“You . . . you . . . you . . .” the man was overcome with rage.

“Suck it, halfwit!” McGonagall barked. “I believe you owe me something?”

“Fifty galleons and a public admission that the Hogwarts Transfiguration program is superior in every way to the one at Beauxbatons,” he sighed in defeat. “It will appear on the third page of *La Merveilleux Diplomatique* within the week.”

“Front page,” Minerva growled. “That was the deal.”

“But . . .” He withered under her glare.

“Front page,” he agreed.

“Pleasure doing business with you, sucker,” Minerva sneered.

“You haven't had the last laugh, Minerva!” Ogden growled. He glanced over his shoulder at his anonymous students. “Shake your fists at her.”

“Yes, Professor Wernstrom,” the students agreed, hastening to comply with his order.

She glanced around. “Come along, Mr. Potter, I think I see Tsveta Dimitrova from Durmstrang trying to hide from us in that corner over there.”

“Coming, Professor,” Harry agreed.

By the end of the day, they'd had several 'conversations' with Minerva's colleagues which, if Harry's calculations were correct, had netted the woman at least fifteen thousand Galleons in goods, gold, and services. He couldn't help but think that he'd managed to get a glimpse of the real McGonagall rather than the professional mask she showed most of the world.

The room went quiet and the lights dimmed. A spotlight lit up the stage and the president of the prize committee took his place.

“Gentlebeings, it is my great pleasure to announce the winner of this year's Puddocky Transfiguration Prize, a young man who's contributed

much to our art despite his young age, a young man who's service to our society and magic as a whole can not be overstated.” The President took a deep breath. “I doubt that I'm surprising anyone when I announce that this years prize goes to . . . Harry James Potter of Hogwarts.”

“Get up there and take your prize, Mr. Potter,” Minerva ordered, punctuating it with a gentle nudge.

Harry took the stage and walked to the podium. “Thank you.” The boy took the medal from the smiling President. “I couldn't have done it without Professor McGonagall.”

“We'll have her up here after you give us a few words,” the President prompted.

“Uh . . .”

“Or perhaps you'd rather give a small demonstration,” the President continued, hoping to put the young man at ease. “It need not be complex.”

“Right,” Harry agreed. He drew his wand, eyes flicking around to find a target before settling on the medal in his hand. A swish and a flick caused the medal to twist into a golden gryphon for a few seconds before the gryphon twisted itself back into the medal.

Silence hit the chamber like a train hitting pigeon. Harry looked up to see that nearly every jaw in the room had dropped.

“I . . .”

“That medal is solid gold,” the President gasped, locking eyes with Harry. “You’ve just broken the third law of transfiguration.” The President’s eyes swept the room. “I trust . . . I trust that there are no more naysayers? I trust that no one doubts that this prize was given to Mr. Potter based on talent and not based on his fame? Mr. Potter, let me be the first to congratulate you for winning this years prize and please also permit me to offer my congratulations for your win next year as well, but, if you’ll do me a small favor?”

“Yes?”

“Do not strain yourself to think of a way to top what you just showed us on stage, I do not believe my poor heart could take it. I believe a round of applause is in order and after that, if Professor Minerva McGonagall would consent to give us a few words?”

A red faced Harry left the stage to the sound of thunderous applause as a stern faced McGonagall took his place.

Minerva’s scowl turned into a grin as she stepped behind the podium. “Thank you for allowing me this opportunity, I promise that I’ll be brief.” She cleared her throat. “I saw him first yeh bloody baboons, he’s mine!” The old woman was glowing. “MINE! BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” she began dancing a jig while making vulgar gestures at several prominent individuals in the crowd.

"And in conclusion I'd like to say, Suck it Wernstrum! Thalla 's cagainn bruis! BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

IIIIIIII

Harry was fairly sure that he was going into a state of shock as he watched his Professor give her speech. By the time she'd finished, he'd nearly managed to convince himself that it was all just a bizarre hallucination.

“Close your mouth, Mr. Potter, it's not polite to stand there gaping at people,” McGonagall chided as she walked up to him.

“Yes, Professor,” he agreed dumbly.

"Come along, Mr. Potter, I know how tempting it is to stay at the reception to." The old woman smirked. "Converse with our valued colleagues, but I know you have an event to go to with Misses Granger and Lovegood tomorrow and I think it best that we get you back so that we can retire at a reasonable hour."

“Yes, Professor,” he replied, trying to process the woman's sudden change from one persona to another.

IIIIIIII

Hermione woke up early the next morning and rushed to the Great Hall to rejoin the other girls at breakfast.

“Did you get them?” Hannah asked eagerly the second Hermione joined them.

“Of course,” Hermione agreed with a faint blush. “I said I would, didn't I?”

“Only after we twisted your arm,” Hannah laughed.

“Let's see,” Susan demanded.

Hermione spread the photos on the table as the other three girls clustered around.

“I'm quite glad that you changed your mind about this, Hermione,” Luna said, a dreamy look on her face.

“Mum sent me a letter,” Hermione mumbled, her blush deepening.

“We'll have to remember to send her a nice thank you note,” Susan decided.

“And copies of the photos,” Hermione added. “She insisted.”

IIIIIIII

Harry awoke with a faint feeling of dread. Something had just tripped his finely honed danger senses and not in the usual way.

“Ron must have eaten something really foul last night,” Harry decided. A quick flick put up a bubblehead charm and Harry was ready to get dressed and face the day.

He found the girls studying together in the Common Room, raising a brief eyebrow at the way Hermione had trampled tradition once again to

bring her friends from other houses into what was supposed to be the heart of Gryffindor territory.

“Guess I shouldn't be surprised,” Harry mumbled to himself. Despite her supposed love of following the rules, Hermione had never paid them much mind when they got in the way of doing something she wanted to.

“What was that, Harry?” Hermione asked glancing up from the book the girls were clustered around. A light blush dusting her cheeks as she hastily closed the book and Handed it to Luna to conceal.

"Nothing important," Harry said. "How is everyone doing this morning?"

“Very well,” Susan said brightly, trying to keep the boy's attention off their new photo album. “How are you doing, Harry?”

“Bit drowsy,” Harry admitted. “Thanks.” He turned towards his best friend. “Hermione.”

“Yes, Harry?” the girl replied.

“I . . .” Nothing to do but come out and say it he supposed. “Let's see what you have on under those robes,” Harry sighed.

“Harry!” Hermione gasped, turning a deep scarlet, he was being much too forward.

“You did remember that you have that speech to give today, didn't you?” he asked, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“Oh.” She deflated a bit and Harry half thought that he saw a brief look of disappointment on Hannah's face. “Right.”

“Your da sent me a letter asking me to make sure that you wore something nice,” Harry continued, “he also wanted me to point out that he made sure the maids packed you something nice to wear so you don't have any excuses. Your mum added that she wants you to wear the blue dress and that there will be a photographer at the event with instructions to get at least two dozen shots of you. I would like to add that this event is for the people that are going to work in your new playground and it's just good manners to show up in something formal.”

“Alright, Harry,” Hermione agreed.

“What about us?” Susan asked.

“If you want to come with us,” Harry agreed. “Though your outfits don't have to be quite as formal as Hermione's. Tell me if you don't have something suitable and I'll see if I can arrange something in the time we have.”

“We'll be fine, thank you, Harry,” Hannah said.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 22

IIIIIIII

The event was more interesting than he'd thought it would be, meaning that it was merely mind numbingly boring so Harry amused himself by watching the crowd. In the front row sat an assortment of local notables, each secure in the fact that they were big fish in the very small pond that the depressed economic area had become. In the second sat an old man with his family, glowing as he whispered about his time in the mines. In the third, he found something interesting.

Harry walked up to the nearest security person and tapped her on the shoulder.

“What's up?” the woman asked.

“Third row aisle,” Harry replied. “Wand concealed in the small of the back, another on his left ankle, and I don't recognize him.”

“Give me a second,” the woman said.

"Alright," Harry agreed. He glanced at his companion and received a nod. "Thank you for your time."

“Ah . . .” the woman cocked her head as she listened to her earpiece.
“Understood.”

“Well?” Harry prompted.

"Gringotts' internal security, not sure why he's here," she replied.

“I think we're about to find out,” Harry said.

“Hmmm?” She glanced up to see that the wizard in question had stood up slowly and had begun walking towards them, hands clearly visible with his palms out.

“Noticed you looking and I thought I might come over to set some minds at ease,” the wizard offered calmly.

“Just wondering what interest Gringotts has in this,” Harry said, eyes flicking over the rest of the crowd.

“No idea,” the mystery wizard admitted. “I'm here so I can give a report on what I saw later.”

“They sent someone from their internal security division to give a report?” Harry's companion asked skeptically.

“They sent the nearest muggle-born,” the mystery wizard corrected.

“Internal security means just that, internal.”

“What do you do for Gringotts?” Harry asked.

“Goblins are a clan based society to some extent. One goblin watching another from the same clan is likely to overlook the actions of their clan member and one from a different clan has the possibility of starting a

feud. Humans allow management to sidestep those issues,” he explained. “Any other questions?”

“What do you plan to do if something happens?” Harry's companion asked.

“Kiss the ground and let you lot take care of it. None of you know me well enough for anything else to work,” he replied.

“Alright,” Harry agreed, he glanced at his companion and received a nod. “Thank you for your time.”

“Not at all,” the man said, turning to leave. “Pleasure to meet the infamous Harry Potter in person.”

The crowd erupted into applause as Hermione's speech concluded. The girl had chosen to hit upon a number of themes in her talk; the return of a small piece Great Britain's rich industrial heritage, the educational possibilities presented by a working Victorian era coal mine, and most importantly the promise of a number of jobs for the local people.

The crowd's reaction seemed to take the girl by surprise. Red faced, she stammered her thanks and fled the stage and into the waiting arms of her friends.

“You did great, Hermione!” Susan cheered.

“I quite liked the part about industrial heritage,” Luna said, eyes shining. “Do you think we should set up a large steam engine to help run the mines?”

Hermione just gave a shy nod in reply, still feeling a bit overwhelmed by her first public speaking engagement.

"Think the one they used to use is still around," an old man announced as he tottered up to the group. "Least I'm fairly sure, it was when I worked in the mines."

"Really?" Hermione's eyes were sparkling.

"From '33 till I got conscripted and then again from '48 to '77 when I managed to break my leg," the old man said proudly.

"Do you want a job?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"Not sure how much use I'd be underground anymore," the old man chuckled.

"Not that," Hermione giggled back. "Telling people what it was like and giving tours."

At Harry's nod, one of the close security men handed the old man a business card.

"Think it over and call the number on the card if you decide you want the job or have any questions," Harry advised.

"I will," the old man said brightly. He turned back to Hermione. "And bless you for bringing the mines back, young lady, bless you."

IIIIIIII

Harry collapsed onto one of the couches in the Gryffindor common room immediately after they'd all gotten back. He'd had no idea the event would be so tiring, no idea how stressful it was to try to keep an eye on so many people at once. It gave him a new found sympathy for Tonks and her people. 'Poor bastards must be made of iron to be able to do it day after day.'

Hermione, Susan, and Hannah took the couch facing his while Luna bounced up and down on the springiest chair.

“Dobby'll bring our meals up here, we've got the weekend to recover.” Harry shot a look at Luna. “Those of us that need it, and McGonagall told me to tell you that there'll be three extra beds in Hermione's dorm tonight if you're not feeling up to going back to your own.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Susan said with a wide smile. “I believe we'll take her up on that.”

“Quite considerate of her,” Hannah agreed.

“Wake me when the food gets here,” Hermione mumbled, cozying up to one of the other girls and falling asleep.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth wasn't in the outer office more than five minutes before he was called in to make his report.

“Well?” the other goblin barked the moment the door closed.

“More evidence has arrived suggesting that our theory the Granger family is testing their heir is correct,” Hooktooth stated. “She has been given control of a defunct coal mine and has stated her intention of bringing it back to life.”

“What are her chances for success?” the senior goblin demanded.

“Very High,” Hooktooth replied. “As things are she stands to make a good profit when one factors in the tax breaks and government subsidies she'll be receiving.”

“Starting her slow then,” the senior goblin snorted.

“We expect that she will take on a larger project soon,” Hooktooth said quickly. “Our analysts believe that she will be expected to find her own project and that the coal mine is both a final test before being set on her own and a consolation prize if she fails to meet the family expectations.”

“Are there any other possible heirs in this generations?” the senior goblin asked calmly.

“None that come close to her ability,” Hooktooth admitted. “We believe that the Grangers' back up plan is to find a suitable husband if his daughter should not prove up to the task of managing the family.”

“Likely wants to find one regardless of how the girl does,” the senior goblin replied. “It's never a good thing to deliberately weaken one's blood.”

“As you say,” Hooktooth said with a toothy grin.

“We have any idea who he's chosen?” the senior goblin asked.

“We believe that he's grooming the last Potter to take that role,” Hooktooth said. “The boy has been shown to have a surprising amount of talent for both war and business.”

“Two words for the same thing,” the senior goblin snorted.

“True, but many humans don't seem to realize that,” Hooktooth pointed out.

“True,” the senior goblin mused.

“Orders?”

“Investigate the other potential heirs and find a way to get someone close to the current heiress,” the senior goblin said after a moment of thought.

“You want a source of information close to the heiress?” Hooktooth asked, hoping to clarify things.

“I want to provide a minor amount of aid to the heiress, one that will keep her friendly towards the goblin nation should she prove worthy.”

“Without being so useful that it will annoy her father and make him believe that we are trying to influence his test,” Hooktooth finished. “I think I have an idea on how to accomplish that.”

“Good, dismissed.”

IIIIIIII

Mandy tumbled out of the Three Broomsticks fireplace and into Ron's waiting arms.

“Almost as bad as Harry,” Ron laughed.

“It's because of all the time we spend on brooms,” Mandy said, dusting herself off with as much dignity as she could muster. “Better you are on a broom the worse you are at floo. No professional Quidditch player makes a good landing.”

“Really?”

“No, I'm just awful at it,” Mandy snorted. “Good to know that I'm not the only one.”

“Didn't expect to see you today,” Ron told the girl with a smile. “What with the game on and all.”

“It's because there's a game on today that I came to see you,” Mandy said. “I sprained my wrist in practice yesterday so I won't be playing.”

“It's not serious is it?” Ron asked in concern.

“It'll be fine in a couple days, I could still play but the coach wants to be safe.”

“Okay.”

“So . . . I was wondering, would you like to watch the match with me?” she asked hopefully. “You can chose between the bench with the players and the owner's box.”

“Should be able to make it.”

"Great, here then. You don't want to be anywhere near the stadium when they're ramping up for a game," Mandy said with a grin. "Why don't we . . . Damn it!"

“Either works for me,” Ron replied.

“What is it?”

“I forgot that I had to talk with Harry, it's the only way the coach was willing to let me skip out on the pre-game. Sorry, Ron, but I promise it won't take more than five minutes.”

“What about?”

"The owners want me to make double sure he's willing to talk and then they want to give him and his girls tickets to the owners box," she replied. "If he ends up going, they're hoping to meet with him and sound him out on what they'll have to do to close the deal."

They found Harry in the Great Hall sitting in front of his half finished breakfast sandwiched between Luna and Hermione across from the two Hufflepuffs.

“Have a seat, Ron,” Hermione said, patting the empty space next to her.

“Had breakfast at the Broomsticks,” Ron replied.

“You snuck out?” Hermione asked, amused.

“I've got standing permission to leave if it's related to my business or training,” Ron replied.

“Meeting your girlfriend is business related?” Hermione asked, winking at the girl in question.

“It is when she represents his biggest client,” Mandy agreed, resisting the urge to squeal at the way Ron's face darkened to match his hair.

“Speaking of the Harpies, I need to speak with you about something, Harry.”

“Shoot.”

“The owners want to make sure that you're willing to talk to them and not just me,” Mandy stated. “I told them you were a normal guy, but they're having trouble believing that you'd be willing to have a sit down just because I asked.”

“I'm still willing to meet with them,” Harry assured the girl.

“I know, but orders are orders.” She blinked. “Almost forgot.” She dug around her pockets and pulled out four golden snitches, handing one to each girl. “Game snitches signed by the team. I’m to give them to you in front of Harry to get on your good side in hopes that, that will get me on his.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said primly. Susan and Hannah just nodded, unable to speak, eyes sparkling in pleasure.

“Yes, thank you very much,” Luna agreed.

“That said, you’re all invited to today’s game. Seats in the owners box so they can run into you by coincidence and strike up a conversation.”

“Convenient,” Harry said. “Accepted if I can get permission to leave.”

“McGonagall’s at the head table,” Hermione pointed out.

“So she is,” Harry agreed. The boy shoveled in the last bit of food into his mouth and chewed it as he walked to meet his Head of House.

“Yes, Mr. Potter?” the old woman raised an eyebrow.

“We’ve been invited to see the Harpies play,” Harry explained.

“Asking my permission to accept?”

“Yes, Professor.”

"HMMMM . . . I'd like to give it, but I'm not sure it would be prudent to let you go unaccompanied. I realize, Mr. Potter, that you would be a perfect gentleman, but there are . . . Do you find this conversation amusing, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, giving him her patented number four look. The one she normally gave students caught casting spells in the halls.

"Are you asking to go along, Professor?"

"I am, Mr. Potter," McGonagall admitted with a glint of amusement.

"I'll see if I can arrange it," Harry promised. "Anyone else, Madame Hooch?"

"Already going," Hooch replied.

"I'll be in the owners box," Harry added.

"I'll be in the dugout," Hooch said with a grin. "They're still trying to tempt me to come back as a coach and I'm milking it for all I can."

With a nod of acknowledgement, Harry spun on his heel and returned to the group.

"Well?" Mandy asked.

"Room for one more?" Harry asked hopefully. "One of the Professors wants to go along as a chaperone."

"Who?" Mandy squinted at the Head Table.

“Professor McGonagall, third from the left,” Harry replied.

“Merlin,” Mandy gasped. “I mean . . . just, Merlin.” She shook her head. “Harry, could . . . could you introduce us?”

Harry led the girl to the Head Table, stopping in front of his Head of House. “Professor, I’d like to introduce you to Mandy. Mandy, Professor McGonagall.”

“A pleasure,” McGonagall said.

“I . . . It’s an honor to meet you, Ms. McGonagall,” Mandy gushed. “An honor.”

“You’re a fan of Transfiguration?” Minerva’s eyebrows rose. She’d never run into a transfiguration groupie outside one of the trade conventions.

“I’m a beater, first string for the Harpies. I never thought . . . I never dreamed I’d meet the real Cannon Ball Mc-gone-a-gall. I’ve seen all your old games, you were amazing.”

“I’m sure there have been better,” Minerva demurred, clearly pleased by what the girl was saying.

“You still hold the league record for the most fouls in one minute, game, season, and career,” Mandy said quickly. “And the team record for the most ulcers given to the coach. You’re a legend.”

“I'm glad someone still remembers me,” McGonagall replied, clearly pleased by what she was hearing.

“Would you like to spend the game in the dugout?” Mandy asked hopefully. “I know the other players would love to meet you.”

“I suppose it's settled then,” McGonagall said. “Be sure to wear your winter cloaks, even if they have managed to solve the problem with the heat, it'll still be cold going to and from the stadium.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed.

“Meet back here in . . .” Minerva glanced at her colleague.

“Two and a half hours should do it,” Hooch said.

“Two and a half hours,” McGonagall agreed.

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed.

“Could you make that three and meet at the Three Broomsticks?” Mandy asked hopefully. “I've got a portkey that'll take us to one of the private arrival areas.”

“Alright,” Minerva agreed. “Three hours at the Three Broomsticks, Mr. Potter.”

“We'll be there, Professor.”

Three hours later, the group met up at the Hogsmead's finest drinking establishment and went together via portkey to the Quidditch stadium in which the day's game was to be played.

They were met by a gorgeous woman in Harpies colors. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter," the woman began. "I'm Christine Harper, the team's public relations officer."

"A pleasure," Harry replied. "This is Hermione, Luna, Susan, and Hannah. I'll assume you already know Ron and at least know of Professor McGonagall and Madame Hooch."

"We all know Mr. Weasley and we're all very grateful for what he's already done for the team," Christine agreed. She turned to the two professors. "And of course we're always pleased to see former players return to see the team play."

"They're gonna be in the dugout with me and Ron," Mandy chirped. "Harry and the girls are going to the box."

"Of course," Christine agreed. "Your coach asked me to direct your party to the locker room, Mandy."

"Got it," Mandy agreed.

The woman turned back to Harry. "Why don't I show you the way," Christine suggested. "We've still got a bit of time until the snitch is released. Would you like me to have lunch or some refreshments sent up while you wait?"

IIIIIIII

Ron's eyes bulged when he walked into the locker room and took in the team's state of dress.

“Ron!” one of the chasers squealed. “You made it.” The girl darted over to give the boy a kiss on the cheek. She was soon joined by the rest of the team.

“Uh,” the blushing boy stammered. “I'll just wait outside until you're dressed?”

“Why?” the keeper asked.

“You saved our asses, least we can do is let you see 'em,” the seeker giggled.

“It seems that Mr. Potter isn't the only one with a harem,” Minerva observed in a perfect deadpan.

“This sort of thing never happened in our day,” Hooch replied, with a smirk.

“Only because I was smart enough to keep you lot away from my husband,” Minerva countered. “I saw him first and I don't share.”

IIIIIIII

To Harry's surprise, he was able to enjoy almost half the game before the subject of business was brought up. Tired of the owners dancing around

the issue and wanting to get back to the game, Harry decided to just get things into the open.

“You got my estimate, didn't you?” Harry asked.

“We did, Mr. Potter. We were hoping you'd be able to give us hard numbers in this meeting,” one of the owners replied.

“I'm going to want a few concessions in addition to the gold,” Harry cautioned.

“What sort of concessions?” another of the owners asked.

“Tickets for employees mainly,” Harry said.

“Shouldn't be a problem,” the third owner replied. “Might be a good idea to give free tickets to Aurors as well, always good to have more guards around.”

“We'll throw in a number of tickets for family members also,” the first suggested, also liking the idea of having a number of dangerous and trustworthy magic users sprinkled about the crowd.

“Anything else, Mr. Potter?”

“That's the main thing, might want to borrow the team a couple times in the future or at least some of the players.”

“Benefits, that sort of thing?”

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

“Give us a number to start with,” the owner requested.

“I can do it for this much, only place I can go from it is up so.” Harry wrote a number on a piece of paper and handed it to the owners. “Take it or leave it.”

“Why so cheap?” one of the owners asked after some discussion with his fellows.

“Several reasons,” Harry replied. “Big one is my best mate, someone who's saved my life a number of times and someone who's life I've saved a number of times in turn, is dating one of your beaters. Keeping her safe makes him happy.”

“How much to add in a half dozen women to keep an eye on the locker rooms?”

Harry added another figure to the paper.

“Done,” the second owner agreed. “Have your solicitor send us a contract please, Mr. Potter.”

“I will,” Harry agreed, making a mental note to get a solicitor. “Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'd like to get back to the game.”

“Of course.”

Harry rejoined the girls and was immediately set upon by his other best friend. “Harry?”

“Yeah, Hermione?”

“If Ron's your best mate, what does that make me?” Hermione demanded, eyes sparkling with amusement.

“My best girl,” Harry replied, eliciting a deep blush from the girl.

“If Hermione's your best girl, what does that make us?” Hannah challenged.

“I realize that I'm you girl's chief source of entertainment, but could we get back to that after the game?” Harry requested. “I really do want to see the rest of it.”

“Okay, Harry,” Hermione chirped.

“Sorry, Harry,” Susan added.

“No problem, I normally don't mind. I just want to see the game right now, you can pick up where you left off when we get back to Hogwarts.”

"It's a date!" Luna promised.

IIIIIIII

Neville reread the letter from his gran, knowing that this was all Hermione's fault. The old woman would have been content with a couple meetings if the girl hadn't sent that letter which added fuel to the fire.

“What am I supposed to do on a muggle date?” Neville sighed. A couple barely remembered muggle studies classes under his belt from before he'd dropped the course and he could barely read a bus map. Still, his eyes drifted over the photo that had been included in the envelope, even if the date was a disaster, he'd at least have something nice to look at while the world fell around his ears.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 23

IIIIIIII

Minerva smiled as she reclaimed her old spot on the bench. The old woman marveled at the fact that it was just as knotty and uncomfortable as it had been when she was on the team. Seemed the current generation of owners was as reluctant to spend gold on team comfort as hers had been, or perhaps they wanted to encourage players by making the time spent out of the game as unpleasant as possible.

The mistress of Transfiguration was torn from her musings when two burly women took seats to either side of her.

"That's my spot," the one to her left challenged.

"Yeh think yeh can take it from me, lass?" McGonagall replied. A wide grin split the old woman's face, her heart filled with both eager anticipation and nostalgia. "Try it," she dared, picking her targets.

"It's really you!" lefty squealed. "It's an honor to meet you, Cannon Ball, you still hold the record for the most refs hospitalized in a single game, season, and career. You're an inspiration."

"Not to mention most refs driven to retirement and most refs sent to the long-term spell ward," righty added, eyes shining. "It's an honor to meet you."

"And the the League records for most opposing players sent to St

Mungo's and most teammates sent to St Mungo's," Lefty gushed.

"They retired the penalty box record after the League changed the rules so that anyone that got close would be banned from play for life," righty explained excitedly. "Can we have your autograph?"

IIIIIIII

Harry was immediately confronted by a nervous Neville when he walked through the portrait hole and back into the Gryffindor Common Room.

"What am I gonna do, Harry?" Neville demanded, hoping the other boy would have some advice to share or some way out of the predicament he'd been unwillingly thrust into.

"About what, Neville?" Harry asked, hoping to make sense of what was happening.

"My gran sent me a letter," Neville began.

"Yes?"

"I'm going on a date with one of Hermione's cousins next week and I don't know what to do on a Muggle date," Neville explained. Or a magical date for that matter. "I don't even know what Muggle money looks like, how am I gonna... What should I do, Harry?"

"Which one?" Hermione's voice asked cheerfully. The girl was still in the hall, waiting for Harry to move so she could enter the room.

Neville just handed the girl the letter he'd received.

"Juliet?" Hermione said in delight. "They did take my recommendation."

"This is your fault?" Neville asked, a look of betrayal adorning the boy's face.

"Move please, Harry," Hermione requested, stepping into the room after he complied. "The selection, yes," she agreed. "It was going to happen anyway, and your choices were a shrew, an idiot, and a sweet but very shy girl. Which would you have chosen?"

"The shy girl," Neville admitted with a blush.

"Which is what I suggested," Hermione said gently. "Most of the remainder of the letter was to make sure they didn't saddle you with my cousin Elizabeth, who really is a shrewish bitch."

"Hermione, language," Harry mock-scolled.

"I also stated that my cousin Annabel might be acceptable since she really is a very sweet girl despite the fact that she can't count to five without using her fingers, and can't count to ten even then," Hermione continued, ignoring her best friend. "If I thought I could have stopped this date from happening, I'd have asked you if you wanted me to. I'm sorry, Neville, but I can't do anything about your gran and my mum."

"But what am I going to do?" Neville demanded, sounding panicked. "I don't even take muggle studies anymore. I quit before even taking a term of it."

"Which is a good thing since the class is worse than useless," Hermione sniffed. "Don't worry, Neville: Harry will take you out and give you a crash course on how the Muggle world works."

"I will?" Harry asked, looking amused.

"It'd be too embarrassing to do it myself, and I don't know any other Muggle-born that I both know well enough and trust, to do it," Hermione agreed, batting her eyelids. "Please, Harry?"

"We can get permission to go out from McGonagall tomorrow if you want, Neville," Harry stated.

"Do you have time for it, Harry?" Neville asked.

"The professors are all busy writing up the results of our research," Harry said with a grin. "Getting ready for another award dinner in Professor Flitwick's case. It's not gonna last, but I'm relatively free at the moment."

IIIIIIII

Harry woke up the next morning to find that Hermione had forced Neville to change three times before she was even remotely satisfied with what he was wearing.

"Pink pants, a bright orange shirt, and a lime green frock coat," she muttered in disgust. "Don't get me started on his shoes. I know he's not color-blind. I just don't understand it." It was as though pure-bloods lost what little common sense they had when someone said the word

`Muggle.'

"Weren't you and Luna planning to do something with your engine today?" Harry asked, assuming they were always up to something and hoping to distract the girl.

"What time is it?" Hermione reached into Harry's pocket and pulled out his watch. "I'm late!" she squeaked. "I gotta go. I already talked to Professor McGonagall for you, Harry. You're using the Floo in her office to go to my London house; my Uncle will be there to meet you." She called the last bit over her shoulder as she darted through the portrait hole.

"Ready to go, Harry?" Neville asked, causing the other boy to jump.

"How long have you been there?" Harry blurted, having no idea that someone had managed to sneak up on him.

"Since Hermione started talking about color-blindness," Neville replied. "Shall we go?"

"I suppose we can eat while we're out," Harry said, tucking his watch back into his pocket.

IIIIIIII

They took the Floo in McGonagall's office and arrived in the London townhouse that Hermione had grown up in.

"Welcome to the second house, Mr Harry," one of the Granger maids greeted them upon their arrival. "Mrs Granger is waiting for you in the

dining room. Do you know where that is?"

"This is my first time in this house," Harry replied.

"This way," the maid said, leading them down the hall.

"This house?" Neville muttered.

"According to Hermione, this is her house for the week. The castle they own is just the weekend house, so it doesn't count."

"Oh," Neville replied. "I think we've got a house in London too, but Gran never uses it. Says it'll be mine when I get out of Hogwarts and want some space to myself."

"Does it have a greenhouse?"

"Merlin!" Neville gasped. "It has to... doesn't it?"

"Might be something you want to check on, Neville," Harry stated.

"Even if it does have one already, what are the chances of it having one that meets your standards?"

"Good point, Harry. Thanks." The boy's eyes unfocused as he started making a mental list of what he would need.

"No problem, Neville."

"Uh, Harry?" A sudden thought caused him to snap back to his current predicament.

"Yeah, Neville?"

"What exactly does one do on a date?" the boy asked. "I've never been on one before."

"Not sure myself, Neville," Harry confessed. "I've only gone on one official date myself and it was a bloody disaster."

"Oh."

"Don't worry. Remember how Hermione said her uncle would be here?"

"Yeah?"

"He's here to help us," Harry said.

"Oh. Great." They walked into the dining room to find Hermione's mother seated at the table. "Thank you for having me, Mrs Granger," Neville said formally, snapping off a quick bow.

"Though distant, we are family, Neville," Anne stated with a smile. "You are welcome in our home and may call me by my given name."

"Okay," Neville agreed, blushing in pleasure.

"Did you manage to get something to eat, or did my daughter chase you away before you could get to that part?" Hermione's mother asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Didn't get a chance to eat at Hogwarts; managed to distract Hermione before she could chase us away," Harry replied cheerfully.

The woman nodded to one of the servants. "Breakfast will be here shortly. My brother will be here in an hour or two if we're lucky, after noon if we aren't." It all depended on how hungover the man was and how quickly he could disengage himself from the tart of the night.

"Thank you," Harry replied.

"No, Harry, thank you for agreeing to show Neville around the normal world for us," she replied. "And thank you, Neville, for agreeing to go on a date with my niece."

"Um... right," Neville said. He hadn't been aware he'd had a choice.

"Suppose the first thing to learn is money," Harry said. The boy pulled a handful of change and a couple of notes out of his pocket. "As you can see, the value is printed on each one."

"What's this one worth?" Neville asked, pointing to one of the coins.

"Five pence," Harry replied.

"How can you tell?"

"It has five pence written on it -- see?" Harry pointed out the number and word.

"What about this one?" He pointed to another coin.

"One pound," Harry said, pointing to the writing.

"What comes after pound?" Neville asked hesitantly.

"Nothing. Just two things to remember -- pence and pounds," Harry replied. "One hundred pence to one pound."

The pure-blood sighed in relief. "That sounds straight-forward enough."

"It can get more complex than that, but we'll save that for later," Harry stated, thanking all that was holy that they'd been born after Decimal Day.

"If it helps, all the paper is pounds," Anne added helpfully.

"Thanks," Neville said. "I think I understand."

"Which reminds me," Harry said. The boy pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket. "Just in case you don't get a chance to go to Gringotts."

"Thanks, Harry. I'll pay you back as soon as I can," Neville said.

"Whenever it's convenient," Harry said with a shrug. "We're friends, Neville. I'm not worried about it."

IIIIIIII

When Hermione arrived at the workspace that had been set aside for them in the engine shed, she found Luna staring at one of their engineering texts with a look that was a perfect mix of concentration and

confusion.

"Hermione, would you mind taking a look at something for me?" the little blonde asked, not taking her eyes off the book.

"Sure, Luna," Hermione agreed, walking over to the other witch's side.

"Am I imagining things, or is this man holding a Higgs Type SR Automatic Arithmancy Calculating Device?"

"I... I don't think it's your imagination," Hermione said. "Copy the page for me, please, Luna."

"All right, Hermione," Luna agreed. "Are you going to send it to the Ministry to report a possible breach of the Statute of Secrecy?"

"I'm going to send it to my father with a request that he find out what it is," Hermione replied. "If there was a breach, it happened ages ago, judging by the clothes they're wearing."

IIIIIIII

Hermione's uncle arrived as they were finishing their breakfasts and took an empty chair next to his sister.

"Good morning, Jim," Harry said greeting the man. "This is Neville. Neville, Hermione's Uncle Jim, your distant cousin."

"Good to meet you, cousin," the big man said calmly.

"Good to meet you too, sir," Neville replied.

"Call me Jim," the man continued.

"Thanks for agreeing to help, Jim," Harry said.

"Always happy to," Hermione's uncle said with a grin. "Particularly when I know what I'm helping with."

"Neville's got a date with one of Hermione's cousins, and I was hoping you'd be willing to give him some pointers on how to behave," Harry explained.

The man eyed the short, slightly pudgy boy standing next to his niece's paramour. "Which one?"

"Juliet."

"One of the few I can stand," the man said honestly. "Hurt her and I'll hurt you -- understand?"

"Yes," Neville gulped.

"Good. Now that the threats are out of the way, we can get down to business." A wide grin split the man's face. "How likely are you to have to deal with an assassination attempt while you're out?"

"Less than Harry, but more than the average bloke," Neville replied, starting to feel at ease, as Hermione's uncle reminded him a bit of some of the Aurors that used to drop by to check on him when he was younger.

"Right," Jim agreed, making a mental note to request that extra security be present when the lad was out with his niece. "We'll worry about it later. First, I think, we'll visit my tailor."

"Um, can we stop at Gringotts first to convert some of my Galleons?" Neville asked.

"My treat." The big man's smile deepened. "Actually, I've got a better idea. Let me ask you a few questions about pure-blood society and I'll charge everything to my employer as a business expense."

"Harry?" Neville looked over at the other boy.

"If it helps, his boss is friends with Madam Bones and knows about magic," Harry stated. "Up to you, Neville."

"So long as you don't want me to violate the Statute," Neville said slowly. "But are you sure? I really can pay if I can go to the bank first."

"How 'bout this? I'll treat you to a tour of my world, and you do the same for me in your world at a later date?" Jim offered, eager to get a chance to pick the boy's brain.

"Okay," Neville agreed. "But only if I can get you a new set of robes when you do."

"Deal," Jim laughed, sticking his hand out.

"Am I supposed to spit on it before we shake?" Neville asked, having a

vague memory about Muggle handshake etiquette.

"No," Jim replied. "People do it, but they don't tend to do it often these days, and almost never when they come from our social class."

"Right." Neville shook the large man's hand.

"Coming, Harry?" Jim asked. "Before you answer, you should remember that my brother-in-law will never forgive you if he finds out you had a chance to screw Charlie out of a few pounds and didn't take it."

"Sure," Harry agreed.

"Finished eating?" the big man asked, upon receiving affirmative nods, he continued. "We'll take my brother in law's car for three good reasons," Jim announced. "The first is that it will annoy him to discover that I took the opportunity to steal every drop of good booze he had in it. The second is because it's large enough for the three of us, which my Aston is not. The third is that you won't accidentally activate the ejection seat or the hidden machine guns if you hit the wrong button by mistake." The two boys laughed in appreciation of the Joke. Jim snapped his fingers, summoning one of the servants. "Get a driver for whatever my brother in law's newest, biggest, toy is and bring it around front."

"At once, sir," the servant agreed.

IIIIIIII

In a few minutes, they were on the road and Jim was exploring the liquor cabinet, a look of profound disgust adorning his face. "That bloody bastard!"

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"My no good brother in law took out all the good stuff and replaced everything alcoholic with the garbage the government uses to strip the paint off old navy ships," Jim replied. "I'm not sure this is something I can forgive. There are jokes and there's depriving a man of the finer things in life." The big man pulled three bottles of soda out of the fridge and handed one to each boy. "Still, they say sacrifice is good for the soul."

"Where are we going first?" Harry prompted.

"Savile Row to meet with my tailor," Jim replied. "Haberdasher or barber after that."

IIIIIIII

Jim spent much of the ride skillfully and subtly extracting every bit of information about wizarding society and government from Neville. It was a novel change, being on the collection side rather than the user side for once -- not one he thought he'd enjoy making permanent, of course, but certainly worth doing again at some future point.

He seamlessly switched to a more mundane subject the instant they stepped out of the car.

"Juliet is very shy and very intelligent," Jim said as they walked into the tailor's shop. He glanced at the proprietor. "Put a rush on this one. We'll come back in an hour for the first fitting, and an hour after that for the second."

"Yes, sir," the tailor agreed.

The boy's did their best to imitate Jim's easy manner as they endured being measured. "Her current obsession seems to be natural science; botany, biology, that sort of thing."

Hermione's uncle switched from dispensing advice to asking questions and back as they hit his favorite barber shop, haberdasher, and club for a meal. All interspersed by return visits to the tailor for more fittings.

As they returned to the Granger family's townhouse later that evening, Jim couldn't resist dispensing a few last bits of advice to ensure that his niece's date with the shy magic-user would be interesting, if not enjoyable.

"If nothing else, remember to make a witty remark after you dispose of an assassin," Jim continued. "For example; if you throw one into the back of a garbage truck to be compacted, you might say something along the lines of 'What a crushing bore.' Or if it was an industrial shredder, one might say something like 'Oh my, he's gone all to pieces.' I find it helps to think up as many situations and remarks as possible beforehand."

Neville turned his laughter into a cough as the man trailed off. "I'll try to remember that."

"I'm completely serious," Jim stated. "It does help to think up situations and remarks ahead of time. Just remember that you can't think of everything and don't worry about it too much. The act of thinking and

practicing ahead of time will make it easier to think up things on the fly."

"Okay," Neville agreed.

"It's likely my sister will provide the car and give the driver a schedule for you to follow. It's not good for her to get used to having her plans work out, so I'm going to give you a list of acceptable places. Chose one of them and have the driver take you there."

IIIIIIII

Lucius' face was impassive as he listened to his spymaster's report on the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The information was both troubling and too stale to do anything about.

"I want more information on the Granger family," Lucius said after a moment of thought. "How possible do you think it would be to get someone on the inside?"

"The staff consists of Muggles, Muggle-born, Half-bloods, and pure-bloods ostracized from normal society for having close relationships with the first three," the woman spoke. "Close enough to impossible to not be worth the effort."

"I see." Lucius wanted to scream in frustration, how could something so big have come out of nowhere? His son was supposed to have warned him about the bloody girl's family! Keeping an eye out for things like that was one of the reasons the little bastard was in Hogwarts in the first place. "See what you can learn about the Grangers and try to get more information on what Bones is doing."

"All right. Anything else?"

"See if we can get someone into Hogwarts," Lucius ordered. "It looks as if Severus and Draco aren't performing to expectations. I want to know if it's a case of incompetence or treason."

IIIIIIII

Chapter 24

IIIIIIII

Amelia had a frown on her face as she supervised her security detail laying charges. Hell of a thing to have to destroy what had, in a very real sense, been her home since leaving Hogwarts but she'd be damned if she let the bastards get the department intact.

"My office next," she ordered. "Be sure there's a way for me to activate all the charges from there."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, boss," one of the Aurors said nervously.

"While I think it's a great idea and, since I have more rank than you do, means mine is a better idea than yours," Amelia said calmly.

"Yes, boss," the Auror said glumly.

"Cheer up," she ordered. "I don't plan to use it, I just want to have options if the worst happens." She'd already decided not to be taken alive, the thought that she might be able to take a whole lot of the bastards with her was more than a bit enticing. "With even a few seconds of warning, we can all be out of here and a safe distance away to watch the Ministry turn into a sinkhole."

"You say so, boss," the Auror said doubtfully.

"I do," Amelia agreed. A shame she couldn't move all of her people out of the Ministry and into one of the secure annexes she'd arranged.

IIIIIIII

Phil put down his newspaper as a nondescript man opened the door to his Rolls-Royce and slipped in.

"What have you got for me?" Phil asked.

"Quite a bit," the man replied. He handed his sometimes employer a shoebox. "Found an old warehouse filled with this stuff. Short yellow ones are Pickett Es-600s, s'what the astronauts carried to the moon. Thought that girl of yours would find 'em interesting if she's developed an appreciation for slide rules."

"And this?" Phill pulled what appeared to be a black rotary pencil sharpener out of the box.

"Curta calculator in poor condition. Figured she could take it apart and keep the unused ones intact," the man explained.

"Ones?"

"Like I said, whole warehouse filled with this stuff. Seems like they just locked the door and forgot about it after electronic calculators got cheap enough to displace the mechanical stuff."

"You bought the lot of it?"

"Figured she'd be interested in this stuff too if she's interested in slide rules," the guy said calmly. "If not and you don't want this stuff, I know a few places I can flog it off."

"No, I'll take it all," Philip stated. "Keep an eye out for similar items."

"Will do." The guy scratched his chin. "You want the warehouse too or should I just have the merchandise shipped to the usual place."

"Get a good sampling of what's available boxed up to send to my daughter right away. Leave the rest in place and get me an inventory when it's convenient. I'll take the warehouse." Phil grinned. "If I can't use it myself, I'm sure I can always flog it off on someone."

IIIIIIII

It was evident to one and all that Hogwarts' resident professor of arithmancy was in a foul mood. Students ducked into side corridors and unused classrooms to avoid crossing her path and risking her wrath as she stalked through the castle in search of her prey.

"Mr. Potter!" Professor Vector shouted, freezing the boy before he could make his escape.

"Professor?" he replied, wondering what had caused the woman to go on the war path.

"Were you aware that I had called in a team of specialists to aid me in my research on how you did what you did with Hermione's train?" she demanded.

“Hadn't a clue, Professor,” Harry replied.

“Were you aware that they've expelled me from their team and told me that they were professionals and had no need for a mere school teacher?” Vector growled.

“Wasn't aware of that either, Professor,” Harry said, his voice hardening a touch.

“What is your first thought upon hearing that information, Mr. Potter?” she persisted.

"That there's no way in hell that they're getting any help from me," Harry said firmly. "Second is to find them and give them a first hand demonstration of some of the spells I accidentally created." See how the bastards liked having their arms switched with their legs for a week or two.

"Minerva said you were a good boy," Vector said with her first smile of the conversation. "The lead researcher on the other hand said that you were, at best, an idiot savant, that you lack both the knowledge and the intellect needed to be useful and that you have little or no value outside your propensity for creating strange effects."

“I see.” Harry was having to exert real effort to restrain himself from marching down to show the bastard a few 'interesting effects' first hand.

"I, on the other hand, believe that you have at least some clue as to the mechanics of your effect, maybe not all of it, but enough to point us in

the correct direction," Vector continued, "which one of is correct, Mr. Potter?"

"I don't always know how I do things, Professor, but in this case it's easy. I'm surprised you haven't figured it out yet," Harry replied.

"Enlighten me," she demanded.

"Borrow your quill?" Harry took the quill from the woman's hand and settled down. "I melded three charms together with a fourth that I came up with on the spot." He wrote down a few equations, dozens of hours being forced to aid the Professors in their research coming in handy.

"The first two were not unexpected, but a feather weight charm on something so large?" She shot him an odd look.

"Every little bit helps," Harry laughed, "not a lot, but enough. It's the last part that allowed me to do it." He jotted down a few more notes.

"A lever," she said dumbly.

"Basic stuff," Harry agreed, "bit less impressive than brute forcing it."

"But much more elegant," she replied. "Would you mind doing me a favor, Mr. Potter?"

"Sure, Professor."

"Allow me to expand on this," she asked.

“Sure,” Harry agreed.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter.” Vector examined his equations. “You made a mistake here.”

“I did?”

“Yes,” she agreed cheerfully, “it seems you underestimated the power requirement by at least a factor of ten.”

Unnoticed by the Professor or her student, hidden inside a classroom that hadn't been used for a dozen decades, a second year Hufflepuff's eyes widened in shocked wonder as she heard enough to get precisely the wrong idea.

Within hours, a dozen rumors raced through the castle, each competing for dominance and each bearing only the merest sliver of the truth.

A hush fell over the Great Hall as Harry walked in and, seeing expressions of shocked awe on the faces of his classmates. Without breaking his stride, Harry walked across the Great Hall to the nearest exit and on to the kitchens for his sustenance. Seemed like the sheep of the wizarding world were going through another of their phases again, nothing for it but to avoid the lot as much as possible till everything had a chance to blow over.

IIIIIIII

Lucius found his wife in the conservatory engaged in some useless activity she no doubt thought suitable for a pureblood matron to pass the time.

"Narcissa, I need you to tell me everything you know about the Granger family," Lucius said seriously.

"I thought you weren't interested in the social scene?" his wife replied archly.

"I've come to the realization that since it is important to you, it should be important to me," he said with a smile. "I'm sorry I've been so neglectful, darling."

"Well, they debuted at one of the Longbottom soirees in the company of Harry Potter, the first social event he's gone to," Narcissa began happily.

Lucius was able to harvest several gems of information from his wife's prattle. The first was that the Granger family had at least two houses, one of which had a stable larger than his manor. The second was that it was rumored the Grangers could buy and sell most of the magical world with pocket change, something he needed to be sure his pet politicians never looked into, lest they decide they weren't of the honest variety. The third was that his wife's interest in high society wasn't quite the waste of resources he'd once thought it to be.

IIIIIIII

Neville's breath caught in his throat when he caught his first glimpse of his prospective date. She was dressed in clothing that would not have

been out of place on a girl of her station one hundred years before. A pale blue dress and hat. Her right hand was empty, her left held a folding fan. One look at her face betrayed a strong family resemblance to both her aunt and cousin Hermione, all three had the same jaw and all three had similarly perfect teeth.

The girl reached up and brushed a strand of auburn hair behind one ear as her eyes focused on him.

"Neville?" Anne Granger said with a smile. "I would like to introduce you to my niece, Juliet Bynder-Aldham."

"A pleasure to meet you, Neville," the girl said almost too softly to hear.

"Likewise," Neville stammered.

"Why don't I let the two of you get to know each other while the driver gets the car ready?" Anne suggested, taking her leave.

Neville spent a very uncomfortable few minutes trying and failing to think up something to say to break the silence. Just as he was about to comment on the weather, the girl spoke.

"How do you know my cousin?" she asked calmly.

"We go to the same school," Neville mumbled.

"I see." Juliet opened a folding fan and raised it to conceal the lower half of her face. "Does that mean you can do magic as well?"

"You know about that?" Neville blurted.

"Of course," she agreed. "You are aware of the fact that there are two other girls in the family that my aunt and your grandmother considered matching you with?"

"Yes," Neville agreed.

"Annabel is a bit younger, Elizabeth is a bit older, and Hermione is almost the same age as my self. Being that we are of similar age, Hermione and I were playmates for much of our childhood. As such, I was in a prime position to witness her perform all manner of unusual phenomenon," Juliet explained primly. Not to mention the fact that the slightly older girl was not nearly as careful with her books as the magical government would have liked.

"Oh." Neville let out a breath. "Um . . . do you have any questions?"

"Oh, a fair few," she agreed, eyes dancing. "But I suppose that I can contain myself until our next date. In the mean time, why don't you tell me about yourself?"

IIIIIIII

Seeing as how she roomed with the two biggest gossip mongers in the student body, it didn't take long for Hermione to get a garbled account of Harry's meeting or the conclusions the student body had drawn from it. Upon receipt of a piece of information that seemed to contradict everything she knew about how magic worked, Hermione grabbed her

partner in crime and went off in search of the boy of their mutual admiration to get to the root of the matter.

They found him in one of his usual hiding spots. The way his grin deepened as they explained what they'd heard indicated that there was more to the story than student gossip would normally lead one to believe.

“You think I did it the hard way?” Harry raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“What did you do, Harry?” Hermione asked.

"Surprised you and Luna didn't figure it out right off." Harry laughed. Even more so than he was that the Professors hadn't considering the two girls' latest obsession with all things mechanical.

"Would you please tell us, Harry?" Luna requested.

“You'll be annoyed enough when you figure it out, you'd be filled with rage if I had to give you the answer,” Harry stated. “Tell you what, I'll give you a hint, shall I?” He scratched his chin. “What was his name again? Right, Archimedes.”

The girl's froze, staring at him in profound shock for a few moments.

“Give me a place to stand with a lever-” one girl began.

“-I will move the whole world,” the other finished the quote.

“See? Easy.” Harry shook his head. “You two are the ones that told me to always look for the simple answer first.”

“We're also the ones that told you natural law was not immutable, just a way of describing our current understanding of the universe,” Luna pointed out.

“And your lever trick still changes everything,” Hermione continued, “we didn't consider it because no one's ever figured out a way to get it to work.”

“Though we must admit that we should have seen that it was far more likely than our original conclusion,” Luna admitted.

"Especially considering your idea about solidifying air to have a flying train," Harry pointed out. "What do you think gave me the idea?"

“Our enchantments are going to take months to cast and the amount of magical energy that we're going to need to draw on is enormous,” Hermione said.

"There is also no way we'd be able to power it without leeching a good deal of magic from the environment," Luna agreed. "We'd have still been excited if you'd have taken months to lift the train-

"-because it still would have been an impressive feat of magic," Hermione agreed. "But pulling out your wand and lifting it?"

“Fine, I get it,” Harry agreed. “Just don't let slip what I told you to the people working on trying to figure out how I did it.”

“Why not?” Hermione asked.

“Well, you know how a bunch of them came in and took the project away from Professor Vector?” Harry asked.

“They did?” Luna asked, clearly outraged by the lack of professional courtesy.

“Said that she'd done well to bring the matter to their attention but that the services of a school teacher were not needed,” Harry continued, “she was less than pleased when found me and told me what happened.”

“And you told her how you did it?” Luna asked.

“After she asked me to help her figure it out, I told her I already knew. She's been busy writing a paper on it for submission,” Harry agreed.

“So you want us to let the prats struggle because they were rude to Professor Vector?” Hermione giggled. “Harry, you gentleman.”

“That and she told me that they were producing some interesting theories and that it would be a shame if someone told them that their whole premise was based on a mistake,” Harry admitted. “Professor Vector figures that either they waste a bunch of time or they come up with a theory that changes the nature of reality. In other words, she gets her revenge or she's so excited by the new theory that she doesn't care.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 25

IIIIIIII

Luna giggled. "I suppose that makes sense."

"It does," he agreed. "Did you two need anything else?"

"I've got something I'd like you to look over, if you have a few moments to spare," Hermione replied.

"For you two?" He grinned. "I've got all the time in the world." Both girls blushed.

"I . . . ah, thank you, Harry," Hermione said. "We were at the engine shed earlier speaking with the crew and it came out that the current owners of the Hogwarts Express are looking to sell."

"You'd like to buy it," Harry guessed.

"Yes," Hermione admitted.

"Do you have enough?"

"More than enough in the Gringotts account that daddy set up for me to use this year," Hermione agreed.

"So what do you need?"

"Could you look at some business papers for me?" Hermione asked.

"Luna and I ran the numbers, but this can't be right."

"What can't be right?"

"Look how cheaply we can buy the Hogwarts Express," Hermione said.

"It's below scrap value if our numbers are correct."

"This isn't just the Hogwarts Express, it's several trains, the engine shed, the tracks, and everything else."

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "Why is it so inexpensive?"

"You saw it yourself," Harry said, pointing to a column of numbers.

"The current owners are losing money on maintenance, even with the fact that the Ministry pays half the upkeep on the tracks. They can't raise prices or cancel service due to their contract with Hogwarts. Owning the train means they're locked into the contract to supply transport to Hogwarts which in turn means they lose money every year."

"What if someone just wanted to buy it so they could play with the trains?" Hermione asked innocently.

"I'd suggest they buy it and then start hauling freight to and from Hogsmead," Harry replied. "I'd guess that would at least offset some of the losses and might even bring a profit."

"So you think this might be a good investment?" Hermione asked intently, knowing he'd just given her a lever that would allow her to convince her father to give her more funding for her projects.

"It might be," he agreed. "Would have to study the issue to be sure either way."

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said brightly.

"Happy to help, Hermione."

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth didn't have long to wait before he was ushered into his superior's office. The senior goblin was always very interested to hear of any information pertaining to the Granger family.

"Well?" the older goblin prompted.

"The Granger Heiress has purchased the company responsible for running the Hogwarts Express," Hooktooth reported. "Along with the purchase order was an unsealed note to her father stating that she planned to begin hauling cargo to Hogsmead and a couple other small settlements on the same line."

"I see. What do our analysts say?"

"That as things are, she's in a position to significantly undercut her competitors and still make a small profit. They believe that her profit

margins will increase dramatically once her coal mine reaches full production."

"Interesting. Do we know what role if any the last Potter played in this?"

"Sources indicate the Granger Heiress approached the Potter for advice and approval before making the purchase. Our analysts believe that he's been asked by her father to act as the Granger Heiress's advisor or arbiter during her test of worthiness."

"I've had a report that the Lovegood's daughter has formed a close relationship to the Granger Heiress," the senior goblin stated.

"Our analysts are split on that one," Hooktooth admitted. "Half of them believe that the Granger Heiress is cultivating her to be the Potter's junior wife."

"Humans do not work like that," the senior goblin growled. "Everyone who's ever spent time as a teller knows that."

"We're no longer sure that's absolutely true," Hooktooth said nervously.

"Explain!"

"You are aware of the Granger Heiress's fondness for books?"

"I am." The senior goblin had a look of impatience on his face.

"We have managed to acquire a record of her purchases for the last six months. Unsurprisingly, the majority seem to be related to her school

courses and business ventures, but, along with those were a small percentage of novels filled with examples of romantic interpersonal relationships between humans."

"So?"

"So the intelligence department purchased a representative sample of those books and it seems that a number of them were about females of lesser social status engaged in sexual relationships with attached males of higher social status."

"The Granger family is of a much higher social status than the Lovegoods," the senior goblin said in understanding.

"As is the Potter family if you take into account the fame accorded to the last Potter for his part in his parents' defeat of their last dark lord," Hooktooth said cautiously.

"True. Do we have any more evidence to support that conclusion?"

"Observers report that the Granger Heiress seems not to mind the idea of the Lovegood forming a relationship with the last Potter," Hooktooth agreed. "The intelligence department approached a number of human employees with strong ties to the non-magical world and several of them stated that they believed such relationships to be common among high caste non-magical humans."

"Increase the intelligence department's budget by fifteen percent to research the mating habits of high status non-magical humans," the senior goblin said after a moment of thought. "What do the analysts

think of our plan to dispatch a token amount of aid to the Granger heiress?"

"They believe that it will help solidify our relationship with the Granger family and they do not believe it will annoy her father," Hooktooth replied.

"Why?"

"Mostly based on the last Potter's behavior and on statements made by the Head of the Granger family. It is believed that the Head will view this as a show of support and approval by Gringotts to his chosen successor."

"Make it so."

IIIIIIII

Minerva was unsurprised to find her favorite student in the engine shed with young Ms. Lovegood, both girls working on the small steam engine that Hermione had received from her parents.

"Ms. Granger!" the Professor called out to get the girl's attention.

The girl pulled her head out of the boiler to regard the old woman with a look of frank curiosity. "Yes, Professor?" She replied respectfully.

Minerva smiled — she thought the smudge of grease on the bridge of the girl's nose was just adorable. "There is a goblin here to see you."

"A goblin?" Hermione frowned, trying to think of why the being was visiting her. "I'd better see what they need then."

With Luna trailing behind, Hermione stepped out of the building to regard her visitor. It was a young goblin, she guessed, based on the lack of wrinkles and scars that she'd seen on most of the other members of his race she'd come into contact with. He was dressed in a clean set of dark blue overalls with a brown leather tool belt and a white canvas tool bag clutched in his left hand.

"Steam Technician fifth class Sprocket," the Goblin said respectfully, coming to attention. "I've heard that you might be hiring and wished to offer my services."

"What sort of experience do you have?" Hermione asked curiously.

"I've mainly worked in the pumping station," the goblin admitted. "But I'm qualified to work on smaller engines like you've got here."

"All right," Hermione said slowly, trying to remember what her father had told her about interviews. "Why did you decide to leave Gringotts?"

"I figured promotions would come faster in a start up," the goblin explained. "I've got another year before I can be promoted to fourth class and six after that before I can even be considered for third." Not to mention the fact that the goblin that had 'suggested' he apply may have mentioned that he could always come back to his old job, that any seniority with the Granger girl would be considered the same as working for Gringotts, and that promotions at Gringotts might come a bit faster after acquiring a bit of experience at the Granger's new company. That's

if he ever decided to leave — he had a feeling that getting in on the ground floor, and staying in once he got in, would be a very good idea.

“Okay,” Hermione agreed. “Let's see what you can do, come on.”
Hermione turned to her Head of House and flashed the woman a quick smile. “Thank you, Professor.”

“What sorts of things does Gringotts use steam engines for?” Luna asked curiously as they walked into the engine shed.

"Lots of things," their newest employee replied. "Pumps to keep the tunnels dry, the cable system that runs the mine cars, digging machines, the machine shops..."

IIIIIIII

Daphne had a smile on her face when the flames changed to reveal the faces of her father and favorite uncle.

"Where's Tracy?" her uncle asked, starting the conversation.

"She'll be here in a moment," Daphne stated. "We caught that toad Goodwin lurking outside the floo rooms the other day and Tracy is making sure that he wasn't stupid enough to do anything."

"He hasn't tried anything with either of you has he?" her uncle asked intently. He'd kill the bastard and exterminate his whole stinking family if he'd been stupid enough to go against the Davis/Greengrass clan.

"He tries very hard not to show too much interest in anyone important enough to have the ability to do something about it or protected by someone able to do something about it," Daphne assured him. "We made it quite clear how our families would react if one of us showed even the slightest bit of interest in him."

"Who is he targeting?"

"No one," Daphne stated. "Every girl at Hogwarts is either too well protected or too closely watched by people who are too well protected or too unimportant to bother with. I think most of his sliminess is an act to convince his father that he's doing what he's supposed to be doing while he's here."

"What makes you think that?"

"Tracy and I broke the privacy charms he had up on a floo call he made to his father the other day," Daphne replied. "Mostly, his father pushing him to go after one of the Gryffindors and him pushing back as hard as he could."

"The Gryffindor his father was pushing him towards was the absolute worst one to sniff around too," Tracy added absently as she walked into the room. "That may have something to do with why he was so hesitant. Self preservation is a powerful motivator for a coward like him."

"Are we secure?" her father asked.

"Not to your standards yet, daddy," Tracy replied.

"All right, does that mean you disagree with Daphne's belief that he's putting on an act?"

"I think it's possible, but I'm not convinced and I don't believe that it's worth the risk to find out," Tracy replied.

"I agree with Tracy that it's not worth the risk to us to find out," Daphne added. "At least, not at the moment. I just think that you or uncle might be worth looking into because it might give us a way to turn him against his family in the future and destroy the rest of the whole filthy lot of them. Better for the world if they're not in it."

"Which girl did his father want him to go after?" Daphne's father prompted.

"Hermione Granger," Daphne stated. "Muggleborn in our year, supposed to be quite wealthy, also under the protection of the Weasleys, the Longbottom family who claims kinship with her, the Lovegoods, the Boneses, and Harry Potter himself."

"Who's number one on the list of students we don't want to annoy," Tracy said as she put up privacy charms. "Reliable rumor suggests that he's killed at least two professors and has faced the Dark Lord in single combat on more than one occasion. Based on a quick peek we were able to get at his medical records, we know that he rescued the Weasley daughter from a basilisk of truly epic proportions if the size of his scars and the amount of venom in his blood is any judge."

"Add that to the fact that he's got a large number of ex-aurors on his pay roll and that half the students in the other three houses would follow him

to hell if he gave the word and he's not someone anyone wants to cross," Daphne stated. "He decides to move in force, Tracy and I are going to do our best to join the crowd behind him and pretend we were with him the whole time."

"We're as secure as I can make us," Tracy announced.

"It's about his muggle born friend that we're making this call," her uncle said slowly. "I'm afraid that we've received a bit of information on a new business that she's developing."

"It's not good," Tracy's father said bluntly. "We're hoping that you can salvage the situation for the families."

Both girls went deathly pale as they listened to their fathers sum up the situation.

IIIIIIII

Professor Flitwick was just getting ready to settle down for the night when the wards told him that there was a great disturbance in the Ravenclaw girl's dorms. In a flash, he was out the door and on his way to check on his charges. He was gratified to be joined by the school nurse en-route. Both because propriety demanded that a female professor make the initial entrance and because it would ensure any injured students got immediate medical care.

They entered Ravenclaw Tower and Flitwick waited at the base of the stairs until Poppy's voice called him up. The room was a disaster. Beds were overturned, book shelves turned over, walls covered in burn marks,

and students trembling from the effects of electrical discharge. Oddly enough, there was one corner of the room that sat untouched.

"They're going to be fine, Filius," the school nurse assured him. "That doesn't mean that I'm not going to take them to the hospital wing for observation overnight just to be sure, of course."

He nodded once and cast a couple detection charms. "Looks like they tripped some anti theft spells," Flitwick said flatly. His goblin blood giving him some very definite ideas on the subject. "Who sleeps there?" he asked his seventh year prefect, indicating the pristine part of the room.

"Lovegood, Professor," the girl replied.

He glanced at the clock. "Ten minutes till curfew."

"Yes, Professor," the prefect agreed.

"Get the other female prefects and have them help Madame Pomfrey move these girls to the hospital wing," he ordered.

"Yes, Professor," the prefect agreed.

"Poppy, I would take it as a personal favor if you would keep them till after I had a chance to speak with them tomorrow," he continued.

"No problem, Filius," the school nurse agreed.

Flitwick was gratified when his missing student returned to her dorm with two minutes to spare. "Good evening, Ms. Lovegood."

"Good evening, Professor," the girl stated politely. "What happened?"

"Your roommates tripped one of the antitheft charms you had protecting your possessions," he replied.

Luna looked at her section of the room and her heart momentarily stopped when she noticed something missing, restarting a second later when she saw her picture frame laying on the floor and apparently undamaged. Two steps brought her to it and she snatched it up, holding it close to her chest.

"May I see it?" Filius asked gently. "I promise that I'll be careful with it."

"Yes, Professor," Luna agreed. With obvious reluctance, the girl handed it over.

Flitwick was relieved to see that the picture frame did not appear to be damaged. As he inspected it, it began cycling through a number of different photos. The first was a picture of the girl's mother, the second was of her father, the third was Luna standing next to Hermione Granger, the fourth was Harry Potter in a great kilt, the fifth was of Harry Potter in a set of formal muggle clothing, the sixth was a picture of her parents together. He handed it back before it got to the seventh. "I'm glad to see that it wasn't damaged."

"So am I, Professor," the girl said softly. "Am I going to be in trouble for this?"

"You have a right to protect what is yours," he assured the girl. "Have they tried to take your things before?"

"They've succeeded, Professor," the girl admitted. "One of my friends decided that they would not succeed again."

"Give Ms. Granger my compliments and tell her that I would be happy to lend her a couple books on the subject from my personal library if she would like," Flitwick offered.

"Thank you, Professor, I will and I believe she would."

"Be sure to tell me if this sort of thing happens again," Flitwick ordered. He rather doubted it would, not after what happened and what he was planning to do about it.

"Yes, Professor, I will," Luna agreed.

"Good. Have a pleasant night, Ms. Lovegood." Filius walked down to the common room and stopped the first male student he could find. "Go up to the dorms and tell the first prefect you find that I want to see them in my office right bloody now," he ordered.

"Yes, Professor," the boy squeaked.

Flitwick's seventh year male prefect arrived at his office only a few minutes after he himself did.

"You called for me, Professor?" the boy asked nervously.

"Were you aware that Ms. Lovegood's roommates were tormenting her and stealing her things?" the diminutive charms professor asked mildly.

"Knew that they were picking on her," the Prefect answered, "did not know they were stealing from her."

"Is there some reason you did nothing about it?" Flitwick demanded hotly.

"Told one of the female Prefects to look into it, Professor," the boy answered quickly, "I'd have handled it myself but I can't get into the dorm to do my own investigation."

"I see." He stared at the boy for a few moments. "Were you aware that Ms. Lovegood is in young Mr. Potter's circle of friends? One apparently close enough for him to have Ms. Granger to place anti-theft charms on her things?"

"I was not, Professor," the suddenly pale Prefect choked.

"Were you aware that Ms. Lovegood and Mr. Potter spent the holiday at Ms. Granger's house?" Flitwick asked.

"I was not aware of that either, Professor," the prefect replied sickly.

"Were you aware that Mr. Potter considers Ms. Lovegood to be one of his very good friends and are you aware of what happens to those that go

against Mr. Potter?” Filius cracked a smile. “If you are not, I have some pictures I could show you provided you've skipped dinner tonight. Best to hold off if you haven't. I have no desire to replace my carpet, you never seem to get the smell of vomit out no matter how skilled at charms you are.” Speculation among the staff was that Snape survived because Harry figured no hell could be worse than being a Snape. Others figured it was because Snape was at least intelligent enough to leave Harry's friends out of his vendetta against the boy's father.

“I've heard what happens, Professor,” the prefect said.

“Speculate for me, what do you think will happen when you inform the investigating female prefect of what you just learned?”

“I think she'll step up her investigation,” he replied quickly.

“No need, please inform her and the other Prefects that I've already dealt with the matter personally.”

“I will, Professor.”

“While you're at it, let them know that I do not like having to deal with these matters personally since that's what I'm supposed to have Prefects for.”

“I will, Professor.”

“Since I'm doing the work of my Prefects, it seems to me that I have no need of them at all,” the Professor continued, “it's something I'm going

to have to think about over the coming weeks. I suggest that you all demonstrate how useful you are.”

“We will, Professor.”

“Tell me, do you happen to know if there's any rule that prevents me from appointing Prefects from the ranks of another house?” Filius continued. “It occurs to me that Mr. Potter's robes could use some adornment.”

“I don't know, Professor, but I can find out for you if you like, Professor,” the Prefect said miserably.

"Splendid idea. While you're at it, find out if it's possible to be a prefect from two houses at once — be sure to inform me on what you've found at our next meeting," Filius finished.

“I will, Professor, I'll also be sure to let the others know what we talked about.”

“See that you do." Flitwick's gaze intensified. "Dismissed.”

IIIIIIII

Daphne and Tracy woke up early the next morning to discuss strategy. The most important thing, they decided, was to be calm and polite. Everything they knew about the girl suggested that she'd be reasonable so long as they gave no reason for her to become unreasonable. Much better than the usual sorts in magical business.

The two girls left Slytherin long before most of their housemates had awoken and spent nearly two hours staking out the area where their target met her friend from Ravenclaw every morning.

"There they are," Tracy whispered. Both girls stepped into the middle of the hallway.

"Granger, Lovegood," Daphne said tightly, trying to will her pulse to slow. The fact that the next few minutes could prove to be vital to their family's future did not help matters.

"Greengrass, Davis," Hermione replied. "What do you want?"

"To talk," Daphne replied. She held up her hands when the other two girls gave them looks of disbelief. "Really."

"When have we done anything to antagonize you or Potter?" Tracy added.

"All right," Hermione agreed. "Talk."

"Don't you think we should have our discussion some place a bit more private?" Tracy asked with a smile.

"Come on," Luna said suddenly. "Harry showed me how to get into the kitchens — it's private enough if you don't mind the house elves." And it would make her feel a lot more comfortable if they had Dobby backing them up in case something went wrong.

"After you then," Daphne agreed.

Both Slytherins noted with approval the fact that while Lovegood took the lead, Granger trailed behind. They'd have been somewhat worried if the other girls were willing to show any hint of vulnerability at this stage as it'd have shown a frightening amount of confidence or complacency. Neither of which would inspire confidence.

“What's this all about?” Hermione demanded after they'd reached the kitchens and taken their seats around a large round table.

"Your new freight business looks to compete with our families' existing freight business and our muggle world imports," Tracy replied. 'Worse, according to their accountants, it looked as if the muggle born would win any direct conflict and drive them out of the market,' Tracy thought unhappily. The war chest the other girl had to fall back on was nothing short of awe inspiring.

Daphne sighed. “Which is why we've come on behalf of our families to negotiate with you.”

“What are you offering?” Hermione asked, hiding her confusion at just what the other two girls were talking about.

“We've got existing contracts and extensive contacts,” Tracy said calmly. “You've got trains and know how. We put those together and we've got a smooth and profitable transition.”

“There's enough profit for all of us and I don't think anyone wants a trade war,” Daphne added, a touch hopefully. “You might win, or you might not. Either way, it would cost you money.”

“I'm not too concerned with profit,” Hermione admitted. “It's nice to have, but not something I'm dependent on.”

“So this is all to run our families into the ground?” Daphne said with a slight waver in her voice, she did not like the direction this conversation was heading.

“I have no intention of doing that,” Hermione said to the immense relief of the other two girls. “Have your families send me your offer, I'll show it to Harry and my father. We can go from there. Deal?”

“Deal,” Daphne said with a grin.

“Deal,” Tracy echoed, ruthlessly suppressing the urge to break out into happy historical giggles. Looked like their families wouldn't be driven into poverty after all. Might even be able get into a better position than they were before.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 26

IIIIIIII

Filius was in a rather jocular mood when he got to breakfast the next morning having just received a bit of information that would be perfect for teasing one of his colleagues with.

"Did you know that there's no rule stating that you can't appoint prefects from other houses?" Flitwick asked with a grin. "Course, it means the automatic transfer of the newly named Prefect to the appointing house."

"Over your dead body ye wee bastard," McGonagall replied flatly. "He's mine and what I have I keep."

"Just an interesting bit of trivia and a new source of motivation for my current batch of prefects," Flitwick assured his colleague. "You know I'd never dream of stealing your best students from you, Minerva."

"Not unless you thought you could get away with it anyway," McGonagall stated, giving the man a suspicious glare.

"You know he's just winding you up, Minerva," Sprout laughed. "Calm down and let me be the first to commend you on how loyal your students are to their friends in other houses." She turned to the charms professor. "Incidentally, did your research reveal if a prefect could be appointed if they're already serving as a prefect for another house?"

"Nay chance of letting yeh get yer hooks into one a'mine either, yeh bloody badger," Minerva said firmly.

IIIIIIII

Anne was somewhat annoyed by how little attention her husband was paying her at breakfast the next morning. It was always more than a bit aggravating to be temporally widowed by matters of business or state.

"No business at the table," she said after it had become clear that he wasn't going to rejoin the world any time soon.

"Hmmm?"

"Neglecting one's family to slightly increase one's chances of making a bit of pocket money is exactly the sort of behavior one expects from the commercial class," she sniffed.

"Good one, darling," he said with a grin. "But I'm afraid you've unjustly accused me this time. Please don't worry, I can't blame you for failing to rise above your roots or join the modern age in which paltry things like evidence of wrong doing is required before making charging one with a crime."

"Oh?"

"Personal. It seems Hermione was correct when she stated her acquisition of the Hogwarts Express was a sound business decision. She's been approached by her main potential competitor with an offer to merge."

"What does Harry say about it?" She grinned in response to her husband's pout. "Or did our daughter not immediately ask for his opinion?"

"She did of course, but you weren't supposed to just flat out ask. You were supposed to pretend you didn't know until I proudly announced that he sent his own report along and . . . oh never mind."

"Did I ever tell you what your former sister in law had to say about your love for the dramatic?"

"I imagine it was just as worth hearing as everything else she said," he said blandly.

"It was," his wife agreed. "You were, however, supposed to pretend you didn't know so that I could reveal the fact that she saw it as yet more evidence of your preference for other men."

"And yet another reason she gave for you to divorce me before we could produce an heir that would make it even harder for her to get her hooks into the family money," he finished.

"She didn't put it quite that bluntly," Anne giggled. "Stating that if I really loved you, I'd leave you and help you come to terms with who you were so that you could be happy. I believe that she thought she was being subtle and, if one is to be honest, I am quite surprised she was able to think up that much."

"Greed has a way of helping some people overcome their natural limitations," Phil said with an unconcerned shrug. "She's rather fortunate she didn't decide to go further than that."

"Oh?"

"Contingencies were in place, darling, in case she decided to take a more active role in removing obstacles. But we're getting off track."

"We are," Anne agreed. "What did Harry have to say?"

"He advised us to offer them ten percent more than they want with a clause stating that we can take it back for a number of reasons plus a further twenty. Flint, one of Tonks' people, suggests that we ignore his advice and lists a number of reasons why following it would be a very bad idea."

"Oh?"

"Has to do with magical culture. She states that the Greengrass/Davis clan would likely take it since we have them over a barrel, but that it would leave a bad taste in their mouth which would cause trouble later. She suggests dealing fair even if it does cost us some concessions we could likely gain and that we be sure to include groundwork to make a potential future severing of our business relationship as easy as possible."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to send this to Harry with a note asking what he thinks of this," Phil said honestly. "Flint said that Harry's idea is a good one providing we wish to subjugate the other two families and leverage ourselves into pureblood society once Hermione becomes head of the family. She added that there are better stepping stones if that is our intention."

"Is it?"

"I don't believe so, but of course one must always remember to keep one's options open."

"And that's what had you so distracted?"

"That and a note Hermione and Luna sent along," he replied.

"What was in the note?"

"Our daughter wishes to know if anyone has ever made a steam powered car, and requests that I send along any plans if the answer is yes."

"Is it?"

"Several times over," Phil replied with a grin.

"So you were distracted by the thought of all the cars you were going to have to add to your collection and the fact that you can probably get our daughter to maintain them for you," Anne asked with a raised eyebrow. "The thought that our daughter might do an honest day's work in her life, especially in, gasp, one of the trades."

"Console yourself with the thought of your great uncle's wildly impractical garden and all the work in it that he insisted on doing himself."

"The difference there is that his hobby cost the family quite a bit of money, whereas our daughter's threatens to make it. The shame, the scandal that one of my blood could do such a thing."

"Just goes to show that your step mother was correct when she said my blood would dilute yours."

"Perish the thought that, that harpy would be correct about anything." Anne giggled. "Nothing for it but to give Hermione more pocket money and with instructions that she wastes it on something frivolous."

"I suppose one can hope this will be one of the times she decides to listen."

IIIIIIII

Sprocket awoke at his usual time that morning and got to work with the dawn's early light with the other men in his employer's new business enterprise. The goblin was unsurprised when the shop foreman waved him over the minute the man arrived.

"You're the new man so I want you to stick with me this morning so I can get a good idea of what you're capable of. Doesn't mean I don't trust you or don't think your skills are up to par, just that I need to see 'em for myself before I can best place you."

"That is reasonable," Sprocket allowed.

"Glad 'ye agree," the corner's of the foreman's mustache twitched upwards. "Why don't 'ye start by checkin over the saddle tank. Safe bet the girls are gonna be all over it the minute the get down here."

"Yes, foreman," Sprocket said respectfully.

The foreman didn't say a word, seemingly content to just watch and occasionally assist when needed while Sprocket went about his duties. Something similar would have never occurred at Gringotts, no higher ranked goblin would ever give up the privilege of work to one of his subordinates. Still, different didn't mean better or worse, just different, Sprocket reminded himself.

"Good job," the foreman broke his silence as the job came to a close.
"Very good job."

Sprocket stayed silent, unsure of the correct protocol to deal with the situation among humans.

"Makes my decision a whole lot easier anyway," the forman mumbled to himself.

Sprocket took that as a hopeful sign.

"Thing is, we don't need anymore men in the regular crews and bringing in someone new would risk ruining a level of teamwork we've spent years building."

The goblin's sphincter clenched.

"So what I'd like to propose is that I assign you to this engine and as a general assistant to the girls."

"I would be responsible for the maintenance of the employer's personal locomotive?" Sprocket asked intently, wanting to be sure he wasn't misunderstanding.

"And to whatever other projects the girls decided to work on," the foreman agreed. "Quickly as things have been moving, I wouldn't be surprised to see you with your own crew and a dozen more engines to take care of afore the year is out. Don't hesitate to sing out if you need a hand or twelve till that happens."

"I will not permit pride to sabotage the chance you have given me, foreman, you have my word on that," Sprocket said seriously. To be given responsibility for a piece of equipment was enough to have made him deliriously happy, but to be given charge of the chief's personal engine? Sprocket would cut his throat rather than live to face the shame of failure.

IIIIIIII

Flint was overcome by a sense of nostalgia as she walked through the gates of her alma mater for the first time in over a decade. The faces may have changed but everything else was just as she remembered it. The sights, the sounds, the sense of tension every time one group got too close to another consisting of a rival house. Far as she was concerned the

only things good about the rotten place was the fact that it had given her an excuse to spend the majority of the year away from her family and the fact that it had been where she'd met her husband. Everything else could go hang.

As the woman continued towards the castle, she was pleasantly surprised to encounter her charge. "Miss Hermione," Flint called out cheerfully. "Just the girl I was hoping to see."

"Oh?" Hermione cocked her head.

"Passing on a message from your father and delivering a package with it," she explained as she pulled out an envelope that looked at least a hundred times too large to fit into her pocket. "Message is as follows; the answer is yes and here are some technical drawings on the best of 'em. I'll try to get you some better plans for it and the rest. All else fails, I'll just buy a few examples and you can come home for the odd weekend to go through them yourself."

"Really?" her charge's blonde shadow asked brightly. "Do you think it would be possible to look over examples ourselves even if he manages to get plans for us?"

"Probably," her charge replied. Hermione daintily accepted the envelope, automatically passing it to her shadow as she continued speaking. "Please thank daddy for me and please pass on Luna's request with it."

"I will, Miss Hermione," Flint agreed. "That business settled, you know where that boy of yours might be?"

"Boy?" Hermione asked with a confused frown.

"Mr. Potter," Flint prompted.

"Harry's either hiding in an unused classroom somewhere or hanging out with Ron in Ron's wood shop," Hermione stated confidently. "Ron's wood shop is next to the Quidditch equipment room across from Hooch's office. If Harry isn't there, go to the kitchens and tell Dobby that you need to find him."

"Why would he be hiding?" Flint asked.

"He figures the Professors will be finishing their write ups soon and will have time to investigate his mistakes again," Hermione explained.

Flint and the girls exchanged a few more pleasantries before going on with her mission. She had a national hero to find.

IIIIIIII

Ron didn't bother to look up from his work when the woman entered. Wasn't anyone in the world important enough to risk making a mistake and very few important enough to warrant delaying his current project.

"Harry Potter here?" the woman asked.

Ah, Ron thought to himself, looked like the first researcher had arrived to pester his friend for another project. "Nope."

"Damn," the woman sighed. "Don't suppose you know where he is, do you?"

"Afraid not," the boy said absently as he eyeballed the curve of his latest creation. "But I'd be happy to tell him that you're looking for him. Who are you again?"

"My name's Flint," she replied. "I got a message I need to give him."

"Any relation to Marcus Flint?"

"Not since I got tossed out of the family," she said, grin widening.

That bit of news did cause Ron's hands to still as the boy wrested his attention away from the project and up to make eye contact. "Who's the message from and why are you delivering it?"

"Message is from Phil Granger, I'm delivering it because I'm one of the Potter Security Contractors assigned to his daughter's detail."

"Phil Granger?" Ron pushed aside his confusion at the words 'Potter Security' and ignored the ones he didn't know with the ease of long practice. "Oi, Harry, got someone here to speak with you!"

A head appeared over a stack of loose wood and two bleary sleep deprived eyes regarded Flint from under a mop of messy black hair. "You work for Tonks," the boy said with a yawn. "What can I do for you?"

"Names Flint," she agreed. "Phil Granger wanted me to pass on a message and to have a talk with you after that."

"Mind if we put up some security charms, Ron?"

"No problem, Harry."

"What's the message?" Harry asked the minute the charms went up.

"Phil's not going to go with your suggestion and I'm here to explain why, and, with your permission to keep myself available to assist you with similar issues in the future," Flint replied. She was there on Tonks' orders who had given them at the strong suggestion of the Chief of Magical Law Enforcement who had also strongly suggested that her new boss might need someone to help him with pureblood issues and general administration. From housewife to aide to the most powerful wizard in the country. She was going up in the world Flint reflected to herself.

"Okay," Harry prompted.

"Your idea would be great if what you wanted to do was to force the Greengrass and Davis families to submit to the Granger family, which is a fairly standard way of leveraging a new-blood family into pureblood society. Problem with it is that you didn't take the people involved into account, see, thing is that the heads of both families are mean bastards in a fight. They'd smile and go along with it while measuring your back for a dagger." Metaphorical, literal or both. Whichever they thought they could get away with. "On the other hand, they also have the reputation for dealing fair."

"Alright," Harry agreed. "Why would . . ." he trailed off as his sleep addled mind made a few connections. "Never mind. Why are you here to explain things in person?"

"Some things are best delivered in person," Flint said, grin deepening. "Good example of that is the second half of our conversation."

"Which consists of?"

"Me giving you a list of families that are ripe for the taking and unlikely to be able to successfully retaliate along with a few suggestions on how one might accomplish that. My former's at the top of the list."

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna somehow managed to keep themselves from tearing over the envelope until after they got to the engine shed and a table to lay out the plans. What followed was two hours of pouring over technical drawings until both girls jointly decided that they were ready to construct their first prototype.

Sprocket, who'd been holding himself silently ready, took that as his cue to step forward with an offer to fetch one of the girl's craftsmen to aid in the project. He didn't get the chance.

"How good a machinist are you, Sprocket?" Hermione asked the moment the goblin left the safety of the shadows.

"I am qualified to make every part needed," he replied.

"Great." Hermione grinned at him. "Are you busy with anything right now?"

"I am not," Sprocket stated calmly.

"Okay, do you have time to help us make a few things?"

"Make?" the goblin asked dumbly, sure that there'd been some mistake.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed. "Daddy sent a few technical drawings for a . . . what's it called, Luna?"

"Doble Steam Engine," the blonde supplied.

"Thank you, Luna," Hermione nodded to her friend. "So we were going to make a prototype to see if we understood how it's supposed to work. Do you have time to help us?"

Blood pounded in his ears as Sprocket's knees buckled. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, the opportunity he was being given, the chance to aid in the creation of an entirely new device.

"Are you alright?" he found himself looking into the concerned eyes of his employer's blonde companion.

"I am," the goblin said shakily. "Just overcome with emotion. It's a great honor to be given the chance of becoming a crafter of new devices, one I've always aspired to but never thought I'd receive for at least several decades." Upon seeing the girls' confusion, he decided to elaborate. "Had I remained with Gringotts, it was likely that I'd spend at least

twenty more years as a technician before I had an opportunity to become a foreman and another several decades after that before I could become a junior craftsman."

"It's that difficult?" Hermione asked.

"Honors so great are seldom easy to achieve," Sprocket stated. "Even that would only be a stepping stone to achieving my dream of becoming a master craftsman, one who's works could never be sold."

"Why can't a master craftsman sell his things?"

"An item made by a goblin master craftsman belongs to the clan. We believe that once a goblin artisan has reached their peak, they stop acting as an individual and become a living treasure of the goblin race as a whole. Master craftsmen produces objects of such quality and beauty that they must be preserved so that future generations can marvel at them and use them as inspiration to achieve even greater levels."

"It's like the family money," Hermione exclaimed, eyes lighting in understanding. "Daddy controls it, but it doesn't belong to any one person, it belongs to the Granger family as a whole, even-no, especially the members of it that haven't been born yet."

"That is remarkably similar," the goblin agreed, surprised at the human. "I was unaware that there were humans that took such a view."

Sprocket spent the remainder of the day with his employer's latest project, managing to produce a working model shortly before the sun went down and his employer was forced to return to her quarters. After

that, he spent another hour cleaning and ordering the work area before returning to Gringotts for a matter that could result in his messy death.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth had retired for the day when a messenger informed him that the goblin he'd 'encouraged' to seek employment with the Granger Heiress had returned to Gringotts and was demanding an audience. With a sigh, he signaled for the junior goblin to be shown in. Either it really was important enough to disturb him or he'd get the pleasure of destroying someone who should never should have been permitted to live past adolescence. Both were worth missing a bit of sleep.

Hooktooth's face was impassive as the junior goblin came in. "Well?"

"I am here to convey my thanks for your suggestion that I seek a position with the Granger Heiress's transport firm," Sprocket said.

"And?" the senior goblin prompted in a tone of voice that informed the other goblin that there had better be more.

"I was hoping you could clarify something for me." Sprocket licked his lips. "I understand that I will suffer an unpleasant death if I were foolish enough to attempt to sell business secrets."

"Or do anything that could potentially jeopardize Gringotts' relationship with her family," Hooktooth said impatiently.

"I would like to know what would happen if I were to share non-privileged background information?"

"Such as?"

"The Heiress made a very profound statement about her family, one very goblin like," Sprocket said carefully. "It seemed like the sort of thing senior management should be aware of even at the cost of jeopardizing my life or future career prospects."

Hooktooth considered the matter. "Speak."

"She stated that her father controls but does not possess the Granger fortune, that it belongs to every Granger, especially those yet to be born," Sprocket stated.

Hooktooth rocked back on his heels, claws twitching in astonishment. "Y-you were correct to bring this to me. Be sure to pass along any future information of this type so long as you do not believe it will annoy or anger the Heiress or her family." He was shocked beyond measure that any human would hold such ideals.

"Though the Granger Heiress owns my loyalty, I do not forget where I came from," Sprocket replied. "So long as it harms her none, I will do my best for the clan. So long as the clan stands with her, I stand with the clan."

IIIIIIII

Chapter 27

IIIIIIII

Harry tried valiantly to think of a reason why McGonagall might have demanded his presence on what was supposed to be one of his days off. A quick mental check didn't remind him of any transfiguration mistakes, so why?

He reached her door and raised his hand to knock.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," his head of house's voice demanded.

With a resigned sigh, Harry opened the door.

"Close it behind you and take a seat, Mr. Potter," McGonagall ordered.

"What's this about, Professor?"

"Are you aware of the fact that we have certain wards around the school to detect the arrival of certain items which are deemed contraband by school regulations?"

"I was not, Professor," Harry replied. Answered a few questions though, almost as many as it brought to mind.

"Would you care to explain why your owl arrived this morning with nearly an eighth of a stone of cured tobacco products and five gills of grain alcohol?"

Harry's face went blank for a moment. "Ah. Sorry about that, Professor, I forgot I ordered it."

"Well?" she asked a touch shortly.

"It's for my meeting with the goblins," Harry explained. "Apparently cigars are considered a delicacy."

"And the alcohol?"

"Navy gin for the client on who's behalf I'm meeting the goblins," Harry said. "Sorry, Professor, it was all supposed to have been delivered to Madam Rosmerta to hold for me since I'm using one of her private rooms to conduct business."

"You're saying your owl delivered it to the wrong place?" Minerva asked a touch calmer, raising an eyebrow.

"She doesn't like delivering anything with my name on it to anyone that's not me, Professor," Harry explained with a shrug. "I thought I'd gotten through to her this time."

"You couldn't have used one of the delivery owls?"

"She likes that even less, Professor." Harry snorted. "She's unfortunately prone to using violence to express her displeasure. It's easier on me and the delivery owls to use her for everything."

"One of the hazards of having an exceptionally loyal and intelligent owl I suppose," Minerva chuckled. "Thank you for explaining things to me, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you for assuming I had an innocent reason, Professor," Harry replied. "Will that be all?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Potter."
"Professor?"

"Having one bottle of one thing on hand for guests is not nearly enough if you're going to continue conducting business meetings, Mr. Potter and I'm afraid you cannot trust the Three Broomsticks' bar to make up for it."

"Professor?"

"Do you have a quill and piece of parchment handy?" The old woman sighed. "You'll also need to set aside a bit of time each day for a few lessons on proper appreciation of the water of life. I think after our usual sessions would be the best time for it. Do you agree, Mr. Potter?"

"Do I have a choice, Professor?"

"You do not, Mr. Potter."

"In that case, I most gratefully agree, Professor."

"I thought you might, Mr. Potter."

IIIIIIII

Septima Vector was completely enthralled by the device she'd been shown by the young misses Granger and Lovegood, mind swirling with an odd mix of horror and wonder. Horror that she'd lived so much of her life without knowing that it existed, wonder that it did and that she might some day own one of her own.

"What did you say this was called?" the woman asked carefully.

"A Curta calculator, Professor," Hermione replied.

The Professor put the precious device down so as to minimize the risk of dropping it it due to how hard her hands were trembling.

"Can . . ." She licked her lips. "Is there any chance you could get another of these?"

"Sure, Professor," Hermione agreed with a shrug. "You can have that one if you want it, Professor. It's one of the ones daddy sent for me and Luna to take apart."

"One of . . . just how many of these . . . these wonderful devices do you have, Ms. Granger?" Vector asked intently.

"I don't know, Professor," Hermione shrugged. "If it's not enough, Sprocket said he could make more for us."

"Sprocket?"

"He's the goblin that works on my engine," the girl explained. "He was able to repair that one so I think there's a good chance he can do it."

"I see." She slowed her heartbeat by force of will.

"It's the reason we came here to consult with you, Professor," Luna spoke for the first time. "We were hoping you'd have some suggestions on how to modify it to make it better suited to doing arithmancy."

IIIIIIII

The senior goblin leaned back in his chair as Hooktooth entered the office. He was beginning to look forward to hearing his subordinate's reports, they gave him the feeling that they were on the edge of something great.

"I am not going to waste time with threats, I do not wish you to waste time with platitudes. Report." Enjoyment or not, it was never a good idea to let a junior be too sure of their position lest they become idle.

"The goblin we sent to assist the Granger heiress brought me something of tremendous importance," Hooktooth said breathlessly.

"I thought I told you to skip the platitudes," the senior goblin growled.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm still a bit stunned by the implications of what I was told and I'm having trouble . . ." Hooktooth shook his head. "The Granger heiress stated that her family's wealth was not solely possessed

by the living members of the family, but also to the generations of Grangers yet to be born."

"That is . . ." The senior goblin blinked. "Very interesting." He contemplated it for a few heartbeats. "What do the analysts think?"

"I have not released it to to the analysts yet," Hooktooth admitted. "I came straight here to report it to you because it changes everything we thought we knew about humans." Hooktooth was trembling in excitement.

"It shows a capacity for long term planning we'd thought humans lacked if nothing else," his superior agreed. "How should this change our dealings with the Granger Clan?" And one more bit of evidence that the Granger Clan was very different from the usual sort of humans they dealt with, well, assuming they weren't some other type of creature that merely appeared to be human.

"I don't know. This is so earth shattering that I'm having a hard time conceiving of it, it's like . . . like spending the first half of your life with nothing but silver only to learn one day that gold exists," Hooktooth replied. "At the very least it shows the value of building deeper ties to the Granger Clan now that we know they have the potential to last longer than a dozen or so decades."

IIIIIIII

Fred peaked through the curtains to survey the crowd. It seemed like there were hundreds of them packing the music hall they'd rented for

their presentation. Every seat was occupied and there were a substantial number of standing wizards in the back.

"Relax," George said. "Just imagine them completely clothed in something that covers every inch of skin and you'll be fine."

"I thought you were supposed to imagine them naked?" Fred said with a grin.

"Take another look at that crowd and decide if you want to do things your way or mine," George reposted.

"I don't have to. I'm sorry for doubting you, twin of mine. Shall we?"

"After you, I insist," George said with a grin.

With a deep breath the two took a moment to brace themselves before stepping through the curtains and onto the stage.

"Welcome to the first Weasley Class for Wizards Wanting Witches," Fred began. "I'm Fred and this is my brother-"

"-George and we're here to teach you the fine art of wooing Harry Potter style."

"This." Fred flicked his wand, causing Hermione's picture to appear. "Is girl number one. Harry got her by defeating a mountain troll."

"Girl number two." George's caused Luna's picture to appear. "Bullies."

"Three and four." Hannah and Susan's pictures joined the other two. "An assassination attempt on the Director of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Now I know what you're thinking. I'm just an average guy, he's the boy-who-lived, this can't possibly work for me," George continued. "You're wrong. This." Ron's picture appeared. "Is our brother."

"A slob, an idiot, not particularly handsome." Fred flicked his wand with every point causing Ron's brow to protrude, snot to dribble out his nose, and his eyes to cross. "I think it's safe to say that every man in this room looks better than this poor specimen of wizardhood."

"This is his girlfriend." Mandy's picture appeared, altered to make a couple of her more prominent attributes look even more prominent. "He's welcome in the Harpies locker room, he's come home covered in several shades of lip marks every time he visits the team, he's been seen on more than one occasion with more than one of them on his arm. His secret? The Harry Potter method. Death Eaters attacked the Harpies. He saved them. They're dating him. "

"That said, one thing you have to keep in mind is the fact that saving girls from Death Eater attacks or other forms of mortal peril only gets you the relationship," Fred lectured. "You also have to maintain it."

"Things that seem to work there are giving them things you made for them, owning your own business, and helping them achieve their goals in life," George continued.

"Do you have to save them from Death Eaters?" one of the audience asked.

"Well," Fred began. "Judging from Harry's example, it also works if you save their relatives and their friend's relatives. But he is the boy who lived, best for us normal guys not to count on that working for us. Doesn't hurt to try though."

"We're guessing any mortal peril would work, but we don't have enough data to be sure," George added.

"Is this guaranteed to let us date multiple girls and have them know about it without getting out bits hexed off?" another member of the audience asked intently.

"We're not sure," Fred admitted. "Both of our research subjects seem to have formed multiple simultaneous relationships but we don't know enough to say for sure if it'll work for everyone."

"In the case of our brother and the Harpies, we don't think he's really dating all of them," George stated. "We do know that he's welcome in their locker room at all times." George smiled. "I'm just going to take a moment to let that sink in, gentlemen, when I say at all times."

"He means at all times," Fred finished. "Really. Know the one we're sure he's dating doesn't object when the others kiss him and drape themselves on him."

"Also gets to put his hands all over them, but that might have to do with the fact that he's fitting them for brooms," George finished thoughtfully. "We'll go into more detail when we go over recommended professions."

IIIIIIII

The senior goblin's ear twitched the next morning when he arrived to find his favorite subordinate already standing at his office door.

"We have an issue," Hooktooth said somewhat nervously. While blaming the messenger was rare in goblin society, he was well aware of the fact that rare and unheard of were two separate things.

"Inside." The senior goblin waited until he was seated behind his desk. "What sort of issue?"

"A number of lower ranked technicians have formally requested permission to leave Gringotts with the intention of requesting admittance to the Granger Heiress's sub-clan."

"How'd they find out about the opportunity?"

"I believe it's due to the ward teams we have working on the Granger estates," Hooktooth replied. "Apparently the Granger is quite proud of his daughter's mechanical aptitude and is eager to brag about it."

"To be expected," the senior goblin murmured. "What do our analysts say about her father's probable reaction?"

"They're split," Hooktooth admitted. "The majority believe that it will please him if he can be convinced that it was not on our orders."

"We have a meeting scheduled with the last Potter, do we not?"

"We do," Hooktooth agreed, relaxing.

"Explain the situation to him and ask his council. The head of Clan Granger will not object if the Potter gives his permission. If the Potter gives his permission, the workers have ours."

IIIIIIII

Severus scowled when his first class, mixed family and enemy of the spoiled brat's year tromped into the room followed by three outsiders. The nerve of the bastards, invading his classroom. How dare they, how dare they have the belief that they could invade his private kingdom. He'd complained to his patron of course, both of them, yet nothing had been done.

He curled a lip when they took their usual places at the back of the room where they could observe the evidence of his angel's despoilment by his chief enemy in hopes that one of the brat's failures could prove useful . . . as if the worthless shit could ever amount to anything.

Class ended as it usually did with the worthless shit turning in a potion of dubious quality, one the presence of the gap toothed fame dazzled morons forced him to accept and grade passing. Another thing he'd complained bitterly to his patrons about.

"What's this?" one of the intruders asked, staring at the Longbottom's latest disaster.

"A waste of ingredients," he said confidently. "Looks like another zero for you, Longbottom." He felt a bit of warmth in his breast at the way

the boy shrunk under his gaze, not as good as his primary target but it would do for now.

"Best analyze it to see what it is and what properties it might have, eh what?" the Ministry idiot said stupidly.

"Right," one of the others agreed. "Never know where the next breakthrough will come from."

Snape sneered, wondering if it could correctly be termed a waste of time if those wasting it were as valueless as the ones before him. No, he decided, scoffing at the thought that the two before him could ever amount to anything rendering their time inherently valueless.

IIIIIIII

Auror Pinch noted with interest the way every potions researcher he had was clustered around a table staring with fascination at a small vial of potion when he came in.

"Potter finally give you lot something to work with?" he called out.

"Not him, Frank and Alice's boy," one of them managed to drag his attention away from the vial long enough to reply.

"What he give you?" Pinch asked.

"Looks to be a fairly broad spectrum antidote. Good for most mild to medium poisons if we're analyzing it correctly."

"Is an antidote what they were trying to create?"

"No," the first researcher replied.

"Looks like it'll take care of anything that takes more than about twenty minutes to do its work," another researcher spoke up.

"His record doesn't show any signs of potions ability, does it?" Pinch said with a frown.

"Far as we can tell, it was a complete accident."

"We're gonna have two sit down with him for a talk, see if we can confirm that his record reflects his true abilities."

"Might want to keep in mind the fact that his records are written by Snape," Pinch pointed out.

"Assume they're all wrong because Snape's a petty bastard," a third researcher said loudly. "Potter's potion today was much better than I'd have expected just going by what's in his file."

IIIIIIII

Macnair strolled arrogantly down the center of Diagon Alley, reveling in the stares and whispered remarks as he passed by, reveling in the fear his mere presence inspired. This was life, this was why he'd pledged himself to the Dark Lord's service those many years ago.

His lip curled into a sneer as he allowed his gaze to sweep over a group of men, anticipating their downward looks and the shame they'd feel at the knowledge that they were too weak and cowardly to stop him from doing anything he wished. Such was the power granted by the mark on his arm, such was the . . . his brow wrinkled in confusion when the men met his eyes, their expressions not fearful but with eager anticipation, eyeing him like a pack of wolves eyes an unfortunate deer. Hungry.

In a flash his good mood disappeared and all he could think of was that he needed to retreat to somewhere else, somewhere he'd be safe from the predatory gazes.

IIIIIIII

The night maintenance crew had been off for had been off for several turns of the glass and waiting in the pub when the first of the early warding crew returned to Gringotts.

"Free drinks so long as you lot can pass more information about the Heiress's new projects," one of the technicians said casually as the warders tromped in.

IIIIIIII

The return of one of their number and the increase in the volume of their chatter convinced Pinch that it might be a good time to get a progress report from the potions research group.

"You lot have anything new to report?" he asked as he walked up to the potions researchers.

"Had a chance to talk to Longbottom," one of the researchers reported.

"Well?" Pinch prompted.

"Kid's a genius when it comes to plant based ingredients. He's able to casually pull up knowledge that I have to go spend time with the reaction tables to pull up and I've been a potions master for fifty years.

"So what he did was no accident?"

"Not sure. He's amazing at vegetable, but he's got a big blind spot when it comes to anything animal or mineral."

"Explains quite a bit about the hows and whys of the sample he produced," another of the researchers volunteered.

"Oh?" Pinch motioned for the man to continue.

"Going over our memories of the class, he appeared to be reluctant to use anything animal or mineral based. Seemed mainly to focus mixing plant based ingredients in ways that wouldn't explode or produce anything dangerous."

"Most of what he knew about animal or mineral materials was how they reacted to vegetable," the first researcher volunteered.

"See if he can make anything original using his methods and knowledge of the reaction tables," Pinch ordered. "If he can . . . hell, even if he

can't, pair him with someone with a better working knowledge of the rest of the tables."

IIIIIIII

Chapter 28

IIIIIIII

Luna and Hermione were a bit surprised to find their astronomy professor happily chatting with the shop foreman when they got back to the engine shed after classes that afternoon.

"Good afternoon, girls," Sinistra said with a broad smile. "I was hoping to get a chance to talk with you two this afternoon."

"Of course, Professor," Hermione agreed automatically. "What can we do for you?"

"I was hoping to persuade you to let me purchase one of the wonderful devices you gave Professor Vector."

"Sure, Professor," Hermione agreed. "I suppose we could check to see if Sprocket's repaired another one."

"Marvelous. Is there any chance you could get more?"

"I suppose so, Professor, why?"

The woman smiled. "Tell me, girls, why is it that Astronomy is considered one of the core disciplines?"

"It's because the alignment of the stars and the planets can have an effect on the brewing of potions and on rituals."

"Correct, ten points to Gryffindor," the woman said. "Anything you'd like to add, Ms. Lovegood?"

"It's also important to know if you are trying to create a new spell," the girl stated.

"And another ten to Ravenclaw. Most of what you learn at Hogwarts is meant to give you a firm enough grounding to be able to read and interpret influence tables. What you may not know is just how much calculation is required to make those tables in the first place, calculation that your little device would simplify immensely."

"I understand, professor. What do people use now?"

"It depends on the level. In your sixth and seventh years, you'll be taught to use an abacus and another calculating device called Napier's bones. Though since you both take Arithmancy, I'd recommend you purchase a slide rule, it's something similar to a Higgs Type SR Automatic Arithmancy Calculating Device. You see, why I'm so excited by your marvelous device."

"We do, Professor," Luna stated, seeing her friend's distraction at the discovery of another hole in her knowledge that needed to be filled. "We promise to speak with Harry about setting up a production facility so that we can produce enough new ones for everyone."

"What type of slide rule, Professor?"

"Kind?"

"My father sent me several along with the Curta, Professor," Hermione clarified. "He says they used to be common in the muggle world until electronic calculators took over."

"Oh?" the woman's eyes were sparkling. "Do you have time to show me?"

"We do, Professor."

"Wonderful. You can explain to me exactly what an electronic calculator is while you do it."

IIIIIIII

Neville looked at the Aurors that had cornered him after his last class with a profound sense of confusion.

"Could . . . could you please repeat what you just said?"

"We'd like you to brew a potion for us," the head Auror replied.

"Are you sure?" the boy was having a hard time believing his ears. "I'm absolutely rubbish at it."

"We'd just like to see you go through the process," the Auror assured him. "You can use our lab and our materials. We just want to watch and take notes."

"Maybe ask a question or two," one of the other Aurors added.

"Think what your grandmother would say to you if she found out you had a chance to get a number of Aurors in your debt and turned it down," the Head Auror said calmly, cutting the boy off before he could say no.

He checked his pocket-watch, having been inspired to get his own after seeing the one Harry had gotten for Christmas. "I suppose I could spare an hour or two," he said reluctantly. "No more than that, I have an important Floo I need to make that I absolutely can not miss."

"You can use our floo point too," the Head Auror said with a grin as he and the others guided Neville to their section of the castle. "More private and secure than the ones most students have access to, just the thing if you've got a pretty young thing you're charming."

IIIIIIII

It was with much trepidation that Daphne and Tracy approached the engine shed, the very center of their new business partner's power. A place of both mystery and odd odors. A place all together too muggle for most of the members of their house.

"Shall we?" Daphne asked as the two girls paused in the doorway. The bright sun made it almost impossible to see into the comparatively dimly lit vestibule.

"After you, dear cousin, after you," Tracy replied.

"No reason to be worried," Daphne said firmly, "I'm sure the reason she hasn't been very communicative is because she got wrapped up in some project or something."

"I'm sure you're right, but of course you are the one from the great pureblood family which naturally makes you superior to me in both intellect and social standing. Meaning you get to go first," Tracy finished smugly.

"You have as much a pureblood as I am," Daphne protested.

"Yeah, but in my case it was from my ma while in your case it was through yer da."

"So?"

"So you've got the pureblood family name which makes you my natural superior. If you think back, I'm sure you'll recall Quince educating us both on the subject back in first year."

"And you'll recall how my dear aunt reacted when word got back to her," Daphne retorted.

"Mum never did have much of a sense of humor," Tracy lamented.

"Not when it came to family anyway," Daphne agreed. "I still think she should have let us deal with it rather than . . . we're wasting time."

"Right you are," Tracy agreed. "After you."

"I . . ."

"Daphne, Tracy!" Hermione's voice echoed happily from the gloom.

"Perfect timing. We were hoping you two would come by for a visit."

"I'm going to take that as a good sign," Tracy whispered. "So stop dawdling and either enter or move out of my way, pureblood scum."

With a snort, Daphne complied, stepping into the shed. Both girls paused for a few moments to allow their eyes to adjust to the reduced light level. Slowly, the shape of the Hogwarts Express and its identical sisters began to reveal themselves. Each engine surrounded by a dozen denim clad attendants performing all manor of mysterious tasks to keep the locomotives in tip top condition.

"Over here!" Hermione called out, summoning the girls to the corner of the shop she'd claimed as her exclusive domain. "So what do you think?" the girl asked breathlessly the moment the other two had arrived, waving excitedly towards an odd vaguely muggle looking contraption that looked as if someone had chopped the front end off the Knight Bus and stuck it onto one of Hogwarts' thestral drawn carriages.

"What is it?" Tracy asked after it became apparent that her cousin was not going to.

"Oh." Hermione blinked. "Of course you wouldn't know," she said with a nod. "It's a delivery lorry. Should make transporting things from the rail depot to their final location much easier and less expensive."

"We based the power plant off the Doble Ultimax steam unit," Luna announced, popping her head out from under the odd boxy device. "Which I'm sure you know is one of the best, if not the best power units for this application."

"Daddy managed to get us a copy of the plans," Hermione chirped.

It took a few minutes for the two Slytherins to understand the device's intended use, but once they did they both immediately grasped its utility.

"So what do you think?" Hermione asked, eager to get her new business partners' opinions.

"We think it'll be great if we can get Ministry approval to use it," Daphne stated.

"All comes down to how large the bribe will have to be," Tracy agreed. "Too big and it won't matter how great it is."

IIIIIIII

Neville eyed the workstation and was relieved to note that nearly everything on the table seemed to have originated from gardens and greenhouses.

"What kind of Potion do you want me to make?" Neville asked.

"Whichever sort you like," the Head Auror stated. "Use any ingredients you like and make whatever you like."

"Yer kinswoman's been complaining about the oil she's using to protect some of her toys from the elements," Auror Pinch announced as he joined the group. "Might think about making something to solve her problem."

"Um, alright," Neville agreed, reaching for his pack to retrieve his potions book.

"Don't bother with that," Pinch said calmly, but firmly. "Just use your knowledge of how things react to make it."

"I . . . I suppose," Neville sighed. The boy closed his eyes for a few moments. "Could I get a quill and a piece of parchment, please?"

"Here you are, lad," Pinch agreed.

Neville wrote out a quick formula. "I'm not sure if this'll be better than what she has now, but I think it'll work."

"Get started then," Pinch said with a grin.

"Can't," Neville refused. "I'd have to leave before it was done to make my floo."

"How about something simple and quick then," Pinch suggested, noting how excited his colleagues were by what the boy had so casually created.

"I suppose I could make a pain relief potion," Neville said thoughtfully. "Well, assuming you've got some whomping willow bark and . . ." he

took a moment to look over the ingredients cabinet. "Maybe some olive oil. I don't see any here."

Pinch nodded to one of the other researchers, causing the woman to sprint out of the room to procure the needed items. Looked as if Potter wasn't the only gem to be discovered at Hogwarts.

IIIIIIII

Hermione was able to conceal all outward signs that she was even slightly worried about what her business partners had revealed until the departure of the afore mentioned partners. The second they were gone and she was sure they weren't likely to return, she let her worries flow.

"Do you think it's really going to be as bad as they said?" Hermione asked, biting her lower lip in distress. "I'd like to believe they're overstating things, but after the lesson we got on how the Ministry works last year . . ."

"One hesitates to believe that they'd be that foolish," Luna mused. "Still, as you said; they were foolish enough to attack Harry last year and they've yet to replace Fudge even after his incompetence and veniality was so publicly revealed."

"Yeah," Hermione sighed. "So what do you think we should do?"

"I would suggest we speak with either Susan or Neville on the matter with a request that they write their aunt or grandmother respectively. Possibly both."

"Neville?"

"Your kinswoman, his grandmother is quite influential," Luna replied.

"I hadn't realized," Hermione said with a disinterested shrug. "Best be Susan. Neville's gonna be busy for the next hour or so."

"Oh?"

"He really hit it off with my cousin," Hermione said, happy for the chance to share the gossip with her best female friend. "They've been flooing each other for at least an hour a night."

IIIIIIII

Tracy monitored the temporary wards they'd thrown up around the private floo booth while her cousin and constant companion cast a few additional privacy and encryption charms.

"We're secure on our end," her father announced.

"One moment," Daphne said. "We're secure on ours."

"What's the emergency?" Tracy's father asked in concern. "Did your meeting go badly?"

"It was your best case scenario number three, uncle," Daphne replied. "She'd gotten wrapped up in a project and forgotten to contact us."

"On the plus side, the project was related to our business," Tracy added.

"So what's the problem?" her uncle replied.

"The problem is with the Ministry," Daphne explained. "She's got a steam powered package wagon which the current administration could potentially use as an excuse to shut our entire business down if we don't get it licensed first."

"You explained to her the necessity of getting Ministry approval?"

"We did, daddy," Tracy agreed. "We're fairly sure she listened too."

"She's fairly law abiding so long as the law doesn't conflict with something she's decided she really wants to do," Daphne stated.

"If it doesn't?"

"She'll ignore it," Tracy predicted. "Well, judging on how she treats the rules at Hogwarts."

"Pays attention to them more than the regular students and harps on the rest to do the same until the rules get in the way."

"Then they may well not exist so far as she's concerned," Tracy finished.

"We'll have a word with her father about how much he's willing to put up or allow her to put up for . . . ah . . ."

"I've been putting the term 'easement fee' in the books," Tracy's father supplied.

"Thank you," his brother in law replied. "In the mean time, I want you two to have a word with Potter about . . ." he trailed off, noticing the looks of profound discomfort on the girls' faces his words had effected. "What is it?"

"We do our best to avoid Potter," Daphne said carefully.

"Why?!" her uncle barked, face going completely expressionless.

"It's not because of anything he's done to us," Tracy assured her father. "It's because of what he was preparing to do to the family."

"Explain," her father said, calming a touch.

"We managed to get a draft of his original proposal for our partnership with Granger," Daphne said reluctantly.

"Corrupted a house elf, did you?" her father asked with a grin. "How bad was it?"

"It was step one of a plan to gain a stranglehold over our family," Daphne continued. "It showed that despite his approval of the partnership, he doesn't trust us any further than he could throw us."

"Less if some of the rumors about him are to be believed," Tracy muttered.

Tracy's father visibly relaxed. "You don't have to worry about that, the issue's been resolved."

"Your cousin Livia Augusta is one of Potter's arms-women," Daphne's father explained.

"She interceded on our behalf?" Tracy asked in relief.

"She saw a chance to repay a debt," her father agreed. "Explained that we were a family of both honor and pride. Told him that he didn't need to put us in chains to force us to keep our word and that putting us in chains would do nothing but breed resentment." Her father nodded to his brother in law.

"Her read on him is that he'll treat us with honor and respect so long as we do the same." The man licked his lips. "She told us that he went on to say that he'll exterminate us without hesitation if it later turns out that trusting us was a mistake."

"Not an issue," Tracy's father interjected quickly. "We'll treat the Grangers like we'd treat any business partner. Livia tells us Potter won't go off just because of a misunderstanding or mistake on someone's part."

"That do something to set your minds at ease?"

"It does, father," Daphne sighed.

"Good."

"What was the debt cousin Livvy needed to repay?"

"We provided a bit of discreet assistance for her elopement. Nothing public, just enough so that she and her new husband would disappear before her family realized exactly what she'd done and arrange for them to disappear in a more permanent fashion."

"Do you think she'd be willing to accompany us to the meeting with Potter?" Tracy asked.

"Why?"

"It's always better to have an introduction, daddy, you taught us that," Tracy finished with a grin.

"True. Potter's arms-men have taken over most of the non public parts of the Broomsticks. Introduce yourselves to Rosmerta if she doesn't already know you; tell her who you are and who you want to speak to. She'll be in and available if luck's with you."

"If it isn't, leave a note asking her to contact you," Tracy's uncle finished. "You've got a bit of time before any of this turns critical. Don't dawdle, but be mindful of the fact that there's no need to rush either."

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna found Susan through the simple expedient of approaching and asking the first group of Puffs they came across. A tactic which proved to be surprisingly effective as they were led to the Hufflepuff common room and escorted to Susan's room a few minutes later.

"Look who's here, Hannah," Susan said with a smile at her closest companion.

"Bit of a surprise," Hannah agreed with a matching grin. "Thought you'd forgotten about us since we all got back to Hogwarts."

"Sorry," Hermione winced. "It's just we got back and we have access to the shop again and . . ."

"Relax," Susan assured her friend. "We're just messing with you. We understand how easy it is to get wrapped up in a project. Happens to Aunt Amelia and Hannah's parents all the time."

"It does," Hannah agreed. "What can we do for you two?"

"We were hoping you'd be willing to write your Aunt for us," Luna replied.

"What about?"

"Did you know that I bought the Hogwarts express?" Hermione asked.

"We did not?" Susan stated, outwardly calm, inwardly reeling. She didn't know why she was surprised, wasn't like the other girl's family couldn't easily afford the purchase.

"Well, because of that, Daphne and Tracy came to us to ask for a partnership with their company since they do a lot of imports and transports and they didn't want to compete."

"And?" Susan prompted.

"Well, Luna and I decided to build a vehicle to make it easier to transport things from the railhead to the shops."

"We based the power plant on the Doble Ultimax steam unit," Luna supplied helpfully. "The body and the rest of the components are mostly from other sources."

"They're worried about the Ministry?" Susan asked bluntly, presuming they were speaking about some sort of motorized vehicle.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed.

"Don't." Susan nodded thanks to one of her housemates as they came in with a tray of tea and snacks. "It's not a problem."

"It's not?" Hermione asked, perking up as Luna did the same at her side. "You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be before Auntie replies with conformation," Susan agreed. "Let's look at things logically, shall we?"

"Alright."

"You have close ties to myself, Hannah, Harry, Neville, Luna, and Ron, along with our families. Right?"

"Yeah," Hermione agreed. "So?"

"So?" Susan choked a laugh into a snort, barely managing not to shoot tea out her nostrils. "Luna, who's in charge of the Ministry Department that handles violations of the acts on misuse of muggle artifacts?"

"Ron's father," Luna replied.

"Who is also responsible for investigation and referring cases for prosecution and above him is my Aunt Amelia. Leaving that aside we have your family." She nodded to Luna. "Which runs the oldest and second most popular newspaper in our world."

"As for the rest," Hannah picked up the conversation to give Susan the chance to enjoy a square of lemon cake. "Neville's family's had you as a guest at their manor and have publicly claimed kinship with your family. Makes you sort of an honorary pureblood with the sort that cares about that sort of thing and puts everyone else on notice that she's in your corner if need be. My mum and dad are senior healers at St. Mungos, which gives them a bit of influence. And then there's Harry."

"Who no one in their right mind would cross right now," Susan finished in a tone of deep satisfaction. "Not after 'you-know's' public appearance anyway."

"Not to mention the spectacular failure of Fudge's campaign to destroy him," Susan agreed. "The only reason Fudge is still the Minister is because Harry hasn't decided to remove him yet and everyone knows that. Trust me, Hermione, no one with even half a brain cell would even dream of trying anything."

"What about Malfoy?"

"Which one?"

"Either," Hermione stated.

"Lucius could make some waves but he's not really in the position to influence anyone that could do too much to hinder you, not after all the capitol he burned to stay out of prison last year. Draco a dimwit but he has enough sense that he won't dare do anything that would so much as inconvenience you," Susan finished.

"He's been very careful not to do anything that would cause direct harm to you, Ron, or any of Harry's close companions," Hannah said in response to Hermione's look of skepticism.

"First year; you get attacked by a troll." Susan raised a finger. "Troll dies at the point of Harry's wand."

"Second year; you get attacked by a snake." Hanna paused for Susan to raise another finger. "Snake dies at Harry's hands. Teacher that attacked Ron gets his brains obliterated out his ears."

"Third year-"

"That's not what happened," Hermione squawked.

"Doesn't matter," Susan stated firmly. "School believes it did."

"My dorm mates have been very careful around me since they found out I was in Harry's circle," Luna confirmed. And had apologized and

begged her not to tell Harry what they'd done. None of them had any doubt that Harry's response would have been excessively violent at best.

“What?!” Hermione gave her friend a look. "They were still bothering you at the beginning of this year." The girl's hands were clenched so hard her knuckles were white.

"The situation had been resolved, Hermione, don't trouble yourself worrying about it," Luna replied, closing that line of inquiry.

"Even leaving the rest aside. Most people think it prudent to stay on the good side of a wizard that's faced 'you-know' in single combat on multiple occasions," Hannah said dryly.

"There!" Susan said with a grin, putting down the quill the other girls hadn't noticed she'd had. "I've just finished the letter I'm going to post to Aunty asking her about this."

"Thank you, Susan," Hermione said brightly, mentally shelving the rest of the issues the girls had brought up.

"Business out of the way, let's get personal." Susan's grin sharpened.

"What's this I hear about Neville having long floo calls with some mysterious girl every night in one of the public floo terminals?"

The four girls spent the remainder of the afternoon catching up and later, at Hermione's insistence, doing and revising their homework assignments.

"We had an absolutely lovely time," Luna stated brightly. "Thank you for having us."

"Please do feel free to drop by any time," Hanna replied. "You're both always welcome."

"We'll try not to be such strangers in the future," Hermione promised.

"We'll be sure to visit you in the engine shed if we go too long without seeing you," Susan promised in return.

"You're always welcome to come," Hermione replied. "It'll keep us from getting too wrapped up in projects if you do."

"So," Hannah said as the entrance to the common room closed. "Do you think she was joking about Harry?"

"No, I think she was dead serious about not knowing how everyone sees him."

"Really?"

"Girl's got a blind spot a mile wide when it comes to things like that. You saw how much notice she takes of her security detail."

"Considering the matter, I'm not sure she even realizes she has one," Hannah said thoughtfully. "You remember how she introduced them." She cleared her throat. "This is our librarian, Ms. Jane, she used to be my governess when I was younger," she said in a reasonable imitation of Hermione's voice. "This is mum's driver, Thomas, he has that knife up

his sleeve to open letters. I'm not sure what that mysterious bulge on his waist is."

"Must be odd to have grown up that way," Susan mused. "I remember how odd it was after Aunt Amelia became the Head Auror and I suddenly had two people following me around everywhere."

"Normal's just another word for the things you're used to," Hannah decided. "Meaning it's too subjective to have any use at all."

"Suppose that's one way of looking at the world."

"Gives us an excuse to ignore the people who say we shouldn't associate with anyone that doesn't fit the boxes they think they should anyway."

"Bugger 'em," Susan agreed.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 29

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth stared at the junior goblin across his until she began to show signs of distress. Damn the higher ups for insisting he bring someone with him. Worse, someone he was wholly unfamiliar with.

"You will not do anything to bring shame to Gringotts or to jeopardize our burgeoning relationship with the Granger Clan," he said firmly.

"Should you be so foolish as to ignore my orders, you will not be given the opportunity to make another mistake."

"My orders are to sit quietly and to take notes on all I observed," she replied. "I am along only as a second set of eyes and ears and as a stenographer should the Potter permit it."

"I see." Hooktooth relaxed a touch. "I had feared you were here as part of a power-play on the senior level."

"My word that I am not there to hinder you or your patrons in any way."

"So far as you know."

"So far as I know," she agreed.

"Very well." Hooktooth motioned for the female to seat herself. "We have a bit of time until we have to leave for our meeting. I'd have

preferred you be assigned earlier so as to personally brief you on the situation. I suppose, given your intended role in the proceedings, that a complete briefing will not be necessary. To start with, what do you know of the Potter?"

IIIIIIII

The Headmaster instructed the gargoyle to step aside as the wards informed him of Harry's approach to the staircase that led to his office. It did not take long for the boy to arrive.

"Thank you for taking the time to see me, Harry," Dumbledore began. "I understand how busy you are."

"I'm always willing to spare a moment for you, sir," Harry replied. He checked his watch. "Or in this case, up to twenty minutes. I'm afraid I have another meeting I need to go to then."

"I believe that should be sufficient." Dumbledore nodded. "I suppose that you are wondering why exactly I asked you here."

"I am."

"You may have noticed that you've spent considerably less time in my office than you have in previous years, Harry," Dumbledore sighed. "I'd like to start out by explaining why." The old man closed his eyes. "Guilt, shame, and fear. I apologize that it's taken this long to muster the courage to have this meeting."

"Sir? Is . . . is this about what happened to Sirius?"

"In part," Dumbledore agreed. "When I placed you with your Aunt, I sought to protect you from Voldemort's loyalists. I knew that things would not be easy for you there and, as you grew, my agents informed me of exactly how bad things were." The old man shook his head. "I thought keeping you there was for the best, I wanted you to be safe, I forgot that a life not lived was a life not worth living."

Dumbledore forced himself to look Harry in the eye. "In a recent conversation, Minerva said something that made me realize that my behavior towards you has been inexcusable. I had thought to tell you that you need not return to your relatives this year before realizing that I had no right to decide. Instead I'll tell you that your fate is in your own hands, I will certainly encourage you not to return to the Dursley residence, but in the unlikely event that you chose to do so, I will not stand in your way. Minerva made me realize that your life is your own, Harry, I will no longer try to control how you choose to live it. I can only apologize at how long it's taken me to realize that simple fact."

"I understand how good intentions can sometimes lead us to unfortunate places, sir. Last year would have driven that point home if I didn't know it before that." Harry smiled. "Why don't we let the past remain in the past."

The boy rose to his feet. "Now if you will excuse me, I really must be on my way."

"Of course," Dumbledore agreed. "Please know that my office door is open, as it always is to any student, and please do not hesitate to come if

you require any aid or council that you believe I might be able to provide."

"I'll take you up on that." Harry laughed. "You wouldn't happen to know a way to distract obsessed researchers, would you?"

"I've found that giving them another target to focus on often works," Dumbledore stated, regarding Harry with a half smile. "Thank you for that, by the way."

IIIIIIII

Oliver took a moment to admire the blank in his hands. It was a bit rougher than his factory broom in some places but the increased comfort more than made up for it.

"Thanks for getting me in on such short notice, Ron," he said sincerely. Word in the league was that there was at least an eight month wait just to get onto the list to get a five minute consultation with his former housemate.

"Thank the fact that you know Harry and the twins well enough for them to lobby on your behalf," Ron replied.

"I'll be sure to thank them too then," Wood agreed. "So what's this I hear about you dating the Harpies?"

"Bunch of dreck, I'd wager," Ron said, making another pencil mark on the broom blank.

"Oh?"

"They're just teasing me because they know I'm safe and because they know Mandy doesn't mind," Ron said absently.

"Why would she?"

"She, I'm dating." Ron sighed as he reached up to check the fit, it was a lot more enjoyable to do with the Harpies than it was with someone aptly named 'Wood.'

IIIIIIII

Flint was waiting when Harry descended from the staircase leading to the Headmaster's office.

"Got a few minutes to meet with a couple people?" she asked with a grin.

"Who?"

"Daphne Greengrass and Tracy Davis," Flint replied. "They're worried that the inspector the Ministry's sending to look over Hermione and Luna's latest device will regulate and fine them out of existence."

"Is it a valid worry?"

"It is but it's been taken care of," Flint stated calmly.

"When's the inspection?"

"Should happen about the time you're meeting with the Goblins."

Harry checked his watch. "Do I need to meet with them or will a message suffice?"

"All depends on the message."

"Tell them that I am aware of the situation and that things have been arranged. Should something go wrong, I will ensure that the situation is resolved in their favor."

"That'll work," Flint said cheerfully.

"And be sure that some of our people are on hand to monitor everything. I don't trust the Ministry or anyone working for it save perhaps Bones and her people."

"Will do," Flint agreed, not bothering to tell him just how many people Tonks had already assigned for the exact same reasons.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth gave a discreet nod to one of his security people when they arrived at Hogsmead causing the other goblin to separate from the group.

"Welcome to the Three Broomsticks," the proprietress said with a wide grin. "Ha-Mr. Potter is already in the meeting room and asked me to pass along that his people had already swept the room for listening

charms and that he would not take offense if you would like your people to do the same."

"Would prefer it actually," a dark haired female human added. "More eyes looking, more chance for something to be found if there's anything to be found."

"We accept the Potter's offer," Hooktooth said. "Would it be acceptable for the meeting to be held directly afterwards?"

The human nodded to one of her subordinates. "Escort whomever he wants to send up and assist them with whatever they need."

The human turned back. "Before I forget, my name is Flint. I'm in command of the Potter Security assets on site for the duration of this meeting."

"Your counterpart," Hooktooth indicated a scarred goblin on his right.

"A pleasure to finally meet you in the flesh." Flint nodded to the goblin.

"Likewise," the heavily scarred goblin replied.

IIIIIIII

Drusilla was a slightly round witch of middling years with dark hair and a hook like nose that brought to mind Hogwarts' least loved professor, not surprising considering the number of ancestors they shared on his mother's side. She'd been an inspector for the Ministry office of

licensing since shortly after her graduation from Hogwarts and had scant chance of ever rising much above her current position.

She'd been on her way out the door to deal with her next assignment, one that circumstance had indicated might be worth a significant amount of graft, when the head of the department called her into his office for a rare personal meeting.

"How aware are you of the issues surrounding your next inspection?" he asked bluntly the second the door closed and the privacy wards went up.

"Two aides to members of the Wizengamot bought my lunch today and loudly expressed worry at a muggle born owning something so important to our society," she replied. "They didn't make any promises but it was understood that it would be beneficial to both my career and to my bank account if I were to find some significant problems."

"Don't," her boss said simply.

"Alright," Drusilla agreed, having worked for the man long enough to know when he was serious. "Why not?"

"In the last hour I've had floos from Arthur Weasley, Amelia Bones, August Longbottom, and a representative from Harry Potter all stating that they would be watching and that they would all be most displeased if there were any irregularities."

"That's . . . pretty impressive," she said honestly. Wondering if they'd threatened anything aside from their displeasure if something went wrong.

"It is," he agreed. "It's why I called you in here to let you know. Do the job by the book and be prepared to overlook any issues minor enough to be ignored. Note any major violations if there are any but do not assign any fines, official or otherwise, until after you've had a chance to meet with me."

"We're not accepting any 'donations' on this one at all?" she asked in shock, this was something entirely outside her experience.

"Not so much as a single knut," he agreed. "Should have seen the look Greengrass' face when I told him we wouldn't be requiring any extra licensing fees. Almost makes the rest of this worth it."

"Got it." Her retirement vault was full enough that she didn't need to be too vigorous about finding ways to supplement it anyway. Not if it meant getting on the bad side of the afore mentioned individuals anyway.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth was pleased by how well the first half of the negotiations had gone. In less than one hour he and the Potter had managed to work out an agreement for his superiors to meet with the Potter's contact in the non-magical government. He was just about to suggest bringing the meeting to a close when the goblin who had been forced onto him at the last minute quietly cleared her throat and handed him a note.

"The first point out of the way, would you have any objection to using the rest of the allocated time to discussing an unrelated matter?" The

goblin fought to keep his face impassive as he waited for the Potter's response.

“I would not,” Harry replied.

“To ease into the matter, might I enquire as to how young Sprocket is working out?”

“Quite well from what I understand,” Harry replied. “The girls have nothing but good to say about him.”

“Would you or the head of the Granger family object if more goblins were to leave Gringotts to seek employment with your female companions?”

“With the understanding that there is only so much work to go around, no,” Harry stated.

“I see.” Hooktooth considered the matter. “How many would be allowed?”

“There's no hard number. Hermione will hire as many as she can keep busy and likely use the spare labor to open more projects which in turn will require more labor.” Harry fought down a laugh. “With enough time, labor, and resources she'll likely end up owning the magical world before she graduates at the rate she's going.”

The goblins went still, each one shocked to the core at what they'd just heard the boy admit.

“In the event that she doesn't have a need for any labor and provided they don't object to other sorts of employment, I'm sure I could find a place for them somewhere,” Harry finished. He was sure Phil would be delighted to have a dozen or so mechanics to keep his collection in top condition if nothing else.

"You say-" his voice broke. "-you say you do not mind the idea of goblin technicians taking service with Ms. Granger." Hooktooth licked his lips. "Would you object to goblins from the other trades doing so as well?"

"I would not," Harry tilted his head, aware that more was going on than he'd previously realized. "Why?"

"The offspring of a senior member of the clan has expressed interest in broadening her horizons in the human world."

"They are more than welcome to come and, as I said before, if we can't find a position for them with Hermione, I will do my best to find a position for her somewhere else."

"The goblin in question is a fully trained auditor."

"I see." Harry considered the matter. "That could actually be quite helpful," he mused. "Assuming I'm correct about Auditors being skilled in financial matters."

"You are," the goblin agreed.

"Excellent. Based on what you know of their capabilities, do you think they would be able and willing to work as an accountant?" Harry asked, thinking of how useful such an individual would be.

"I can safely say that she will be happy for the opportunity and gratified by the trust placed in her at being given such an important task."

"Wonderful," Harry said. "Hermione's good with numbers but it's almost impossible to get her to take an interest in money."

"Oh?" The goblin's heart was racing. "I was given to understand that she'd made quite a bit of it in her business ventures."

"She has," Harry agreed. "The thing is, money is a means to an end for her." He laughed. "Don't get me wrong, she's quite good at it when she can be bothered to be, it's just difficult to convince her to focus more time on her finances if it comes at the expense of less time with her projects."

"I see." The goblin carefully considered his response. "That is often the case with engineers."

IIIIIIII

Auror Pinch was amused to note that the future head of the Longbottom family was already in the research space when he returned from his meal.

"His young lady was quite enthusiastic about the idea of regular access to a private floo connection," the lead potions researcher whispered.

“Should I make a note to do something nice for that young lady?” Pinch whispered back.

“Yes.”

“How nice?”

“He's cranked out the formulas for five new potions since he arrived today and brewed two of them.”

“Oh? How interesting are we talking here?”

"It's not that we wouldn't have been capable of creating these potions, it's more that we never thought to. No one really has, no one has ever really seen the need to develop 100 percent plant based potions. The one he created is about ten percent better than any of the control potions we brewed from his recipe, he's reading the potion as it brews and tweaking the recipe to fit the ingredients at hand. We've got the makings of a master if we can convince him to go for it.”

IIIIIIII

Spikenose had always been a bit disgusted by the pitiful creatures the humans called house elves. They were weak, they were servile, they were pathetic wastes of flesh unworthy of the resources they consumed to gain the energy needed to be self mobile.

The creature blocking her path had none of those defects. In stark contrast to the usual slump, it stood proud and erect. Rather than

cringing cowardice, its eyes sparked with fury and barely restrained madness. In fact . . . taking care to make no sudden moves she gave the creature a once over. He didn't look too bad.

"Why is yous asking questions about the Great and Powerful Harry Potter sir?!" the goblin had to restrain herself from taking a step back from the uncharacteristically fierce house elf.

"I am trying to gather intelligence for my superiors," Spikenose replied with as much calm as she could muster. Even his voice was filled with the promise of violence and pain. Her pulse quickened as she realized just how close she was to death.

"Why?" Dobby's glare deepened, sizing up his potential opponent. A quick pop back to create distance, a hand wave to bombard the goblin with everything he could touch with his magic, followed by another pop to close. A bit of quick work with a kitchen knife and bob's your uncle. Solid bits to Hogwarts' pigs and the drain for everything else. Though . . . hadn't Harry Potter sir's Loveygood said something about goblins making good pies? Perhaps the pigs would have to do without. He took a moment to eye her to identify the areas that would deliver the best cuts of meat.

"We wish to know more about him and the Granger clan so that we may negotiate without fear of accidentally causing offense," the goblin replied, noting that her admission caused the house elf to relax his stance and to stop eyeing her like the security dragons eyed their morning sheep. "Our problem is that neither he nor the Granger Clan act as humans are supposed to."

"Dobby understands that humans can be difficult to understand," the house elf sighed, allowing himself to relax completely. "Dobby will be happy to share tales of the Mighty and Wonderful Harry Potter sir's fantastic deeds."

And in a flash, the terrifying predator she'd been facing disappeared, cloaking itself in camouflage to appear to be nothing more than another of the human's servants. She wondered if perhaps she hadn't discovered a new species, something that mimicked house elves to get better access to its human prey . . . which seemed to be contradicted by its protective interest in the Potter. She gave a mental sigh, why couldn't she have gone into a simple field like dragon husbandry? Only thing you had to worry about there was being eaten or the odd accidental maiming.

Spikenose listened in wonder as the creature educated her on the great deeds of the 'Great and Wonderful Harry Potter sir the Great and Wonderful.' The things he described sounded as if they came from one of the sagas told by the huldufólk of the frozen island.

"The next part." The house elf looked downcast. "Dobby is ashamed of his actions in the next part. Dobby thought Dobby was protecting the Great and Wonderful Harry Potter sir, Dobby . . ."

The goblin motioned for the house elf to continue.

"Dobby didn't realize," the house elf said mournfully. "Dobby didn't know that he was saving bad former master's life. It wasn't until later, when Dobby saw the corpse of the great snake that Dobby understood the might of the Great and Cunning Harry Potter sir."

"Please continue."

"Bad former master came to Hoggywarts not knowing that he was entering a trap set by the Most Cunning and Amazing Harry Potter sir. Bad former master did not know that Harry Potter sir had figured out his evil schemes. Harry Potter sir waited until bad former master was alone and struck with the first part of his plan." The house elf straightened up. "Freeing Dobby and provoking Dobby's bad former master to attack Harry Potter sir with the killing curse."

"He did what?!" Spikenose exclaimed in shock, almost unable to believe what she was hearing. That anyone, even Lucius Malfoy would be stupid enough to attack a child in a house of learning. She gave a mental shake of the head, yet another piece of evidence that backing the man's master would be a mistake as if they needed any more than they already had.

"Dobby saw bad former master tried to use death curse on Harry Potter sir and Dobby was filled with rage." The house elf took a breath.

"Dobby used his magic to throw bad former master hard enough to break seventeen bones, shatter one kidney, and rupture three other organs, and ensure that bad young master would never have sibbylings. Dobby didn't understand that he was doubting the Stupendous and Awe Inspiring Harry Potter sir's prowess, Dobby didn't understand that if he had waited one second more that bad master would have been no more."

"Based . . ." the goblin tried to slow her breathing. "Based on your story it's quite possible Harry Potter delayed acting in order to give you the opportunity to strike him yourself."

"Dobby doesn't understand."

"It could have been a test to see how you'd react, a test of your worth as a potential vassal or ally. If that is the case, I would assume that you passed in light of the fact that associates with you on a regular basis," the goblin replied, returning to her normal monotone. "Or it could have been a gift to you. He may have figured that your aid to him earned you the right to make the first strike on your former master or he may have figured that you deserved the first strike after learning of your treatment at the man's hands."

"Dobby knew that the Most Mighty Wizard Harry Potter sir was generous, but Dobby never realized the extent of it," the awestruck house elf whispered.

"Sometimes it takes an outsider to point out what is before you," the goblin stated. "Might I request a boon in return for the small service I was able to provide?"

"What does goblin want?"

"Might I request a viewing of the great snake's corpse for myself and at least one of my superiors?"

"Dobby doesn't see the harm." The house elf nodded to himself, one really couldn't get a proper picture of just how powerful the Great Harry Potter sir was until one got a chance to take the measure of one of his defeated foes.

IIIIIIII

Daphne and Tracy waited nervously in the engine shed with their business partners waiting for the Ministry's inspector to arrive.

"She's coming," Tracy announced, informed by several carefully pre-placed charms.

"Please remember to let us do all the talking," Daphne half begged as the Ministry inspector walked through the door.

"My name is Inspector second class Glass. Take me to the device," the woman said, pronouncing each word as if it were a vulgarity.

"Right this way," Daphne said.

"How does it work?" the inspector demanded the moment she'd gotten within sight of the package lorry.

"It uses steam just like the Hogwarts Express," Tracy supplied.

"Is it the exact same system as the Hogwarts Express?" the pinch faced woman asked with a frown of confusion. "Why doesn't it look the same as the Express?"

"Uh . . ." Daphne winced, cursing herself for the fact that she had yet to do enough study to truly understand the design.

"The Hogwarts Express runs on coal, our delivery wagons run on coal oil. Different fuels and different roles mean different design," Hermione stated, trying not to look bored.

"Is coal oil similar to what the muggles use to run their horseless carriages?" the woman asked intently.

"Only to the point that they're both liquid hydrocarbons derived from destructive distillation of fossil fuels," Hermione replied.

"Uh . . ."

"Muggle vehicles run on the petroleum distillate gasoline, often referred to colloquially as petrol where as the fuel used to be created via an alchemical process involving decomposition of our feedstock, in this case cannel coal, which as you know is a form of bituminous coal, to produce liquid coal oil."

"We'd be happy to give a more detailed explanation of the process if you have time," Luna chirped. "It shouldn't take more than seven or eight hours to go over the highlights."

"I'd recommend it," Hermione continued showing a bit of life for the first time since the conversation began. "It's absolutely fascinating stuff."

"That won't be necessary," the inspector said quickly, having been cornered by Arthur Weasley who seemed to have a pathological need to explain everything about his hobby/profession enough times to know what was coming. "I'm only here to satisfy the Ministry that you aren't improperly using any muggle devices."

"I can safely say that you won't be able to buy this type of engine in any of the muggle shop I've frequented," Tracy told the woman seriously.

"There isn't a bit of it that was made in the muggle world, right Hermione?"

"There is one bit," Hermione stated calmly. The girl reached into her pocket to pull something out. "Every bit of it was made in house save for the mantles for the pressure lanterns."

"What-" the inspector bit her tongue, hoping that choking off the question would prevent being on the receiving end of another incomprehensible lecture. "They're just wicks?"

"They're smaller versions of what's used on the gas lights in Diagon Alley," Luna said helpfully.

"The same actually," Hermione stated. "They're the ones who gave me the contact information for their supplier."

"Oh. Do you enchant them in anyway?"

"We're currently using the same process as the Ministry," Luna replied.

"I suppose that's alright then," the inspector smiled. "Good work. I'll be happy to report to my superiors that you've created the first completely magical horseless carriage in the country. Don't be surprised if you get an inquiry as to the feasibility of converting or replacing the current Ministry cars with one of yours."

"We look forward to it," Daphne said quickly. "Just be sure they understand that each one is made by hand by skilled craftsmen so wait times and prices will be understandably high."

"Not that we aren't willing to give the Ministry a special deal or to rush them to the front of the queue," Tracy added with a smile.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 30

IIIIIIII

Harry gave Flint the eye to have refreshments brought out as the meeting came to a close.

“Thank you,” Hooktooth said, carefully selecting a cigar.

“Please take as many as you wish to,” Harry said. “Flint. Be sure they're given a few boxes to take back to Gringotts.”

“Yes, sir.”

“There's no need to trouble yourself,” Hooktooth said with what passed for a grin.

“Please, I insist. It's the least I can do in return for all the new employees you're being kind enough to send to us.”

Hooktooth's eyes rolled back in pleasure as he savored his first bite.

“Exquisite. Easily the best I've had the pleasure of experiencing.”

“Glad you approve,” Harry said with a grin. Seemed Hermione's uncle Jim's tastes were good.

“I am eternally grateful that you pressed me to take more back to the tunnels. It would have been a great shame for the others to miss out on

something so good.” He sighed. “A shame I’m not empowered to make trade agreements,” he finished somewhat wistfully. Or perhaps not, there was little chance that he would be able to bargain effectively after his first bite.

“So bring along someone who for our next meeting and we’ll hash something out,” Harry suggested. “Flint.”

“Sir?”

“I want you to triple the number of boxes you give to our guests when we leave. Have them marked as product samples on our expense forms.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you,” Hooktooth said.

“Thank you for helping me reach another market,” Harry replied. Looked like Phil had been onto something. He gave a mental snort, no surprise that a businessman of his ability would sniff out a chance to make a profit.

IIIIIIII

Spikenose stared in awe at the corpse of the great serpent. To think that a human child could slay such a beast in single combat. She shook her head in wonder, it was an amazing task even with the aid he had from the firebird. More than anything else, it drove home the fact that Gringotts would do well to make allies of Clan Granger for she had no

doubt that they'd be terrifying opponents with such a warrior on their side.

“Any-” She swallowed. “Any idea why it hasn't begun to decay?”

“Dobby and the other elfies has been keeping it fresh for Harry Potter sir,” the house elf replied. As a monument to his triumph if for no other reason.

IIIIIIII

The head of Hooktooth's detail pulled him aside as he stepped out of the meeting room. The senior security goblin seemed a bit off, as if he'd just been the recipient of a bit of life changing information.

“One of my people has something she says you need to see before returning to Gringotts.”

“Oh?” Hooktooth glanced at the security goblin's face. “Which one?”

“The one I assigned to gather information on the Potter.”

“What does she want me to see?”

“She suggests that it would be best to go without any foreknowledge.” The goblin thought for a moment before deciding to add a bit more information. “It's possible you wouldn't believe her if she told you about it ahead of time. I almost didn't,” the goblin snorted. “Hell, she almost didn't when she heard it.” And likely wouldn't have if the Potter's servant hadn't revealed what was lurking beneath his camouflage. Looked like

they'd have to start taking house elves into account when they made security plans.

IIIIIIII

Daphne sagged and seemed to melt onto a chair as soon as she was sure the Ministry's inspector wasn't going to return. She shared a look with her cousin, neither of them had so much as heard of an inspection that had gone half as well, not even one conducted on a business belonging to Lucius 'the Minister's in my back pocket' Malfoy.

“Potter said he'd taken care of it,” she mumbled to herself.

“I told you there was nothing to worry about,” Hermione sniffed. “Like you said; Harry arranged everything. If Harry says something's been taken care of, it has been.”

“Don't suppose he'd be willing to help us with a few other things?” Tracy asked hopefully, tongue darting over her lips as she contemplated the possibilities.

“Like what?” Hermione prompted, eyeing the girl with no small amount of suspicion. It wasn't that she distrusted her two business partners per say, but Harry already had a lot of time consuming activities on his plate and she was more than a bit reluctant to add to them if she didn't have to.

“Ministry isn't the only one that asks for donations,” Daphne said sourly. “More than a bit surprised that no one's come by to ask us to pay 'insurance' to keep any 'accidents' from happening to our business.”

“Likely because we haven't moved much product yet,” Tracy opined. Could also be their new partner's staff, she reflected to herself, no one messed with Goblins if they wanted to stay above ground.

“Harry's already looking after our business.” Her lips pursed as she considered the matter. “I could ask Harry to look into it for your father's businesses when he has a spare moment if it's really important,” Hermione offered. “Just realize that it might take a while before he has a spare moment.”

“It'd take a while to talk our dads into agreeing to bring him in on this anyway,” Tracy giggled. “Thank you, Hermione.”

“We owe you one,” Daphne agreed, looking like she hadn't liked admitting it. “We personally that is, not our family or business.”

“They're not the same thing?” Hermione asked, looking a touch confused. “Sorry, none of my business.”

Sprocket suppressed a grin at his Chief's words. A goblin in human skin. He'd been more fortunate than he'd known at the time when he'd been offered a chance to seek service under the heiress of Clan Granger.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth's entire attention was on the corpse of the great serpent. It filled the entire chamber, coiling from one end to the other, two sword like fangs jutting from the thing's half closed jaws. How in the hell had the Potter done this even with the aid of a phoenix? He'd have laid odds

on it against any three of the security dragons and counted himself fortunate for every sucker dumb enough to take a bet against it.

“What do you think?” he asked the security chief, trying and failing to tell himself that his analysis must be flawed and hoping that the other goblin could give him something better.

“I think I didn't bring enough guards,” the other goblin said calmly, eyes searching the chamber for hidden threats.

“What?”

“My instructions are to see that you are protected against all possible threats. All possible includes the Potter, I did not bring enough guards.” The old goblin sighed. “I find myself sincerely hoping that he did not take that as an insult.”

“Humans aren't like that,” Hooktooth said absently, unable to rip his eyes away from the corpse.

“Humans can't kill a beast like this when they're children either,” the older goblin replied. “How sure are we that he's a human. Sprocket says the Granger Heiress is a goblin in human skin and we're still not sure what the hell the Potter's house elf really is.” The old goblin turned to his subordinate. “Find out everything else you can about the Potter's triumphs and gather what evidence you can as well. Higher ups and analysts are going to want every detail you can ferret out.”

“So are the story tellers,” Hooktooth added faintly. “The Potter has already performed at least one deed worthy of a saga.” He waved his

hand at the evidence of the boy's triumph. "Imagine what other tales are lurking in his past."

"Not the first human to be honored, but the first in quite some time," the chief of security agreed, trying to decide the proper number of security goblins to bring with him to the next meeting to show the proper amount of respect and worrying that the proper number would be too large to fit in the town of Hogsmead.

IIIIIIII

Padma rocked back on her heels as the fire changed color, indicating that the floo was connected, and would have fallen if not for the steady hands of her sister.

"Did you put up privacy charms?" the face in the flames, an Indian man with a neatly trimmed black beard and a strong familial resemblance to her sister asked.

"Yes, father, just like you taught us," she agreed.

"Wonderful. I trust that you are both doing well?"

"We are, daddy," Parvati stated. "Padma's number four in our year."

"Parvati is doing quite well despite not being in the top ten," Padma continued calmly. "Easily in the top twenty."

"Cept in divination where I'm always one or two," Parvati finished. "What did you tell us to floo you for, daddy?"

“I've recently come into possession of some interesting information concerning one of your classmates,” their father replied. “What do you know about Harry Potter?”

“He's a terrible date and a worse dancer,” Parvati stated firmly. “Though he was sweet enough to apologize after.”

“Unlike his friend,” Padma sniffed. “Though that bit of information is a bit dated. He's currently involved in several research projects that take up a large amount of his time.”

“And he spends the rest of his time hiding from the Professors so that they don't have a chance to drag him into even more. Almost never see him around the common room anymore,” Parvati giggled.

“He also controls the largest private security company in the magical world,” their father said with a hint of grin. “One charged with the security of at least three of your classmates.”

“Who?”

“Hermione Granger, Susan Bones, and Hannah Abbot.”

“Add Luna Lovegood,” Padma said after a moment of thought. “I can not confirm that but it is not likely that she isn't being looked after if Hermione is.”

“Hermione Granger is their principle charge.”

“Not surprising if they work for Harry,” Parvati said, looking as if she'd just been handed a juicy piece of gossip.

“Her family is rich enough to buy and sell the Malfoys with pocket money,” their father said simply, silencing both his daughters. “They have a contract with Harry Potter to keep her safe by all means necessary.”

“You are sure of that, father?” Padma asked dumbly.

“I am.”

The twins shared a look for a several moments.

“Do you have any other news to share, daddy?” Parvati asked, breaking the silence.

“Have you heard the rumor that Harry Potter stated the Malfoy manor house was smaller than the Granger family's stables?”

“We have now, daddy.”

“Her mother had yours and a number of other society women including Dame Augusta Longbottom over for tea. She states that he was not exaggerating.”

“Oh.” For the first time, Parvati looked unsure of herself. “She doesn't act like it.”

“Unless you consider how she expects to be obeyed when she gives an order or the fact that she seems to regard rules as being meant for people other than herself,” Padma laughed.

“Guess so,” Parvati mumbled, wondering just how she'd managed to know so little about one of her roommates even after living with her for years.

“Do you want us to get you more information, father?”

“If you can without giving offense. The main reason I instructed you to contact me was to remind you of the fact that one of the reasons you were sent to Hogwarts was to make connections and to point out some valuable potential connections to make.”

“Are you telling us to get closer to Harry, daddy?” Parvati asked with a gleam in her eyes.

“I'm telling you that he'd be a good person to be friends with if he is worth befriending,” he said. “No amount of potential gold is worth approaching him or spending so much as a second in his company if he is not.”

“Thank you, father,” Parvati said sweetly. “I'm on fairly good terms with Luna,” she volunteered.

“Hermione and I get along just fine,” her twin added.

“Good. Be upfront about what you're doing, as I said Hogwarts is a place to build connections as much as it is a place of learning.”

“Yes, father/daddy,” the twins agreed.

“Good. Padma, I trust you not to let Parvati be overly impulsive.”

“Yes, father.”

“Parvati, I trust that you will not allow Padma to be excessively cautious.”

“You can count on me, daddy.”

IIIIIIII

Harry noted with approval the way the maintenance personnel watched him as he approached the girls. The imperius and polyjuice meant that no one could be trusted and the return of Voldemort meant a little paranoia was warranted.

As focused as they were on the problem at hand, it took several minutes before the girls noticed his presence and Harry took the time to run his, admittedly amateur, eye over the building to look for possible vulnerabilities.

“Going to have to have another word with Tonks,” he muttered to himself. Both to have her run her own evaluation and to have her speak with the workers. Dumbledore's decision not to permit any private security to enter Hogwarts grounds was inconvenient but not insurmountable. All else failed he'd have the Express crew trained as

bodyguards and the bodyguards trained as crew. Would take longer than he liked, but-

“Harry,” Hermione said in delight, cutting off his train of thought. “How did the meeting go?”

“Fairly well I think. Managed to secure a few more workers for you including someone to help you deal with your finances and I may also have laid the groundwork for a trading deal with Gringotts.”

“That's great, Harry!” Hermione cheered.

“We could so much more if we had more workers as efficient as Sprocket to assist us,” Luna agreed.

“Not to mention the fact that the trade deal I'm working on could pay for some of the raw materials and machinery you're using in your projects if I farm it out to your import business,” Harry said dryly.

“That's-” Hermione cut off as she pondered the matter.

“Never thought about where the money comes from?” Harry asked, more than a bit amused by his friend's attitude.

“It never seemed important,” she said simply.

“Oh.” Harry took a breath. “Your father wanted me to point out the fact that your profits go back to you and can be used to fund further projects.”

“They can?” Hermione blinked. “I’d assumed . . .” she trailed off. “I suppose a proper foundry might be nice to have.”

“Not to mention how convenient having a steel mill would be,” Luna chirped. “And a heavy machine shop.”

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed, getting a far off look in her eyes.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 31

IIIIIIII

Daphne waited until her cousin had finished putting up the wards and secrecy charms before tossing a handful of floo powder into the fire and whispering the address.

“Is everything alright?” her uncle asked the second his head appeared in the flames.

“It is, father,” Tracy answered with uncharacteristic formality. “Or at least, we believe it is.”

“Is my father there?” Daphne asked softly.

“He will be in a moment, Daphne, can you wait or is immediate action required?” Concern marked his features as his mind sought a reason for the two girls' odd behavior.

The two cousins shared a look. “It can wait, father,” Tracy stated.

“How is school going?” the man in the flames asked.

“All is well, father,” Tracy replied. “There were a few remarks about our partnership with Granger, but as yet, everyone has been intelligent enough to avoid saying anything offensive.”

“What about your personal lives?” he tried another tack. “All going well there too?”

“We both maintain that none of the available boys are worth our time, uncle,” Daphne answered. “Two or three may have potential after they do a bit of growing up and a couple more that may be suitable if the Dark Lord situation is resolved favorably.”

“Muggle born?”

“Along with a couple of half bloods from what would be unacceptable families if the Dark Lord wins,” Tracy agreed.

“I . . . your father's just arrived, Daphne.” He moved to the side to allow his brother-in-law to join the conference.

“Father,” Daphne stated.

“Daughter,” he replied calmly.

“Uncle,” Tracy greeted the man.

“Niece,” he greeted back. “Why did you two decide to contact us early?”

“The Ministry Inspector looked at the delivery carriage today, father,” Daphne began. “We tried to do things the way you told us to, but-”

“But she refused to certify,” her father sighed. “I was afraid that would be the case after the head of the department refused to consider accepting any sort of 'licensing fees' until after the inspection.”

“That's not what happened,” Tracy said. “She asked a couple questions and then granted a permanent unrestricted license for it and any similar vehicles Granger and Lovegood decide to build.”

“What?” Tracy's father blurted, eyes widening in shock. “That's unheard of.”

“Do you have any idea how this happened?” Daphne's asked, confusion marring his features.

“We shared a few concerns with Granger about the inspection. She later informed us that Potter had taken care of everything and that we were not to worry,” Tracy reported.

“What did Potter say?” Tracy's father asked.

“We were unable to get a meeting with him before the inspection,” Daphne replied. “We've since been able to determine that he was in a meeting with Dumbledore this morning and spent most of the afternoon meeting with representatives from Gringotts.”

“Cousin Livvy said that we were not to take his refusal as a snub and that we were not to worry about the meeting because everything had been arranged,” Tracy added.

“Find out what you can and keep us informed,” Daphne's father said after a moment of thought.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth looked a bit shaken when he entered his superior's office a few hours later, mind still reeling from the unbelievable things he'd been able to confirm.

The senior goblin's eyebrow raised as his subordinate took his seat. "Well?" His appetite having been wetted by the preliminary report.

"Which report would you prefer to hear first? The one on the meeting or the one about the Potter?"

"Start with the meeting," his superior ordered.

"Based on information given to me by the Potter, I am no longer sure of our theory that the Potter is proctoring the heiress's test of worthiness," Hooktooth began.

"Why not?"

"The Potter stated that the Granger heiress would likely own the human magical's society before she graduated," Hooktooth stated, mouth dry. "He further stated that while the Granger heiress's appetite for labor was not endless, that we were welcome to send him as many workers as we liked from any sector of society and gave his personal word that he would do all he could to find a place with them if there was not one at the heiress's side. As things stand, either he or the Granger need only say the world and the country will be theirs."

"I see." The senior goblin rocked back. "What of the auditor?"

“He was quite eager to have her and stated that he intended to make her the heiress's personal accountant. The Potter explained that despite her talent for it, the Granger heiress is generally disinclined to indulge of matters of business unless related to her primary passion of engineering.”

“What do the analyst think?”

“They're still pouring over the contact reports.”

“Alright,” the senior goblin sighed, why couldn't the data he wanted be available when he wanted it? “What do you think. Your first impressions only.”

“As the Potter stated, the Granger heiress is skilled in both engineering and business. Not surprising considering her lineage, the Granger Clan is among the strongest in the world thanks to their proven abilities to grow wealth. Picture yourself in the shoes of the Head of Clan Granger, your offspring is skilled in two areas, but is prone to neglecting one in favor of the other. What do you do?”

“You do your best to impress upon them the importance of the neglected area, failing that, you find them a trustworthy partner or assistant to help them.”

“What if your offspring has enough wisdom to find partners for themselves? What then?”

“You verify that your offsprings choices are good ones and ensure that they are . . . that's what the Granger Clan Chief is doing with the Potter.”

“Yes, sir. I believe that if there was a test of worthiness, it was for the Potter to prove that he was worthy of remaining at the heiress's side.”

“He passed.”

“He passed and in doing so, impressed the clan chief so much that he was made warmaster of the Granger Clan. Note that the arms-men responsible for the heiress's safety are the Potter's sworn armsmen. Note how closely the Potter is involved in the heiress's businesses. So closely that we had assumed he was proctoring the heiress's test of worthiness.”

“Warmaster indeed,” the senior goblin muttered to himself. “Do you have any other information to support your theory?”

“The Potter offered refreshments at the close of the meeting.”

“Go on.”

“He then offered a trade deal after I commented on how difficult it was to get cigars of the same quality in the tunnels, insisted I take several cases back with me to help convince those senior to me that such a deal would be in our interest.”

“Interesting that he arranged the possibility of opening an import deal with us so soon after the heiress obtained a fifty percent share of a company dedicated to importing muggle luxuries,” the senior goblin mused. “Alright. Tell me what happened after the meeting.”

“Have you seen the preliminary report, sir?”

“I have.”

"The things the Potter's retainer told us were unbelievable," Hooktooth replied. "So unbelievable that it's understandable we'd doubt them."

"And?" the senior goblin prompted again in a harsher tone, warning his subordinate to get to the point.

"They're true," Hooktooth said firmly. "They're all true."

"Even the part about slaying the fourth founder's beast in single combat?" the senior goblin asked with a hit of disbelief.

"The Potter's retainer took me in to the fourth founder's private chamber to view the corpse," Hooktooth replied. "It's all true. A half grown boy killed a thousand year old basilisk in single combat with nothing but a wand and a sword."

“Further evidence supporting the idea that the Granger clan named him their warmaster,” the senior goblin stated. “What did you think of the Security Goblin Spikenose's report on the house elf?

“I noticed he was different but I did not see what she did. I recommend reading Senior Armsmaster Bloodclaw's report.”

“Summarize it.”

“The creature carefully evaluated each of us when we arrived and spent the rest of the time staying out of arms reach. Based on its body

language and positioning, he believes it was prepared to murder all of us if it decided we might pose a threat to the Potter.”

“What do you think of Spikenose's belief that the Potter's retainer is not a house elf?”

“I believe that while it is possible that she is correct, that it is far more likely that the bonds the wizards forced upon his species are being used to suppress their true nature or that his bonding with the Potter has allowed him to take on some of the Potter's traits.”

“Or some combination of the above or something else,” the senior goblin stated. “We've confirmed he has a bond with the Potter?”

“Yes, though it is different from every other house elf bond the security personnel have seen. They are still trying to find a way to explain how that's possible.”

“Have three analysts assigned to the matter and be sure they're given the opportunity to speak with Spikenose and anyone else that had close contact with the creature.”

“Yes, sir.”

IIIIIIII

In a move that would look very much like smoothing one's robes to an outside observer, Anguish checked again to be sure that the tools of her trade had not disappeared since she'd last checked them thirty seconds before.

'Not an hour out of the bank and I've already lost my nerve,' she thought in disgust. Chin straightening, the goblin strode confidently into the wooden structure in which her new chief awaited.

It took only a moment for the goblin's eyes to adjust to the difference in light level. Her proximity wards reported the presence of three humans, one less than she could see. The sound of soft, regular, breathing from deeper in the shop told her the probable location of the missing human. Neither of the two was her new warchief, though the larger human, the female, matched the description of her chief's aide. Well, she decided, nothing for it but to push on and see what happened.

“My name is Anguish,” she introduced herself.

“I'm Flint, Harry's assistant,” the larger human replied.

It wasn't a confirmation that the human was the chief's aide, while the human displayed no signs of deception that she could detect, Anguish did not yet consider her a reliable source. Best continue cautiously but respectfully.

“I was instructed to report to the Potter here so that I could swear myself into the service of the Granger Heiress.”

“You're going to have to wait a few minutes,” the female human stated.

“I see.”

“He's asleep at the moment,” Flint explained. “That is not meant as an insult to you, he gave strict instructions that he be woken the second you arrive

“You are ignoring his orders?” Anguish asked calmly. It would be interesting to see if and how the individual would try to justify herself to the chief. It would be equally interesting to see how the chief chose to address the situation.

“He doesn't get much opportunity to sleep and Hermione ordered that we weren't to disturb him unless it was unavoidable when he does get an opportunity.” The human grinned, being respectful enough to keep her teeth covered.

“I see,” Anguish repeated.

“We wake him if it can't wait, we don't if it's not time sensitive. I hope you understand.”

The human appeared to ready herself for violence, Anguish presumed that it was on the off chance that she decided to make an issue of it. Such was the reputation of her profession, she supposed, terribly useful at times, terribly inconvenient at others.

“I am able to wait as long as need be,” Anguish replied.

“Shouldn't be long, he doesn't usually drift off for more than a few minutes at a time. Can't be good for him to get so little rest.”

“Is ensuring he gets rest one of your responsibilities?” Anguish asked curiously.

“One of them,” the human agreed. “You'd still have to get past Ron even if it wasn't. Between the two of us, that wouldn't be as simple as you might think.”

“I am aware,” Anguish stated. “I have reviewed all of the material Gringotts had on the incident in the Harpies locker room.”

“Has the auditor arrived, Flint?” a deeper voice called out from the depths of the shop. It appeared the third human had awoken.

“Just got here, boss,” the human replied. “Her coming in musta been what woke you up.”

Her new chief stepped out of the shadows and regarded his aide with a flat look for a few moments. To the other human's credit, she did not look away until he nodded his head in acceptance.

“My name is Harry,” her chief began. “You come highly recommended.”

“Thank you, sir. I have adopted the name of Anguish when dealing with humans.”

“Welcome, Anguish.” He did not offer his hand, showing that he had some knowledge of goblin customs. “The current political environment makes it difficult to have an obvious security detail with the girls at all times. So far as Hogwarts is concerned, your only duty is to help Hermione manage her finances.”

“I assume my true duties are to ensure that she is protected, both physically and financially,” Anguish asked.

“They are,” her chief confirmed. “You have a meeting scheduled with Tonks tomorrow, who serves as the local head of security and with Ms. Jane the day after, who has been the head of Hermione's security detail since she's had a security detail.” His lips pursed. “Hermione tends not to acknowledge the fact that she even has a security detail, but will listen if told she cannot do something for her own safety. Just be sure to stress that it is important.”

“Understood.”

“Do you have any questions for me?”

“I do not, sir,” Anguish replied.

“Do not hesitate to speak with me at any time if you have any or any concerns,” her chief ordered. “Dobby!”

Anguish twitched at the appearance of the creature her cousin had spoken of. It really did appear to be nothing more than a common house elf.

“Yes, Harry Potter sir?” the still unidentified creature asked.

“This is Anguish,” her chief introduced her. “She's going to be working with the girls from now on.”

“Yes, Harry Potter sir! Dobby will be sure to bring an extra meal to Harry Potter sir's Hermy's shed for Harry Potter sir's Hermy's new worker.”

“Thank you, Dobby.” Her new chief pulled an expensive looking watch out of his pocket and checked the time. “Time for my nightly detention.”

“With Flitwick and McGonagall tonight,” her chief's aide said helpfully. “Your head of house believes it best for you to explore the potential of combining the two fields.”

“If you'll excuse me,” her chief addressed her.

“Of course,” Anguish said automatically.

“Flint.”

“Yes?”

“Escort her to the engine shed and introduce her to the girls.”

“Yes, sir.”

Anguish followed her new co-worker out of the workshop and across the school grounds to the engine shed that housed the the trains that serviced Hogwarts. They found Hermione and Luna elbows deep in the engine compartment of their new delivery vehicle.

“Got another employee here for you, Ms. Hermione,” Flint said respectfully.

"My name is Anguish, Mistress Granger," the young goblin calmly introduced herself. "The Potter has assigned me to help look after your personal finances."

"Harry said you'd be coming soon," Hermione said cheerfully. "This is Luna, we work together most of the time." She indicated her best female friend with a wave of the hand. "That's Sprocket." She indicated a goblin on the other side of the shop who looked anything but pleased to be brought to the attention of the newcomer. "He takes care of our locomotive and helps us make things. Pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine, Mistress Granger," Anguish stated, making a mental note to investigate both of the indicated individuals. It mattered not that they'd both presumably been vetted by the Granger Clan and Gringotts. They had not been vetted by her.

"Would you like something to eat?" Hermione continued. "We were just about to get something."

"Thank you, Mistress Granger, I most humbly accept," Anguish stated, pleased her primary knew enough to keep her close.

"Everyone," Hermione let her gaze sweep across the faces seated around the table. "This is Anguish, she's going to be working with us from now on." After waiting for a round of greeting, the girl then named each of the workers currently present.

"Interesting name, Anguish," the foreman commented.

"Goblins who work with or around humans typically take second names in order to make things easier for all parties." A necessary accommodation when one race lacked the vocal cords to properly pronounce the other race's language. "These names often have something to do with the goblin in question's occupation."

"That's why your name is Sprocket," Hermione said beaming at the other goblin at the table. "Did you know that, Luna?"

"I did, Hermione," Luna replied. "The Quibbler had a second page article on the subject a few years ago."

"So why did you choose Anguish?"

"It is the feeling most individuals get when they hear that I have been assigned to audit their books," she said with a toothy smile.

IIIIIIII

Sprocket did not know how to feel about the new addition to his employer's staff. On the one hand, he could certainly see the benefit to the girl's safety. On the other, it had the potential to be quite detrimental to his own. The fact that she had pulled him aside for a private discussion at the completion of the meal led to him slightly favoring the latter idea.

"Before we begin, I wish to make one thing perfectly clear," the auditor began. "I am not here to punish minor infractions or to discover imaginary sinners. I am here to protect the Mistress from all threats physical and financial. Am I clear?"

"You are," Sprocket said, almost sagging in relief.

"Good. I have chosen to speak with you on this matter because you have been thoroughly vetted and for the simple reason that you are a known quantity; you understand who I am, you understand what I am, and you understand what I am prepared to do should I deem it necessary to do my duty."

Sprocket choose silence as the best answer.

"Who is the mistress's blonde companion?"

"I refuse to break the employer's confidence," Sprocket said woodenly.

"I will give you a couple moments to contemplate exactly what you just said and who you said it to, and what I am capable of doing to you if you persist in being an obstacle," Anguish said calmly.

"I refuse to break the employer's confidence," Sprocket repeated, preparing himself for the worst.

"Wonderful." A toothy grin split Anguish's face. "It is good to see that my assessment of you was correct."

"What?"

"I am not the only one of the people coming to take a position in Mistress Granger's staff and you will soon be one of many Gringotts

trained technicians in our lady's service. Do you understand what that means?"

"There will likely be several with seniority over me," Sprocket sighed. Nothing good ever lasted, a shame as he'd grown to like helping the Employer with her projects and servicing her personal locomotive.

"That is both correct and incorrect," Anguish stated calmly. "There will likely be some that have seniority over you in the Gringotts system, but none that do in service to the Granger Clan. Something you must imprint in your mind is the fact that you hold your position because Mistress Granger desires it, you can not be moved from your position by anyone unless our lady desires it. Do you understand?"

"I do," Sprocket agreed.

"See that the new employees understand that as well. This is not Gringotts and as such, the rules and traditions of Gringotts are meaningless. This is the Granger Clan and we are in personal service to the Clan heiress, as such her desires are paramount. Do whatever you must to drive that point home and call me if you need the point driven forcefully."

"My oath," Sprocket agreed. "I will not allow any to go against the Employer's will in anything."

Anguish nodded in satisfaction. "Without betraying a single one of Mistress Granger's secrets, please tell me what you can about the Mistress's companion."

"What?" Sprocket was confused by the meeting's sudden change in tone.

"Do you need me to repeat my question?"

"Uh, no. I am unsure, but I believe the Employer has selected Ms. Luna, the blonde, to be her junior wife."

"Interesting. What about the rest of the humans here?"

"Though new to her service, I have no reason to doubt any of their loyalties to the Employer."

"Do you know or suspect potential threats in the castle or the surrounding region?"

"I've heard that there might be some in the castle, not sure who."

Sprocket took a few moments before coming to a decision. "Best ones to ask on that would be one of the Potter's arms-men or the Employer's kinsman. The shop foreman may know more."

IIIIIIII

Chapter 32

IIIIIIII

Anguish found the next person she wanted to meet in one of Hogwarts' smaller greenhouses tending what appeared to be a purple melon.

“Good afternoon,” she stated. “I am Anguish, the Granger heiress' new auditor. I wish to have a few moments of your time to meet if you can spare them.”

“Alright,” the boy agreed, not even bothering to look up from his task. “What do you need?”

It was puzzling. Her files stated the boy was a pureblood and thus should know what her title implied, yet he seemed unconcerned.

“You know what I am,” she stated calmly.

“I know what you are,” he confirmed, still intent on his work.

“You do not seem worried.”

“What me, worry?” Neville grinned, hands going still as he turned to regard the goblin. “Here? With the Peruvian mantrap I cultivated from a seed behind you. Here? With the dart throwing alder on your left, or . . . well, I think you get the idea.”

“You're sitting in the middle of a very well crafted death trap,” Anguish said, looking around. “One I lacked the knowledge of to recognize.”

“Most people wouldn't,” he laughed. The boy's hands were clean with a charm.

“What do you want in trade to help me achieve enough knowledge so that I'm not caught in a similar trap in the future?” Anguish asked intently.

“You're sworn to protect my cousin?”

“I am.”

“I'll give you the family rate,” Neville grinned. “I'd like someone to go over the family books and to help me learn enough to maintain them myself. A service for a service?”

“That is acceptable,” Anguish stated.

“Wonderful.” The boy rose to his feet and indicated that she should follow him. “I've got an area set up back here. Not much, just a place to catch a few hours of sleep if I have to be down here for a while, but it's got a table and a couple chairs so it'll be more comfortable than squatting in the dirt.”

A dozen leaf covered vines twined and wove themselves together to form the table while the chairs were crafted out of old gardening tools and earthenware planters.

“It's not much, but it works,” Neville commented as he took a seat.
“Would you like anything to eat or drink?”

“I have already eaten today, but thank you for your offer. I came to ask for your assessment on the leader of the pro-dark lord faction,” Anguish explained.

“He and the ones he hangs out with are mostly talk. I strongly suggest not getting proactive without Harry giving the go-ahead unless you become aware of an immediate threat.” The boy pursed his lips. “Scratch that, if you become aware of any kind of threat, do what you think best and I will back you to the hilt.” He laughed. “Get me and I'll heat up the irons for you and hold their feet if you want. The Longbottom family has been looking for an excuse to remove the Malfoys since the slithered in from the continent, but so far the bastards have been smart enough not to give us anything we could publicly act on.”

“Here's hoping young Draco isn't as intelligent or lucky as his fore bearers,” Anguish said with a smile that matched the one on Neville's face. Wide and hopeful.

IIIIIIII

Hermione was more than a bit surprised to find her head of house waiting in the common room when she came down that morning. Her surprise deepened when she noticed the absence of her best friend. Harry was an early riser, likely due to his damned relatives, and it was a rare occasion that he slept in.

“Mr. Potter could not get away from his project with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement this morning,” McGonagall said dryly. “They usually permit him to escape in time to meet you, but I'm afraid he may have broken another immutable law of magic and they were loath to let him go.”

“Harry has work in the morning too?” The girl's eyes narrowed.

“For quite some time, yes,” the old woman agreed. “No less than three hours every morning before class and as much time as he can spare the rest of the time.”

“When is he supposed to sleep?”

“When he sneaks off to Mr. Weasley's workshop, the one you three think we don't know about,” McGonagall answered dryly. “His aide is rather dogged in her defense of his rest time.”

“What aide?” Hermione asked flatly. The girl's lips whitened and drew into thin lines.

“Mrs. Flint.” McGonagall stated, nothing in her tone suggesting how amused she was by her favorite student's reaction. Few things were better in life than to look down on the follies of youth from the tower of experience.

“Oh.” Hermione brightened. “I see.”

“Wonderful.” Minerva choked down a laugh. “The reason I came to meet you this morning, Ms. Granger, is to inform you that you are excused from classes for the day.”

“I am?” The girl's head tilted. “May I ask why, Professor?”

“Your father has requested your presence for what he characterized as a moderately important meeting. I saw no reason to deny his request in light of the fact that you've already completed and turned in every assignment for the remainder of the year.”

“I didn't mean to inconvenience you, Professor, it's just that I don't have as much time to do assignments, what with all the time Luna and I have been spending in the engine shed, so I thought it best to get everything done early.”

“It was not a complaint, Ms. Granger.”

“Yes, Professor.”

Minerva escorted the girl to the front entrance where they were met by a dozen armsmen and two dangerous looking goblins.

“Anguish, Sprocket,” Hermione said with a wide smile. The girl turned to the humans and reddened. “I am sorry, but I'm afraid that I cannot recall your names at this time. Please excuse my rudeness.”

“Flint,” the woman at the head of the group. “I'm normally assigned to work with Harry so we haven't met more than once or twice. Rest of the

group is new so there's no reason you should know any of them either so don't worry about it.”

“Still.” Hermione bit her lower lip. To the girl, it was absolutely unconscionable that she did not know at least the names of the staff assigned to her. She'd been raised to think of the people who kept her world running as members of her family, that she had allowed her other interests to distract her to the point that she did not know such a simple thing was, and would remain a source of shame. No matter what Harry's aide said.

“If you wish, I shall procure dossiers on every employee with pictures and personal information so that this does not happen to you again,” Anguish said calmly.

“Thank you, Anguish, that will be quite helpful,” Hermione chirped, her earlier good cheer returning. Making a mental note to spend the next dozen nights memorizing them if necessary. “What are you all doing here?”

Anguish nodded for Sprocket to go first.

“Just came to report that the new goblins should be arriving later today and that living areas and workspaces have been prepared.”

“Thank you, Sprocket. Could you help the shop foreman and Luna get them settled in?”

“Of course, Mistress,” Sprocket replied, bowing low. It was a great honor to be trusted with the clan's voice, even for so small a task. He silently vowed that he would not disappoint.

“Harry told the rest of us to make sure you got to your meeting safely,” Flint spoke up. “You know how he worries.”

“He also suggested that you might appreciate a few extra hands around in case you had a chance to go book shopping,” one of the new men stated with a perfectly straight face.

Hermione giggled. “You too, Anguish?”

“The Potter has ordered me to stay close to you every time you leave the protection of the castle,” Anguish stated. And to keep the girl safe by any means necessary. The exact words he'd used were; 'I don't care if you need to make a mountain of corpses so long as Hermione stays safe.' A very goblin like statement, she'd thought approvingly at the time. It, more than anything, had confirmed that she had made the right choice when she joined his war-band.

“Yer da also suggested she come along,” Flint added. “Said it would be to your benefit to have your accountant on hand unless you had all your financial information memorized.”

“Okay,” Hermione agreed. “Shall we?”

Flint pulled two lengths of chain out of her pocket “Way we're doing this is we're going to split into two groups, first group goes ahead and

the second group follows after we get an all clear. You're in the second group, Ms. Hermione.”

“Just like with the cars.” Hermione nodded.

“And for similar reasons,” Flint agreed. “Anguish?”

“I shall be in the Mistress' group,” the goblin stated firmly.

“Group one,” Flint ordered. The woman pulled what looked like a makeup compact out of her pocket and stared at the mirror. “Group one's clear. Everyone grab the chain and we're off in three . . . two . . . one.”

They arrived in what Hermione recognized as a hallway outside one of the private meeting rooms in her father's private club.

“Nice place,” Flint commented, eyeing the wood paneling and the intricate Persian carpets that likely cost more than she made in a year.

“The food is quite good as well,” Hermione replied cheerfully. “Be sure to have them send something up for you so you can try it.”

The door opened to reveal her father's driver. The man's right hand was in the right pocket of his grey sport cut, his flat expression cracked and he shot her a quick grin before his face went expressionless.

“Six three one penguin,” Flint said carefully.

“Five fifty star fix,” he replied calmly.

“We're clear,” Flint announced, causing a number of nervous wands to relax a touch.

“You can go in, Ms. Hermione,” her father's driver said respectfully.

“After we've had a chance to sweep the room,” Flint said firmly.

“So long as you understand that this meeting is private,” the man replied firmly.

“Harry said to do what you said,” Flint said to Hermione. “Well?”

“Yes, of course.” Hermione nodded. “James, be sure they get something to eat while I'm talking with daddy.”

At Flint's nod, three of the guards walked into the room and carefully cast every detection charm they knew. Three more swept the room for listening devices and secret passages the mundane way.

“Yes, Ms. Hermione,” the man said indulgently. “Something for yourself as well?”

“Yes, but it can wait until after we've gone through whatever daddy called me here to talk about.”

“Of course, Ms. Hermione.”

“You may go in, Ms. Hermione,” James announced upon getting the nod from Flint, after her people vacated the room.

Hermione's father was seated in a rich leather chair. With a smile, the man rose to his feet and engulfed her with his arms.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, darling. I suppose you're wondering why I called you here.” He nodded over her head for his driver to close the door and take his customary post.

“What is it, daddy?” Hermione asked.

He smiled. “You have the opportunity to purchase a repair yard for steam engines. Should you?”

Hermione opened her mouth to give an affirmative and closed it abruptly. “I don't know.”

“You don't know?”

“I'd need more information before I could decide,” the girl admitted.

“How much is it, where is it, what condition is it in, how much would it take to maintain it, how much would it take to get it into the condition I need it to be in, how much can I afford to spend now, how much can I afford to spend on an ongoing basis, how much can I expect it to bring me. Did . . . did I miss anything, daddy?” The girl began chewing on her lower lip.

“Perhaps.” His smile deepened. “Should you consider buying it on credit?”

“No,” she answered immediately.

“Why not?”

“We are Grangers. We are not borrowers or lenders.”

“Not directly anyway, we do own portions of banks and banks do make loans, for example.”

“We own portions of businesses that make loans. We do not,” Hermione said firmly.

“Alright, what about asking the public to make donations to restore and preserve a historical building?”

“We are Grangers,” the girl said, sounding more confident. “We do not ask for money with our hats in our hand. We may give to worthy causes, we do not ask others to give for our benefit.”

“What about asking a business partner?”

Hermione frowned. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“It depends on the partner,” Hermione stated.

“Oh?” He gestured for her to continue.

“Is it someone I already have a long term relationship with? If not, is it someone I can build a long term relationship with? Will this deal benefit us both? Is there a chance this deal could harm our relationship?”

“Alright.” He nodded to his driver. “All the information you need should be in that folder. Tell me if there is anything else you would like to know.”

Hermione took several minutes to go through the paperwork and a few more to do a bit of mental arithmetic.

“Well?”

“I'm not sure, daddy,” Hermione admitted.

“Why not?”

“I don't know if my finances will allow it,” Hermione explained.

“Why not?” he repeated himself.

“Because I have people who take care of that for me, daddy,” Hermione replied with a smile, feeling a bit more confident.

“Harry?” He did his best to stay impassive.

“Is one of them,” Hermione allowed. “The other is Anguish.”

“I'm not sure I've had the pleasure.”

“She's the one who came to the meeting with me, daddy.”

“The one waiting outside?”

“Yes, daddy.”

“You may ask her three questions,” Phil allowed.

Hermione suppressed a grin. They'd played the same game since she was a young child, the earliest version had been something along the lines of 'ask three questions and tell me what animal I'm thinking of.' The amount of information she was given had grown in complexity and the number of questions she was allowed varied, but it remained the same game she'd played all her life.

With a giggle, the girl pulled a piece of parchment out of one pocket and a quill out of another and wrote three short sentences. “Done.”

“May I?” Phil held out his hand. It only took a moment to read the questions, the man handed the parchment back without a hint to show how pleased he was by what he'd read. “Alright, darling.”

Hermione rose to her feet and walked to the door. Phil privately noted how adorable she looked as she switched from dutiful daughter to part time businesswoman. A shame he couldn't have cameras in the room, hopefully one of the ones in the hall was able to get something suitable to be framed.

The girl opened the door and handed the parchment through the doorway to her employee who made a few notations before handing it back. It was clear from the expression on her face that she'd answered his question before she'd retaken her seat.

“Well?”

“It may be a good move for me to buy this property if I could partner up with the Greengrass/Davis families and or with Harry. It would be a risk, but not a large one.”

“So you're going to buy it?”

“No, daddy.”

“Why not?”

“Because the risk is fairly low, it is still too high,” Hermione sighed. “I could survive a loss, Tracy and Daphne's family couldn't. Ruining them would ruin what promises to be a long term relationship between us as individuals and possibly family to family. The possible rewards aren't worth that.”

“And Harry?”

“I'm not sure,” Hermione admitted. “Harry has his fingers in so many pies that it's hard to know exactly what he has available or what he could afford to lose.”

“Good job, darling.”

“Was this a test?”

“Life is a test, darling. One of my duties as your father is to prepare you for it.”

“Okay, daddy.”

“If you had chosen to buy this property, I'd have waited to see if you were able to keep your company from going bankrupt.”

“And if I hadn't been?”

“Failure is part of the learning process, darling. Since you didn't, I'm going to make an offer.”

“What kind of offer, daddy?”

“I'll use the family money to purchase it along with a couple other properties and I will pay for them to be brought up to your standards. In return, a portion of your business will belong to the family as a whole rather than you individually.”

“What percentage were you thinking about?”

He smiled. “What percentage should I be asking for?”

“The most you think you can get,” Hermione chirped.

“And what percentage will you be offering?”

“The least I think you'll take.”

“That's my girl,” he said proudly.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 33

IIIIIIII

Snape eyed the Potter as the boy entered into his class. The others, the fools from the Ministry, were still invading his domain, limiting what he could do to get some of his own back from the man who'd stolen everything from him. The Potions Master suppressed a sneer as he watched the intruders cluster around the Longbottom, the biggest failure in class, a near squib. Better than wasting their time with the Potter, but only just. Damn them for their presence, damn them for interfering with his vengeance, damn them for being walking insults to his craft!

IIIIIIII

Hermione was on cloud nine when she skipped into the Engine shed. The results of her afternoon meeting meant she now had the ability to build new engines rather than just maintain the ones she already had. It was starting to feel as if nothing was beyond her reach, that the future was within her grasp.

“Anguish, I have some papers I would like you to look over,” she stated cheerfully.

“Of course, Mistress,” the goblin agreed.

The girl nodded to one of the guards who handed her a leather document case and then carefully removed a sheaf of papers. “I know daddy put in several embarrassing clauses, I do not know that I found all of them.”

“Mistress?” the goblin took the contract, visibly confused by what the girl had told her. It was inconceivable that a clan leader would seek advantage over their heir unless they had some reason to suspect that their heir was attempting to take their position early.

“Daddy says that I can't always rely on lawyers so he expects me to know how to read a contract myself. I was able to find three clauses already, the first stated that I agreed to wear a maid costume every day of our next vacation, the second stated that I would serve him and mummy breakfast in bed every morning of my next holiday at home, the third stated that -” the girl blushed a deep red. “-that I would do something that isn't germane to this conversation. Daddy awarded me an additional two percent of Granger Steelworks for every clause I caught, but he was much too pleased with himself when I agreed to his terms to have caught every one of them.”

Anguish nodded internally, a training exercise then. That changed things considerably. “Granger Steelworks, Mistress?”

“The family has decided to reopen Ravenscraig, agreeing to give the speech at the opening ceremonies and at the opening ceremonies of several other acquisitions netted me an additional four percent for my company.”

“I see.” Anguish nodded. “I will find what other traps your father left for you to trip, Mistress. Though it may be too late to avoid them, we can at least prepare ourselves.”

“Thank you, Anguish. Sprocket!”

“Coming, Mistress!” the goblin replied, approaching at a dead run. The goblin skidded to a perfect stop just out of arms reach. “How may I serve you, Mistress?”

“Have the new workers been settled?”

“They have, Mistress,” Sprocket agreed.

“Would it be convenient for me to meet them after we are finished here?”

“They are ready to meet you at any time, Mistress, day or night.”

“Thank you, Sprocket. So you know, we will be taking possession of a foundry, a forge, and a small factory. We will be responsible for their maintenance and will be able to use them but they, along with the coal mine, will be spun off into a separate entity under my direct control. Expect that more facilities will be added later. We will also be taking possession of an engine repair facility, a ship yard, three scrap yards, no less than a dozen engines with funding to put them in working order, and several hectares of land.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“The new facilities under my direct control are not required or even expected to make any money. We may use them for our projects, or we may let them lay fallow. We need to get them in a working state quickly and we need not spare any expense getting them there.” Hermione sighed. “I'm afraid we will have to be a bit slower and more mindful of costs for everything else. Do you understand, Sprocket?”

“I understand your orders, Mistress,” the goblin said carefully.

“Why are you taking possession of several properties that may be drains on your finances, Mistress?” Anguish asked, looking up from the contract she'd been examining.

“They're tax write offs for the family,” Hermione explained. “Taking a small loss on them means we pay less on taxes from other income. Managing them is another of daddy's tricks to make me spend more time on business and less time having fun. He knew I couldn't resist making them mine,” the girl sighed.

“As you say, Mistress,” Anguish stated.

“I'll show you the relevant parts of the law later,” Hermione promised. “Sprocket, could you let the new workers know that we're going to start doing the initial surveys of the new properties tomorrow? I'll be in to meet them and give them the details after we finish here.”

“Of course, Mistress!” the goblin spun on his heels and marched back to the group.

“I believe that I have found something, Mistress,” Anguish reported.

“How bad is it?” Hermione braced herself.

“It states that you agree to wear clothing deemed appropriate by your mother every time you open a new facility and that you agree to open any facility that is to be under your direct control and any company in which at least two percent of the stock is owned by you personally or by a company under your direct control. In return you will be personally awarded one percent of the new company's stock, unless it is already under your direct control, and in return for acting as your mother's proxy, the Potter will be awarded one half of a percent of the company's stock.”

“I noticed that, Anguish, it's why it states that Harry gets one half of a percent for acting as mother's proxy. Daddy's been taking advantage of his good nature to have him do it for free and I will not have it. I told daddy that I expected Harry to be compensated for his time and daddy agreed.”

Enthusiastically, the man was tremendously pleased to have a chance to deepen ties with his daughter's friend. “Daddy and I also have an agreement to make that clause retroactive which will give Harry a half percent of the coal mine.”

“I see. I will continue my search, Mistress.” It didn't take Anguish long to find another potentially embarrassing clause. “It states here that you agree to restore any motor vehicles older than nineteen seventy and to offer your father first refusal at ten percent below market.”

“What?” The girl's eyes narrowed. “Where?”

“It is burred rather well, mistress. This section here states that you will restore any historical vehicles, this clause here states that the term historic will mean any vehicle made before the year nineteen seventy and that you will grant your father the right of first refusal for any sales of restored vehicles.”

“Where does it give him a discount?”

“Near the end when you agree to a ten percent discount for any member of the family for goods and services.”

“I knew it!” Hermione exclaimed, a frown forming. “I knew daddy'd slipped something else in.”

“If you knew, why did you sign, Mistress?”

“Because that's one of the rules,” Hermione explained. “Don't worry, I'd have never signed this if it hadn't come from daddy unless you and a dozen or so lawyers had cleared it first.”

“I am relieved to hear that, Mistress. Do you already have a legal team or is that something I should look into acquiring?”

“I've been using daddy's, but see if it would make sense to put our own on retainer or if it would get our own in house team.”

“I shall do so, Mistress.”

“Thank you, Anguish.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione's uncle strolled through the halls of his club and down the stairs to his boss' office without, uncharacteristically, a pause to flirt with the woman in the front office.

“Why yes, James,” Charlie stated after his best agent stormed into his office. “I can spare a few minutes. What can I do for you.”

“I haven't gotten a field assignment in months,” Hermione's Uncle said flatly. “Double O eight took the last assignment that was supposed to go to me.”

“And six before that,” Charlie agreed. “We've decided that it would be best to keep you close to home for the time being.”

“Why?”

“There have been suggestions that you're overdue for a promotion,” Charlie stated. “And more than one comment that it is high time you grew up and took your place in society.”

“Is my sister behind this?”

“A whisper or two,” Charlie allowed. “I suspect most of the push is coming from your brother in law. I believe, and this is just speculation, that he is arranging things so that your niece will be able to take a seat in the house of commons if she so desires.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The fact that she's the public face of the mine reopening and will be the public face when they reopen the steelworks.” Charlie offered his best agent a cigar. “She'll be the Prime Minister before she's thirty at the rate things are going.”

“Something being my heir could compromise if things go as they did with the majority of my predecessors.” Jim lit his cigar. “I knew Phil was a bastard.”

Charlie snorted. “You have no idea.”

“Enlighten me.”

“We became aware of a plot against your sister and her child shortly after Hermione's birth,” Charlie began. “I was ordered to inform your brother in law.”

“What sort of plot?”

“A dash of political due to your father and several more of economic. The Granger family does its best to stay out of the public eye, but it is not difficult to see that they are a family of means.” Charlie took a sip of gin. “So I arranged to meet with the man and to tell him everything we were willing to admit to knowing.” Charlie grinned. “First thing he did was ask me to be the girl's godfather, told me he wanted me to have a personal interest in her safety.”

Hermione's Uncle laughed in delight.

“Second thing he did was to triple security. We didn't find out about the third thing until a bit later.”

“Oh?”

“Within twenty four hours every one of the blighters in a position of power received a personalized photo album containing pictures of their family, friends, neighbors, and pets along with a handwritten note hoping that their loved ones stay as healthy as his own. Within forty eight everyone on the second level got one. Seventy two got the third. We never did find out if it went further than that.

Two years later we got wind of another plot against your sister. One of our informants tipped us as to why a trio of men had been dumped off a fishing boat thirty miles off the western coast on orders from the other side. To the best of our knowledge, there has never been a third plot against any member of the Granger family.”

Charlie shook his head. “Haven't been able to confirm it, but we believe he had a conditional hit out on his sister in law. Anything happened to him and your sister, and she would have followed them within a day. The orders we to do anything to prevent her from attaining guardianship of your niece. If anything happened to your nice.” Charlie paused to pour a drink. “Well, there are some things one does not speak of in the company of those with sensitive dispositions. Believe me, James, it was ugly what he had planned.”

With a wide grin, Hermione's Uncle Jim poured himself a drink, quite pleased to learn that his sister had chosen so well.

IIIIIIII

Filius was in a rather jocular mood when he got to breakfast the next morning having just received a bit of information that would be perfect for teasing one of his colleagues with.

"Did you know that there's no rule stating that you can't appoint prefects from other houses?" Flitwick asked with a grin. "Course, it means the automatic transfer of the newly named Prefect to the appointing house."

"Over your dead body ye wee bastard," McGonagall replied flatly. "He's mine and what I have I keep."

"Just an interesting bit of trivia and a new source of motivation for my current batch of prefects," Flitwick assured his colleague. "You know I'd never dream of stealing your best students from you, Minerva."

"Not unless you thought you could get away with it anyway," McGonagall stated, giving the man a suspicious glare.

"You know he's just winding you up, Minerva," Sprout laughed. "Calm down and let me be the first to commend you on how loyal your students are to their friends in other houses." She turned to the charms professor. "Incidentally, did your research reveal if a prefect could be appointed if they're already serving as a prefect for another house?"

"Nay chance of letting yeh get yer hooks inta one a'mine either, yeh bloody badger," Minerva said firmly.

IIIIIIII

Anne was somewhat annoyed by how little attention her husband was paying her at breakfast the next morning. It was always more than a bit aggravating to be temporarily widowed by matters of business or state.

"No business at the table," she said after it had become clear that he wasn't going to rejoin the world any time soon.

"Hmmm?"

"Neglecting one's family to slightly increase one's chances of making a bit of pocket money is exactly the sort of behavior one expects from the low commercial class," she sniffed.

"Good one, darling," he said with a grin. "But I'm afraid you've unjustly accused me this time. Please don't worry, I can't blame you for failing to rise above your roots or join the modern age in which paltry things like evidence of wrong doing is required before making charging one with a crime."

"Oh?"

"Personal. It seems Hermione was correct when she stated her acquisition of the Hogwarts Express was a sound business decision. She's been approached by her main potential competitor with an offer to merge."

"What does Harry say about it?" She grinned in response to her husband's pout. "Or did our daughter not immediately ask for his opinion?"

"She did of course, but you weren't supposed to just flat out ask. You were supposed to pretend you didn't know until I proudly announced that he sent his own report along and . . . oh never mind."

"Did I ever tell you what your former sister in law had to say about your love for the dramatic?"

"I imagine it was just as worth hearing as everything else she said," he said blandly.

"It was," his wife agreed. "You were, however, supposed to pretend you didn't know so that I could reveal the fact that she saw it as yet more evidence of your preference for other men."

"And yet another reason she gave for you to divorce me before we could produce an heir that would make it even harder for her to get her hooks into the family money," he finished.

"She didn't put it quite that bluntly," Anne giggled. "Stating that if I really loved you, I'd leave you and help you come to terms with who you were so that you could be happy. I believe that she thought she was being subtle and, if one is to be honest, I am quite surprised she was able to think up that much."

"Greed has a way of helping some people overcome their natural limitations," Phil said with an unconcerned shrug. "She's rather fortunate she didn't decide to go further than that."

"Oh?"

"Contingencies were in place, darling, in case she decided to take a more active role in removing obstacles. But we're getting off track."

"We are," Anne agreed. "What did Harry have to say?"

"He advised us to offer them ten percent more than they want with a clause stating that we can take it back for a number of reasons plus a further twenty. Flint, one of Tonks' people, suggests that we ignore his advice and lists a number of reasons why following it would be a very bad idea."

"Oh?"

"Has to do with magical culture. She states that the Greengrass/Davis clan would likely take it since we have them over a barrel, but that it would leave a bad taste in their mouth which would cause trouble later. She suggests dealing fair even if it does cost us some concessions we could likely gain and that we be sure to include groundwork to make a potential future severing of our business relationship as easy as possible."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to send this to Harry with a note asking what he thinks of this," Phil said honestly. "Flint said that Harry's idea is a good one providing we wish to subjugate the other two families and leverage ourselves into pureblood society once Hermione becomes head of the family. She added that there are better stepping stones if that is our intention."

"Is it?"

"I don't believe so, but of course one must always remember to keep one's options open."

"And that's what had you so distracted?"

"That and a note Hermione and Luna sent along," he replied.

"What was in the note?"

"Our daughter wishes to know if anyone has ever made a steam powered car, and requests that I send along any plans if the answer is yes."

"Is it?"

"Several times over," Phil replied with a grin.

"So you were distracted by the thought of all the cars you were going to have to add to your collection and the fact that you can probably get our daughter to maintain them for you," Anne asked with a raised eyebrow. "The thought that our daughter might do an honest day's work in her life, especially in, gasp, one of the trades."

"Console yourself with the thought of your great uncle's wildly impractical garden and all the work in it that he insisted on doing himself."

"The difference there is that his hobby cost the family quite a bit of money, whereas our daughter's threatens to make it. The shame, the scandal that one of my blood could do such a thing."

"Just goes to show that your step mother was correct when she said my blood would dilute yours."

"Perish the thought that, that harpy would be correct about anything." Anne giggled. "Nothing for it but to give Hermione more pocket money and with instructions that she wastes it on something frivolous."

"I suppose one can hope this will be one of the times she decides to listen."

IIIIIIII

Sprocket awoke at his usual time that morning and got to work with the dawn's early light with the other men in his employer's new business enterprise. The goblin was unsurprised when the shop foreman waved him over the minute the man arrived.

"You're the new man so I want you to stick with me this morning so I can get a good idea of what you're capable of. Doesn't mean I don't trust you or don't think your skills are up to par, just that I need to see 'em for myself before I can best place you."

"That is reasonable," Sprocket allowed.

"Glad 'ye agree," the corner's of the foreman's mustache twitched upwards. "Why don't 'ye start by checkin over the saddle tank. Safe bet the girls are gonna be all over it the minute the get down here."

"Yes, foreman," Sprocket said respectfully.

The foreman didn't say a word, seemingly content to just watch and occasionally assist when needed while Sprocket went about his duties. Something similar would have never occurred at Gringotts, no higher ranked goblin would ever give up the privilege of work to one of his subordinates. Still, different didn't mean better or worse, just different, Sprocket reminded himself.

"Good job," the foreman broke his silence as the job came to a close.
"Very good job."

Sprocket stayed silent, unsure of the correct protocol to deal with the situation among humans.

"Makes my decision a whole lot easier anyway," the forman mumbled to himself.

Sprocket took that as a hopeful sign.

"Thing is, we don't need anymore men in the regular crews and bringing in someone new would risk ruining a level of teamwork we've spent years building."

The goblin's sphincter clenched.

"So what I'd like to propose is that I assign you to this engine and as a general assistant to the girls."

"I would be responsible for the maintenance of the employer's personal locomotive?" Sprocket asked intently, wanting to be sure he wasn't misunderstanding.

"And to whatever other projects the girls decided to work on," the foreman agreed. "Quickly as things have been moving, I wouldn't be surprised to see you with your own crew and a dozen more engines to take care of afore the year is out. Don't hesitate to sing out if you need a hand or twelve till that happens."

"I will not permit pride to sabotage the chance you have given me, foreman, you have my word on that," Sprocket said seriously. To be given responsibility for a piece of equipment was enough to have made him deliriously happy, but to be given charge of the chief's personal engine? Sprocket would cut his throat rather than live to face the shame of failure.

IIIIIIII

Flint was overcome by a sense of nostalgia as she walked through the gates of her alma mater for the first time in over a decade. The faces may have changed but everything else was just as she remembered it. The sights, the sounds, the sense of tension every time one group got too close to another consisting of a rival house. Far as she was concerned the

only things good about the rotten place was the fact that it had given her an excuse to spend the majority of the year away from her family and the fact that it had been where she'd met her husband. Everything else could go hang.

As the woman continued towards the castle, she was pleasantly surprised to encounter her charge. "Miss Hermione," Flint called out cheerfully. "Just the girl I was hoping to see."

"Oh?" Hermione cocked her head.

"Passing on a message from your father and delivering a package with it," she explained as she pulled out an envelope that looked at least a hundred times too large to fit into her pocket. "Message is as follows; the answer is yes and here are some technical drawings on the best of 'em. I'll try to get you some better plans for it and the rest. All else fails, I'll just buy a few examples and you can come home for the odd weekend to go through them yourself."

"Really?" her charge's blonde shadow asked brightly. "Do you think it would be possible to look over examples ourselves even if he manages to get plans for us?"

"Probably," her charge replied. Hermione daintily accepted the envelope, automatically passing it to her shadow as she continued speaking. "Please thank daddy for me and please pass on Luna's request with it."

"I will, Miss Hermione," Flint agreed. "That business settled, you know where that boy of yours might be?"

"Boy?" Hermione asked with a confused frown.

"Mr. Potter," Flint prompted.

"Harry's either hiding in an unused classroom somewhere or hanging out with Ron in Ron's wood shop," Hermione stated confidently. "Ron's wood shop is next to the Quidditch equipment room across from Hooch's office. If Harry isn't there, go to the kitchens and tell Dobby that you need to find him."

"Why would he be hiding?" Flint asked.

"He figures the Professors will be finishing their write ups soon and will have time to investigate his mistakes again," Hermione explained.

Flint and the girls exchanged a few more pleasantries before going on with her mission. She had a national hero to find.

IIIIIIII

Ron didn't bother to look up from his work when the woman entered. Wasn't anyone in the world important enough to risk making a mistake and very few important enough to warrant delaying his current project.

"Harry Potter here?" the woman asked.

Ah, Ron thought to himself, looked like the first researcher had arrived to pester his friend for another project. "Nope."

"Damn," the woman sighed. "Don't suppose you know where he is, do you?"

"Afraid not," the boy said absently as he eyeballed the curve of his latest creation. "But I'd be happy to tell him that you're looking for him. Who are you again?"

"My name's Flint," she replied. "I got a message I need to give him."

"Any relation to Marcus Flint?"

"Not since I got tossed out of the family," she said, grin widening.

That bit of news did cause Ron's hands to still as the boy wrested his attention away from the project and up to make eye contact. "Who's the message from and why are you delivering it?"

"Message is from Phil Granger, I'm delivering it because I'm one of the Potter Security Contractors assigned to his daughter's detail."

"Phil Granger?" Ron pushed aside his confusion at the words 'Potter Security' and ignored the ones he didn't know with the ease of long practice. "Oi, Harry, got someone here to speak with you!"

A head appeared over a stack of loose wood and two bleary sleep deprived eyes regarded Flint from under a mop of messy black hair. "You work for Tonks," the boy said with a yawn. "What can I do for you?"

"I work for you," she corrected. "Name's Flint. Phil Granger wanted me to pass on a message and to have a talk with you after that."

"Mind if we put up some security charms, Ron?"

"No problem, Harry."

"What's the message?" Harry asked the minute the charms went up.

"Phil's not going to go with your suggestion and I'm here to explain why, and, with your permission to keep myself available to assist you with similar issues in the future," Flint replied. She was there on Tonks' orders who had given them at the strong suggestion of the Chief of Magical Law Enforcement who had also strongly suggested that her new boss might need someone to help him with pureblood issues and general administration. From housewife to aide to the most powerful wizard in the country. She was going up in the world Flint reflected to herself.

"Okay," Harry prompted.

"Your idea would be great if what you wanted to do was to force the Greengrass and Davis families to submit to the Granger family, which is a fairly standard way of leveraging a new-blood family into pureblood society. Problem with it is that you didn't take the people involved into account, see, thing is that the heads of both families are mean bastards in a fight. They'd smile and go along with it while measuring your back for a dagger." Metaphorical, literal or both. Whichever they thought they could get away with. "On the other hand, they also have the reputation for dealing fair."

"Alright," Harry agreed. "Why would . . ." he trailed off as his sleep addled mind made a few connections. "Never mind. Why are you here to explain things in person?"

"Some things are best delivered in person," Flint said, grin deepening. "Good example of that is the second half of our conversation."

"Which consists of?"

"Me giving you a list of families that are ripe for the taking and unlikely to be able to successfully retaliate along with a few suggestions on how one might accomplish that. My former's at the top of the list."

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna somehow managed to keep themselves from tearing over the envelope until after they got to the engine shed and a table to lay out the plans. What followed was two hours of pouring over technical drawings until both girls jointly decided that they were ready to construct their first prototype.

Sprocket, who'd been holding himself silently ready, took that as his cue to step forward with an offer to fetch one of the girl's craftsmen to aid in the project. He didn't get the chance.

"How good a machinist are you, Sprocket?" Hermione asked the moment the goblin left the safety of the shadows.

"I am qualified to make every part needed," he replied.

"Great." Hermione grinned at him. "Are you busy with anything right now?"

"I am not," Sprocket stated calmly.

"Okay, do you have time to help us make a few things?"

"Make?" the goblin asked dumbly, sure that there'd been some mistake.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed. "Daddy sent a few technical drawings for a . . . what's it called, Luna?"

"Doble Steam Engine," the blonde supplied.

"Thank you, Luna," Hermione nodded to her friend. "So we were going to make a prototype to see if we understood how it's supposed to work. Do you have time to help us?"

Blood pounded in his ears as Sprocket's knees buckled. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, the opportunity he was being given, the chance to aid in the creation of an entirely new device.

"Are you alright?" he found himself looking into the concerned eyes of his employer's blonde companion.

"I am," the goblin said shakily. "Just overcome with emotion. It's a great honor to be given the chance of becoming a crafter of new devices, one I've always aspired to but never thought I'd receive for at least several decades." Upon seeing the girls' confusion, he decided to elaborate. "Had I remained with Gringotts, it was likely that I'd spend at least

twenty more years as a technician before I had an opportunity to become a foreman and another several decades after that before I could become a junior craftsman."

"It's that difficult?" Hermione asked.

"Honors so great are seldom easy to achieve," Sprocket stated. "Even that would only be a stepping stone to achieving my dream of becoming a master craftsman, one who's works could never be sold."

"Why can't a master craftsman sell his things?"

"An item made by a goblin master craftsman belongs to the clan. We believe that once a goblin artisan has reached their peak, they stop acting as an individual and become a living treasure of the goblin race as a whole. Master craftsmen produces objects of such quality and beauty that they must be preserved so that future generations can marvel at them and use them as inspiration to achieve even greater levels."

"It's like the family money," Hermione exclaimed, eyes lighting in understanding. "Daddy controls it, but it doesn't belong to any one person, it belongs to the Granger family as a whole, even-no, especially the members of it that haven't been born yet."

"That is remarkably similar," the goblin agreed, surprised at the human. "I was unaware that there were humans that took such a view."

Sprocket spent the remainder of the day with his employer's latest project, managing to produce a working model shortly before the sun went down and his employer was forced to return to her quarters. After

that, he spent another hour cleaning and ordering the work area before returning to Gringotts for a matter that could result in his messy death.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth had retired for the day when a messenger informed him that the goblin he'd 'encouraged' to seek employment with the Granger Heiress had returned to Gringotts and was demanding an audience. With a sigh, he signaled for the junior goblin to be shown in. Either it really was important enough to disturb him or he'd get the pleasure of destroying someone who should never should have been permitted to live past adolescence. Both were worth missing a bit of sleep.

Hooktooth's face was impassive as the junior goblin came in. "Well?"

"I am here to convey my thanks for your suggestion that I seek a position with the Granger Heiress's transport firm," Sprocket said.

"And?" the senior goblin prompted in a tone of voice that informed the other goblin that there had better be more.

"I was hoping you could clarify something for me." Sprocket licked his lips. "I understand that I will suffer an unpleasant death if I were foolish enough to attempt to sell business secrets."

"Or do anything that could potentially jeopardize Gringotts' relationship with her family," Hooktooth said impatiently.

"I would like to know what would happen if I were to share non-privileged background information?"

"Such as?"

"The Heiress made a very profound statement about her family, one very goblin like," Sprocket said carefully. "It seemed like the sort of thing senior management should be aware of even at the cost of jeopardizing my life or future career prospects."

Hooktooth considered the matter. "Speak."

"She stated that her father controls but does not possess the Granger fortune, that it belongs to every Granger, especially those yet to be born," Sprocket stated.

Hooktooth rocked back on his heels, claws twitching in astonishment. "Y-you were correct to bring this to me. Be sure to pass along any future information of this type so long as you do not believe it will annoy or anger the Heiress or her family." He was shocked beyond measure that any human would hold such ideals.

"Though the Granger Heiress owns my loyalty, I do not forget where I came from," Sprocket replied. "So long as it harms her none, I will do my best for the clan. So long as the clan stands with her, I stand with the clan."

IIIIIIII

Harry tried valiantly to think of a reason why McGonagall might have demanded his presence on what was supposed to be one of his days off.

A quick mental check didn't remind him of any transfiguration mistakes, so why?

He reached her door and raised his hand to knock.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," his head of house's voice demanded.

With a resigned sigh, Harry opened the door.

"Close it behind you and take a seat, Mr. Potter," McGonagall ordered.

"What's this about, Professor?"

"Are you aware of the fact that we have certain wards around the school to detect the arrival of certain items which are deemed contraband by school regulations?"

"I was not, Professor," Harry replied. Answered a few questions though, almost as many as it brought to mind.

"Would you care to explain why your owl arrived this morning with nearly an eighth of a stone of cured tobacco products and five gills of grain alcohol?"

Harry's face went blank for a moment. "Ah. Sorry about that, Professor, I forgot I ordered it."

"Well?" she asked a touch shortly.

"It's for my meeting with the goblins," Harry explained. "Apparently cigars are considered a delicacy."

"And the alcohol?"

"Navy gin for the client on who's behalf I'm meeting the goblins," Harry said. "Sorry, Professor, it was all supposed to have been delivered to Madam Rosmerta to hold for me since I'm using one of her private rooms to conduct business."

"You're saying your owl delivered it to the wrong place?" Minerva asked a touch calmer, raising an eyebrow.

"She doesn't like delivering anything with my name on it to anyone that's not me, Professor," Harry explained with a shrug. "I thought I'd gotten through to her this time."

"You couldn't have used one of the delivery owls?"

"She likes that even less, Professor." Harry snorted. "She's unfortunately prone to using violence to express her displeasure. It's easier on me and the delivery owls to use her for everything."

"One of the hazards of having an exceptionally loyal and intelligent owl I suppose," Minerva chuckled. "Thank you for explaining things to me, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you for assuming I had an innocent reason, Professor," Harry replied. "Will that be all?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Potter."

"Professor?"

"Having one bottle of one thing on hand for guests is not nearly enough if you're going to continue conducting business meetings, Mr. Potter and I'm afraid you cannot trust the Three Broomsticks' bar to make up for it."

"Professor?"

"Do you have a quill and piece of parchment handy?" The old woman sighed. "You'll also need to set aside a bit of time each day for a few lessons on proper appreciation of the water of life. I think after our usual sessions would be the best time for it. Do you agree, Mr. Potter?"

"Do I have a choice, Professor?"

"You do not, Mr. Potter."

"In that case, I most gratefully agree, Professor."

"I thought you might, Mr. Potter."

IIIIIIII

Septima Vector was completely enthralled by the device she'd been shown by the young misses Granger and Lovegood, mind swirling with an odd mix of horror and wonder. Horror that she'd lived so much of her life without knowing that it existed, wonder that it did and that she might some day own one of her own.

"What did you say this was called?" the woman asked carefully.

"A Curta calculator, Professor," Hermione replied.

The Professor put the precious device down so as to minimize the risk of dropping it due to how hard her hands were trembling.

"Can . . ." She licked her lips. "Is there any chance you could get another of these?"

"Sure, Professor," Hermione agreed with a shrug. "You can have that one if you want it, Professor. It's one of the ones daddy sent for me and Luna to take apart."

"One of . . . just how many of these . . . these wonderful devices do you have, Ms. Granger?" Vector asked intently.

"I don't know, Professor," Hermione shrugged. "If it's not enough, Sprocket said he could make more for us."

"Sprocket?"

"He's the goblin that works on my engine," the girl explained. "He was able to repair that one so I think there's a good chance he can do it."

"I see." She slowed her heartbeat by force of will.

"It's the reason we came here to consult with you, Professor," Luna spoke for the first time. "We were hoping you'd have some suggestions on how to modify it to make it better suited to doing arithmancy."

IIIIIIII

The senior goblin leaned back in his chair as Hooktooth entered the office. He was beginning to look forward to hearing his subordinate's reports, they gave him the feeling that they were on the edge of something great.

"I am not going to waste time with threats, I do not wish you to waste time with platitudes. Report." Enjoyment or not, it was never a good idea to let a junior be too sure of their position lest they become idle.

"The goblin we sent to assist the Granger heiress brought me something of tremendous importance," Hooktooth said breathlessly.

"I thought I told you to skip the platitudes," the senior goblin growled.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm still a bit stunned by the implications of what I was told and I'm having trouble . . ." Hooktooth shook his head. "The Granger heiress stated that her family's wealth was not solely possessed by the living members of the family, but also to the generations of Grangers yet to be born."

"That is . . ." The senior goblin blinked. "Very interesting." He contemplated it for a few heartbeats. "What do the analysts think?"

"I have not released it to to the analysts yet," Hooktooth admitted. "I came straight here to report it to you because it changes everything we thought we knew about humans." Hooktooth was trembling in excitement.

"It shows a capacity for long term planning we'd thought humans lacked if nothing else," his superior agreed. "How should this change our dealings with the Granger Clan?" And one more bit of evidence that the Granger Clan was very different from the usual sort of humans they dealt with, well, assuming they weren't some other type of creature that merely appeared to be human.

"I don't know. This is so earth shattering that I'm having a hard time conceiving of it, it's like . . . like spending the first half of your life with nothing but silver only to learn one day that gold exists," Hooktooth replied. "At the very least it shows the value of building deeper ties to the Granger Clan now that we know they have the potential to last longer than a dozen or so decades."

IIIIIIII

Fred peaked through the curtains to survey the crowd. It seemed like there were hundreds of them packing the music hall they'd rented for their presentation. Every seat was occupied and there were a substantial number of standing wizards in the back.

"Relax," George said. "Just imagine them completely clothed in something that covers every inch of skin and you'll be fine."

"I thought you were supposed to imagine them naked?" Fred said with a grin.

"Take another look at that crowd and decide if you want to do things your way or mine," George reposted.

"I don't have to. I'm sorry for doubting you, twin of mine. Shall we?"

"After you, I insist," George said with a grin.

With a deep breath the two took a moment to brace themselves before stepping through the curtains and onto the stage.

"Welcome to the first Weasley Class for Wizards Wanting Witches," Fred began. "I'm Fred and this is my brother-"

"-George and we're here to teach you the fine art of wooing Harry Potter style."

"This." Fred flicked his wand, causing Hermione's picture to appear. "Is girl number one. Harry got her by defeating a mountain troll."

"Girl number two." George's caused Luna's picture to appear. "Bullies."

"Three and four." Hannah and Susan's pictures joined the other two. "An assassination attempt on the Director of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Now I know what you're thinking. I'm just an average guy, he's the boy-who-lived, this can't possibly work for me," George continued. "You're wrong. This." Ron's picture appeared. "Is our brother."

"A slob, an idiot, not particularly handsome." Fred flicked his wand with every point causing Ron's brow to protrude, snot to dribble out his nose, and his eyes to cross. "I think it's safe to say that every man in this room looks better than this poor specimen of wizardhood."

"This is his girlfriend." Mandy's picture appeared, altered to make a couple of her more prominent attributes look even more prominent.

"He's welcome in the Harpies locker room, he's come home covered in several shades of lip marks every time he visits the team, he's been seen on more than one occasion with more than one of them on his arm. His secret? The Harry Potter method. Death Eaters attacked the Harpies. He saved them. They're dating him. "

"That said, one thing you have to keep in mind is the fact that saving girls from Death Eater attacks or other forms of mortal peril only gets you the relationship," Fred lectured. "You also have to maintain it."

"Things that seem to work there are giving them things you made for them, owning your own business, and helping them achieve their goals in life," George continued.

"Do you have to save them from Death Eaters?" one of the audience asked.

"Well," Fred began. "Judging from Harry's example, it also works if you save their relatives and their friend's relatives. But he is the boy who lived, best for us normal guys not to count on that working for us. Doesn't hurt to try though."

"We're guessing any mortal peril would work, but we don't have enough data to be sure," George added.

"Is this guaranteed to let us date multiple girls and have them know about it without getting out bits hexed off?" another member of the audience asked intently.

"We're not sure," Fred admitted. "Both of our research subjects seem to have formed multiple simultaneous relationships but we don't know enough to say for sure if it'll work for everyone."

"In the case of our brother and the Harpies, we don't think he's really dating all of them," George stated. "We do know that he's welcome in their locker room at all times." George smiled. "I'm just going to take a moment to let that sink in, gentlemen, when I say at all times."

"He means at all times," Fred finished. "Really. Know the one we're sure he's dating doesn't object when the others kiss him and drape themselves on him."

"Also gets to put his hands all over them, but that might have to do with the fact that he's fitting them for brooms," George finished thoughtfully. "We'll go into more detail when we go over recommended professions."

IIIIIIII

The senior goblin's ear twitched the next morning when he arrived to find his favorite subordinate already standing at his office door.

"We have an issue," Hooktooth said somewhat nervously. While blaming the messenger was rare in goblin society, he was well aware of the fact that rare and unheard of were two separate things.

"Inside." The senior goblin waited until he was seated behind his desk. "What sort of issue?"

"A number of lower ranked technicians have formally requested permission to leave Gringotts with the intention of requesting admittance to the Granger Heiress's sub-clan."

"How'd they find out about the opportunity?"

"I believe it's due to the ward teams we have working on the Granger estates," Hooktooth replied. "Apparently the Granger is quite proud of his daughter's mechanical aptitude and is eager to brag about it."

"To be expected," the senior goblin murmured. "What do our analysts say about her father's probable reaction?"

"They're split," Hooktooth admitted. "The majority believe that it will please him if he can be convinced that it was not on our orders."

"We have a meeting scheduled with the last Potter, do we not?"

"We do," Hooktooth agreed, relaxing.

"Explain the situation to him and ask his council. The head of Clan Granger will not object if the Potter gives his permission. If the Potter gives his permission, the workers have ours."

IIIIIIII

Severus scowled when his first class, mixed family and enemy of the spoiled brat's year tromped into the room followed by three outsiders. The nerve of the bastards, invading his classroom. How dare they, how dare they have the belief that they could invade his private kingdom.

He'd complained to his patron of course, both of them, yet nothing had been done.

He curled a lip when they took their usual places at the back of the room where they could observe the evidence of his angel's despoilment by his chief enemy in hopes that one of the brat's failures could prove useful . . . as if the worthless shit could ever amount to anything.

Class ended as it usually did with the worthless shit turning in a potion of dubious quality, one the presence of the gap toothed fame dazzled morons forced him to accept and grade passing. Another thing he'd complained bitterly to his patrons about.

"What's this?" one of the intruders asked, staring at the Longbottom's latest disaster.

"A waste of ingredients," he said confidently. "Looks like another zero for you, Longbottom." He felt a bit of warmth in his breast at the way the boy shrunk under his gaze, not as good as his primary target but it would do for now.

"Best analyze it to see what it is and what properties it might have, eh what?" the Ministry idiot said stupidly.

"Right," one of the others agreed. "Never know where the next breakthrough will come from."

Snape sneered, wondering if it could correctly be termed a waste of time if those wasting it were as valueless as the ones before him. No, he

decided, scoffing at the thought that the two before him could ever amount to anything rendering their time inherently valueless.

IIIIIIII

Auror Pinch noted with interest the way every potions researcher he had was clustered around a table staring with fascination at a small vial of potion when he came in.

"Potter finally give you lot something to work with?" he called out.

"Not him, Frank and Alice's boy," one of them managed to drag his attention away from the vial long enough to reply.

"What he give you?" Pinch asked.

"Looks to be a fairly broad spectrum antidote. Good for most mild to medium poisons if we're analyzing it correctly."

"Is an antidote what they were trying to create?"

"No," the first researcher replied.

"Looks like it'll take care of anything that takes more than about twenty minutes to do its work," another researcher spoke up.

"His record doesn't show any signs of potions ability, does it?" Pinch said with a frown.

"Far as we can tell, it was a complete accident."

"We're gonna have two sit down with him for a talk, see if we can confirm that his record reflects his true abilities."

"Might want to keep in mind the fact that his records are written by Snape," Pinch pointed out.

"Assume they're all wrong because Snape's a petty bastard," a third researcher said loudly. "Potter's potion today was much better than I'd have expected just going by what's in his file."

IIIIIIII

Macnair strolled arrogantly down the center of Diagon Alley, reveling in the stares and whispered remarks as he passed by, reveling in the fear his mere presence inspired. This was life, this was why he'd pledged himself to the Dark Lord's service those many years ago.

His lip curled into a sneer as he allowed his gaze to sweep over a group of men, anticipating their downward looks and the shame they'd feel at the knowledge that they were too weak and cowardly to stop him from doing anything he wished. Such was the power granted by the mark on his arm, such was the . . . his brow wrinkled in confusion when the men met his eyes, their expressions not fearful but with eager anticipation, eyeing him like a pack of wolves eyes an unfortunate deer. Hungry.

In a flash his good mood disappeared and all he could think of was that he needed to retreat to somewhere else, somewhere he'd be safe from the predatory gazes.

IIIIIIII

The night maintenance crew had been off for had been off for several turns of the glass and waiting in the pub when the first of the early warding crew returned to Gringotts.

"Free drinks so long as you lot can pass more information about the Heiress's new projects," one of the technicians said casually as the warders tromped in.

IIIIIIII

The return of one of their number and the increase in the volume of their chatter convinced Pinch that it might be a good time to get a progress report from the potions research group.

"You lot have anything new to report?" he asked as he walked up to the potions researchers.

"Had a chance to talk to Longbottom," one of the researchers reported.

"Well?" Pinch prompted.

"Kid's a genius when it comes to plant based ingredients. He's able to casually pull up knowledge that I have to go spend time with the reaction tables to pull up and I've been a potions master for fifty years.

"So what he did was no accident?"

"Not sure. He's amazing at vegetable, but he's got a big blind spot when it comes to anything animal or mineral."

"Explains quite a bit about the hows and whys of the sample he produced," another of the researchers volunteered.

"Oh?" Pinch motioned for the man to continue.

"Going over our memories of the class, he appeared to be reluctant to use anything animal or mineral based. Seemed mainly to focus mixing plant based ingredients in ways that wouldn't explode or produce anything dangerous."

"Most of what he knew about animal or mineral materials was how they reacted to vegetable," the first researcher volunteered.

"See if he can make anything original using his methods and knowledge of the reaction tables," Pinch ordered. "If he can . . . hell, even if he can't, pair him with someone with a better working knowledge of the rest of the tables."

IIIIIIII

Luna and Hermione were a bit surprised to find their astronomy professor happily chatting with the shop foreman when they got back to the engine shed after classes that afternoon.

"Good afternoon, girls," Sinistra said with a broad smile. "I was hoping to get a chance to talk with you two this afternoon."

"Of course, Professor," Hermione agreed automatically. "What can we do for you?"

"I was hoping to persuade you to let me purchase one of the wonderful devices you gave Professor Vector."

"Sure, Professor," Hermione agreed. "I suppose we could check to see if Sprocket's repaired another one."

"Marvelous. Is there any chance you could get more?"

"I suppose so, Professor, why?"

The woman smiled. "Tell me, girls, why is it that Astronomy is considered one of the core disciplines?"

"It's because the alignment of the stars and the planets can have an effect on the brewing of potions and on rituals."

"Correct, ten points to Gryffindor," the woman said. "Anything you'd like to add, Ms. Lovegood?"

"It's also important to know if you are trying to create a new spell," the girl stated.

"And another ten to Ravenclaw. Most of what you learn at Hogwarts is meant to give you a firm enough grounding to be able to read and interpret influence tables. What you may not know is just how much calculation is required to make those tables in the first place, calculation that your little device would simplify immensely."

"I understand, professor. What do people use now?"

"It depends on the level. In your sixth and seventh years, you'll be taught to use an abacus and another calculating device called Napier's bones. Though since you both take Arithmancy, I'd recommend you purchase a slide rule, it's something similar to a Higgs Type SR Automatic Arithmancy Calculating Device. You see, why I'm so excited by your marvelous device."

"We do, Professor," Luna stated, seeing her friend's distraction at the discovery of another hole in her knowledge that needed to be filled. "We promise to speak with Harry about setting up a production facility so that we can produce enough new ones for everyone."

"What type of slide rule, Professor?"

"Kind?"

"My father sent me several along with the Curta, Professor," Hermione clarified. "He says they used to be common in the muggle world until electronic calculators took over."

"Oh?" the woman's eyes were sparkling. "Do you have time to show me?"

"We do, Professor."

"Wonderful. You can explain to me exactly what an electronic calculator is while you do it."

IIIIIIII

Neville looked at the Aurors that had cornered him after his last class with a profound sense of confusion.

"Could . . . could you please repeat what you just said?"

"We'd like you to brew a potion for us," the head Auror replied.

"Are you sure?" the boy was having a hard time believing his ears. "I'm absolutely rubbish at it."

"We'd just like to see you go through the process," the Auror assured him. "You can use our lab and our materials. We just want to watch and take notes."

"Maybe ask a question or two," one of the other Aurors added.

"Think what your grandmother would say to you if she found out you had a chance to get a number of Aurors in your debt and turned it down," the Head Auror said calmly, cutting the boy off before he could say no.

He checked his pocket-watch, having been inspired to get his own after seeing the one Harry had gotten for Christmas. "I suppose I could spare an hour or two," he said reluctantly. "No more than that, I have an important Floo I need to make that I absolutely can not miss."

"You can use our floo point too," the Head Auror said with a grin as he and the others guided Neville to their section of the castle. "More private and secure than the ones most students have access to, just the thing if you've got a pretty young thing you're charming."

IIIIIIII

It was with much trepidation that Daphne and Tracy approached the engine shed, the very center of their new business partner's power. A place of both mystery and odd odors. A place all together too muggle for most of the members of their house.

"Shall we?" Daphne asked as the two girls paused in the doorway. The bright sun made it almost impossible to see into the comparatively dimly lit vestibule.

"After you, dear cousin, after you," Tracy replied.

"No reason to be worried," Daphne said firmly, "I'm sure the reason she hasn't been very communicative is because she got wrapped up in some project or something."

"I'm sure you're right, but of course you are the one from the great pureblood family which naturally makes you superior to me in both intellect and social standing. Meaning you get to go first," Tracy finished smugly.

"You have as much a pureblood as I am," Daphne protested.

"Yeah, but in my case it was from my ma while in your case it was through yer da."

"So?"

"So you've got the pureblood family name which makes you my natural superior. If you think back, I'm sure you'll recall Quince educating us both on the subject back in first year."

"And you'll recall how my dear aunt reacted when word got back to her," Daphne retorted.

"Mum never did have much of a sense of humor," Tracy lamented.

"Not when it came to family anyway," Daphne agreed. "I still think she should have let us deal with it rather than . . . we're wasting time."

"Right you are," Tracy agreed. "After you."

"I . . ."

"Daphne, Tracy!" Hermione's voice echoed happily from the gloom.

"Perfect timing. We were hoping you two would come by for a visit."

"I'm going to take that as a good sign," Tracy whispered. "So stop dawdling and either enter or move out of my way, pureblood scum."

With a snort, Daphne complied, stepping into the shed. Both girls paused for a few moments to allow their eyes to adjust to the reduced light level. Slowly, the shape of the Hogwarts Express and its identical sisters began to reveal themselves. Each engine surrounded by a dozen

denim clad attendants performing all manner of mysterious tasks to keep the locomotives in tip top condition.

"Over here!" Hermione called out, summoning the girls to the corner of the shop she'd claimed as her exclusive domain. "So what do you think?" the girl asked breathlessly the moment the other two had arrived, waving excitedly towards an odd vaguely muggle looking contraption that looked as if someone had chopped the front end off the Knight Bus and stuck it onto one of Hogwarts' thestral drawn carriages.

"What is it?" Tracy asked after it became apparent that her cousin was not going to.

"Oh." Hermione blinked. "Of course you wouldn't know," she said with a nod. "It's a delivery lorry. Should make transporting things from the rail depot to their final location much easier and less expensive."

"We based the power plant off the Doble Ultimax steam unit," Luna announced, popping her head out from under the odd boxy device. "Which I'm sure you know is one of the best, if not the best power units for this application."

"Daddy managed to get us a copy of the plans," Hermione chirped.

It took a few minutes for the two Slytherins to understand the device's intended use, but once they did they both immediately grasped its utility.

"So what do you think?" Hermione asked, eager to get her new business partners' opinions.

"We think it'll be great if we can get Ministry approval to use it," Daphne stated.

"All comes down to how large the bribe will have to be," Tracy agreed. "Too big and it won't matter how great it is."

IIIIIIII

Neville eyed the workstation and was relieved to note that nearly everything on the table seemed to have originated from gardens and greenhouses.

"What kind of Potion do you want me to make?" Neville asked.

"Whichever sort you like," the Head Auror stated. "Use any ingredients you like and make whatever you like."

"Yer kinswoman's been complaining about the oil she's using to protect some of her toys from the elements," Auror Pinch announced as he joined the group. "Might think about making something to solve her problem."

"Um, alright," Neville agreed, reaching for his pack to retrieve his potions book.

"Don't bother with that," Pinch said calmly, but firmly. "Just use your knowledge of how things react to make it."

"I . . . I suppose," Neville sighed. The boy closed his eyes for a few moments. "Could I get a quill and a piece of parchment, please?"

"Here you are, lad," Pinch agreed.

Neville wrote out a quick formula. "I'm not sure if this'll be better than what she has now, but I think it'll work."

"Get started then," Pinch said with a grin.

"Can't," Neville refused. "I'd have to leave before it was done to make my floo."

"How about something simple and quick then," Pinch suggested, noting how excited his colleagues were by what the boy had so casually created.

"I suppose I could make a pain relief potion," Neville said thoughtfully. "Well, assuming you've got some whomping willow bark and . . ." he took a moment to look over the ingredients cabinet. "Maybe some olive oil. I don't see any here."

Pinch nodded to one of the other researchers, causing the woman to sprint out of the room to procure the needed items. Looked as if Potter wasn't the only gem to be discovered at Hogwarts.

IIIIIIII

Hermione was able to conceal all outward signs that she was even slightly worried about what her business partners had revealed until the departure of the afore mentioned partners. The second they were gone and she was sure they weren't likely to return, she let her worries flow.

"Do you think it's really going to be as bad as they said?" Hermione asked, biting her lower lip in distress. "I'd like to believe they're overstating things, but after the lesson we got on how the Ministry works last year . . ."

"One hesitates to believe that they'd be that foolish," Luna mused. "Still, as you said; they were foolish enough to attack Harry last year and they've yet to replace Fudge even after his incompetence and veniality was so publicly revealed."

"Yeah," Hermione sighed. "So what do you think we should do?"

"I would suggest we speak with either Susan or Neville on the matter with a request that they write their aunt or grandmother respectively. Possibly both."

"Neville?"

"Your kinswoman, his grandmother is quite influential," Luna replied.

"I hadn't realized," Hermione said with a disinterested shrug. "Best be Susan. Neville's gonna be busy for the next hour or so."

"Oh?"

"He really hit it off with my cousin," Hermione said, happy for the chance to share the gossip with her best female friend. "They've been flooing each other for at least an hour a night."

IIIIIIII

Tracy monitored the temporary wards they'd thrown up around the private floo booth while her cousin and constant companion cast a few additional privacy and encryption charms.

"We're secure on our end," her father announced.

"One moment," Daphne said. "We're secure on ours."

"What's the emergency?" Tracy's father asked in concern. "Did your meeting go badly?"

"It was your best case scenario number three, uncle," Daphne replied. "She'd gotten wrapped up in a project and forgotten to contact us."

"On the plus side, the project was related to our business," Tracy added.

"So what's the problem?" her uncle replied.

"The problem is with the Ministry," Daphne explained. "She's got a steam powered package wagon which the current administration could potentially use as an excuse to shut our entire business down if we don't get it licensed first."

"You explained to her the necessity of getting Ministry approval?"

"We did, daddy," Tracy agreed. "We're fairly sure she listened too."

"She's fairly law abiding so long as the law doesn't conflict with something she's decided she really wants to do," Daphne stated.

"If it doesn't?"

"She'll ignore it," Tracy predicted. "Well, judging on how she treats the rules at Hogwarts."

"Pays attention to them more than the regular students and harps on the rest to do the same until the rules get in the way."

"Then they may well not exist so far as she's concerned," Tracy finished.

"We'll have a word with her father about how much he's willing to put up or allow her to put up for . . . ah . . ."

"I've been putting the term 'easement fee' in the books," Tracy's father supplied.

"Thank you," his brother in law replied. "In the mean time, I want you two to have a word with Potter about . . ." he trailed off, noticing the looks of profound discomfort on the girls' faces his words had effected. "What is it?"

"We do our best to avoid Potter," Daphne said carefully.

"Why?!" her uncle barked, face going completely expressionless.

"It's not because of anything he's done to us," Tracy assured her father. "It's because of what he was preparing to do to the family."

"Explain," her father said, calming a touch.

"We managed to get a draft of his original proposal for our partnership with Granger," Daphne said reluctantly.

"Corrupted a house elf, did you?" her father asked with a grin. "How bad was it?"

"It was step one of a plan to gain a stranglehold over our family," Daphne continued. "It showed that despite his approval of the partnership, he doesn't trust us any further than he could throw us."

"Less if some of the rumors about him are to be believed," Tracy muttered.

Tracy's father visibly relaxed. "You don't have to worry about that, the issue's been resolved."

"Your cousin Livia Augusta is one of Potter's arms-women," Daphne's father explained.

"She interceded on our behalf?" Tracy asked in relief.

"She saw a chance to repay a debt," her father agreed. "Explained that we were a family of both honor and pride. Told him that he didn't need to put us in chains to force us to keep our word and that putting us in chains would do nothing but breed resentment." Her father nodded to his brother in law.

"Her read on him is that he'll treat us with honor and respect so long as we do the same." The man licked his lips. "She told us that he went on to say that he'll exterminate us without hesitation if it later turns out that trusting us was a mistake."

"Not an issue," Tracy's father interjected quickly. "We'll treat the Grangers like we'd treat any business partner. Livia tells us Potter won't go off just because of a misunderstanding or mistake on someone's part."

"That do something to set your minds at ease?"

"It does, father," Daphne sighed.

"Good."

"What was the debt cousin Livvy needed to repay?"

"We provided a bit of discreet assistance for her elopement. Nothing public, just enough so that she and her new husband would disappear before her family realized exactly what she'd done and arrange for them to disappear in a more permanent fashion."

"Do you think she'd be willing to accompany us to the meeting with Potter?" Tracy asked.

"Why?"

"It's always better to have an introduction, daddy, you taught us that," Tracy finished with a grin.

"True. Potter's arms-men have taken over most of the non public parts of the Broomsticks. Introduce yourselves to Rosmerta if she doesn't already know you; tell her who you are and who you want to speak to. She'll be in and available if luck's with you."

"If it isn't, leave a note asking her to contact you," Tracy's uncle finished. "You've got a bit of time before any of this turns critical. Don't dawdle, but be mindful of the fact that there's no need to rush either."

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna found Susan through the simple expedient of approaching and asking the first group of Puffs they came across. A tactic which proved to be surprisingly effective as they were led to the Hufflepuff common room and escorted to Susan's room a few minutes later.

"Look who's here, Hannah," Susan said with a smile at her closest companion.

"Bit of a surprise," Hannah agreed with a matching grin. "Thought you'd forgotten about us since we all got back to Hogwarts."

"Sorry," Hermione winced. "It's just we got back and we have access to the shop again and . . ."

"Relax," Susan assured her friend. "We're just messing with you. We understand how easy it is to get wrapped up in a project. Happens to Aunt Amelia and Hannah's parents all the time."

"It does," Hannah agreed. "What can we do for you two?"

"We were hoping you'd be willing to write your Aunt for us," Luna replied.

"What about?"

"Did you know that I bought the Hogwarts express?" Hermione asked.

"We did not?" Susan stated, outwardly calm, inwardly reeling. She didn't know why she was surprised, wasn't like the other girl's family couldn't easily afford the purchase.

"Well, because of that, Daphne and Tracy came to us to ask for a partnership with their company since they do a lot of imports and transports and they didn't want to compete."

"And?" Susan prompted.

"Well, Luna and I decided to build a vehicle to make it easier to transport things from the railhead to the shops."

"We based the power plant on the Doble Ultimax steam unit," Luna supplied helpfully. "The body and the rest of the components are mostly from other sources."

"They're worried about the Ministry?" Susan asked bluntly, presuming they were speaking about some sort of motorized vehicle.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed.

"Don't." Susan nodded thanks to one of her housemates as they came in with a tray of tea and snacks. "It's not a problem."

"It's not?" Hermione asked, perking up as Luna did the same at her side. "You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be before Auntie replies with conformation," Susan agreed. "Let's look at things logically, shall we?"

"Alright."

"You have close ties to myself, Hannah, Harry, Neville, Luna, and Ron, along with our families. Right?"

"Yeah," Hermione agreed. "So?"

"So?" Susan choked a laugh into a snort, barely managing not to shoot tea out her nostrils. "Luna, who's in charge of the Ministry Department that handles violations of the acts on misuse of muggle artifacts?"

"Ron's father," Luna replied.

"Who is also responsible for investigation and referring cases for prosecution and above him is my Aunt Amelia. Leaving that aside we have your family." She nodded to Luna. "Which runs the oldest and second most popular newspaper in our world."

"As for the rest," Hannah picked up the conversation to give Susan the chance to enjoy a square of lemon cake. "Neville's family's had you as a

guest at their manor and have publicly claimed kinship with your family. Makes you sort of an honorary pureblood with the sort that cares about that sort of thing and puts everyone else on notice that she's in your corner if need be. My mum and dad are senior healers at St. Mungos, which gives them a bit of influence. And then there's Harry."

"Who no one in their right mind would cross right now," Susan finished in a tone of deep satisfaction. "Not after 'you-know's' public appearance anyway."

"Not to mention the spectacular failure of Fudge's campaign to destroy him," Susan agreed. "The only reason Fudge is still the Minister is because Harry hasn't decided to remove him yet and everyone knows that. Trust me, Hermione, no one with even half a brain cell would even dream of trying anything."

"What about Malfoy?"

"Which one?"

"Either," Hermione stated.

"Lucius could make some waves but he's not really in the position to influence anyone that could do too much to hinder you, not after all the capitol he burned to stay out of prison last year. Draco a dimwit but he has enough sense that he won't dare do anything that would so much as inconvenience you," Susan finished.

"He's been very careful not to do anything that would cause direct harm to you, Ron, or any of Harry's close companions," Hannah said in response to Hermione's look of skepticism.

"First year; you get attacked by a troll." Susan raised a finger. "Troll dies at the point of Harry's wand."

"Second year; you get attacked by a snake." Hanna paused for Susan to raise another finger. "Snake dies at Harry's hands. Teacher that attacked Ron gets his brains obliterated out his ears."

"Third year-"

"That's not what happened," Hermione squawked.

"Doesn't matter," Susan stated firmly. "School believes it did."

"My dorm mates have been very careful around me since they found out I was in Harry's circle," Luna confirmed. And had apologized and begged her not to tell Harry what they'd done. None of them had any doubt that Harry's response would have been excessively violent at best.

"What?!" Hermione gave her friend a look. "They were still bothering you at the beginning of this year." The girl's hands were clenched so hard her knuckles were white.

"The situation had been resolved, Hermione, don't trouble yourself worrying about it," Luna replied, closing that line of inquiry.

"Even leaving the rest aside. Most people think it prudent to stay on the good side of a wizard that's faced 'you-know' in single combat on multiple occasions," Hannah said dryly.

"There!" Susan said with a grin, putting down the quill the other girls hadn't noticed she'd had. "I've just finished the letter I'm going to post to Auntie asking her about this."

"Thank you, Susan," Hermione said brightly, mentally shelving the rest of the issues the girls had brought up.

"Business out of the way, let's get personal." Susan's grin sharpened.

"What's this I hear about Neville having long floo calls with some mysterious girl every night in one of the public floo terminals?"

The four girls spent the remainder of the afternoon catching up and later, at Hermione's insistence, doing and revising their homework assignments.

"We had an absolutely lovely time," Luna stated brightly. "Thank you for having us."

"Please do feel free to drop by any time," Hanna replied. "You're both always welcome."

"We'll try not to be such strangers in the future," Hermione promised.

"We'll be sure to visit you in the engine shed if we go too long without seeing you," Susan promised in return.

"You're always welcome to come," Hermione replied. "It'll keep us from getting too wrapped up in projects if you do."

"So," Hannah said as the entrance to the common room closed. "Do you think she was joking about Harry?"

"No, I think she was dead serious about not knowing how everyone sees him."

"Really?"

"Girl's got a blind spot a mile wide when it comes to things like that. You saw how much notice she takes of her security detail."

"Considering the matter, I'm not sure she even realizes she has one," Hannah said thoughtfully. "You remember how she introduced them." She cleared her throat. "This is our librarian, Ms. Jane, she used to be my governess when I was younger," she said in a reasonable imitation of Hermione's voice. "This is mum's driver, Thomas, he has that knife up his sleeve to open letters. I'm not sure what that mysterious bulge on his waist is."

"Must be odd to have grown up that way," Susan mused. "I remember how odd it was after Aunt Amelia became the Head Auror and I suddenly had two people following me around everywhere."

"Normal's just another word for the things you're used to," Hannah decided. "Meaning it's too subjective to have any use at all."

"Suppose that's one way of looking at the world."

"Gives us an excuse to ignore the people who say we shouldn't associate with anyone that doesn't fit the boxes they think they should anyway."

"Bugger 'em," Susan agreed.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth stared at the junior goblin across his until she began to show signs of distress. Damn the higher ups for insisting he bring someone with him. Worse, someone he was wholly unfamiliar with.

"You will not do anything to bring shame to Gringotts or to jeopardize our burgeoning relationship with the Granger Clan," he said firmly.

"Should you be so foolish as to ignore my orders, you will not be given the opportunity to make another mistake."

"My orders are to sit quietly and to take notes on all I observed," she replied. "I am along only as a second set of eyes and ears and as a stenographer should the Potter permit it."

"I see." Hooktooth relaxed a touch. "I had feared you were here as part of a power-play on the senior level."

"My word that I am not there to hinder you or your patrons in any way."

"So far as you know."

"So far as I know," she agreed.

"Very well." Hooktooth motioned for the female to seat herself. "We have a bit of time until we have to leave for our meeting. I'd have preferred you be assigned earlier so as to personally brief you on the situation. I suppose, given your intended role in the proceedings, that a complete briefing will not be necessary. To start with, what do you know of the Potter?"

IIIIIIII

The Headmaster instructed the gargoyle to step aside as the wards informed him of Harry's approach to the staircase that led to his office. It did not take long for the boy to arrive.

"Thank you for taking the time to see me, Harry," Dumbledore began. "I understand how busy you are."

"I'm always willing to spare a moment for you, sir," Harry replied. He checked his watch. "Or in this case, up to twenty minutes. I'm afraid I have another meeting I need to go to then."

"I believe that should be sufficient." Dumbledore nodded. "I suppose that you are wondering why exactly I asked you here."

"I am."

"You may have noticed that you've spent considerably less time in my office than you have in previous years, Harry," Dumbledore sighed. "I'd like to start out by explaining why." The old man closed his eyes. "Guilt, shame, and fear. I apologize that it's taken this long to muster the courage to have this meeting."

"Sir? Is . . . is this about what happened to Sirius?"

"In part," Dumbledore agreed. "When I placed you with your Aunt, I sought to protect you from Voldemort's loyalists. I knew that things would not be easy for you there and, as you grew, my agents informed me of exactly how bad things were." The old man shook his head. "I thought keeping you there was for the best, I wanted you to be safe, I forgot that a life not lived was a life not worth living."

Dumbledore forced himself to look Harry in the eye. "In a recent conversation, Minerva said something that made me realize that my behavior towards you has been inexcusable. I had thought to tell you that you need not return to your relatives this year before realizing that I had no right to decide. Instead I'll tell you that your fate is in your own hands, I will certainly encourage you not to return to the Dursley residence, but in the unlikely event that you chose to do so, I will not stand in your way. Minerva made me realize that your life is your own, Harry, I will no longer try to control how you choose to live it. I can only apologize at how long it's taken me to realize that simple fact."

"I understand how good intentions can sometimes lead us to unfortunate places, sir. Last year would have driven that point home if I didn't know it before that." Harry smiled. "Why don't we let the past remain in the past."

The boy rose to his feet. "Now if you will excuse me, I really must be on my way."

"Of course," Dumbledore agreed. "Please know that my office door is open, as it always is to any student, and please do not hesitate to come if you require any aid or council that you believe I might be able to provide."

"I'll take you up on that." Harry laughed. "You wouldn't happen to know a way to distract obsessed researchers, would you?"

"I've found that giving them another target to focus on often works," Dumbledore stated, regarding Harry with a half smile. "Thank you for that, by the way."

IIIIIIII

Oliver took a moment to admire the blank in his hands. It was a bit rougher than his factory broom in some places but the increased comfort more than made up for it.

"Thanks for getting me in on such short notice, Ron," he said sincerely. Word in the league was that there was at least an eight month wait just to get onto the list to get a five minute consultation with his former housemate.

"Thank the fact that you know Harry and the twins well enough for them to lobby on your behalf," Ron replied.

"I'll be sure to thank them too then," Wood agreed. "So what's this I hear about you dating the Harpies?"

"Bunch of dreck, I'd wager," Ron said, making another pencil mark on the broom blank.

"Oh?"

"They're just teasing me because they know I'm safe and because they know Mandy doesn't mind," Ron said absently.

"Why would she?"

"She, I'm dating." Ron sighed as he reached up to check the fit, it was a lot more enjoyable to do with the Harpies than it was with someone aptly named 'Wood.'

IIIIIIII

Flint was waiting when Harry descended from the staircase leading to the Headmaster's office.

"Got a few minutes to meet with a couple people?" she asked with a grin.

"Who?"

"Daphne Greengrass and Tracy Davis," Flint replied. "They're worried that the inspector the Ministry's sending to look over Hermione and Luna's latest device will regulate and fine them out of existence."

"Is it a valid worry?"

"It is but it's been taken care of," Flint stated calmly.

"When's the inspection?"

"Should happen about the time you're meeting with the Goblins."

Harry checked his watch. "Do I need to meet with them or will a message suffice?"

"All depends on the message."

"Tell them that I am aware of the situation and that things have been arranged. Should something go wrong, I will ensure that the situation is resolved in their favor."

"That'll work," Flint said cheerfully.

"And be sure that some of our people are on hand to monitor everything. I don't trust the Ministry or anyone working for it save perhaps Bones and her people."

"Will do," Flint agreed, not bothering to tell him just how many people Tonks had already assigned for the exact same reasons.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth gave a discreet nod to one of his security people when they arrived at Hogsmead causing the other goblin to separate from the group.

"Welcome to the Three Broomsticks," the proprietress said with a wide grin. "Ha-Mr. Potter is already in the meeting room and asked me to pass along that his people had already swept the room for listening charms and that he would not take offense if you would like your people to do the same."

"Would prefer it actually," a dark haired female human added. "More eyes looking, more chance for something to be found if there's anything to be found."

"We accept the Potter's offer," Hooktooth said. "Would it be acceptable for the meeting to be held directly afterwards?"

The human nodded to one of her subordinates. "Escort whomever he wants to send up and assist them with whatever they need."

The human turned back. "Before I forget, my name is Flint. I'm in command of the Potter Security assets on site for the duration of this meeting."

"Your counterpart," Hooktooth indicated a scarred goblin on his right.

"A pleasure to finally meet you in the flesh." Flint nodded to the goblin.

"Likewise," the heavily scarred goblin replied.

IIIIIIII

Drusilla was a slightly round witch of middling years with dark hair and a hook like nose that brought to mind Hogwarts' least loved professor,

not surprising considering the number of ancestors they shared on his mother's side. She'd been an inspector for the Ministry office of licensing since shortly after her graduation from Hogwarts and had scant chance of ever rising much above her current position.

She'd been on her way out the door to deal with her next assignment, one that circumstance had indicated might be worth a significant amount of graft, when the head of the department called her into his office for a rare personal meeting.

"How aware are you of the issues surrounding your next inspection?" he asked bluntly the second the door closed and the privacy wards went up.

"Two aides to members of the Wizengamot bought my lunch today and loudly expressed worry at a muggle born owning something so important to our society," she replied. "They didn't make any promises but it was understood that it would be beneficial to both my career and to my bank account if I were to find some significant problems."

"Don't," her boss said simply.

"Alright," Drusilla agreed, having worked for the man long enough to know when he was serious. "Why not?"

"In the last hour I've had floos from Arthur Weasley, Amelia Bones, August Longbottom, and a representative from Harry Potter all stating that they would be watching and that they would all be most displeased if there were any irregularities."

"That's . . . pretty impressive," she said honestly. Wondering if they'd threatened anything aside from their displeasure if something went wrong.

"It is," he agreed. "It's why I called you in here to let you know. Do the job by the book and be prepared to overlook any issues minor enough to be ignored. Note any major violations if there are any but do not assign any fines, official or otherwise, until after you've had a chance to meet with me."

"We're not accepting any 'donations' on this one at all?" she asked in shock, this was something entirely outside her experience.

"Not so much as a single knut," he agreed. "Should have seen the look Greengrass' face when I told him we wouldn't be requiring any extra licensing fees. Almost makes the rest of this worth it."

"Got it." Her retirement vault was full enough that she didn't need to be too vigorous about finding ways to supplement it anyway. Not if it meant getting on the bad side of the afore mentioned individuals anyway.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth was pleased by how well the first half of the negotiations had gone. In less than one hour he and the Potter had managed to work out an agreement for his superiors to meet with the Potter's contact in the non-magical government. He was just about to suggest bringing the meeting to a close when the goblin who had been forced onto him at the last minute quietly cleared her throat and handed him a note.

“The first point out of the way, would you have any objection to using the rest of the allocated time to discussing an unrelated matter?” The goblin fought to keep his face impassive as he waited for the Potter's response.

“I would not,” Harry replied.

“To ease into the matter, might I enquire as to how young Sprocket is working out?”

“Quite well from what I understand,” Harry replied. “The girls have nothing but good to say about him.”

“Would you or the head of the Granger family object if more goblins were to leave Gringotts to seek employment with your female companions?”

“With the understanding that there is only so much work to go around, no,” Harry stated.

“I see.” Hooktooth considered the matter. “How many would be allowed?”

“There's no hard number. Hermione will hire as many as she can keep busy and likely use the spare labor to open more projects which in turn will require more labor.” Harry fought down a laugh. “With enough time, labor, and resources she'll likely end up owning the magical world before she graduates at the rate she's going.”

The goblins went still, each one shocked to the core at what they'd just heard the boy admit.

“In the event that she doesn't have a need for any labor and provided they don't object to other sorts of employment, I'm sure I could find a place for them somewhere,” Harry finished. He was sure Phil would be delighted to have a dozen or so mechanics to keep his collection in top condition if nothing else.

"You say-" his voice broke. "-you say you do not mind the idea of goblin technicians taking service with Ms. Granger." Hooktooth licked his lips. "Would you object to goblins from the other trades doing so as well?"

"I would not," Harry tilted his head, aware that more was going on than he'd previously realized. "Why?"

"The offspring of a senior member of the clan has expressed interest in broadening her horizons in the human world."

"They are more than welcome to come and, as I said before, if we can't find a position for them with Hermione, I will do my best to find a position for her somewhere else."

"The goblin in question is a fully trained auditor."

"I see." Harry considered the matter. "That could actually be quite helpful," he mused. "Assuming I'm correct about Auditors being skilled in financial matters."

"You are," the goblin agreed.

"Excellent. Based on what you know of their capabilities, do you think they would be able and willing to work as an accountant?" Harry asked, thinking of how useful such an individual would be.

"I can safely say that she will be happy for the opportunity and gratified by the trust placed in her at being given such an important task."

"Wonderful," Harry said. "Hermione's good with numbers but it's almost impossible to get her to take an interest in money."

"Oh?" The goblin's heart was racing. "I was given to understand that she'd made quite a bit of it in her business ventures."

"She has," Harry agreed. "The thing is, money is a means to an end for her." He laughed. "Don't get me wrong, she's quite good at it when she can be bothered to be, it's just difficult to convince her to focus more time on her finances if it comes at the expense of less time with her projects."

"I see." The goblin carefully considered his response. "That is often the case with engineers."

IIIIIIII

Auror Pinch was amused to note that the future head of the Longbottom family was already in the research space when he returned from his meal.

“His young lady was quite enthusiastic about the idea of regular access to a private floo connection,” the lead potions researcher whispered.

“Should I make a note to do something nice for that young lady?” Pinch whispered back.

“Yes.”

“How nice?”

“He's cranked out the formulas for five new potions since he arrived today and brewed two of them.”

“Oh? How interesting are we talking here?”

"It's not that we wouldn't have been capable of creating these potions, it's more that we never thought to. No one really has, no one has ever really seen the need to develop 100 percent plant based potions. The one he created is about ten percent better than any of the control potions we brewed from his recipe, he's reading the potion as it brews and tweaking the recipe to fit the ingredients at hand. We've got the makings of a master if we can convince him to go for it.”

IIIIIIII

Spikenose had always been a bit disgusted by the pitiful creatures the humans called house elves. They were weak, they were servile, they were pathetic wastes of flesh unworthy of the resources they consumed to gain the energy needed to be self mobile.

The creature blocking her path had none of those defects. In stark contrast to the usual slump, it stood proud and erect. Rather than cringing cowardice, its eyes sparked with fury and barely restrained madness. In fact . . . taking care to make no sudden moves she gave the creature a once over. He didn't look too bad.

"Why is yous asking questions about the Great and Powerful Harry Potter sir?!" the goblin had to restrain herself from taking a step back from the uncharacteristically fierce house elf.

"I am trying to gather intelligence for my superiors," Spikenose replied with as much calm as she could muster. Even his voice was filled with the promise of violence and pain. Her pulse quickened as she realized just how close she was to death.

"Why?" Dobby's glare deepened, sizing up his potential opponent. A quick pop back to create distance, a hand wave to bombard the goblin with everything he could touch with his magic, followed by another pop to close. A bit of quick work with a kitchen knife and bob's your uncle. Solid bits to Hogwarts' pigs and the drain for everything else. Though . . . hadn't Harry Potter sir's Lovegood said something about goblins making good pies? Perhaps the pigs would have to do without. He took a moment to eye her to identify the areas that would deliver the best cuts of meat.

"We wish to know more about him and the Granger clan so that we may negotiate without fear of accidentally causing offense," the goblin replied, noting that her admission caused the house elf to relax his stance and to stop eyeing her like the security dragons eyed their morning

sheep. "Our problem is that neither he nor the Granger Clan act as humans are supposed to."

"Dobby understands that humans can be difficult to understand," the house elf sighed, allowing himself to relax completely. "Dobby will be happy to share tales of the Mighty and Wonderful Harry Potter sir's fantastic deeds."

And in a flash, the terrifying predator she'd been facing disappeared, cloaking itself in camouflage to appear to be nothing more than another of the human's servants. She wondered if perhaps she hadn't discovered a new species, something that mimicked house elves to get better access to its human prey . . . which seemed to be contradicted by its protective interest in the Potter. She gave a mental sigh, why couldn't she have gone into a simple field like dragon husbandry? Only thing you had to worry about there was being eaten or the odd accidental maiming.

Spikenose listened in wonder as the creature educated her on the great deeds of the 'Great and Wonderful Harry Potter sir the Great and Wonderful.' The things he described sounded as if they came from one of the sagas told by the huldufólk of the frozen island.

"The next part." The house elf looked downcast. "Dobby is ashamed of his actions in the next part. Dobby thought Dobby was protecting the Great and Wonderful Harry Potter sir, Dobby . . ."

The goblin motioned for the house elf to continue.

"Dobby didn't realize," the house elf said mournfully. "Dobby didn't know that he was saving bad former master's life. It wasn't until later,

when Dobby saw the corpse of the great snake that Dobby understood the might of the Great and Cunning Harry Potter sir."

"Please continue."

"Bad former master came to Hoggywarts not knowing that he was entering a trap set by the Most Cunning and Amazing Harry Potter sir. Bad former master did not know that Harry Potter sir had figured out his evil schemes. Harry Potter sir waited until bad former master was alone and struck with the first part of his plan." The house elf straightened up. "Freeing Dobby and provoking Dobby's bad former master to attack Harry Potter sir with the killing curse."

"He did what?!" Spikenose exclaimed in shock, almost unable to believe what she was hearing. That anyone, even Lucius Malfoy would be stupid enough to attack a child in a house of learning. She gave a mental shake of the head, yet another piece of evidence that backing the man's master would be a mistake as if they needed any more than they already had.

"Dobby saw bad former master tried to use death curse on Harry Potter sir and Dobby was filled with rage." The house elf took a breath.

"Dobby used his magic to throw bad former master hard enough to break seventeen bones, shatter one kidney, and rupture three other organs, and ensure that bad young master would never have sibbylings. Dobby didn't understand that he was doubting the Stupendous and Awe Inspiring Harry Potter sir's prowess, Dobby didn't understand that if he had waited one second more that bad master would have been no more."

"Based . . ." the goblin tried to slow her breathing. "Based on your story it's quite possible Harry Potter delayed acting in order to give you the opportunity to strike him yourself."

"Dobby doesn't understand."

"It could have been a test to see how you'd react, a test of your worth as a potential vassal or ally. If that is the case, I would assume that you passed in light of the fact that associates with you on a regular basis," the goblin replied, returning to her normal monotone. "Or it could have been a gift to you. He may have figured that your aid to him earned you the right to make the first strike on your former master or he may have figured that you deserved the first strike after learning of your treatment at the man's hands."

"Dobby knew that the Most Mighty Wizard Harry Potter sir was generous, but Dobby never realized the extent of it," the awestruck house elf whispered.

"Sometimes it takes an outsider to point out what is before you," the goblin stated. "Might I request a boon in return for the small service I was able to provide?"

"What does goblin want?"

"Might I request a viewing of the great snake's corpse for myself and at least one of my superiors?"

"Dobby doesn't see the harm." The house elf nodded to himself, one really couldn't get a proper picture of just how powerful the Great Harry

Potter sir was until one got a chance to take the measure of one of his defeated foes.

IIIIIIII

Daphne and Tracy waited nervously in the engine shed with their business partners waiting for the Ministry's inspector to arrive.

"She's coming," Tracy announced, informed by several carefully pre-placed charms.

"Please remember to let us do all the talking," Daphne half begged as the Ministry inspector walked through the door.

"My name is Inspector second class Glass. Take me to the device," the woman said, pronouncing each word as if it were a vulgarity.

"Right this way," Daphne said.

"How does it work?" the inspector demanded the moment the'd gotten within sight of the package lorry.

"It uses steam just like the Hogwarts Express," Tracy supplied.

"Is it the exact same system as the Hogwarts Express?" the pinch faced woman asked with a frown of confusion. "Why doesn't it look the same as the Express?"

"Uh . . ." Daphne winced, cursing herself for the fact that she had yet to do enough study to truly understand the design.

"The Hogwarts Express runs on coal, our delivery wagons run on coal oil. Different fuels and different roles mean different design," Hermione stated, trying not to look bored.

"Is coal oil similar to what the muggles use to run their horseless carriages?" the woman asked intently.

"Only to the point that they're both liquid hydrocarbons derived from destructive distillation of fossil fuels," Hermione replied.

"Uh . . ."

"Muggle vehicles run on the petroleum distillate gasoline, often referred to colloquially as petrol where as the fuel used to be created via an alchemical process involving decomposition of our feedstock, in this case cannel coal, which as you know is a form of bituminous coal, to produce liquid coal oil."

"We'd be happy to give a more detailed explanation of the process if you have time," Luna chirped. "It shouldn't take more than seven or eight hours to go over the highlights."

"I'd recommend it," Hermione continued showing a bit of life for the first time since the conversation began. "It's absolutely fascinating stuff."

"That won't be necessary," the inspector said quickly, having been cornered by Arthur Weasley who seemed to have a pathological need to explain everything about his hobby/profession enough times to know

what was coming. "I'm only here to satisfy the Ministry that you aren't improperly using any muggle devices."

"I can safely say that you won't be able to buy this type of engine in any of the muggle shop I've frequented," Tracy told the woman seriously. "There isn't a bit of it that was made in the muggle world, right Hermione?"

"There is one bit," Hermione stated calmly. The girl reached into her pocket to pull something out. "Every bit of it was made in house save for the mantles for the pressure lanterns."

"What-" the inspector bit her tongue, hoping that choking off the question would prevent being on the receiving end of another incomprehensible lecture. "They're just wicks?"

"They're smaller versions of what's used on the gas lights in Diagon Alley," Luna said helpfully.

"The same actually," Hermione stated. "They're the ones who gave me the contact information for their supplier."

"Oh. Do you enchant them in anyway?"

"We're currently using the same process as the Ministry," Luna replied.

"I suppose that's alright then," the inspector smiled. "Good work. I'll be happy to report to my superiors that you've created the first completely magical horseless carriage in the country. Don't be surprised if you get

an inquiry as to the feasibility of converting or replacing the current Ministry cars with one of yours."

"We look forward to it," Daphne said quickly. "Just be sure they understand that each one is made by hand by skilled craftsmen so wait times and prices will be understandably high."

"Not that we aren't willing to give the Ministry a special deal or to rush them to the front of the queue," Tracy added with a smile.

IIIIIIII

Harry gave Flint the eye to have refreshments brought out as the meeting came to a close.

"Thank you," Hooktooth said, carefully selecting a cigar.

"Please take as many as you wish to," Harry said. "Flint. Be sure they're given a few boxes to take back to Gringotts."

"Yes, sir."

"There's no need to trouble yourself," Hooktooth said with what passed for a grin.

"Please, I insist. It's the least I can do in return for all the new employees you're being kind enough to send to us."

Hooktooth's eyes rolled back in pleasure as he savored his first bite.

"Exquisite. Easily the best I've had the pleasure of experiencing."

“Glad you approve,” Harry said with a grin. Seemed Hermione's uncle Jim's tastes were good.

“I am eternally grateful that you pressed me to take more back to the tunnels. It would have been a great shame for the others to miss out on something so good.” He sighed. “A shame I'm not empowered to make trade agreements,” he finished somewhat wistfully. Or perhaps not, there was little chance that he would be able to bargain effectively after his first bite.

“So bring along someone who for our next meeting and we'll hash something out,” Harry suggested. “Flint.”

“Sir?”

“I want you to triple the number of boxes you give to our guests when we leave. Have them marked as product samples on our expense forms.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you,” Hooktooth said.

“Thank you for helping me reach another market,” Harry replied. Looked like Phil had been onto something. He gave a mental snort, no surprise that a businessman of his ability would sniff out a chance to make a profit.

IIIIIIII

Spikenose stared in awe at the corpse of the great serpent. To think that a human child could slay such a beast in single combat. She shook her head in wonder, it was an amazing task even with the aid he had from the firebird. More than anything else, it drove home the fact that Gringotts would do well to make allies of Clan Granger for she had no doubt that they'd be terrifying opponents with such a warrior on their side.

“Any-” She swallowed. “Any idea why it hasn't begun to decay?”

“Dobby and the other elfies has been keeping it fresh for Harry Potter sir,” the house elf replied. As a monument to his triumph if for no other reason.

IIIIIIII

The head of Hooktooth's detail pulled him aside as he stepped out of the meeting room. The senior security goblin seemed a bit off, as if he'd just been the recipient of a bit of life changing information.

“One of my people has something she says you need to see before returning to Gringotts.”

“Oh?” Hooktooth glanced at the security goblin's face. “Which one?”

“The one I assigned to gather information on the Potter.”

“What does she want me to see?”

“She suggests that it would be best to go without any foreknowledge.” The goblin thought for a moment before deciding to add a bit more information. “It's possible you wouldn't believe her if she told you about it ahead of time. I almost didn't,” the goblin snorted. “Hell, she almost didn't when she heard it.” And likely wouldn't have if the Potter's servant hadn't revealed what was lurking beneath his camouflage. Looked like they'd have to start taking house elves into account when they made security plans.

IIIIIIII

Daphne sagged and seemed to melt onto a chair as soon as she was sure the Ministry's inspector wasn't going to return. She shared a look with her cousin, neither of them had so much as heard of an inspection that had gone half as well, not even one conducted on a business belonging to Lucius 'the Minister's in my back pocket' Malfoy.

“Potter said he'd taken care of it,” she mumbled to herself.

“I told you there was nothing to worry about,” Hermione sniffed. “Like you said; Harry arranged everything. If Harry says something's been taken care of, it has been.”

“Don't suppose he'd be willing to help us with a few other things?” Tracy asked hopefully, tongue darting over her lips as she contemplated the possibilities.

“Like what?” Hermione prompted, eyeing the girl with no small amount of suspicion. It wasn't that she distrusted her two business partners per

say, but Harry already had a lot of time consuming activities on his plate and she was more than a bit reluctant to add to them if she didn't have to.

“Ministry isn't the only one that asks for donations,” Daphne said sourly. “More than a bit surprised that no one's come by to ask us to pay 'insurance' to keep any 'accidents' from happening to our business.”

“Likely because we haven't moved much product yet,” Tracy opined. Could also be their new partner's staff, she reflected to herself, no one messed with Goblins if they wanted to stay above ground.

“Harry's already looking after our business.” Her lips pursed as she considered the matter. “I could ask Harry to look into it for your father's businesses when he has a spare moment if it's really important,” Hermione offered. “Just realize that it might take a while before he has a spare moment.”

“It'd take a while to talk our dads into agreeing to bring him in on this anyway,” Tracy giggled. “Thank you, Hermione.”

“We owe you one,” Daphne agreed, looking like she hadn't liked admitting it. “We personally that is, not our family or business.”

“They're not the same thing?” Hermione asked, looking a touch confused. “Sorry, none of my business.”

Sprocket suppressed a grin at his Chief's words. A goblin in human skin. He'd been more fortunate than he'd known at the time when he'd been offered a chance to seek service under the heiress of Clan Granger.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth's entire attention was on the corpse of the great serpent. It filled the entire chamber, coiling from one end to the other, two sword like fangs jutting from the thing's half closed jaws. How in the hell had the Potter done this even with the aid of a phoenix? He'd have laid odds on it against any three of the security dragons and counted himself fortunate for every sucker dumb enough to take a bet against it.

“What do you think?” he asked the security chief, trying and failing to tell himself that his analysis must be flawed and hoping that the other goblin could give him something better.

“I think I didn't bring enough guards,” the other goblin said calmly, eyes searching the chamber for hidden threats.

“What?”

“My instructions are to see that you are protected against all possible threats. All possible includes the Potter, I did not bring enough guards.” The old goblin sighed. “I find myself sincerely hoping that he did not take that as an insult.”

“Humans aren't like that,” Hooktooth said absently, unable to rip his eyes away from the corpse.

“Humans can't kill a beast like this when they're children either,” the older goblin replied. “How sure are we that he's a human. Sprocket says the Granger Heiress is a goblin in human skin and we're still not sure what the hell the Potter's house elf really is.” The old goblin turned to

his subordinate. “Find out everything else you can about the Potter's triumphs and gather what evidence you can as well. Higher ups and analysts are going to want every detail you can ferret out.”

“So are the story tellers,” Hooktooth added faintly. “The Potter has already performed at least one deed worthy of a saga.” He waved his hand at the evidence of the boy's triumph. “Imagine what other tales are lurking in his past.”

“Not the first human to be honored, but the first in quite some time,” the chief of security agreed, trying to decide the proper number of security goblins to bring with him to the next meeting to show the proper amount of respect and worrying that the proper number would be too large to fit in the town of Hogsmead.

IIIIIIII

Padma rocked back on her heels as the fire changed color, indicating that the floo was connected, and would have fallen if not for the steadying hands of her sister.

“Did you put up privacy charms?” the face in the flames, an Indian man with a neatly trimmed black beard and a strong familial resemblance to her sister asked.

“Yes, father, just like you taught us,” she agreed.

“Wonderful. I trust that you are both doing well?”

“We are, daddy,” Parvati stated. “Padma's number four in our year.”

“Parvati is doing quite well despite not being in the top ten,” Padma continued calmly. “Easily in the top twenty.”

“Cept in divination where I'm always one or two,” Parvati finished. “What did you tell us to floo you for, daddy?”

“I've recently come into possession of some interesting information concerning one of your classmates,” their father replied. “What do you know about Harry Potter?”

“He's a terrible date and a worse dancer,” Parvati stated firmly. “Though he was sweet enough to apologize after.”

“Unlike his friend,” Padma sniffed. “Though that bit of information is a bit dated. He's currently involved in several research projects that take up a large amount of his time.”

“He spends the rest of his time hiding from the Professors so that they don't have a chance to drag him into even more. Almost never see him around the common room anymore,” Parvati giggled.

“He also controls the largest private security company in the magical world,” their father said with a hint of grin. “One charged with the security of at least three of your classmates.”

“Who?”

“Hermione Granger, Susan Bones, and Hannah Abbot.”

“Add Luna Lovegood,” Padma said after a moment of thought. “I can not confirm that but it is not likely that she isn't being looked after if Hermione is.”

“Hermione Granger is their principle charge.”

“Not surprising if they work for Harry,” Parvati said, looking as if she'd just been handed a juicy piece of gossip.

“Her family is rich enough to buy and sell the Malfoys with pocket money,” their father said simply, silencing both his daughters. “They have a contract with Harry Potter to keep her safe by all means necessary.”

“You are sure of that, father?” Padma asked dumbly.

“I am.”

The twins shared a look for a several moments.

“Do you have any other news to share, daddy?” Parvati asked, breaking the silence.

“Have you heard the rumor that Harry Potter stated the Malfoy manor house was smaller than the Granger family's stables?”

“We have now, daddy.” And they'd both see to it that it got passed around, neither was fond of the racist little git or his inbreed family.

“Her mother had yours and a number of other society women including Dame Augusta Longbottom over for tea. She states that he was not exaggerating.”

“Oh.” For the first time, Parvati looked unsure of herself. “She doesn't act like it.”

“Unless you consider how she expects to be obeyed when she gives an order or the fact that she seems to regard rules as being meant for people other than herself,” Padma laughed.

“Guess so,” Parvati mumbled, wondering just how she'd managed to know so little about one of her roommates even after living with her for years.

“Do you want us to get you more information, father?”

“If you can without giving offense. The main reason I instructed you to contact me was to remind you of the fact that one of the reasons you were sent to Hogwarts was to make connections and to point out some valuable potential connections to make.”

“Are you telling us to get closer to Harry, daddy?” Parvati asked with a gleam in her eyes.

“I'm telling you that he'd be a good person to be friends with if he is worth befriending,” he said. “No amount of potential gold is worth approaching him or spending so much as a second in his company if he is not.”

“Thank you, father,” Parvati said sweetly. “I’m on fairly good terms with Luna,” she volunteered.

“Hermione and I get along just fine,” her twin added.

“Good. Be upfront about what you’re doing, as I said Hogwarts is a place to build connections as much as it is a place of learning.”

“Yes, father/daddy,” the twins agreed.

“Good. Padma, I trust you not to let Parvati be overly impulsive.”

“Yes, father.”

“Parvati, I trust that you will not allow Padma to be excessively cautious.”

“You can count on me, daddy.”

IIIIIIII

Harry noted with approval the way the maintenance personnel watched him as he approached the girls. The imperius and polyjuice meant that no one could be trusted and the return of Voldemort meant a little paranoia was warranted.

As focused as they were on the problem at hand, it took several minutes before the girls noticed his presence and Harry took the time to run his, admittedly amateur, eye over the building to look for possible vulnerabilities.

“Going to have to have another word with Tonks,” he muttered to himself. Both to have her run her own evaluation and to have her speak with the workers. Dumbledore's decision not to permit any private security to enter Hogwarts grounds was inconvenient but not insurmountable. All else failed he'd have the Express crew trained as bodyguards and the bodyguards trained as crew. Would take longer than he liked, but-

“Harry,” Hermione said in delight, cutting off his train of thought. “How did the meeting go?”

“Fairly well I think. Managed to secure a few more workers for you including someone to help you deal with your finances and I may also have laid the groundwork for a trading deal with Gringotts.”

“That's great, Harry!” Hermione cheered.

“We could so much more if we had more workers as efficient as Sprocket to assist us,” Luna agreed.

“Not to mention the fact that the trade deal I'm working on could pay for some of the raw materials and machinery you're using in your projects if I farm it out to your import business,” Harry said dryly.

“That's-” Hermione cut off as she pondered the matter.

“Never thought about where the money comes from?” Harry asked, more than a bit amused by his friend's attitude.

“It never seemed important,” she said simply.

“Oh.” Harry took a breath. “Your father wanted me to point out the fact that your profits go back to you and can be used to fund further projects.”

“They can?” Hermione blinked. “I’d assumed . . .” she trailed off. “I suppose a proper foundry might be nice to have.”

“Not to mention how convenient having a steel mill would be,” Luna chirped. “And a heavy machine shop.”

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed, getting a far off look in her eyes.

IIIIIIII

Daphne waited until her cousin had finished putting up the wards and secrecy charms before tossing a handful of floo powder into the fire and whispering the address.

“Is everything alright?” her uncle asked the second his head appeared in the flames.

“It is, father,” Tracy answered with uncharacteristic formality. “Or at least, we believe it is.”

“Is my father there?” Daphne asked softly.

“He will be in a moment, Daphne, can you wait or is immediate action required?” Concern marked his features as his mind sought a reason for the two girls' odd behavior.

The two cousins shared a look. “It can wait, father,” Tracy stated.

“How is school going?” the man in the flames asked.

“All is well, father,” Tracy replied. “There were a few remarks about our partnership with Granger, but as yet, everyone has been intelligent enough to avoid saying anything offensive.”

“What about your personal lives?” he tried another tack. “All going well there too?”

“We both maintain that none of the available boys are worth our time, uncle,” Daphne answered. “Two or three may have potential after they do a bit of growing up and a couple more that may be suitable if the Dark Lord situation is resolved favorably.”

“Muggle born?”

“Along with a couple of half bloods from what would be unacceptable families if the Dark Lord wins,” Tracy agreed.

“I . . . your father's just arrived, Daphne.” He moved to the side to allow his brother-in-law to join the conference.

“Father,” Daphne stated.

“Daughter,” he replied calmly.

“Uncle,” Tracy greeted the man.

“Niece,” he greeted back. “Why did you two decide to contact us early?”

“The Ministry Inspector looked at the delivery carriage today, father,” Daphne began. “We tried to do things the way you told us to, but-”

“But she refused to certify,” her father sighed. “I was afraid that would be the case after the head of the department refused to consider accepting any sort of 'licensing fees' until after the inspection.”

“That's not what happened,” Tracy said. “She asked a couple questions and then granted a permanent unrestricted license for it and any similar vehicles Granger and Lovegood decide to build.”

“What?” Tracy's father blurted, eyes widening in shock. “That's unheard of.”

“Do you have any idea how this happened?” Daphne's asked, confusion marring his features.

“We shared a few concerns with Granger about the inspection. She later informed us that Potter had taken care of everything and that we were not to worry,” Tracy reported.

“What did Potter say?” Tracy's father asked.

“We were unable to get a meeting with him before the inspection,” Daphne replied. “We've since been able to determine that he was in a meeting with Dumbledore this morning and spent most of the afternoon meeting with representatives from Gringotts.”

“Cousin Livvy said that we were not to take his refusal as a snub and that we were not to worry about the meeting because everything had been arranged,” Tracy added.

“Find out what you can and keep us informed,” Daphne's father said after a moment of thought.

IIIIIIII

Hooktooth looked a bit shaken when he entered his superior's office a few hours later, mind still reeling from the unbelievable things he'd been able to confirm.

The senior goblin's eyebrow raised as his subordinate took his seat. “Well?” His appetite having been wetted by the preliminary report.

“Which report would you prefer to hear first? The one on the meeting or the one about the Potter?”

“Start with the meeting,” his superior ordered.

“Based on information given to me by the Potter, I am no longer sure of our theory that the Potter is proctoring the heiress's test of worthiness,” Hooktooth began.

“Why not?”

“The Potter stated that the Granger heiress would likely own the human magical's society before she graduated,” Hooktooth stated, mouth dry. “He further stated that while the Granger heiress's appetite for labor was not endless, that we were welcome to send him as many workers as we liked from any sector of society and gave his personal word that he would do all he could to find a place with them if there was not one at the heiress's side. As things stand, either he or the Granger need only say the world and the country will be theirs.”

“I see.” The senior goblin rocked back. “What of the auditor?”

“He was quite eager to have her and stated that he intended to make her the heiress's personal accountant. The Potter explained that despite her talent for it, the Granger heiress is generally disinclined to indulge of matters of business unless related to her primary passion of engineering.”

“What do the analyst think?”

“They're still pouring over the contact reports.”

“Alright,” the senior goblin sighed, why couldn't the data he wanted be available when he wanted it? “What do you think. Your first impressions only.”

“As the Potter stated, the Granger heiress is skilled in both engineering and business. Not surprising considering her lineage, the Granger Clan is among the strongest in the world thanks to their proven abilities to grow

wealth. Picture yourself in the shoes of the Head of Clan Granger, your offspring is skilled in two areas, but is prone to neglecting one in favor of the other. What do you do?”

“You do your best to impress upon them the importance of the neglected area, failing that, you find them a trustworthy partner or assistant to help them.”

“What if your offspring has enough wisdom to find partners for themselves? What then?”

“You verify that your offsprings choices are good ones and ensure that they are . . . that's what the Granger Clan Chief is doing with the Potter.”

“Yes, sir. I believe that if there was a test of worthiness, it was for the Potter to prove that he was worthy of remaining at the heiress's side.”

“He passed.”

“He passed and in doing so, impressed the clan chief so much that he was made warmaster of the Granger Clan. Note that the arms-men responsible for the heiress's safety are the Potter's sworn armsmen. Note how closely the Potter is involved in the heiress's businesses. So closely that we had assumed he was proctoring the heiress's test of worthiness.”

“Warmaster indeed,” the senior goblin muttered to himself. “Do you have any other information to support your theory?”

“The Potter offered refreshments at the close of the meeting.”

“Go on.”

“He then offered a trade deal after I commented on how difficult it was to get cigars of the same quality in the tunnels, insisted I take several cases back with me to help convince those senior to me that such a deal would be in our interest.”

“Interesting that he arranged the possibility of opening an import deal with us so soon after the heiress obtained a fifty percent share of a company dedicated to importing muggle luxuries,” the senior goblin mused. “Alright. Tell me what happened after the meeting.”

“Have you seen the preliminary report, sir?”

“I have.”

"The things the Potter's retainer told us were unbelievable," Hooktooth replied. "So unbelievable that it's understandable we'd doubt them."

"And?" the senior goblin prompted again in a harsher tone, warning his subordinate to get to the point.

"They're true," Hooktooth said firmly. "They're all true."

"Even the part about slaying the fourth founder's beast in single combat?" the senior goblin asked with a hit of disbelief.

"The Potter's retainer took me in to the fourth founder's private chamber to view the corpse," Hooktooth replied. "It's all true. A half grown boy

killed a thousand year old basilisk in single combat with nothing but a wand and a sword.”

“Further evidence supporting the idea that the Granger clan named him their warmaster,” the senior goblin stated. “What did you think of the Security Goblin Spikenose's report on the house elf?”

“I noticed he was different but I did not see what she did. I recommend reading Senior Armsmaster Bloodclaw's report.”

“Summarize it.”

“The creature carefully evaluated each of us when we arrived and spent the rest of the time staying out of arms reach. Based on its body language and positioning, he believes it was prepared to murder all of us if it decided we might pose a threat to the Potter.”

“What do you think of Spikenose's belief that the Potter's retainer is not a house elf?”

“I believe that while it is possible that she is correct, that it is far more likely that the bonds the wizards forced upon his species are being used to suppress their true nature or that his bonding with the Potter has allowed him to take on some of the Potter's traits.”

“Or some combination of the above or something else,” the senior goblin stated. “We've confirmed he has a bond with the Potter?”

“Yes, though it is different from every other house elf bond the security personnel have seen. They are still trying to find a way to explain how that's possible.”

“Have three analysts assigned to the matter and be sure they're given the opportunity to speak with Spikenose and anyone else that had close contact with the creature.”

“Yes, sir.”

IIIIIIII

In a move that would look very much like smoothing one's robes to an outside observer, Anguish checked again to be sure that the tools of her trade had not disappeared since she'd last checked them thirty seconds before.

'Not an hour out of the bank and I've already lost my nerve,' she thought in disgust. Chin straightening, the goblin strode confidently into the wooden structure in which her new chief awaited.

It took only a moment for the goblin's eyes to adjust to the difference in light level. Her proximity wards reported the presence of three humans, one less than she could see. The sound of soft, regular, breathing from deeper in the shop told her the probable location of the missing human. Neither of the two was her new warchief, though the larger human, the female, matched the description of her chief's aide. Well, she decided, nothing for it but to push on and see what happened.

“My name is Anguish,” she introduced herself.

“I'm Flint, Harry's assistant,” the larger human replied.

It wasn't a confirmation that the human was the chief's aide, while the human displayed no signs of deception that she could detect, Anguish did not yet consider her a reliable source. Best continue cautiously but respectfully.

“I was instructed to report to the Potter here so that I could swear myself into the service of the Granger Heiress.”

“You're going to have to wait a few minutes,” the female human stated.

“I see.”

“He's asleep at the moment,” Flint explained. “That is not meant as an insult to you, he gave strict instructions that he be woken the second you arrive

“You are ignoring his orders?” Anguish asked calmly. It would be interesting to see if and how the individual would try to justify herself to the chief. It would be equally interesting to see how the chief chose to address the situation.

“He doesn't get much opportunity to sleep and Hermione ordered that we weren't to disturb him unless it was unavoidable when he does get an opportunity.” The human grinned, being respectful enough to keep her teeth covered.

“I see,” Anguish repeated.

“We wake him if it can't wait, we don't if it's not time sensitive. I hope you understand.”

The human appeared to ready herself for violence, Anguish presumed that it was on the off chance that she decided to make an issue of it. Such was the reputation of her profession, she supposed, terribly useful at times, terribly inconvenient at others.

“I am able to wait as long as need be,” Anguish replied.

“Shouldn't be long, he doesn't usually drift off for more than a few minutes at a time. Can't be good for him to get so little rest.”

“Is ensuring he gets rest one of your responsibilities?” Anguish asked curiously.

“One of them,” the human agreed. “You'd still have to get past Ron even if it wasn't. Between the two of us, that wouldn't be as simple as you might think.”

“I am aware,” Anguish stated. “I have reviewed all of the material Gringotts had on the incident in the Harpies locker room.”

“Has the auditor arrived, Flint?” a deeper voice called out from the depths of the shop. It appeared the third human had awoken.

“Just got here, boss,” the human replied. “Her coming in musta been what woke you up.”

Her new chief stepped out of the shadows and regarded his aide with a flat look for a few moments. To the other human's credit, she did not look away until he nodded his head in acceptance.

“My name is Harry,” her chief began. “You come highly recommended.”

“Thank you, sir. I have adopted the name of Anguish when dealing with humans.”

“Welcome, Anguish.” He did not offer his hand, showing that he had some knowledge of goblin customs. “The current political environment makes it difficult to have an obvious security detail with the girls at all times. So far as Hogwarts is concerned, your only duty is to help Hermione manage her finances.”

“I assume my true duties are to ensure that she is protected, both physically and financially,” Anguish asked.

“They are,” her chief confirmed. “You have a meeting scheduled with Tonks tomorrow, who serves as the local head of security and with Ms. Jane the day after, who has been the head of Hermione's security detail since she's had a security detail.” His lips pursed. “Hermione tends not to acknowledge the fact that she even has a security detail, but will listen if told she cannot do something for her own safety. Just be sure to stress that it is important.”

“Understood.”

“Do you have any questions for me?”

“I do not, sir,” Anguish replied.

“Do not hesitate to speak with me at any time if you have any or any concerns,” her chief ordered. “Dobby!”

Anguish twitched at the appearance of the creature her cousin had spoken of. It really did appear to be nothing more than a common house elf.

“Yes, Harry Potter sir?” the still unidentified creature asked.

“This is Anguish,” her chief introduced her. “She's going to be working with the girls from now on.”

“Yes, Harry Potter sir! Dobby will be sure to bring an extra meal to Harry Potter sir's Hermy's shed for Harry Potter sir's Hermy's new worker.”

“Thank you, Dobby.” Her new chief pulled an expensive looking watch out of his pocket and checked the time. “Time for my nightly detention.”

“With Flitwick and McGonagall tonight,” her chief's aide said helpfully. “Your head of house believes it best for you to explore the potential of combining the two fields.”

“If you'll excuse me,” her chief addressed her.

“Of course,” Anguish said automatically.

“Flint.”

“Yes?”

“Escort her to the engine shed and introduce her to the girls.”

“Yes, sir.”

Anguish followed her new co-worker out of the workshop and across the school grounds to the engine shed that housed the the trains that serviced Hogwarts. They found Hermione and Luna elbows deep in the engine compartment of their new delivery vehicle.

“Got another employee here for you, Ms. Hermione,” Flint said respectfully.

"My name is Anguish, Mistress Granger," the young goblin calmly introduced herself. "The Potter has assigned me to help look after your personal finances.

"Harry said you'd be coming soon," Hermione said cheerfully. "This is Luna, we work together most of the time." She indicated her best female friend with a wave of the hand. "That's Sprocket." She indicated a goblin on the other side of the shop who looked anything but pleased to be brought to the attention of the newcomer. "He takes care of our locomotive and helps us make things. Pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine, Mistress Granger," Anguish stated, making a mental note to investigate both of the indicated individuals. It mattered not that they'd both presumably been vetted by the Granger Clan and Gringotts. They had not been vetted by her.

"Would you like something to eat?" Hermione continued. "We were just about to get something."

"Thank you, Mistress Granger, I most humbly accept," Anguish stated, pleased her primary knew enough to keep her close.

"Everyone," Hermione let her gaze sweep across the faces seated around the table. "This is Anguish, she's going to be working with us from now on." After waiting for a round of greeting, the girl then named each of the workers currently present.

"Interesting name, Anguish," the foreman commented.

"Goblins who work with or around humans typically take second names in order to make things easier for all parties." A necessary accommodation when one race lacked the vocal cords to properly pronounce the other race's language. "These names often have something to do with the goblin in question's occupation."

"That's why your name is Sprocket," Hermione said beaming at the other goblin at the table. "Did you know that, Luna?"

"I did, Hermione," Luna replied. "The Quibbler had a second page article on the subject a few years ago."

"So why did you choose Anguish?"

"It is the feeling most individuals get when they hear that I have been assigned to audit their books," she said with a toothy smile.

IIIIIIII

Sprocket did not know how to feel about the new addition to his employer's staff. On the one hand, he could certainly see the benefit to the girl's safety. On the other, it had the potential to be quite detrimental to his own. The fact that she had pulled him aside for a private discussion at the completion of the mean led to him slightly favoring the latter idea.

"Before we begin, I wish to make one thing perfectly clear," the auditor began. "I am not here to punish minor infractions or to discover imaginary sinners. I am here to protect the Mistress from all threats physical and financial. Am I clear?"

"You are," Sprocket said, almost sagging in relief.

"Good. I have chosen to speak with you on this matter because you have been thoroughly vetted and for the simple reason that you are a known quantity; you understand who I am, you understand what I am, and you understand what I am prepared to do should I deem it necessary to do my duty."

Sprocket choose silence as the best answer.

"Who is the mistress's blonde companion?"

"I refuse to break the employer's confidence," Sprocket said woodenly.

"I will give you a couple moments to contemplate exactly what you just said and who you said it to, and what I am capable of doing to you if you persist in being an obstacle," Anguish said calmly.

"I refuse to break the employer's confidence," Sprocket repeated, preparing himself for the worst.

"Wonderful." A toothy grin split Anguish's face. "It is good to see that my assessment of you was correct."

"What?"

"I am not the only one of the people coming to take a position in Mistress Granger's staff and you will soon be one of many Gringotts trained technicians in our lady's service. Do you understand what that means?"

"There will likely be several with seniority over me," Sprocket sighed. Nothing good ever lasted, a shame as he'd grown to like helping the Employer with her projects and servicing her personal locomotive.

"That is both correct and incorrect," Anguish stated calmly. "There will likely be some that have seniority over you in the Gringotts system, but none that do in service to the Granger Clan. Something you must imprint in your mind is the fact that you hold your position because Mistress Granger desires it, you can not be moved from your position by anyone unless our lady desires it. Do you understand?"

"I do," Sprocket agreed.

"See that the new employees understand that as well. This is not Gringotts and as such, the rules and traditions of Gringotts are meaningless. This is the Granger Clan and we are in personal service to the Clan heiress, as such her desires are paramount. Do whatever you must to drive that point home and call me if you need the point driven forcefully."

"My oath," Sprocket agreed. "I will not allow any to go against the Employer's will in anything."

Anguish nodded in satisfaction. "Without betraying a single one of Mistress Granger's secrets, please tell me what you can about the Mistress's companion."

"What?" Sprocket was confused by the meeting's sudden change in tone.

"Do you need me to repeat my question?"

"Uh, no. I am unsure, but I believe the Employer has selected Ms. Luna, the blonde, to be her junior wife."

"Interesting. What about the rest of the humans here?"

"Though new to her service, I have no reason to doubt any of their loyalties to the Employer."

"Do you know or suspect potential threats in the castle or the surrounding region?"

"I've heard that there might be some in the castle, not sure who."
Sprocket took a few moments before coming to a decision. "Best ones to ask on that would be one of the Potter's arms-men or the Employer's kinsman. The shop foreman may know more."

IIIIIIII

Anguish found the next person she wanted to meet in one of Hogwarts' smaller greenhouses tending what appeared to be a purple melon.

"Good afternoon," she stated. "I am Anguish, the Granger heiress' new auditor. I wish to have a few moments of your time to meet if you can spare them."

"Alright," the boy agreed, not even bothering to look up from his task. "What do you need?"

It was puzzling. Her files stated the boy was a pureblood and thus should know what her title implied, yet he seemed unconcerned.

"You know what I am," she stated calmly.

"I know what you are," he confirmed, still intent on his work.

"You do not seem worried."

"What me, worry?" Neville grinned, hands going still as he turned to regard the goblin. "Here? With the Peruvian mantrap I cultivated from a seed behind you. Here? With the dart throwing alder on your left, or . . . well, I think you get the idea."

“You're sitting in the middle of a very well crafted death trap,” Anguish said, looking around. “One I lacked the knowledge of to recognize.”

“Most people wouldn't,” he laughed. The boy's hands were clean with a charm.

“What do you want in trade to help me achieve enough knowledge so that I'm not caught in a similar trap in the future?” Anguish asked intently.

“You're sworn to protect my cousin?”

“I am.”

“I'll give you the family rate,” Neville grinned. “I'd like someone to go over the family books and to help me learn enough to maintain them myself. A service for a service?”

“That is acceptable,” Anguish stated.

“Wonderful.” The boy rose to his feet and indicated that she should follow him. “I've got an area set up back here. Not much, just a place to catch a few hours of sleep if I have to be down here for a while, but it's got a table and a couple chairs so it'll be more comfortable than squatting in the dirt.”

A dozen leaf covered vines twined and wove themselves together to form the table while the chairs were crafted out of old gardening tools and earthenware planters.

“It's not much, but it works,” Neville commented as he took a seat.

“Would you like anything to eat or drink?”

“I have already eaten today, but thank you for your offer. I came to ask for your assessment on the leader of the pro-dark lord faction,” Anguish explained.

“He and the ones he hangs out with are mostly talk. I strongly suggest not getting proactive without Harry giving the go-ahead unless you become aware of an immediate threat.” The boy pursed his lips. “Scratch that, if you become aware of any kind of threat, do what you think best and I will back you to the hilt.” He laughed. “Get me and I'll heat up the irons for you and hold their feet if you want. The Longbottom family has been looking for an excuse to remove the Malfoys since the slithered in from the continent, but so far the bastards have been smart enough not to give us anything we could publicly act on.”

“Here's hoping young Draco isn't as intelligent or lucky as his fore bearers,” Anguish said with a smile that matched the one on Neville's face. Wide and hopeful.

IIIIIIII

Hermione was more than a bit surprised to find her head of house waiting in the common room when she came down that morning. Her surprise deepened when she noticed the absence of her best friend. Harry was an early riser, likely due to his damned relatives, and it was a rare occasion that he slept in.

“Mr. Potter could not get away from his project with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement this morning,” McGonagall said dryly. “They usually permit him to escape in time to meet you, but I'm afraid he may have broken another immutable law of magic and they were loath to let him go.”

“Harry has work in the morning too?” The girl's eyes narrowed.

“For quite some time, yes,” the old woman agreed. “No less than three hours every morning before class and as much time as he can spare the rest of the time.”

“When is he supposed to sleep?”

“When he sneaks off to Mr. Weasley's workshop, the one you three think we don't know about,” McGonagall answered dryly. “His aide is rather dogged in her defense of his rest time.”

“What aide?” Hermione asked flatly. The girl's lips whitened and drew into thin lines.

“Mrs. Flint.” McGonagall stated, nothing in her tone suggesting how amused she was by her favorite student's reaction. Few things were better in life than to look down on the follies of youth from the tower of experience.

“Oh.” Hermione brightened. “I see.”

“Wonderful.” Minerva choked down a laugh. “The reason I came to meet you this morning, Ms. Granger, is to inform you that you are excused from classes for the day.”

“I am?” The girl's head tilted. “May I ask why, Professor?”

“Your father has requested your presence for what he characterized as a moderately important meeting. I saw no reason to deny his request in light of the fact that you've already completed and turned in every assignment for the remainder of the year.”

“I didn't mean to inconvenience you, Professor, it's just that I don't have as much time to do assignments, what with all the time Luna and I have been spending in the engine shed, so I thought it best to get everything done early.”

“It was not a complaint, Ms. Granger.”

“Yes, Professor.”

Minerva escorted the girl to the front entrance where they were met by a dozen armsmen and two dangerous looking goblins.

“Anguish, Sprocket,” Hermione said with a wide smile. The girl turned to the humans and reddened. “I am sorry, but I'm afraid that I cannot recall your names at this time. Please excuse my rudeness.”

“Flint,” the woman at the head of the group. “I'm normally assigned to work with Harry so we haven't met more than once or twice. Rest of the

group is new so there's no reason you should know any of them either so don't worry about it.”

“Still.” Hermione bit her lower lip. To the girl, it was absolutely unconscionable that she did not know at least the names of the staff assigned to her. She'd been raised to think of the people who kept her world running as members of her family, that she had allowed her other interests to distract her to the point that she did not know such a simple thing was, and would remain a source of shame. No matter what Harry's aide said.

“If you wish, I shall procure dossiers on every employee with pictures and personal information so that this does not happen to you again,” Anguish said calmly.

“Thank you, Anguish, that will be quite helpful,” Hermione chirped, her earlier good cheer returning. Making a mental note to spend the next dozen nights memorizing them if necessary. “What are you all doing here?”

Anguish nodded for Sprocket to go first.

“Just came to report that the new goblins should be arriving later today and that living areas and workspaces have been prepared.”

“Thank you, Sprocket. Could you help the shop foreman and Luna get them settled in?”

“Of course, Mistress,” Sprocket replied, bowing low. It was a great honor to be trusted with the clan's voice, even for so small a task. He silently vowed that he would not disappoint.

“Harry told the rest of us to make sure you got to your meeting safely,” Flint spoke up. “You know how he worries.”

“He also suggested that you might appreciate a few extra hands around in case you had a chance to go book shopping,” one of the new men stated with a perfectly straight face.

Hermione giggled. “You too, Anguish?”

“The Potter has ordered me to stay close to you every time you leave the protection of the castle,” Anguish stated. And to keep the girl safe by any means necessary. The exact words he'd used were; 'I don't care if you need to make a mountain of corpses so long as Hermione stays safe.' A very goblin like statement, she'd thought approvingly at the time. It, more than anything, had confirmed that she had made the right choice when she joined his war-band.

“Yer da also suggested she come along,” Flint added. “Said it would be to your benefit to have your accountant on hand unless you had all your financial information memorized.”

“Okay,” Hermione agreed. “Shall we?”

Flint pulled two lengths of chain out of her pocket “Way we're doing this is we're going to split into two groups, first group goes ahead and

the second group follows after we get an all clear. You're in the second group, Ms. Hermione.”

“Just like with the cars.” Hermione nodded.

“And for similar reasons,” Flint agreed. “Anguish?”

“I shall be in the Mistress' group,” the goblin stated firmly.

“Group one,” Flint ordered. The woman pulled what looked like a makeup compact out of her pocket and stared at the mirror. “Group one's clear. Everyone grab the chain and we're off in three . . . two . . . one.”

They arrived in what Hermione recognized as a hallway outside one of the private meeting rooms in her father's private club.

“Nice place,” Flint commented, eyeing the wood paneling and the intricate Persian carpets that likely cost more than she made in a year.

“The food is quite good as well,” Hermione replied cheerfully. “Be sure to have them send something up for you so you can try it.”

The door opened to reveal her father's driver. The man's right hand was in the right pocket of his grey sport cut, his flat expression cracked and he shot her a quick grin before his face went expressionless.

“Six three one penguin,” Flint said carefully.

“Five fifty star fix,” he replied calmly.

“We're clear,” Flint announced, causing a number of nervous wands to relax a touch.

“You can go in, Ms. Hermione,” her father's driver said respectfully.

“After we've had a chance to sweep the room,” Flint said firmly.

“So long as you understand that this meeting is private,” the man replied firmly.

“Harry said to do what you said,” Flint said to Hermione. “Well?”

“Yes, of course.” Hermione nodded. “James, be sure they get something to eat while I'm talking with daddy.”

At Flint's nod, three of the guards walked into the room and carefully cast every detection charm they knew. Three more swept the room for listening devices and secret passages the mundane way.

“Yes, Ms. Hermione,” the man said indulgently. “Something for yourself as well?”

“Yes, but it can wait until after we've gone through whatever daddy called me here to talk about.”

“Of course, Ms. Hermione.”

“You may go in, Ms. Hermione,” James announced upon getting the nod from Flint, after her people vacated the room.

Hermione's father was seated in a rich leather chair. With a smile, the man rose to his feet and engulfed her with his arms.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, darling. I suppose you're wondering why I called you here.” He nodded over her head for his driver to close the door and take his customary post.

“What is it, daddy?” Hermione asked.

He smiled. “You have the opportunity to purchase a repair yard for steam engines. Should you?”

Hermione opened her mouth to give an affirmative and closed it abruptly. “I don't know.”

“You don't know?”

“I'd need more information before I could decide,” the girl admitted.

“How much is it, where is it, what condition is it in, how much would it take to maintain it, how much would it take to get it into the condition I need it to be in, how much can I afford to spend now, how much can I afford to spend on an ongoing basis, how much can I expect it to bring me. Did . . . did I miss anything, daddy?” The girl began chewing on her lower lip.

“Perhaps.” His smile deepened. “Should you consider buying it on credit?”

“No,” she answered immediately.

“Why not?”

“We are Grangers. We are not borrowers or lenders.”

“Not directly anyway, we do own portions of banks and banks do make loans, for example.”

“We own portions of businesses that make loans. We do not,” Hermione said firmly.

“Alright, what about asking the public to make donations to restore and preserve a historical building?”

“We are Grangers,” the girl said, sounding more confident. “We do not ask for money with our hats in our hand. We may give to worthy causes, we do not ask others to give for our benefit.”

“What about asking a business partner?”

Hermione frowned. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“It depends on the partner,” Hermione stated.

“Oh?” He gestured for her to continue.

“Is it someone I already have a long term relationship with? If not, is it someone I can build a long term relationship with? Will this deal benefit us both? Is there a chance this deal could harm our relationship?”

“Alright.” He nodded to his driver. “All the information you need should be in that folder. Tell me if there is anything else you would like to know.”

Hermione took several minutes to go through the paperwork and a few more to do a bit of mental arithmetic.

“Well?”

“I'm not sure, daddy,” Hermione admitted.

“Why not?”

“I don't know if my finances will allow it,” Hermione explained.

“Why not?” he repeated himself.

“Because I have people who take care of that for me, daddy,” Hermione replied with a smile, feeling a bit more confident.

“Harry?” He did his best to stay impassive.

“Is one of them,” Hermione allowed. “The other is Anguish.”

“I'm not sure I've had the pleasure.”

“She's the one who came to the meeting with me, daddy.”

“The one waiting outside?”

“Yes, daddy.”

“You may ask her three questions,” Phil allowed.

Hermione suppressed a grin. They'd played the same game since she was a young child, the earliest version had been something along the lines of 'ask three questions and tell me what animal I'm thinking of.' The amount of information she was given had grown in complexity and the number of questions she was allowed varied, but it remained the same game she'd played all her life.

With a giggle, the girl pulled a piece of parchment out of one pocket and a quill out of another and wrote three short sentences. “Done.”

“May I?” Phil held out his hand. It only took a moment to read the questions, the man handed the parchment back without a hint to show how pleased he was by what he'd read. “Alright, darling.”

Hermione rose to her feet and walked to the door. Phil privately noted how adorable she looked as she switched from dutiful daughter to part time businesswoman. A shame he couldn't have cameras in the room, hopefully one of the ones in the hall was able to get something suitable to be framed.

The girl opened the door and handed the parchment through the doorway to her employee who made a few notations before handing it back. It was clear from the expression on her face that she'd answered his question before she'd retaken her seat.

“Well?”

“It may be a good move for me to buy this property if I could partner up with the Greengrass/Davis families and/or with Harry. It would be a risk, but not a large one.”

“So you're going to buy it?”

“No, daddy.”

“Why not?”

“Because the risk is fairly low, it is still too high,” Hermione sighed. “I could survive a loss, Tracy and Daphne's family couldn't. Ruining them would ruin what promises to be a long term relationship between us as individuals and possibly family to family. The possible rewards aren't worth that.”

“And Harry?”

“I'm not sure,” Hermione admitted. “Harry has his fingers in so many pies that it's hard to know exactly what he has available or what he could afford to lose.”

“Good job, darling.”

“Was this a test?”

“Life is a test, darling. One of my duties as your father is to prepare you for it.”

“Okay, daddy.”

“If you had chosen to buy this property, I'd have waited to see if you were able to keep your company from going bankrupt.”

“And if I hadn't been?”

“Failure is part of the learning process, darling. Since you didn't, I'm going to make an offer.”

“What kind of offer, daddy?”

“I'll use the family money to purchase it along with a couple other properties and I will pay for them to be brought up to your standards. In return, a portion of your business will belong to the family as a whole rather than you individually.”

“What percentage were you thinking about?”

He smiled. “What percentage should I be asking for?”

“The most you think you can get,” Hermione chirped.

“And what percentage will you be offering?”

“The least I think you'll take.”

“That's my girl,” he said proudly.

IIIIIIII

Snape eyed the Potter as the boy entered into his class. The others, the fools from the Ministry, were still invading his domain, limiting what he could do to get some of his own back from the man who'd stolen everything from him. The Potions Master suppressed a sneer as he watched the intruders cluster around the Longbottom, the biggest failure in class, a near squib. Better than wasting their time with the Potter, but only just. Damn them for their presence, damn them for interfering with his vengeance, damn them for being walking insults to his craft!

IIIIIIII

Hermione was on cloud nine when she skipped into the Engine shed. The results of her afternoon meeting meant she now had the ability to build new engines rather than just maintain the ones she already had. It was starting to feel as if nothing was beyond her reach, that the future was within her grasp.

“Anguish, I have some papers I would like you to look over,” she stated cheerfully.

“Of course, Mistress,” the goblin agreed.

The girl nodded to one of the guards who handed her a leather document case and then carefully removed a sheaf of papers. “I know daddy put in several embarrassing clauses, I do not know that I found all of them.”

“Mistress?” the goblin took the contract, visibly confused by what the girl had told her. It was inconceivable that a clan leader would seek

advantage over their heir unless they had some reason to suspect that their heir was attempting to take their position early.

“Daddy says that I can't always rely on lawyers so he expects me to know how to read a contract myself. I was able to find three clauses already, the first stated that I agreed to wear a maid costume every day of our next vacation, the second stated that I would serve him and mummy breakfast in bed every morning of my next holiday at home, the third stated that -” the girl blushed a deep red. “-that I would do something that isn't germane to this conversation. Daddy awarded me an additional two percent of Granger Steelworks for every clause I caught, but he was much too pleased with himself when I agreed to his terms to have caught every one of them.”

Anguish nodded internally, a training exercise then. That changed things considerably. “Granger Steelworks, Mistress?”

“The family has decided to reopen Ravenscraig, agreeing to give the speech at the opening ceremonies and at the opening ceremonies of several other acquisitions netted me an additional four percent for my company.”

“I see.” Anguish nodded. “I will find what other traps your father left for you to trip, Mistress. Though it may be too late to avoid them, we can at least prepare ourselves.”

“Thank you, Anguish. Sprocket!”

“Coming, Mistress!” the goblin replied, approaching at a dead run. The goblin skidded to a perfect stop just out of arms reach. “How may I serve you, Mistress?”

“Have the new workers been settled?”

“They have, Mistress,” Sprocket agreed.

“Would it be convenient for me to meet them after we are finished here?”

“They are ready to meet you at any time, Mistress, day or night.”

“Thank you, Sprocket. So you know, we will be taking possession of a foundry, a forge, and a small factory. We will be responsible for their maintenance and will be able to use them but they, along with the coal mine, will be spun off into a separate entity under my direct control. Expect that more facilities will be added later. We will also be taking possession of an engine repair facility, a ship yard, three scrap yards, no less than a dozen engines with funding to put them in working order, and several hectares of land.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“The new facilities under my direct control are not required or even expected to make any money. We may use them for our projects, or we may let them lay fallow. We need to get them in a working state quickly and we need not spare any expense getting them there.” Hermione sighed. “I'm afraid we will have to be a bit slower and more mindful of costs for everything else. Do you understand, Sprocket?”

“I understand your orders, Mistress,” the goblin said carefully.

“Why are you taking possession of several properties that may be drains on your finances, Mistress?” Anguish asked, looking up from the contract she'd been examining.

“They're tax write offs for the family,” Hermione explained. “Taking a small loss on them means we pay less on taxes from other income. Managing them is another of daddy's tricks to make me spend more time on business and less time having fun. He knew I couldn't resist making them mine,” the girl sighed.

“As you say, Mistress,” Anguish stated.

“I'll show you the relevant parts of the law later,” Hermione promised. “Sprocket, could you let the new workers know that we're going to start doing the initial surveys of the new properties tomorrow? I'll be in to meet them and give them the details after we finish here.”

“Of course, Mistress!” the goblin spun on his heels and marched back to the group.

“I believe that I have found something, Mistress,” Anguish reported.

“How bad is it?” Hermione braced herself.

“It states that you agree to wear clothing deemed appropriate by your mother every time you open a new facility and that you agree to open any facility that is to be under your direct control and any company in

which at least two percent of the stock is owned by you personally or by a company under your direct control. In return you will be personally awarded one percent of the new company's stock, unless it is already under your direct control, and in return for acting as your mother's proxy, the Potter will be awarded one half of one percent of the company's total stock.”

“I noticed that, Anguish, it's why it states that Harry gets one half of a percent for acting as mother's proxy. Daddy's been taking advantage of his good nature to have him do it for free and I will not have it. I told daddy that I expected Harry to be compensated for his time and daddy agreed.”

Enthusiastically, the man was tremendously pleased to have a chance to deepen ties with his daughter's friend. “Daddy and I also have an agreement to make that clause retroactive which will give Harry a half percent of the coal mine.”

“I see. I will continue my search, Mistress.” It didn't take Anguish long to find another potentially embarrassing clause. “It states here that you agree to restore any motor vehicles older than nineteen seventy and to offer your father first refusal at ten percent below market.”

“What?” The girl's eyes narrowed. “Where?”

“It is burred rather well, mistress. This section here states that you will restore any historical vehicles, this clause here states that the term historic will mean any vehicle made before the year nineteen seventy and that you will grant your father the right of first refusal for any sales of restored vehicles.”

“Where does it give him a discount?”

“Near the end when you agree to a ten percent discount for any member of the family for goods and services.”

“I knew it!” Hermione exclaimed, a frown forming. “I knew daddy'd slipped something else in.”

“If you knew, why did you sign, Mistress?”

“Because that's one of the rules,” Hermione explained. “Don't worry, I'd have never signed this if it hadn't come from daddy unless you and a dozen or so lawyers had cleared it first.”

“I am relieved to hear that, Mistress. Do you already have a legal team or is that something I should look into acquiring?”

“I've been using daddy's, but see if it would make sense to put our own on retainer or if it would get our own in house team.”

“I shall do so, Mistress.”

“Thank you, Anguish.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione's uncle strolled through the halls of his club and down the stairs to his boss' office without, uncharacteristically, a pause to flirt with the woman in the front office.

“Why yes, James,” Charlie stated after his best agent stormed into his office. “I can spare a few minutes. What can I do for you.”

“I haven't gotten a field assignment in months,” Hermione's Uncle said flatly. “Double O eight took the last assignment that was supposed to go to me.”

“And six before that,” Charlie agreed. “We've decided that it would be best to keep you close to home for the time being.”

“Why?”

“There have been suggestions that you're overdue for a promotion,” Charlie stated. “There has also been more than one comment that it is high time you grew up and took your place in society.”

“Is my sister behind this?”

“A whisper or two,” Charlie allowed. “I suspect most of the push is coming from your brother in law. I believe, and this is just speculation, that he is arranging things so that your niece will be able to take a seat in the house of commons if she so desires.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The fact that she's the public face of the mine reopening and will be the public face when they reopen the steelworks.” Charlie offered his best agent a cigar. “She'll be the Prime Minister before she's thirty at the rate things are going.”

“Something being my heir could compromise if things go as they did with the majority of my predecessors.” Jim lit his cigar. “I knew Phil was a bastard, just didn't think he was this much of one.”

“You may think you have an idea of how much of a bastard he can be,” Charlie snorted. “But trust me when I state that in actuality, he's a bigger bastard than you can imagine.”

“Enlighten me.”

“We became aware of a plot against your sister and her child shortly after Hermione's birth,” Charlie began. “I was ordered to inform your brother in law.”

“What sort of plot?”

“A dash of political due to your father and several more of economic. The Granger family does its best to stay out of the public eye, but it is not difficult to see that they are a family of means.” Charlie took a sip of gin. “So I arranged to meet with the man and to tell him everything we were willing to admit to knowing.” Charlie grinned. “First thing he did was ask me to be the girl's godfather, told me he wanted me to have a personal interest in her safety.”

Hermione's Uncle laughed in delight. “Sounds like exactly the sort of thing he would think of.”

“Second thing he did was to triple security. We didn't find out about the third thing until a bit later.”

“Oh?”

“Within twenty four hours every one of the blighters in a position of power received a personalized photo album containing pictures of their family, friends, neighbors, and pets along with a handwritten note from Phil Granger hoping that their loved ones stayed as healthy as his own. Within forty eight everyone on the second level got one. Seventy two got the third. We never did find out if it went further than that.

Two years later we got wind of another plot against your sister. One of our informants tipped us as to why a trio of men had been dumped off a fishing boat thirty miles off the western coast on orders from the other side. To the best of our knowledge, there has never been a third plot against any member of the Granger family.”

Charlie shook his head. “Haven't been able to confirm it, but we believe he had a conditional hit out on his sister in law. Anything happened to him and your sister, and she would have followed them within a day. The orders we to do anything to prevent her from attaining guardianship of your niece. If anything happened to your niece.” Charlie paused to pour a drink. “Well, there are some things one does not speak of in the company of those with sensitive dispositions. Believe me, James, it was ugly what he had planned.”

“Not half as bad as what I would have done, I'm sure,” Jim replied.

“Worse, James. Phil is, above all else, a family man. One reason I let our lords and masters talk me into keeping you close to home is the fact that

you might be one of the few people he'd listen to if the troubles in the wizarding world start to heat up.”

With a wide grin, Hermione's Uncle Jim poured himself a drink, quite pleased to learn that his sister had chosen so well.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 34

IIIIIIII

A group of Hermione's new employees followed her as she walked into her new engine repair facility. It was in rough shape, most of the equipment hadn't been used in decades. Still, the two girls' eyes were sparkling with anticipation as their minds considered all they'd be able to do with it.

"Hoist's broken," Hermione's new shop foreman announced. "Won't be able to do much till we get that fixed."

"Is there some way we could get started without it?" Luna asked hopefully, she and her friend were itching to create.

"What do you do at Gringotts when something like this happens?" Hermione echoed curiously. "Do you just stop working till it gets fixed?"

"Generally have security send up a couple of trolls to do the heavy lifting," the foreman replied. "Slows things down but it's better than coming to a halt. Unfortunately, we don't have any trolls available."

"No," Hermione agreed. "We don't."

“We could use golems,” Luna suggested shyly. “They can be quite strong.”

“True,” Hermione mused. “Do you think it would be possible to adapt the golem process to something more mechanical?”

“I don't see why not,” Luna said, starting to get excited. “We could get around having to create a new set of instructions for each action by using a pilot.”

“Might be worth looking into making the usual sort at some point though,” Hermione mused.

“Hmm?” Luna gave her friend her full attention.

“They use robots in normal factories to do things like welding, might be able to do the same with specially constructed golems for some of the production work.”

“True,” Luna agreed, making a note to explore the idea further.

“Back to the problem at hand,” Hermione declared. “The main issue that I think we need to overcome is power.”

“We could increase the crew size beyond just the operator and add a steam engine,” Luna said, bouncing up and down. “And we can solve the fuel storage issue by using the rune work from vanishing cabinets!”

“I think we have a working solution,” Hermione declared. The girl turned back to her new foreman. “How soon can we start constructing the prototype?”

"Uh . . . Miss, we're not going to be able to do any of this without a hoist," the foreman said cautiously.

"You're right," Hermione agreed.

"Best get started on fixing that first," Luna added. "Do you think you could have it ready to start fabricating the first parts in twelve hours?" she finished hopefully.

"Be at least fourteen," Hermione corrected. "The joints are going to be a bit fiddly so we should definitely take our time with them."

"Safer to get everything planned out right before we get too far into it," Luna agreed.

“We should have this place functional enough to start work,” the foreman agreed cautiously. “But it'll take days to get this place fully operational.”

“No problem,” Hermione said cheerfully. “They won't be needed until the next time the hoist breaks anyway.”

“And that won't likely happen for a while judging by the level of quality we've come to expect from goblin craftsmanship,” Luna added.

Their new foreman stood a bit straighter at that, always nice to be appreciated.

IIIIIIII

Lucius was in the middle of what promised to be a productive meeting with the Minister when his arm began to ache, making him again regret the follies of youth and the return of his so called 'master.' All he'd wanted was a bit of fun, to join his companions in masks and black robes. To teach the lesser beings in the magical world how dangerous it was to have thoughts about rising above their proper places, to thin the muggle herd a bit. Instead he'd found himself saddled with a madman. He allowed himself a brief moment of mourning thinking about the proper purebloods that had been lost to the thing, at the opportunities lost due to the thing's insistence of acting so much in the open.

“I still don't understand how we'll be able to shut down their business, Lucius,” Fudge bleated, bringing the proper pureblood's thoughts back to the present. “They have the right permits and Amelia has made it known how disappointed she'd be if things were misfiled.”

“Since when have you been afraid of a jumped up street Auror, Cornelius?” Lucius' tone dripped with amusement. The pain in his arm grew insistent.

“It's not her I'm afraid of, Lucius,” Fudge simpered. “It's who's behind her.”

“Dumbledore?” Lucius laughed. “A crazy old man.”

“Not him,” Fudge whispered. “Potter.”

“A mere boy?”

“They say he's Merlin returned,” Fudge's voice lowered to the point Lucius had trouble hearing him. “They say he's got the respect of the goblins and that he's just looking for an opportunity to . . .” Fudge licked his lips. “They say he's a killer.”

“So have him arrested and thrown in Azkaban,” Lucius said grandly. “You're the Minister, it's well within your power.”

“Have who arrest him, Lucius?” Fudge whined. “He has Amelia eating out of his hand.”

Lucius' jaw clenched as the pain in his arm intensified. “Let me look into the matter for you, Cornelius, I'm sure a solution will present itself.”

“I hope so, Lucius,” Fudge said, not looking hopeful. “If anyone can, it will be you.”

“How are matters coming with your.” Lucius smirked. “Protégé?” The pain in his arm intensified to the point that it was becoming nearly impossible to ignore. It was time to cut the meeting and to see what his 'master' wished.

“It's as you said, Lucius. He's the perfect one to take the responsibility for all the misfortune that's befallen us. The right people are in agreement, he's a pureblood but not the right sort of pureblood. No one of importance will object.”

“Good I . . .” his arm throbbed. “Am afraid that I must be going.”

“Are you alright, Lucius?” Fudge asked, informing the other man that some of his discomfort had shown.

“Nothing important enough to concern yourself with, Minister, but if you will be good enough to excuse me.”

“Of course. Good day, Lucius.”

“Good day, Minister.”

IIIIIIII

Harry awoke from his nap to find his assistant waiting for him. The look on her face suggested that she had something that, while not important enough to wake him, was time sensitive.

“What's up?”

"We've got a situation at the Ministry," Flint reported. "Arthur Weasley's third is being groomed to be Fudge's fall guy. We let that happen it's unavoidable that there'll be at least some splash on Arthur."

"Alright," Harry agreed. "What's being done about it?"

"Bones is doing her best to get him transferred somewhere out of the line of fire but she's getting a bit of push back from the office of Personnel."

"They Fudge's people?"

"They hate the bastard as much as we do. Push back is because they're not exactly fond of Bones either and they know that while she is the type to hold a grudge, she's not the type to get too nasty about it."

"Why are you coming to me about it?"

"You're developing the reputation of being someone willing to crawl naked over broken glass for the opportunity to avenge a slight." She grinned. "All I'm doing is suggesting we make use of that."

"What's Mr. Weasley say about all this?"

"Not a thing. He isn't asking if that's what you mean."

"He wouldn't and shouldn't have to," Harry sighed. "Do what you can."

"Bones wanted me to pass on her thanks after you said yes. Said it isn't often she gets to play the good Auror."

"Tell her to invoke my name whenever it seems like it would be useful to do so, but make sure she knows I will want to know about it afterwards and find a nice way to let her know that I'll revoke the privilege if it gets abused," Harry ordered.

"No problem, Chief."

"Chief?"

“S'what the goblins are calling you, rest of us are picking it up from them.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

“Had to chase off three researchers during your nap. They think they've figured out how you did one of those things you do and they want to see if you can do it again.”

“Which thing?”

“Different one each time, Chief, least I think it was a different thing each time. Didn't understand more than about half the words they were using. Oh, and they did let slip something else boss. Your friend Neville is up for a Flamel Potions Prize.”

“I'll assume that's impressive?”

“Very, Chief.”

“What for?”

“He's basically rewritten the books used for all seven years of potions and he's well on his way to creating a new branch of the discipline. Likely be up for a Herbarium too at the rate he's going.”

“He know yet?”

“Don't think so, Chief.”

“See if we can confirm it.”

“You got it, Chief.”

“That all?”

“That's it, Chief.”

IIIIIIII

Amelia strolled into the Office of Personnel with a wide grin on her face. Ignoring the frantic receptionist, she strolled past the man and into the office of the Head.

“Lo, Foresythe!” she cheered. “Glad I could catch you before you left early for the day.

“Bones,” the man spat.

“Just came to show you some pictures,” Amelia continued. “They're fascinating. Corpse of a massive thousand year old basilisk that nearly killed two of Harry Potter's friends. He was in second year when he did this, imagine what he could do now.”

“You are being remarkably unsubtle about this,” the man sighed. “Fine, Potter wants the Weasley twit transferred. The Weasley twit gets transferred. Do you care where?”

“Far enough from here that he doesn't get splattered, safe enough that nothing happens to the little bastard, and unimportant enough that it doesn't help his career.”

“Done, on the condition that my office and my people get included.”

“Included in what?”

“Your escape plan, Amelia, or are you under the mistaken impression that it's a secret?”

“Who knows?”

“Only the ones intelligent to pour piss from a boot.” Foresythe grinned.
“So, not many.”

“This why you've been dragging your heels?”

“That and as a gesture of my esteem for you, Amelia,” his grin deepened. “I do so hope that it was taken in the spirit I intended.”

IIIIIIII

Lucius was on the ground screaming a split second after he entered his 'master's' throne room.

“I dislike it when my servants force me to wait, Lucius,” Voldemort hissed, letting up the curse. “I trust you had a good reason.”

“I was meeting with the Minister to advance your interests, my lord,”
Lucius gasped

“I see. I trust things are going well?” Voldemort smiled. “Managing the fool is your duty after all, Lucius, and you know what I do to those who fail to do their duties.”

“He's afraid of Bones getting in the way of things, Master, it's getting more difficult to push him,” Lucius worded things carefully in hopes of giving the master a new target to focus on. “It's getting more difficult to guide him to doing what's correct.”

“Is it?” The thing raised its wand. “CRUCIO!”

Lucius screamed as every nerve in his body activated

“Do you enjoy disappointing me, Lucius?” the creature asked calmly. “I find myself wondering, Lucius, if it wouldn't be easier to have you replaced. Be happy, Lucius, I accept your excuse.”

“You are most merciful, my Lord” Lucius gasped.

“Return to your duties and see that you do not disappoint me this time.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Send in young Flint after you leave,” the Dark Lord ordered. “I think it's time he got a bit of experience. Tell him I think it's long past time Amelia Bones stopped hindering my plans.” He'd see how his pawn died before deciding if the woman was worthy of his personal attention.

“By your command, my Lord.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 35

IIIIIIII

Blood pounded in Marcus' ears as the dark lord gave his orders. Command. It was an intoxicating feeling to be given men and the task of removing one of his lord's enemies from the earth.

“What about her niece, my lord?” he asked, forcing the words through dry lips. “She'll be on her own after her aunt is gone.”

“Only proper for the commander to go first if you're able to catch her,” Voldemort replied, evidently amused by the question. “Give her to the beasts when the men have had their fill.”

“Yes, my lord.” He was inordinately proud of the fact that his voice didn't crack.

“I'm giving you four men and a dozen creatures, young Flint,” the Dark Lord purred.

“How shall I bring the wards down, my lord?”

“I will deal with the wards and with any stragglers,” Voldemort stated. “I will also be watching with great interest, be sure not to disappoint me.”

“I'd rather die, my lord,” Marcus replied.

“I have no doubt of that, young Flint,” Voldemort replied with a wide smile. “We will attack at midnight, take the time between now and then to familiarize yourself with the men and beasts.”

“By your command, my lord.” Marcus kissed the hem of his lord's robe and backed out of the room.

The recent graduate took a few moments to calm himself, wouldn't do for his new subordinates to see how excited he was. It was just like the minutes before a big Quidditch game, he told himself, only difference was that the scoring was different and the rewards were greater. He closed his eyes and contemplated what he'd do to Bones the younger, knowing that it wouldn't be hard to snatch the little bint the next time she left the castle's protections. Perhaps he'd sample her several times before throwing her to the beasts and she became ruined and too foul to touch. No loss if not, he decided, there would be others, he was sure he'd have a chance at hundreds more in the service of his lord. All he had to do was be patient and good things would come.

Heart calmed and a smile on his face, he entered the room in which his new command had been gathered.

The wizards weren't much, Flint admitted silently. Pure, but not of good families. Still, they had their use and value enough to see the sense in joining the winning side. The beasts were less impressive, scraggly worn things unworthy of fighting alongside Greyback, they'd been handed down to act as cannon fodder, to die or prove themselves worthy.

“You the leader, then?” one of the animals sneered, daring to address his better.

“CRUCIO!” Flint incanted for the first time, savoring the animal's screams. “Anyone else have any questions?” He was careful to lift the spell before there was any lasting damage, not wanting to waste the creature's life when it could be better spent on the coming victory. “I thought not.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna returned from their first day at their new play land to find several crates containing their next newest toy.

“What's this?” Hermione addressed the foreman.

“Waterjet cutter, think yer young gentleman arranged for it.”

“How does it work?” Luna demanded.

“High pressure jet of water cuts parts out of metal. Gent who's supposed to teach us how to use it says this is a small one so it can't do nearly as much as a full sized model.” The man dug an object out of his pocket. “Left this as an example of what they can do. Says it took him almost no time at all to turn that out compared to doing it the way we do now.”

Hermione took the part and turned it over in her hands. “A bit rough but it might be nice to have for prototyping,” the girl observed.

“We'll have to remember to thank Harry,” Luna chirped.

IIIIIIII

Amelia arrived home that evening, had a light meal, and got to bed early. Meetings with Philip Granger, meetings with her muggle counterpart, meetings with her Aurors to plan the defense of the Ministry. Not for the first time she wished there was a spell that let one create a second version of themselves, better a dozen copies. Even with one copy she was sure she'd still have trouble getting everything done.

It felt as if she'd just gotten to sleep when one of her detail woke her up.

“What is it?” she asked groggily.

“Someone's trying to take down the wards around the manor,” the younger woman whispered back.

“Tonight of all bloody nights,” Amelia cursed, reaching for her boots. “Son of a whore had to do it on the night I had an early bloody morning.”

“Duty platoon reports they'll be out the door in two minutes.”

“Let's hope the bloody wards last that long,” Amelia sighed.

IIIIIIII

The wards shattered and Voldemort watched as his pawn cautiously followed his group to the house. One thing the little sot did right, the Dark Lord thought to himself, forcing the werewolves to go first. He'd

have to remember to crucio the little bastard to see that he didn't do it again. Self preservation was not a trait he liked to see in his servants.

Things were going well, Voldemort observed, perhaps a bit too well. Was Bones even home? He'd expected the woman and her detail to have reacted by . . . the man's mouth went dry as his finely honed senses detected anti-apperation wards going up. "Trigger your portkeys," he ordered. A bit more than half of the two dozen he'd brought managed to escape, of those all but four including himself had left body parts behind. Ambush! The Dark Lord raged. Bones had been expecting him. Rage clouded Voldemort's eyes as the answer came to him. He had a traitor.

IIIIIIII

Amelia's grin threatened to split her face. Six bloody prisoners and six more in the ground with no losses to the good guys from the group at the edge of her wards and not a bloody escape from the blighters that had crossed in.

"Orders, boss?"

"Slap another set of wards on the manor and keep an eye on it. It's possible they'll try to burn it or something and we may as well see if we can grab another set of prisoners if they do. No heroics and not enough resources to stop a determined effort."

"Yes, boss. You want us to see if we can break the prisoners before morning?"

“Put them on ice. Have Tonks ask Potter if we can borrow his pet auditor in the morning.”

“Got it, boss.”

Amelia's blood was singing as she returned to her section of the Granger residence, it was a good time to be alive.

IIIIIIII

Sprocket was waiting with half a dozen goblin technicians at the the entrance of the Common Room when Hermione stepped out that morning.

“Anguish is off on an errand,” the goblin greeted his liege. “The other techs are with Ms. Lovegood, and the Deputy Headmistress would like a word when it is convenient. She instructed me to tell you that she will be in her office for the first half of the day and her quarters for the second.”

“Any idea where Harry's hiding?”

“Believe he's making arrangements for an informal meeting with Gringotts to discuss trading in luxury items.”

“You wished to speak with me, Professor?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, come in, Ms. Granger.” Minerva had a wide smile on her face. “I wanted to be the first to tell you some good news, they think they've

figured out how Mr. Potter managed to break the third law of transfiguration.”

“That's wonderful news, Professor!” Hermione cheered. “Have you told Harry?”

“He seemed to give it as much importance as I thought he would,” Minerva said wryly. “Which is why I wanted to be sure to tell you since we both know he wouldn't have thought to.”

“Harry can be quite modest about that sort of thing,” Hermione said primly.

“Quite,” Minerva agreed. “Be sure your parents are also informed.”

“I wouldn't dream of keeping something so important from them,” Hermione replied, scandalized by the thought.

“By parents I mean your father,” Minerva sighed. “There are political aspects to this. Your father will be sure that Madame Bones and the Goblins know.”

“Or I could write a letter to all of the above, Professor,” Hermione pointed out.

“You could,” Minerva agreed. “I suggested going through your father because I believe he'd have a much better appreciation of the political aspects and, as a result, be much better at knowing how to present the information in a way that most benefits Mr. Potter.”

“Oh.” Hermione's face went blank. “I see, thank you, Professor. I must admit that I hadn't considered that aspect of it.”

“I wouldn't have expected you to, Ms. Granger, not after knowing you for all these years.” The woman leaned back. “Business out of the way, do you have time for a bit of conversation?”

“Always, Professor.”

IIIIIIII

Marcus woke slowly and immediately knew that things had gone very wrong. His shoulders slumped, he'd been captured. Better than it could have been, he supposed. He'd have to spend a bit of time in the Ministry's holding cells, perhaps a week or two in Azkaban before his master took over the country and made them as gods among men. It would be unpleasant, it was the least of his worries. Far worse was the fact that he'd failed his lord and would have to suffer his lord's displeasure.

A bit of moving about revealed that he was both blindfolded and chained to a chair. Likely in one of the interrogation rooms and left to stew a bit to try and worry him a bit. Internally, Marcus sneered. He knew the weak fools at the Ministry lacked the guts to do anything to him. A sudden thought brought a smile to his face, with any luck the others would all break and spill what they knew. That way his lord's ire would be focused on the weak minded fools and perhaps he'd reward his only faithful servant, the one who didn't break.

There was the faint sound of someone screaming in the background, must have been loud to get through the soundproofing around the room. Marcus grinned in amusement, he wondered if it was a recording of some sort or if they had a junior Auror outside screaming at the top of their lungs. He'd have to ask after they took the place, might be a good opening before he showed some unfortunate former Auror how to do a real interrogation.

The door opened, drawing him from his thoughts, and closed. He put a look of confident condescension on his face as the footsteps got closer and closer.

“Marcus Flint,” a voice whispered into his ear. “We have one of your cousins working for us. Happily for her, you're between her and a rather large inheritance.” He heard a chair scrap across the floor, presumably as it was being pulled out from under a table. “You were caught attempting to assassinate the Head of The Department of Magical Law Enforcement. For that, you are going to die. You will tell me everything you know, you will not lie, you will not attempt to hide things. Do you understand?”

“Exactly who do you think you're fooling with that tough Auror act? We both know the dark lord is going to own this country in a month. Save yourself some pain, let me loose and join the winning side. Do it now and I'll put in a good word for you.”

“Forgive me, I forgot to introduce myself.”

The blindfold was torn off and Flint blinked several times, attempting to adjust to the sudden brightness. The figure across from him didn't look

right through half blinded eyes. There were no red robes, the skin tone looked odd . . . no. Fear warred with horror as his eyes cleared enough to have some idea of who, rather what he was dealing with.

“My name is Auditor Anguish,” the creature introduced itself with a toothy grin. “You are going to tell me everything.”

IIIIIIII

Luna was already in the shop when Hermione got there. Wordlessly, the other girl handed her friend a mug of tea and an empty notebook.

“Sorry I was late,” Hermione said, flopping down next to the other girl. “Professor McGonagall wanted to tell me that they think they've figured out how Harry broke the third law of transfiguration.”

“Wonderful,” Luna cheered. “I assume she also wanted to be sure you told your father.”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed.

“Did she have to tell you why it was so important?” Luna continued.

“She did. How did you know?”

“I am the daughter of the greatest living journalist in the magical world, Hermione,” Luna said breezily. “One picks up things.”

“I'm sure one does,” Hermione said dryly. “Are we ready for the test?”

“We shall be in a few moments, they're just doing their fifth set of checks now.”

“They're starting,” Hermione whispered. “This is it.”

Hermione's first engine, the little ex Coal Board her parents had given her, slowly inched out of the shed operated by her chief engineer and crewed by Sprocket, a fireman, and two other goblin techs. At a nod from the girl, the man increased speed, at another nod, Sprocket turned a dial. There was no visible change for the first pair of heartbeats. The two girls watched in spellbound wonder for two more.

“It's working,” Luns squeaked. “I can see a gap between the rails and the wheels.”

“We did it, Luna!” Hermione cheered. “We did it!”

As scheduled, Sprocket slowly turned back the dial, holding his breath until they'd touched down and come to a complete stop.

Hermione and Luna were there in a flash.

“Is everyone alright?” Hermione asked, prioritizing the safety of her employees over her triumph.

“We're all fine, Miss,” the engineer replied. “Hardly noticed a thing.”

“Power consumption was a touch higher than calculations suggested it would be,” Sprocket volunteered. “We wouldn't have been able to make a controlled landing if I'd waited much longer.”

“You did the right thing, Sprocket,” Hermione said with a wide grin.
“Important thing is that we proved the concept.”

Sprocket sighed. “Power consumption is going to be the key, we'll need to bring it down a lot or I don't think we'll be able to do much with it. Not even if we run it along ley lines.”

“Let us know if you think of something, Sprocket,” Hermione ordered.
“Same goes for everyone else, we'll take ideas from anyone. Not just about this, about anything. Never know who'll come up with a winner. We surround ourselves with the best, it's to be expected that the best will have good ideas.”

“We will do our best to make the clan proud,” Sprocket promised, feeling like he was going to burst in pride at the trust being shown.

“To the drawing board!” Luna cheered.

The two girls rushed into their office to do a bit of inventing. Ideas flew back and fourth like shells over Verdun. Numerous, fast, and explosive.

“Luna, are you aware of any ways to convert heat and light or electricity into magical energy?” Hermione mused, eyes unfocused.

“Oh my, yes,” Luna chirped, “for example the lightning rods on Hogwarts convert the energy from strikes into magic that helps strengthen the wards. It's one of the reasons the castle is so strong.” The girl smirked. “Wasn't that mentioned in Hogwarts, a History?” she added innocently.

“It may have been,” Hermione admitted. “But it has been several years since I've given it a read, too many new books to go through at the moment. What about light and heat?”

“I believe there are several old rituals that are partially powered by a large fire,” Luna said thoughtfully. “It is not an area I know much about.”

“Start looking,” Hermione said with a wide smile. “I have an idea.”

“Oh?”

“Oh,” Hermione agreed. “I just need to order a few things to make it work.”

“Tell me more,” Luna ordered, bouncing up and down.

She did.

IIIIIIII

Phil arrived to dinner to find his wife with a perplexed look on her face. It was one he was quite familiar with, their daughter had done or was about to do something and his lovely bride was trying to decide if she should take credit or assign blame. Promised to be a rather good evening either way.

“What new mischief has the scion of the Granger house gotten herself into?”

“I'm not sure. She's made a rather large order from Russia of all places,” Anne's nose scrunched up. “Her shopping list makes absolutely no sense.”

“Oh? What does she want?” He calmly took a glass of wine from one of the servants.

“Old paint, old clocks, and two thousand smoke detectors,” Anne stated. “I can't imagine what she's planning on doing with it all.”

Old paint, old clocks, and two thousand smoke . . .” his eyes widened in alarm. “Get me Tonks right now!” he barked at the nearest security person. The man was on his feet in a flash. “Sorry to run, darling, I'll explain how our daughter's typical aristocratic attitude is threatening to violate a rather large number of treaties upon my return.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 36

IIIIIIII

Hermione didn't know what to think. One minute she was in her workshop, the next she'd been bundled off to a surprise meeting with her father who had a look on his face she'd never seen before.

“Darling, I never thought I'd have to say it. But you are absolutely forbidden from buying plutonium, americium, radium, uranium, or any other material that can be used to make either a nuclear device or a nuclear reactor.”

“But daddy, it's just a little light water reactor,” Hermione said quickly. “It's perfectly safe if you know what you're doing.”

“Show me a PHD in nuclear engineering from a reputable university with your name on it and I'll think about it,” he replied. “Until then, no.”

“But-”

“No!” He said firmly. “Don't make me bring Harry into this.”

Hermione's mouth snapped closed as a light blush dusted her cheeks.

“What about Fusion? All I'd need is a bit of heavy water and I believe it would be legal for me to do without an advanced degree.”

“Send me a proposal and I'll run it past some people,” he sighed, why did parenting have to be so much work? He was sure he'd never been so much trouble to his parents, must be something she picked up from her mother's side. Making a mental note to mention it to his wife at some point, he continued. “It's not that I don't trust you, darling, it's that I don't want you doing things that could potentially be against international law.” He thought it best not to mention how flexible domestic law could be in regards to their family.

“I'll . . . I'll also need a bit of leeway with your new rule,” she sighed. “The lantern mantels we use have thorium in them which could be used to make a liquid salt reactor.”

“You may purchase and possess nuclear materials in small amounts so long as it is lawful for you to do so,” he allowed. He sighed. “You are also forbidden from creating any other weapons of mass destruction. No chemical weapons, no biological weapons, no neutron bombs.”

“I'm not sure why I would, daddy,” Hermione perked up at the non-restriction. “All I wanted was to experiment with a new power source to run the train.”

“Alright, darling. How about this, you may design a fusion reactor with your friend. I will see if I can find a plasma physicist or two that knows about the magical world to assist you. Failing that, I'll do my best to find someone with related knowledge. In return, you give up fission for now. Deal?”

“The start of one, daddy,” Hermione chirped, doing her best to look both adorable and innocent. “I'd still like a sample of a nuclear material for a transfiguration experiment I thought up earlier.”

The man eyed his progeny with no small amount of suspicion. “What sort of sample?”

“How about uranium two thirty eight?” Hermione suggested. “It has to do with one of Harry's discoveries.”

“What's he done now?” Phil asked, allowing himself to relax a touch.

“Harry broke the third law of transfiguration when he transfigured an object into gold. It gave me an idea I wanted to test and I needed some samples to test my idea.”

“And the reactor?”

“If I'm going to go through the trouble to gather a large amount of material to experiment on, I may as well have a plan for what to do with it after I've conducted my experiments. That's just common sense.”

“Of course it is.” He closed his eyes and counted to ten. “Was there anything else, darling?”

“One thing, daddy,” Hermione chirped, an angelic smile lighting her face.

“Go ahead.” His gut sank, he knew that look.

“Aside from a trivial amount of help with my fusion reactor, what are you going to give me to make up for the fact that I can't build a fission reactor?”

“I should have known.” Pride warred with reason as reason pointed out how much this was likely to cost him. Every penny she thinks she can wring out of you, pride replied, she is her father's daughter after all. He just hoped his little girl didn't realize what was going through his mind, would give her much to big an advantage in the coming negotiation.

IIIIIIII

Anne noted the way her newest assistant cocked her head and divined the reason. With a flick of her wrist, she signaled to one of the servants to have their meals brought back to the table. Her husband had returned, entertainment was sure to follow.

“Do you have any idea what your daughter was going to do?” Phil announced as he strode into the room. “Not only do I doubt it, I suspect you'd see nothing amiss at her blatant disregard for the law.”

“Don't keep me in suspense,” she prompted, suppressing a giggle. This promised to be good.

“Your daughter was attempting to procure enough radioactive material to make a nuclear reactor. She also told me that the main reason she wanted all of it was for a couple experiments, but that she had the idea of building a reactor so that none of her highly illegal radioactive material would go to waste after she was done playing with it. I blame you, no one in my family's ever done anything like this.”

“I'll have you know, that no one from my family has ever . . . damn!”

“Forgot about your brother for a minute, didn't you.”

“Why don't we agree to blame him and call it a draw?”

“Why don't we not.”

“In that case, I would like to point out the fact that the only reason she was planning to build a nuclear reactor was to avoid waste. I'm sure that no one on my side of the family has ever let their actions be governed by such a pedestrian reason. Where as your family, a family of merchants, has never let so much as a penny slip through their fingers.”

“A draw it is.”

IIIIIIII

Luna perked up when her best friend returned. Upon seeing the look on the other girl's face, she was practically bouncing in excitement.

“Welcome back, Hermione,” Luna said cheerfully. “I take it your meeting went well?”

“Plan B,” Hermione answered. “We don't get a fission reactor, we do get fusion, and you are going to love the concessions I got.”

“Everything we hoped for?” Luna asked hopefully.

“And more, Luna,” Hermione replied, looking like a cat that had just eaten a particularly large canary. “More than we'd hoped. Daddy slipped up, he was so proud that I demanded he make it worth my while that he let himself be a lot softer than usual. Where's Sprocket?”

“Here, mistress!” the goblin in question sprinted across the workshop.

“Let everyone know that we're going to get a couple more facilities. Three factories, one dry dock, and one aerodrome. Be sure to also put out the word that we're going to be needing more people, a lot more people.”

IIIIIIII

Voldemort seethed. His attack on Bones had failed spectacularly. He had lost some of his most faithful, wizards trusted to stand by his side in battle. To his mind, there was only one reason for that, only one thing that could have alerted Bones to the danger and allowed her the time to lay a trap. A traitor.

Some part of his mind noted the arrival of Bellatrix, his most faithful servant. The rest was consumed by rage.

“Speak!”

“I have come to report failure, my lord,” Bellatrix said, eyes cast down. “The traitors you assigned me to question broke before revealing the full extent of their crimes against you. I have no excuses, my lord, all I can say is that I was so enraged by their admissions that I allowed myself to be careless.”

“It is a rage we share, Bella. I forgive you, this time.”

“You are most merciful, my lord.”

“Continue cutting, I want this poison cut out of my death eaters. Dispose of any you have even the slightest bit of suspicion towards. The guilty deserve every bit of pain you visit upon them, the innocent will understand that their duty is to serve me and that their deaths will be in my service.”

“I understand, my lord, I will end all who stand against you.”

“Of that, I have no doubt Bella. Of that, I have no doubt.” The Dark Lord leaned back. “I have decided our response for the insult delivered and I have decided that you shall be my instrument of vengeance.”

“I am honored, my lord,” Bellatrix gasped. “Truly, your generosity knows no bounds.”

“I will hold the details till the last moment, Bella, I don't want you to be distracted from your current task. I will say this, my response will be similar to your task. All must die, the faithful will die knowing that they died in my service. The blood traitors and mudbloods will die screaming and cursing my name. None will survive that I don't send.”

“I hear, my lord, it will be my greatest pleasure to obey.”

“You may hand pick as many as you need, Bella. I shall also give you Lucius and Avery as sub-commanders. Their task will be to support you

in all things, to ensure that you and yours succeed, and will understand that their forces will take the bulk of any casualties.” The dark lord's smile turned cold. “One way or another.”

IIIIIIII

Ron awoke the next day, had breakfast, and endured the day's classes, mind on other things. Ollivander was coming. The greatest wand craftsman in the country was coming to inspect his woodwork. The boy'd be lying if he said he wasn't nervous.

He was out of the castle and in his workshop a split second after his last class ended. He had orders to complete, he had exercises to do and to send back to the stock makers Hermione's da had introduced to him, he had projects to work on. It was a whole weekend worth of work and then some. It didn't seem like he had a spare moment and he loved every second of it. A small part of his mind marveled at how little homework he had to do, seemed the teachers were willing to be a bit more understanding when they knew he was working on his future. Who knew?

The boy stopped his work and reached for something to drink, knowing that Harry's mad elf always had something ready for him on the right side of his work bench.

“HOOT!”

And found himself with a handful of severely annoyed owl.

“Sorry about that, didn't notice you there,” Ron said apologetically.
“What do you have for me?”

The owl fixed him with a glare and violently thrust out its claw.

“A letter from Mandy!” Ron exclaimed in delight. “Wait a mo, I'll have a reply for you in just a minute.” He opened a drawer. “Good, still have some owl treats. Help yourself while I read it and write my response.”

“Hoot.” The much less annoyed owl took him up on his offer.

The letter was brief, in short she was inviting him to spend the weekend with the team. They had practice and the excuse given was that they wanted him on hand to take care of any alterations the brooms might need. The real reason was burred at the end of her letter. She missed him, both of them had busy schedules and they hadn't so much as seen each other in two weeks.

Ron looked over his unfinished projects, his orders, his exercises, his homework. Regrettably, he didn't have the time to take her up on her offer. Ron dashed out a quick reply accepting her invitation. His work could wait a couple days and it wasn't like he couldn't take some of it with him to work on when Mandy was busy with her own job. What he couldn't do was take his relationship for granted, his work would always be there. She might not, especially if he made a habit of pushing her aside in favor of his job. His work was replaceable, he failed in it he'd just have to find something else. He failed his relationship, he knew he'd never find someone as good as Mandy.

Ron affixed the letter to the owl and watched as it flew off. Wouldn't hurt to work a bit late, not like sleep was all that important. Maybe he could get Harry's mad elf to bring him dinner too, he mused. Wouldn't be too bad if he couldn't, wasn't like it would be the end of the world if he missed a meal or two.

IIIIIIII

Hannah and Susan finished their weekend homework early and spent the rest of the time between their last class and their evening meal helping the younger years finish theirs. Wouldn't do to have hanging over them and spoil their weekend in Hogsmead.

“Rose know we're gonna be there?” Hannah asked.

“She says she reserved a room on the second floor of the Three Broomsticks. She says she was able to get Brown, Byrd, and Jacobs to come too,” Susan replied, naming three former members of her protection detail. “She's not sure about Hamilton or Smythe, they say they'll try to be there but they can't promise anything.”

“I can't believe Rose is going to have a baby,” Hannah said happily. The woman had been in charge of Susan's protection since Susan had needed someone to be in charge of her safety. “Isn't it great?”

“She said she tried to time things so it wouldn't make her take time off,” Susan said in excitement. “She said she wanted to be sure to be around when I had summer off because she figured she could use us as babysitters.”

“Is it babysitting if she's in the room with us?” Hannah asked.

“Aunt Amelia says that the law isn't clear on the matter but that she doesn't see why not. This is going to be the best summer.”

“We're going to be together, we're going to be with Hermione and Luna, and we're all going to have a baby to play with,” Hannah agreed. “Only thing that would make it better is if . . . if you know wasn't around.”

“I'm sure Harry and Aunt Amelia will get to him. She said she almost had the bugger the other night but that he was better at running away than her people were at throwing up wards. Said the inconsiderate sod had the utter nerve to attack at night when she had an early morning and that he was lucky his slower minions didn't have much of a fight in them or she'd have been really cross.”

Hannah giggled. “Only a matter of time then?”

“Shoe's on the other foot this time around,” Susan agreed. “Wasn't like it was when we were babies. We've got Harry, we've got Aunt Amelia in charge, we've got more people. Aunt Amelia says we're somewhere between the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end.”

IIIIIIII

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to keep himself focused as his assistant went over the security plan for his informal meeting with the goblins.

“We've already got the beginning of an agreement with them,” Flint continued. “Everything important has been decided, all you have to do is check the agreement and sign it.”

“Greengrass and Davis on board?”

“Signed and sealed,” Flint agreed. “Philip wanted it whispered to you that he can be sure that nothing will go wrong on his end.”

“That's something, I suppose,” Harry yawned. “Our people know what they're supposed to be doing?”

“They do, boss.”

“Alright, seems we've covered everything. Get yourself some sleep, I'm going to be doing the same.”

“Right, boss.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 37

IIIIIIII

Neville noted with no small amount of surprise that Harry was still in bed when he woke up that morning. Unusual even for a weekend, just went to show how how exhausting his dorm mate's schedule was.

He got dressed as quietly as possible and tip toed down the stairs to the common room. Half the house was already there, to be expected for a Hogsmeade weekend, he supposed. The younger years treated it as a special occasion. The chance to see new things, to eat new things, to buy new things. Its luster may have worn out after a couple years, but the memory remained.

“Good morning, cousin,” Neville said happily. “Planning to go to Hogsmeade today?”

“I'm not on rotation to escort this visit, there's also the fact that Luna and I are too busy working on something that, if successful, will change the world as we know it,” Hermione replied cheerfully. “You?”

“Good luck with your project, I look forward to hearing about your success. I'll be on the floo with Juliet a bit later today, some projects in the Greenhouse before that. Would you like me to pass on anything to her?”

Hermione nodded. “Give her my best. Is Ron still asleep?”

“Gone when I got up, Harry is, though.”

Hermione's grin widened significantly. “That's almost unheard of, both those things.”

“I don't have any details but I understand that Ron has an appointment with the Harpies that will take most or all of the weekend.”

Hermione glanced up at the clock and squeaked. “I don't mean to be rude, cousin, but I'm afraid I really must cut our chat short.”

“No offense taken, cousin,” Neville replied. “Safe travels.”

“Goodbye, Neville,” Hermione giggled.

Neville watched the girl disappear out the entrance. “Anyone who's going to Hogsmeade willing to do me a favor?”

“What'd you need, Nev?”

“Half a dozen quills and some ink,” Neville replied.

“Sure.”

“Neville handed the other boy a dozen galleons. “Leftovers go to buying Gryffindors drinks at the Three Broomsticks if you don't mind.”

“Course not since I'm a Gryffindor. Thanks, Nev, you're a good'un.”

“I try to be.”

IIIIIIII

At the same time Hermione was on her way to her workshop, Susan and Hannah were dressed in their finest and half way to Hogsmeade.

“What'd you get her?” Susan asked.

“One hundred and One Useful Spells For The New Mother and Fifty Potions,” Hannah replied. “Mum recommended it. You?”

“Enchanted ear plugs,” Susan replied. “Aunt Amelia says that Rose is going to need them.”

IIIIIIII

Ron winced as one of the second-string chasers took a bludger to the arm, almost losing the quaffle as she fell off her broom but making a last-second pass to her partner.

“Wish we could have had that happen in a game,” Mandy said wistfully.

“That was a great pass.”

“Coaches have cameras recording everything, right?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, they're used for critiques after the practice bouts. Why?”

“Tell them to put out books filled with the greatest moves in practice or the greatest blunders or something. People will buy them.”

“What?

“Bloody great move, wasn't it?”

“Yeah.”

“Glad you saw it, aren't you?”

“Yeah.”

“So convert it into something you can sell and sell it. Market it as a look behind the scenes, tell people it's stuff they don't normally get to see, and you'll sell a copy to every one of your fans.” The boy snorted. “Likely ten copies to every one of your competitors hoping to get a bit more information about the team.”

“I'll mention it to the coach,” Mandy promised.

“No need,” a smooth voice said from behind them.

The couple turned to find one of the owners smiling at them. “It's a good idea, we'll do it.”

“With a percentage of every sale going to Ron for the idea?” Mandy asked hopefully.

“Why not?” the woman agreed. “Shall we send the tentative contract to the usual place, Mr. Weasley?”

“Please,” Ron stated. “Yer daughter like the autographed picture of Harry?”

“She said it was the best birthday present ever,” the woman replied. “It's why I'm here, actually. How'd you get him to do it? He said no when I approached him.”

“I'm his best mate and I've saved his life a couple times,” Ron answered. “Makes it a bit easier to convince him to do things he doesn't want to do. Also got a whole load of dirt on him which makes it even easier.”

“What sort of dirt?” Mandy asked suspiciously.

“The sort that's not really a big deal but that would embarrass him a bit if I told it to Hermione,” Ron replied easily. “Not that she doesn't already know it, but Harry's good at pretending she doesn't.”

IIIIIIII

Voldemort smiled as three of his inner circle entered his throne room, threw themselves to the ground, and kissed the hem of his robe.

“Arise, my most faithful,” the Dark Lord purred. “I have an important mission for you three. Lucius, report the information you discovered.”

“Potter has reserved a private meeting room at the Three Broomsticks for the day. The reservation slip notes that he intends to arrive at eleven and that his guests will arrive shortly before or after.”

“Bellatrix, I think it long past time you taught the world that none escape the great Lord Voldemort.”

“It will be my greatest honor and privilege, My Lord,” Bella gasped, almost too moved to talk.

“You have picked your team?”

“I have, My Lord.”

“Good. Lucius, Avery.”

“My Lord?” the two men chorused.

“Your job is to keep the Aurors off Bellatrix when they arrive. Her mission is paramount, as such her life and the lives of her team are more important than yours. Do you understand?”

“We do, My Lord.”

“Good. I will be checking that understanding after the battle. If more of her team are killed, captured, or wounded than either of yours, I will rectify that mistake. Do you understand who I will start that correction with?”

“We do, My Lord,” Lucius replied.

“Good. If Potter proves to be less than punctual, I want the three of you to amuse yourselves by killing blood traitors and any that associate with them. Look at groups, not individuals. If any group has so much as one

mudblood or blood traitor, the entire group dies. Have I made myself clear?”

“You have, My Lord,” Bellatrix said, eyes mad, chest heaving with excitement. “Might I make a suggestion, My Lord?”

“You may, Bellatrix.”

“Might Lucius and Avery pass the time waiting for the Aurors by carrying out those instructions? And might my team and I do the same after Potter has been dealt with?”

“Yes, Bella, you may. Kill the nits and burn the town if you have time to do so.”

“For your glory, My Lord,” Bellatrix panted. “For what you have given me, I am truly grateful.”

Yes, the dark lord thought to himself. Potter or no Potter, this should wipe the grin of Bones' face and remind the public that he was someone to fear.

IIIIIIII

Harry awoke with a start. A quick glance at his pocket watch assured the boy that he was not late to his meeting. Following a long shower, the boy dressed in an appropriate set of robes and walked to the castle entrance to meet his assistant.

“Morning, Chief,” Flint said with a grin. “Looks like you managed to get some sleep.”

“Researchers must be too busy writing papers to bother me,” Harry said with a grin.

“McGonagall threatened to hex them to death if they so much as talked to you over the weekend. Think she's getting worried you're working too hard.”

“Remind me to do something nice for her.”

“Goblins sent a message that they've arrived at the meeting room, one I talked to wanted me to pass on that they got in early cause the guy you're talking to has a . . . can't call it a sweet tooth, but he loves to eat cigars and was hoping that some would be put out for him to snack on while waiting for you to arrive.”

“I trust he was right?”

“Was, Chief, guy we assigned to set up the room brought out a whole sampler platter for them.”

“Give him a bonus,” Harry said immediately. “Him and anyone involved in it.”

“Will do, Chief,” Flint agreed happily. “Along the same lines, goblin that talked to me earlier put in a polite request that we not arrive too early. Guess his boss is hard to deal with and he's hoping a dozen or so good cigars will improve his mood.”

“We'll walk then,” Harry suggested. “Should have plenty of time.”

“Yes, Chief.”

“Any other news?”

“Minor commotion at the Granger estate, no details on it. Phil Granger wanted to be the one to tell you what happened.”

“Talk to his people about setting up a meeting.”

“Already done, Chief. Another bit of news is we were able to confirm that your mate Neville is up for a Flamel Potions Prize and that you're in the running for a Flamel Charms Prize.”

“Good on Neville. I assume those are considered prestigious?”

“Very.”

“We know if Snape knows?”

“We're fairly sure he doesn't, Chief,” Flint replied with a grin. “He's attended the last seven of nine award ceremonies. I already have two dozen photographers hired and I'm looking for more.”

“Publish every photo in a book, give one to Neville with my compliments, take half the profits for yourself and toss the other half in the employee bonus fund.”

“Will do, Chief,” Flint agreed. “Ten gets you twenty that it's a best seller.”

“Sucker bet,” Harry laughed. “Hermione and Luna in the workshop?”

“They are, Chief. Bones and Abbot are at the Broomsticks with Bones' security detail. Rose is having a baby shower.”

“I send her anything?”

“You sent a self rocking crib and an invitation to work for you. She sent back a rather nice thank you note and a suggestion to do something anatomically possible with your note so long as Bones was in charge. From Rose, that's a glowing compliment, Chief.”

“I'll take it in the spirit it was intended,” Harry assured the woman. “You have any time to spend with your husband lately?”

“Not much between my job and his new employer, Chief,” Flint admitted.

Harry checked his watch as the entered the village of Hogsmeade. “Remind me to have a word with your husband's employer about that. I'll try to at least get the two of you a long weekend.”

“Thanks, boss, I will. I-” The hairs on the back of Flint's neck went up. A big group of people was arriving via magical transport. She went for her wand.

Harry calmly noted the appearance of more Death Eaters than he'd ever seen in one place outside of a cemetery.

“Flint, be sure the goblins are told that I'm going to have to skip today's meeting.” In a flash the boy's wand was in his hand, half a heartbeat later he was in the midst of his enemies and cursing like mad.

“Chief!” Flint watched in horror as the boy she was responsible to protect dove headfirst into certain death. “Damn it!” She drew her wand and began hexing every bastard that so much as looked at the boy, hoping that it would be enough.

Scattered about the street, two dozen Potter Security Operatives drew theirs and joined their leader in what they were sure was a hopeless fight. It wasn't a question of fighting to survive. Their choice was simple, die on their knees begging to avoid their fate or to die on their feet. It wasn't a hard choice, not for the type Harry had hired.

IIIIIIII

Rose laughed wildly, holding up for all to see the latest obscene object one of her colleagues had given her.

“Thanks, Partridge!” Rose called out. “I'll be sure to put it to good-”

Every Auror in the room froze, their senses screaming that someone was transporting in.

“Death Eaters!” Partridge yelled from the window. “Rose, get the girls out of here!”

Without a hint of hesitation, Rose grabbed both girls in a hug and activated their emergency portkeys.

IIIIIIII

Neville laughed as Juliet finished her impersonation of her uncle Jim. He'd been delighted to discover that the girl had hidden a delightful sense of humor under her shy exterior.

“When do you think you can spare the time for another date?” the girl asked, switching back to normal.

“Never. Time spent with you is never spared, it's carefully hoarded. To answer the question, when will I be privileged with your company? Let me know what times work for you and I will do my utmost to be available. No mater what I have to skip or cancel, you're worth more to me than the world.”

“Neville,” the girl sighed. “I-”

“What's wrong?”

“Some people just arrived,” Juliet said. “They're saying something about a Death Eater attack in Hogsmeade?”

In one smooth motion, the boy threw a hand full of floo powder into the fire “Three Broomsticks!” An instant later he tumbled into the pub.

“Younger students first, through the fire and back to the castle. Older

students guard the floo, close it after you or close it if you think the bastards are going to get in!" Neville ordered.

"What're you going to do, mate?" Seamus asked with a grin, already knowing the answer and eager to join in.

"Buy time," Neville replied, heading towards the door.

"Hear that?" Seamus yelled. "Neville's not going to let Harry hog all the fun this time. Who's with us?"

"Gryffindor!" Dean, Lavender, Parvati, and half a dozen upper years cheered.

"Hope this isn't a private party," Justin said calmly as he joined the group. "Shall we?"

"We don't take a step back, we hold till every little one is back in the castle, none gets past us and lives," Neville said firmly, reaching for the door. The boy drew his wand, took a deep breath, and opened the door. "DESPERTA FERRO!"

"FOR QUEEN AND COUNTRY!" Justin screamed as he rushed out, when in Rome and all that. May as well face the end as a man of his class should.

"DEX AIE!"

"WEST HAM TILL I DIE!"

The students poured out of the pub and immediately set upon the nearest group of Death Eaters.

“Hakkaa Päälle!” Inkeri McIver, a svelt blonde seventh year screamed, bisecting a Death Eater before turning her wand on another, a grin adorned her face knowing that she would soon be feasting in the halls of Valhalla, entertaining her ancestors with the tale of her glorious death. She wielded her wand like a whip, flinging cutting charm after cutting charm into the mass of Death Eaters. “Hakkaa Päälle!” It was a good day to die.

“Har Har Mahadev!” Parvati laughed, blood pounding in her ears. She knew she was going to die, she'd accepted that when she'd joined Neville band. She was going to die, but she was going to make damn sure that they took enough Death Eaters with them that every one of the younger students would make it back to the castle safely. The girl grunted as something hit her in the side, no time to worry about what that could have been, there was work to be done. Her wand flicked and a rain of icicles fell from the sky onto her foes.

“Har Har Mahadev!” Lavender echoed, not knowing the words but understanding the spirit they conveyed. Unlike her best friend, she focused more on defense, doing her best to protect her friends and fellow students, doing her best to delay the end of what she knew to be a hopeless battle long enough for the Broomsticks to be emptied. The girl threw a quick blood clotting charm at her best friend and banished a handful of gravel to intercept a killing curse.

For the Death Eaters, it was as if a swarm of demons had erupted from hell. Minds frozen by indecision, some tried to fight, some tried to run, most died.

IIIIIIII

Sprout threw up a wall of earth, blocking a group of her children from a hail of curses before turning on their attackers intent on killing every one of them.

Blood spatter stained her robes, the woman ignored her rapidly growing list of injuries. She couldn't allow herself to fall, she couldn't allow herself to slow down, not while the man had had-

IIIIIIII

Harold Greene hadn't gone to Hogwarts nor had anyone from his family. Hogwarts letters weren't exactly the sort of thing people on his tier of life expected to see. He'd gone to a good school, graduated, and apprenticed with the local pastry maker. The man had taught him every aspect of the craft. More importantly the man had had a pretty daughter his age. One thing had led to another and Harold was expecting his third child at the end of the month.

Harold's heart sank when they arrived. He was going to die. He was never going to see his new child. Harold smiled. His wife and children were out of town visiting his parents. Whatever happened, they'd be safe. Knowing that, he thought he could face his death calmly.

A spark of hope lit in his breast when Harry Potter threw himself into the fray. To be expected of the boy-who-lived, he thought to himself, wishing he had a thimblefull of the boy's courage. That hope died when Harold realized just how many Death Eaters there were. No one, not even the boy-who-lived could take that many by themselves.

“Protect the Chief!” the man to his right screamed, drawing his wand and cursing a Death Eater.

Harold's eyes widened in shock. Who said the boy-who-lived had to do everything himself? “Protect the Chief!” Harold echoed, drawing his own wand and hitting a Death Eater with a bludgeoning charm. It was a good nickname, he thought, much easier to say than the boy-who-lived.

In ones and twos the residents of Hogsmeade began to realize exactly what was happening. Their neighbors were fighting back, their neighbors were helping the boy-who-lived. How could they not do the same?”

IIIIIIII

McGonagall transfigured two dozen cobblestones into a horde of flying monkeys. Half of them immediately went to hover protectively in front of her students, blocking any curses from getting to the children. The other half set upon the attackers.

What had the world done to have these bastards inflicted upon it, she lamented. The woman dodged a curse and transfigured her attacker's clothing into hot pitch. She hoped the man's screams of agony didn't disturb her children too much.

IIIIIIII

Martha McCoy had lived in Hogsmeade her entire life as had her mother and her mother and generations of her family to the founding of the town. Unlike most of the residents, she wasn't overcome by fear. She felt nothing but rage. How dare they! How bloody dare they attack her town!

“So what if I'm going to die?” she muttered to herself. “So what if they're going to kill me?” She banished a cobblestone into one of the Death Eaters, shattering the man's skull. “That one isn't going to kill me!” A dozen more stones ripped out of the street and rose into the air. “Or that one! Or that one! Or that one!”

IIIIIIII

Flitwick stood calmly in the middle of the street, a serene smile on his face, seemingly ignoring the spellfire, waving his wand like a conductor and interlacing deadly curses directed at his foes with shields and healing charms at the students.

IIIIIIII

A soft 'pop' caused the shop foreman to look up from his work into the eyes of the crazed house elf that usually brought his employer's meals.

“Yes?”

“May Dobby borry some of these spikeys?” the elf asked, holding up a hand full of carriage screws. “Dobby promises to clean them and bring them back when he is done with them.”

“How many do you want?”

“Dobby only needs fifteen,” the house elf replied.

“They're yours,” the foreman replied.

“Thank you, Mr. Forryman.”

IIIIIIII

Bella had never experienced anything like it. The sheep were fighting back. The thought of retreat or surrender never crossed her mind. She would accomplish the mission given to her by her lord or she would die. There were no other options. The insane woman flung a killing curse at her target and became the target of thirty more.

She didn't live to see Harry summoning one of her subordinates into the path of the spell.

IIIIIIII

From the meeting room on the third floor of the Three Broomsticks, Shattertooth of Gringotts watched as the Death Eaters appeared. Seemed he'd have more time to enjoy cigars than he'd thought. The old goblin grinned in approval as the boy he was supposed to meet with unhesitatingly hurled himself into danger. Goblin in human skin indeed. It seemed the stories were true.

“I want every goblin at this window watching a different part of the battle!” Shattertooth ordered, his unblinking gaze locked on the Potter. “The ballad they write about this will either make a fitting end to the Saga of Potter, the goblin in human skin, and worthy cap to his funeral, or it will make a fine chapter of many.”

“Damn the treaty that won't let us join in,” one of his underlings lamented.

Now there, a spare part of Sharptooth's mind noted, was an idea he'd have to investigate later. His grin widened as a hail of spells rained down from the room below. Perhaps he'd get lucky and a goblin would get hit by a stray curse? Be an easy solution to the treaty.

IIIIIIII

Back at the Granger estate, Tonks wanted to scream in frustration. Of all the bloody days! The woman's foot tapped impatiently as the seconds, seconds that felt like years, ticked. She hated the sound, hated the fact that each tick meant her people were alone, knowing that each tick meant the death of a friend and colleague.

“Fifteen in the first group, ready to go!” her number two shouted. “Second group will follow in fifteen seconds.”

“Away Portkeys!” Tonks ordered.

IIIIIIII

The world spun and it took a moment for Hermione to realize what had happened. Her foreman had picked her up and was sprinting towards the engine shed. Beside her, Luna was being carried in a similar fashion by her conductor.

“Get them in the boiler,” the Engineer ordered the second the foreman and conductor arrived with their precious cargo.

All around the shop, the girls could see the rest of the crew arming themselves with the various items and implements.

“Come on, Hermione,” Luna grabbed her friend's arm and dragged her towards the massive engine, “we can find out what this is all about later.”

“But . . .”

“Don't come out till I say it's safe,” the Engineer called after them. “No matter what you hear, don't come out!”

“No harm comes to them while a single one of us draws breath!” the foreman ordered. “They want our girls, they have to climb over our corpses to get to them!”

The goblin technicians roared in approval. A half second later the humans did the same.

IIIIIIII

Donald had spent six lonely years at Hogwarts without a girlfriend, without so much as a smile from a member of the opposite sex that even hinted at more. As with the others, he'd sent his galleon to the Weasley twins for their manual; the wizard's guide to getting witches using the Harry Potter method, with no real hope that it'd be helpful but hope, as they say, is a powerful thing.

Hope had turned to disappointment after he'd read it, sure he'd practiced the spells and started the exercise routine, but where was he going to find a mythical creature or group of Death Eaters to rescue a comely young witch from?

Donald knew he was going to die when he saw the black robes and dark masks. What a waste, he thought to himself as he contemplated all the things he'd never get to do. He'd never get to see the Harpies play in person, never get a chance to achieve his dream of becoming a candy maker, never get to meet a girl and . . . his eyes widened as he realized just what kind of opportunity had just fallen into his lap. On the minus side, there was a high risk of death. That was mitigated by the fact that Wanda Wilkins, if not the prettiest girl in school then certainly the prettiest to him, was being held at wand-point by one of the fiends. He opened his mouth to shout something suitably heroic before remembering the advice in the dueling section of his favorite dating manual. Surprise is your friend, why waste it? Heroic statements are all well and good. Make them when it's safe. The Death Eater went down in a heap as his bones turned to saltwater taffy.

“Get away from her!” Donald screamed at the corpse. “Come on, Wanda.” He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her into the nearest alley. “It's not safe here in the open.”

“Donald?” the girl squeaked. “You saved me.”

“Thank me later,” he said as he lined up on his next target. “We need to stop them before they hurt anyone.” Another Death Eater went down as his bones turned into a confection.

“Right,” she said, voice a touch calmer. “Watch my back and I’ll watch yours?”

“Deal.” He flinched, a spell getting a bit too close to his face.

“Bastard!” Wanda screamed, ending the threat with a stream of conjured nails.

“Want to go out some time if we live through this?” he asked, missing his target but ending the man next to him.

“Not sure we have the time.” They both dropped to the ground as the spellfire got a bit too intense. “I . . . I guess that’s a good thing,” her voice caught. “Every second we keep them busy is one the younger kids can use to get somewhere safe.”

“Yeah,” he sighed.

Surprising both of them, she leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. “Since we don’t have time to do things the normal way, why don’t we just skip that bit and say we’re boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“Al-alright,” he agreed. He raised a wall of earth, saving both of them from a pair of killing curses. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“I was going to try to save you so you’d go out with me,” he admitted. “I didn’t even think about the little ones till you mentioned them.”

“You’re thinking about them now, aren’t you?” There was a lull in the spellfire.

“Yeah.”

“Then I forgive you,” she giggled, kissing him again. “I just wish you’d asked me out yesterday.”

“Really?”

“No one ever has before,” she sighed. “I was starting to worry that there was something wrong with me.”

“I wanted to, but-” He threw himself on top of her, recognizing the incoming hex. The blasting hex hit the wall of the building they were taking cover behind, sending hundreds of splinters ranging in size from fingers to arms pin-balling around the alley.

“But,” she whispered. “Donald?”

“But I wasn’t brave enough, you’re too pretty,” he coughed, trying to smile. “I’m just a coward at heart.”

“Are you alright?”

“I don't think so,” he admitted. “Sorry, but I don't know if I'll be able to be your boyfriend for much longer.”

“Donald, I'm going to try to get out from under you so I can look at your back.” She took a deep breath. “Ready.”

“You're hurt, too,” the boy sounded almost accusatory. “You didn't tell me you were hurt.”

“What?”

“Your side,” he said, fumbling for his wand. “Stay still, I'm going to try to stop the bleeding.”

Her eyes naturally followed his line of sight to the splinter the size of her wand stuck almost through the meat of her left hip.

“Hello the alley! Aurors, are you alright?”

“How do we know you're not Death Eaters?” Wanda demanded.

“By the fact that we're not trying to kill you,” the voice replied, sounding amused.

The girl considered the reply for a second. “Do you have a healer!” she called back hopefully.

IIIIIIII

The battle for Hogsmeade, as it would later be called, lasted less than five minutes. History books would record that the Dark Lord's best faced the hero of the wizard world, a schoolboy aided only by the common folk of the town, and shattered. Very little mention was made of the Potter Security Operatives or the Aurors. Some books would note that Harry was aided by no more than two or three of his armymen, others would note that there were four Aurors assigned to the town and at least two more that happened to be shopping that day. Those that did would quickly add that such a small number of trained wands would have had little effect on the battle and that the main thing to remember was that the battle had shown the Dark Lord to be naught but a paper tiger, far from being a man to be feared the battle had shown that common folk could stand against the best he had to offer and win.

IIIIIIII

Chapter 38

IIIIIIII

Hermione and Luna readied their wands as the boiler opened. Both girls sighed in relief at the face of the foreman.

“You two don't have any scratches or anything do you?”

“We're okay, what happened?”

“Not sure exactly,” the foreman admitted. “All I know is that we got word to get you some place safe. Guards arrived a few minutes ago.”

The two girls climbed out of the train and into a crowd of goblins, each armed with one of the tools of their trade.

“Forgive me for being away, Mistress,” Anguish said, taking her place beside the heiress. “The Potter loaned me to Madame Bones for a bit of work.”

“That's fine, Anguish,” Hermione said. “Do you know what happened?”

“Not enough details to give an accurate report, Mistress, all I know is that the Chief earned another ballad for his saga,” the goblin replied proudly, her chin tilting up. The Gringotts auditors would be burning with jealousy at her foresight in joining his war band early.

Which tells me precisely nothing, Hermione reflected to herself.

Hermione's eyes lit up when Hagrid entered the room, finally a source of information that couldn't keep his mouth shut.

“Make way, make way,” the large man bellowed, moving through the crowds to get to the two.

“What's going on, Hagrid?” Hermione asked. There was something about the half giant's expression that worried the girl.

“Death Eater attack in Hogsmead,” the half giant replied. He held a large crossbow with the casual air of someone's who's spent countless hours mastering their weapon of choice. “Come on, we gotta get you two back to the castle where it's safe.”

“What about Harry?” Hermione demanded, her pulse racing. He had to be alright, Harry wouldn't let a group of masked cowards take him down.

“I'm sure he's alright,” Hagrid said, sounding as if he were trying to convince himself, “he knows not to get mixed up in something like that.”

The two girls locked eyes and turned deathly pale.

“We're all going along,” Sprocket said firmly, hefting his wrench. “No spell shall hit the Mistress or her companion while any of us are alive to step in front of it.” The rest of the maintenance staff nodded grimly.

“More the merrier,” Hagrid said with false cheer. “Come on.”

Tonks and fifty of Harry's best security people surrounded the group as they made the short trip to the castle.

“Stay in the center,” Tonks ordered as they entered the great hall. “I want men on every side passage, no one gets close that isn't one of us or vetted!”

IIIIIIII

Spikenose did not jump when the creature that called itself a house elf appeared before her. Considering the fact that the only way it could do so was to somehow pass through a dozen layers of wards like they did not exist, her outward calm was a more notable feat than might otherwise be the case.

“Dobby needs goblin help,” the 'elf' announced.

“Oh?” the goblin's nose caught the distinct scent of human blood on the other creature. She smiled mentally at that, figuring the fact that the fact that he'd neglected to remove evidence of what he'd done, evidence that he wasn't quite what he presented himself to be was a sign of trust.

“Dobby is able to detect human magic, but is unable to dispel it,” he explained. “Dobby does not want to risk piggys getting hurt.”

“Do-” she paused to consider how best to approach the matter. Management would be pleased at the opportunity to gather more information on the Potter and the Granger Clan and she personally

would like to know more about the the creature she was conversing with.
“Do you have time for me to consult my superiors and to find a specialist to accompany us?”

“Dobby is in no hurry. Harry Potter, sir, is in his normal bed and his Hermie and Looney are with Harry Potter sir's Tonks.”

“Alright,” she agreed, making a mental note of the terms the supposed house elf had used. “I will return in a few minutes.”

IIIIIIII

Mandy's eyebrows rose when one of their security people discretely entered the room. There was something wrong, she could tell by the way the woman walked.

Ron turned to face the woman. “Yes?”

White faced, the woman leaned down to whisper into his ear.

He sprang to his feet. “I need a floo.”

“What's up?”

“Off to do something stupid,” Ron replied. “Take care of yourself.”
There was a note of finality in his tone, as if he wasn't sure they'd see each other again.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“There was an attack on Hogsmeade, bad one. They drove off the first one and they're expecting the second any second now.”

“I'm coming too,” Mandy announced. “Want to get a bit of my own back after what the bastards tried in the locker room.”

“Hold up a bit,” the owner ordered.

“I'll quit the team right now if you try to stop me,” Mandy threatened.

“Stop you?” the woman laughed. “We're all going. You, me, your teammates, the team healers, the trainers, the security, everyone. Come another attack, we'll all get a bit of our own back. No attack and we'll help with the rescue efforts.”

“Oh.”

“Hogsmeade is full of fans, we're nothing without them.” Leaving aside the publicity they'd get if they survived, it was the right thing to do.

IIIIIIII

Dobby popped the goblins back to the Forbidden Forest and waved for them to get to it. He hated to be so abrupt, but he was on a bit of a schedule. If he didn't get done soon, some other elf might try to make Harry Potter sir's lunch.

“What happened here?” one of the curse breakers muttered in shock.

“Bad wizards go too close to Harry Potter sir's Hermy and Looney,” the elf explained, bestowing the corpses with a look of deep disapproval.

“Darky marks on bad wizards' arms have bad magic and bad wizards' pockets have bad magic. Dobby can't finish butchering bad wizards for the piggys until after bad magic is gone and Dobby can't return Harry Potter sir's Hermy's spikeys till after piggys have been fed.” The look of disapproval deepened. “Bad wizards are keeping Dobby from returning Harry Potter sir's Hermy's things and Dobby can't punish them for it.” There was an undercurrent of barely repressed rage in the house elf's voice, how dare they make him risk another elf cooking Harry Potter sir's lunch! Dobby's knuckles cracked as his fists tightened.

“Not much more you could do to them,” Spikenose agreed, eyes on the remains of the Death Eater hit team, each of which was pinned to a tree by a carriage screw through the throat.

To the house elf's relief, it did not take long for the goblin curse breakers to carry out their task. Looked like he'd have plenty of time to make sure Harry Potter sir got all his favorite dishes.

“What do you want us to do with their things?”

“Goblins can keep what they want to pay for breaking curses.

“And the rest?”

“Put it in Harry Potter sir's vault,” the house elf replied with a disinterested shrug. Dobby was a good elf, he had more important things to worry about than the petty baubles carried by bad wizards, like what to make Harry Potter sir for desert? A treacle tart perhaps? On the other

hand, he'd just gotten a recipe for ischlers, perhaps Harry Potter sir would like to try something new?

IIIIIIII

Narcissa went white as the wireless paused for a special news bulletin and gave her a good idea of what her husband had been up to. Children, the bastard she was married to had attempted to murder children. Unlike him, she had a fairly good idea of how the public was likely to react.

“Skippy?” she surprised herself with how calm she sounded.

“Yes, Mistress Cissy?”

“Can you feel my husband?”

The elf's eyes went glassy. “Skippy can't feel the master.”

“Do we currently have any guests in the east wing?” she asked, dreading the answer.

“No mistress.”

Narcissa let out a slow breath of relief. “We're leaving. Gather up everything from my and my son's rooms along with anything valuable in the rest of the house and move it to my vaults at Gringotts. Do not concern yourselves with any dark items.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Skippy.” Narcissa's order froze the elf. “Get yourself and the others out of here if our guests should return. Do not return to the manor after your task has been completed, we're leaving this place for good.”

“Yes, Mistress. Where shall Mistress' good elvies go?”

“Go to Hogwarts and try to blend in until after I call you,” Narcissa ordered. The woman gathered up a handful of floo and tossed it into the fire. “Black Lake Cottage,” she called out the name of her first destination. It wouldn't be safe, not so long as her sister served the Dark Lord, but hopefully it would buy her time to consider her next move.

IIIIIIII

Luna noted the way her best friend hunched over as they overheard each new scrap of rumor from the younger years milling about the hallways. Harry Potter had dueled a hundred Death Eaters, Hogsmeade was burning, Neville Longbottom had saved them all at the cost of his life, the upper years were all dead, everyone in Hogsmeade was dead, Harry Potter was barely clinging to life, the Dark Lord himself had arrived and Harry Potter had fought him off. Each was worse than the last, each suggested that Harry would be lucky to look as good as Moody if the healers managed a miracle.

"I'm sure he's fine," Luna said soothingly as the two girls walked into the hospital wing, "he is Harry Potter after all. A dozen or so Death Eaters ambushing him on a Hogsmeade weekend shouldn't even merit a two paragraph mention on the fifth page."

The blond was doing all she could to keep her composure and found that trying keep Hermione calm was helping to keep herself calm as well. She'd finally gotten friends, she just couldn't lose one of them.

“How's Harry?” Hermione asked tearfully as they entered the hospital wing. She'd heard a dozen rumors about the boy's condition after his fight as she'd walked to the hospital wing, each one more horrible than the last.

The two girls braced themselves for the worst as the school nurse turned towards them.

“Sleeping,” Poppy replied softly. “I would appreciate it if you two would lower your voices.” The woman looked exhausted.

“Is he going to make a full recovery?” Hermione blurted. “I realize that confidentiality prevents you from giving any details but please, I . . . we just need to know that he's going to be alright.”

“Mr. Potter suffered some minor abrasions, a couple cuts, some bumps and bruises, and I believe that he may have cracked a bone in his wrist.” Shattered two ribs, had the spell residue of a hundred curses, had nearly bled out, and had a rather nasty hang nail, but she saw no reason to go into great detail, the boy would tell his friends in the unlikely event that he chose to.

“That's all?” Hermione sobbed in relief.

“For the most part,” Poppy said gently. “He's going to make a full recovery.”

“But . . . but we heard that he was attacked by a dozen Death Eaters?” Luna wondered, having used her standard tactic of reducing the rumored amount by a factor of ten to get something approaching the truth.

"A bakers dozen," Professor Flitwick's inappropriately cheerful voice caused both girls to jump, "at least." And that was without mentioning all the other groups running around town.

“What do you mean at least?” Hermione demanded.

"That's how many were left behind of the group that went after him," the diminutive Charms Professor replied, smiling broadly, still feeling the euphoria of combat. "We're still not sure how many of them escaped."

“But . . . how?”

"They were bunched up when they arrived and Mr. Potter chose not to give them any time to prepare themselves for conflict. By the time they'd regained their wits, he was already among them making their lives very uncomfortable." The half goblin laughed. "Seeing that the Death Eaters were no threat to them, many of the surrounding bystanders amused themselves by taking pot shots at any Death Eater foolish enough to give them a clear target."

“Can we see him?” Luna asked plaintively, surprising everyone with the request. “We promise to be very quiet.”

“In a moment,” the healer said, her eyes sweeping over the girls' attendants. “I have a bit of work to do before I can allow this many

visitors.” Best get him cleaned up enough to make it hard to tell that she'd left a few things out when she'd described his injuries.

IIIIIIII

Dobby didn't bother to stop working on Harry Potter sir's meal when Hogwarts' senior elves approached. No doubt the poor excuses for elves had come to whine about one thing or another or to accuse him of being a bad elf again.

“Other elves say that Dobby must leave Hoggwarts and never return!” the senior elf pronounced firmly. “Begone, begone, begone!”

“Why would Dobby do that?” the house elf sighed. If it wasn't one thing it was another, sometimes he wished he really were the bad elf the others accused him of being. Course, if he was, none of them would dare bother him for fear of having bad things done to them. He supposed it was proof that the idiots knew that he really was a good elf if nothing else.

“Dobby has raised his hand against wizards, Dobby has committed an unforgivable act, Dobby is banished.”

“Elvies can not commit an unforgivable act if it is for their family,” Dobby pointed out reasonably. “Dobby has done nothing wrong.”

“Is true,” the most ancient of the elves confirmed. “Is why Sneezy pushed bad former Headmaster Dippydot down stairs three times after bad former Headmaster told head girl she had to earn her name.”

“Students is family so elvies can protect students when they can,” the senior elf agreed. “Dobby has no master, Dobby is not a Hogwarts elf, Dobby has no family, so Dobby is banished.”

“Dobby has no master?” Now he knew the others brains were bent.
“Since when does Dobby have no master?”

The other elves glanced at each other. “Since Dobby's former master gave him clothes.”

“And afterward, Dobby got Harry Potter sir as his master. Dobby made piggy food out of bad wizards that wanted to hurt Harry Potter sir's Hermy and Looney and Harry Potter sir's Hermy's things and peoples.”

“Dobby doesn't call Harry Potter sir master.”

“Harry Potter sir doesn't want to be called 'master' so Dobby doesn't say it to Harry Potter sir,” the house elf explained. “Is strange, but humans is confusing,” Dobby recited the well known house elf's lament.

“Dobby works for pay,” the kitchen's senior elf sneered. “So Dobby is a bad elf and so Dobby is banished.”

“Dobby works for Professor Dumbydore's pay, not Harry Potter sir's and Dobby puts his pay in Harry Potter sir's vault.”

“Elvies is allowed to work for pay if pay goes to elves's master,” the senior elf admitted. “Why is Dobby working for Headmaster's pay?”

“Harry Potter sir is a kind and generous master, he doesn't have enough work for Dobby so tells Dobby that he is allowed to get work at Hoggywarts for hisself. Great kind Harry Potter sir makes messes every year for Dobby and other elfies while at Hoggywarts.” Dobby let it sink in for a moment before delivering the coup de gras. “Harry Potter sir opened the chamber of the great snake that had not been cleaned for a thousand years so that good house elves could clean it. Dobby has the greatest most generous master of them all.”

The other elves went silent, no doubt reflecting on how wrong they were and how fortunate Dobby was to have the greatest, and consequently one of the most confusing, humans as his master.

“Sneezy says Harry Potter sir is a good master to be so kind to his Dobby,” the most ancient of the elves pronounced. “Dobby is a good elf.” There was a short pause then the ancient elf leaned forward to whisper into Dobby's ear. “Does Dobby think the Great Harry Potter sir would be generous enough to find more work for other elvies?”

“Dobby will ask Harry Potter sir when Harry Potter sir has the time to be asked by Dobby.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 39

IIIIIIII

Amelia was in her office attempting to make a dent in the mountain of paperwork she'd been cursed with when the door opened to admit one of her aides. Her blood went cold at the expression on the man's face.

“Attack on Hogsmeade, Boss.”

“Susan?”

“Confirmed safe along with Hannah. Looks like they wanted to kill as many students as possible and Potter in particular.”

“How bad?” she braced herself for the worst.

“Potter's alive, report says that most of the bad guys aren't. Don't have anything definite, still waiting for the quick response to report back with more than just an initial size up.”

“Get everyone we've got, tell them we're going to Hogsmeade to help with the clean up.”

“We'll be ready in four minutes, boss. Healer Rage says she'll have a team from St. Mungos in eight.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione recognized six of the twelve people surrounding Harry's bed, they all worked for him. Her eyes narrowed a bit as she tried to figure out who the other half were.

“Healer Chalmers,” Luna called out. “Do you remember me?”

“How could I forget the girl who accidentally transfigured her hair into horns and snakes!” the woman laughed. “How are you, Luna.”

“You're here to look after Harry?”

“Healer Devon and I.” She indicated the man on her left. “Are here to help everyone we can. The attack filled the hospital wing, it filled St.

Mungoes, it filled the clinic at Hogsmeade, and it filled a couple other places. It's bad, Luna, only consolation we can offer is that it would have been a great deal worse without that young man.”

“Can we have a moment with him?” Luna asked. “He's our very good friend and we were very worried about him.”

“Take as much time as you need,” the healer agreed, motioning for the others to give the two girls a bit of privacy.

“Are you pondering what I'm pondering, Luna?” Hermione whispered.

“I don't know, Hermione,” Luna whispered back. “I'm pondering how fun it would be to gently show a few prominent Death Eater families our disapproval of their attempt on Harry's life.”

“Gently?” Hermione asked, a smile forming on her face as she contemplated the mayhem to come.

“Regrettably, showing proper disapproval would create an unacceptable hardship for innocent people in the fallout pattern.” Luna sighed.

“Shame your father wouldn't let us build a fusion reactor.”

“Nothing says 'you annoyed me' better then tactical nuclear weapons,” Hermione agreed. “Come, Luna, we have work to do.”

“Alright, Hermione.” Luna bent down to give Harry a soft kiss on the cheek. “Let's get dangerous.”

“Let's show them why you never anger an Engineer,” Hermione agreed, bending down to kiss Harry's other cheek. “Let's show them why it's better to cut your own throat than cross a Granger.”

IIIIIIII

Flint was pleasantly surprised to find the goblins still in the room at the Three Broomsticks.

“It's Potter's assistant,” the guard at the door announced.

“By all means, invite her in,” the senior goblin said with a wide toothy smile. “Welcome, fellow warrior, please do not take it as an insult that I brought so few guards.”

“I am here alone and without my Chief,” Flint said formally. “Even with him, there would be no insult, I doubt you have enough fighters in the nation to match him.”

“I'd have taken that statement as a boast and an insult before witnessing what I did today,” the senior goblin laughed. “Now? Now all I can do is admit the truth of it. A goblin misfortunate enough to have been a human, what a loss to the clan. What brings you here, warrior?”

“I am here to convey my Chief's regrets that he was unable to attend this meeting,” Flint replied. “The only excuses I have to offer are that it is not in my Chief's nature to turn from a fight, not even for a negotiation with a goblin as skilled as yourself and that it is not in my nature to permit my Chief to risk unnecessary harm to himself by delaying medical attention.”

“Yes, I noticed you stun him when he tried to keep the appointment,” the senior goblin agreed. “Why?”

“Part of the job's to keep the Chief safe from everyone including himself,” Flint explained. “I didn't do it, one of the others would have.”

“Convey to your Chief that the entertainment he was good enough to provide more than makes up for his lack of presence, I look forward to seeing if his prowess at war is matched by his prowess at the negotiating

table. Convey also that we would consider it a privilege to reschedule the meeting at a time and place convenient to him.”

“Gringotts or the Granger Estate,” Flint “Only places I trust him to not find any trouble.” Flint winched at the goblin's raised eyebrow. “Good point, please allow me to rephrase that.”

“Proceed.”

“I'd rather he be somewhere with more backup the next time he decides to leap into trouble.”

“An admirable consideration.”

IIIIIIII

The first thing Amelia noticed when she arrived at Hogsmeade was a pair of gibbets bracketing the town gate.

“Get that thing down before some idiot gets a picture of it,” the Head of Magical Law Enforcement ordered. “We know who's in it?”

“Think it's Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrangle, boss,” Auror Partridge, the senior Auror on scene replied. “They're a bit cursed up to tell for sure. As for your orders, well-” the woman bit her lip. “Townspeople are a bit touchy about that, only reason they're still up.”

Amelia considered what the woman had said. “We getting any prisoners?”

“Not many, boss, weren't getting any from the local SAR teams till an incident with two of ours.” The Auror glanced around. “Two of ours had to save a couple of theirs from the citizens. I understand that there was some talk about building a gallows and putting ours next to theirs if ours pushed the matter too much.”

“What stopped them?”

“Flint arrived, told 'em we weren't saving the bastards from the crowd, we were saving them for Potter's pet auditor.”

“I take it the crowd accepted that?”

“Citizens have turned in a couple of the bastards after word got around, none of them in good shape but I guess ya gotta make allowances.”

“Anyone asks why we're cutting them down tell them that leaving the bastards up is a public health hazard, same as if we left a pile of dung to sit in the street. Have a couple healers back you up if you think it'll help.” Amelia suppressed a grin. The townspeople were murderous, aware they'd survived and enraged almost beyond belief at their attackers. The Dark Lord had intended to sow fear, instead he'd sown the seeds of his destruction.

“Yes, boss.”

Amelia looked around. “Who are all the people on brooms?”

“Professional Quidditch teams, boss. Harpies arrived first, Cannons weren't too far behind. They brought their team healers, they brought their team security, everybody. Been really useful to have too, boss. Saved a lot of lives.”

“Hastings!” she bellowed, summoning one of her junior aides. “Make a note of which teams are here, I want to be sure they're properly recognized for their help.”

“Got it, boss.”

“What else do we have?” Amelia asked. “Who's in charge here anyway?”

“Flint's been in overall command here, boss,” Partridge replied. “I was the senior Auror on scene till you got here.”

IIIIIIII

Susan and Hannah were waiting when they walked out of the hospital wing and enveloped their friends in a group hug.

“How's Harry?” Susan asked.

“Fine,” Hermione said, her face colored with relief.

“I'm sorry,” Susan said suddenly, looking guilty. “Hannah and I were safe at your house when Harry was fighting for his life.”

“Susan's security portkeyed us there,” Hannah explained.

“There's no need to feel guilty about doing your job,” Hermione recited.
“Ms. Jane taught me that when I was a little girl, some people fight and some people run. Only reason to be ashamed of running is if it's your job to fight, if it's your job to run you should feel ashamed of fighting unless you have no other choice.”

“What are you going to do, Hermione?” Susan asked, seeing the expression on her friend's face.

“Respond, Susan, I'm going to respond.”

IIIIIIII

Dumbledore face could have been carved out of wood, gone was his normal smile, gone was the twinkle in his eye, gone was any hint of emotion.

“I am afraid I can not allow that, Nymphadora,” Dumbledore stated.
“You see-”

“Either we move at least two dozen of mine into the school or I'm pulling Hermione and Susan out of it,” Tonks said bluntly. “At a guess, Harry, Luna, and a few others would come with them.”

“Nymphadora, I-.” Dumbledore began.

“It took us five bloody minutes to get to Hermione,” Tonks growled. “She was on the edge of the wards and we didn't have eyes on because you insisted we stay out of the castle grounds. We got lucky with Susan, wanted to visit her detail so she was with us when things went bad. At a minimum; I'm moving people into Hogwarts, we have eyes on twenty four hours a day, and we're moving several students out of whatever house they're in and into Gryffindor or Hufflepuff or somewhere else to simplify the security situation. That's not up for negotiation, would you like to know what is?”

“Nymphadora, I understand your concerns but-”

“Please excuse us for a moment, Ms. Tonks,” Minerva interrupted, heading off the explosion. “Albus and I need to discuss a few things.”

“Discuss them quick,” Tonks barked, glaring at the old man. “I have no patience at all when it comes to the safety of my charges.”

“Understandable,” Minerva agreed, “I have a similar attitude regarding the safety of my students.”

Minerva waited until the younger woman was out of the room and the privacy wards were up before turning on the Headmaster. “Why the bloody hell shouldn't we have as many guards for the children here as we can possibly get?”

“Because despite everything, we are still a nation of laws,” Dumbledore said tiredly. “If I were to permit one student to bring in their personal guards, I would have no choice but to allow others to do the same. I do so and we both know that it will result in Lucius Malfoy bringing in as many vipers as possible.”

“So hire bloody security for the school. We have the funds for it, don't we?” the woman demanded. “Hell, Harry would probably give us a discount if we asked nicely.”

Dumbledore stared at his deputy. “Say that again, Minerva.”

“What? That we have the funds to hire extra security? Or that Mr. Potter would give us a discount?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore agreed, a smile forming on his face. “The school will hire security and we will tell the families that they are also welcome to hire extra security but only if they come from an approved security company.”

“I'll just send a note to Mr. Potter's assistant that you want a moment of his time,” Minerva agreed, a matching smile on her face. “Shall I tell Ms. Tonks that we have a possible solution?”

“Please do, Minerva. I fear that I shall have to impose on you to look after the school after that,” the old man sighed heavily. “I fear that I will be busy the rest of the day. We are missing several students and one professor.”

“There's a chance they were evacuated directly to one of the hospitals, Albus.”

“Let us hope we are so fortunate. I will be in Hogsmeade aiding in the search efforts if you need me, Minerva. While there, I will also do my best to identify the fallen. Much as I loath to say it, I dearly hope that every one of them is a former student with a coiled serpent on their arm.”

IIIIIIII

The sound of china clinking together brought Harry to full wakefulness. For what seemed like hours he'd been drifting in the space between sleep and consciousness, vaguely aware that he was in the hospital wing and unable to find the motivation to do more than simply exist.

“Hello, Dobby,” he said, pushing himself up.

“Hello, Harry Potter Sir!” Dobby said, his grin threatening to split his face. “Dobby has brough lunch for Harry Potter sir.”

“Thank's, Dobby.”

“Dobby, Dobby has a favor from other elvies to ask from Harry Potter sir.”

“What can I do for you, Dobby?”

“Other elvies ask Dobby to ask Harry Potter sir to find them more work.”

“Winky?”

“Not Winky, but Dobby thinks Winky would want to be in a family not as a worker.”

“Tell her to talk to Hermione about it,” Harry suggested.

“Winky is afraid Harry Potter sir's Grangy will try to give her clothes again,” Dobby admitted with an embarrassed look on his face.

“Tell Winky that Hermione was trying to free the elves because she found out how the Malfoys treated you and because she heard that house elves see their family as their family.”

“Dobby doesn't understand the second part, Harry Potter sir.”

“Hermione took it seriously when she heard that house elves look after their families because they're their families,” Harry repeated. “She sees the staff that takes care of her as members of her family. She was horrified to hear how bad families treat their house elves, just as she was horrified to hear how the

Dursleys treated me. She sees giving elves clothes the same way she'd see the police rescuing abused children.”

“Dobby understands,” the house elf said, eyes wide. He'd never heard of a human with such an elvish attitude, another bit of evidence to support his theory that Harry Potter was the greatest wizard who would ever live. No one else could have explained that his Grangy's actions were due to familial love rather than a desire to make all elves miserable as had been the prevailing theory in the kitchens. He should have expected no less from the wizard who called a house elf, friend.

“Happy to be of service.” Harry's joints cracked as he sat up. “How many elves?”

“As many as work can be found for, Harry Potter sir,” Dobby replied.

“Remind me to write a letter to Phil Granger after lunch,” Harry said after a moment of thought. “I know he has a lot of places to clean. Oh, and remind me to talk with Hermione the next time she comes up. We'll see if we can't get Winky a new family and I doubt Winky alone could clean all Hermione's toys.”

“Yes, Harry Potter sir,” Dobby nodded, eyes wide.

“So, what'd you bring me?”

“Dobby brought all of Harry Potter sir's favorites.” The house elf's ears drooped. “Dobby is sorry he couldn't help Harry Potter sir with the bad wizards, Dobby was busy removing dangerous vermin from the forbidden forest.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, Dobby, you were busy and that's that. Do you have anything you have to do now or can you join me?”

“Dobby will stay,” the house elf said, touched that the Great Harry Potter sir would ask him, a mere elf to dine with him. Truly he was blessed to serve the greatest wizard of them all.

“Great, meals are always better when you have good company.”

IIIIIIII

Neither Hermione nor Luna said a word until they were both back in the engine shed surrounded by the engines and technicians.

“Anguish, gather our people together,” Hermione ordered. “I wish to address the to discuss the fact that there has been an attempt on Harry's life.”

“Harry is much too good natured to take it personally,” Luna added. “Which is why we're going to respond for him.”

“We're doing nothing less than he would do if they tried to harm us,” Hermione agreed. “The fact that he is not willing to deliver an appropriate response to attacks on his own person is something we shall have to address at some point in the future.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 40

IIIIIIII

Hermione's uncle paused at the door, the meeting was unexpected and his superior had an odd look on his face. Neither thing was good in his line of business.

“Come in, James,” Charlie said, waving for Hermione's uncle to enter the room. “Have a seat.”

“What's wrong?” Hermione's uncle asked calmly.

“Hmm?”

“You're mixing me a drink, you're mixing it the way I like it rather than the cover, and you're using the good stuff. What's wrong?”

“I initially called you in to discuss the attempted assassination of your niece's young gentleman. We've recently been given evidence showing that your niece was also targeted.” Charlie gave an actual smile. “It was handled appropriately. At approximately the same time as the attack, we uncovered an unrelated plot to kidnap your sister.”

“Bad things usually come in threes. What else?”

“There isn't any easy way to say this, Jim. We've known each other a long time and-” Charlie pursed his lips and straightened his back. “My lord, I regretfully inform you of the death of your father.”

Jim sighed. “It's over then, old bastard finally let go.”

“Orders from the very highest level state that you are to be removed from active service effective immediately.”

“Has my replacement been chosen yet?”

“He has, Jim. Good man, come up from SBS.”

“Carrying on the tradition,” Jim sighed heavily. “Pass on a message from me, would you?”

“Of course.”

“I don't know how many men have had the name, number, and cover since the first, but I'd like to pass on some words I wish my predecessor had been alive to pass on to me; Including the first, I'm the fourth to have held the position and lived to see retirement. Try to be the fifth.” Jim exhaled deeply. “What now?”

“The very highest level has expressed their desire to see you take your proper place in society,” Charlie replied. “She wished me to add that you have done more than your part, you deserve a rest.”

“Wonderful sentiment, let's hope the world lets me have it. You know what happened to one of my predecessors when he tried to give things up to marry and settle down, it destroyed him.”

“We've gotten better at preventing that sort of thing.” Charlie drained his drink and began making himself another. “Buck up, Jim, it could be worse.”

“Yeah, I could be saddled with your job.” Unfortunately for Hermione's uncle, he failed to notice the gleam that appeared in the other man's eye at those words.

IIIIIIII

A smile appeared on Voldemort's face as he contemplated the information his spy had delivered. A chance had presented itself, one that would make his defeat at Hogsmeade appear to be part of a brilliant plan, one which in one fell swoop could deliver victory over the fools that opposed him.

The Dark Lord arose from his throne, this was too important to leave to an underling. He would lead the attack himself.

IIIIIIII

The goblins' eyes shone with malice as their mistress discussed her plans. Techs they may be, rear support they may be, but in each of them beat the heart of a warrior. The bastards had made a fatal mistake when they chose to crawl out of their holes to pick a fight with Clan Granger!

“I want everyone to start keeping notebooks,” Hermione said loudly. “Put any ideas in them you get for new technology or improvements on what we already have, especially for things that will be useful for what we have to do. You work for me, that means that you're the best at what you do, I wouldn't have anyone else in my employ.” The girl paused, smiling as her people cheered wildly. “Don't let anyone tell you

different, not even yourselves. You are the best, the future will prove it. Does anyone have any questions or ideas?"

"One, mistress," Anguish spoke. "I would suggest incorporation the company under goblin law. It will provide a modest tax break and make it much more difficult for the Ministry to take action against us without provoking conflict with Gringotts."

"It won't stop us from carrying out the plan, will it?"

"I will double check with the legal team, but it should not, mistress."

"Do so and do it if there aren't any problems," Hermione ordered.
"Anyone else?"

Sprocket raised his hand. "I have an idea, mistress."

"What is it, Sprocket?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"Most of our opponents live on country estates, but not all of them. We'll need a way to go after the ones in the city too."

“Do you have a solution?”

“I might, mistress, I would like to request an hour to check if my idea is viable before presenting it.”

“Granted. Let me know either way, sometimes it's more valuable to know if an idea won't work. Good work, Sprocket. Anyone else?”

IIIIIIII

Amelia didn't know what to think when Auror Watts, a five year veteran of the force, approached. The man had a lost expression on his face and it was clear that he was holding back tears.

“What is it?”

“We found Professor Sprout, boss.” The man squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep composure. “She didn't go easy.”

“Damn.” Amelia took a moment, the woman had been one of the more popular instructors for nearly two decades. “Damn.”

IIIIIIII

Harry had a sudden thought as he finished his meal. Maybe he wasn't as alone as he'd thought he'd been.

“You know, Dobby.”

“Yes, Harry Potter sir?”

“I just thought of something, Hermione's staff is her family. For me, my friends are my family. Don't have many blood relatives, don't have any close blood relatives that I'm willing to claim, so that will have to do. Sound good, Dobby?”

“Is . . . is Harry Potter saying that Dobby is not his friend, that Dobby is his family?” the house elf asked slowly.

“Can't it be both?”

Dobby rocked back on his heels, that was almost unprecedented. Very few families reciprocated the love their elves gave them, there were no words to describe Harry Potter's greatness for combining familial love and friendship. "Yes, Harry Potter sir," Dobby said thickly. "Yes, it can be both."

"Good." Harry yawned. "Gives us another reason for us both to live through this mess, eh, Dobby?" The boy yawned. "Let's work towards a world where little Potters can have a meal with their uncle Dobby and his kids without having to worry about all the garbage we've had to deal with."

"Yes, Harry Potter sir," the elf whispered as his friend drifted off to sleep, his eyes filling with tears. "Dobby will do all he can to see that world."

IIIIIIII

Ms. Jane arrived to find her charge crouched over a drafting table, her pen darting over the paper as she designed something that would no doubt revolutionize the world. She'd always been proud of her little reader's insatiable thirst for knowledge and was pleased to see the girl using it constructively.

“Hermione.”

The girl gave a start. “Ms. Jane? What are you doing here?”

“Representing your parents,” the librarian stated. “I’m sorry, darling, but I have some bad news.”

She braced herself. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry, darling, it’s your grandfather. He passed away this morning.”

“He passed away after the last stroke,” Hermione disagreed. “Uncle Jim says his body just kept going out of habit.”

“Are you alright?”

“I made peace with it after he had his stroke,” Hermione replied. “Was there anything else?”

“They wished me to check on your health and safety,” Ms. Jane replied. “They would have come themselves but there was an incident. Both are fine, but you know how these things can go.”

“What a day,” Hermione sighed. “No one was hurt, were they?”

“Not even the bad guys,” Ms. Jane assured her charge. “Your mother wanted me to pass on that she expects you to spend the weekend at home, your professors will be notified.”

“Can Luna come?”

“You may bring as many people as you need,” Ms. Jane allowed.

“Thank you. Please notify my parents that Harry will also be coming along.”

“Alright, darling.”

The girl stared blankly at her half completed diagram. “Ms. Jane?”

“Yes, darling?”

“Does Harry have people watching out for him like I have people watching out for me?”

“He does, darling.”

“Have them doubled,” Hermione ordered, eyes flashing. “There are either not enough right now or they aren't good enough.”

“To be fair to them, darling, his reaction to seeing a group of masked killers was to dive into the middle of them and the only reason his injuries are so minor is because his people killed everyone that looked at him crosseyed.”

“Alright, tell them they have my thanks for doing a good job and double them.”

Ms. Jane smiled. “I'll see what I can do, darling. How are you dealing with what happened in Hogsmead?”

Hermione smiled. “I'm just trying focus on a new project to keep my mind occupied.”

Ms. Jane leaned forward to inspect the girl's drafting board and in an instant her mind went back to the day she'd been hired to look after Phil Granger's only daughter and the first orders he'd given. Seemed Hermione had taken more after her father than anyone had previously realized.

“I will be involved in the planning once this gets completed and you are ready to use it, darling,” Ms. Jane said firmly. “Is that understood?”

“Yes, Ms. Jane. You aren't going to tell daddy, are you?”

“Not unless he asks some very direct questions, darling.” She gathered the girl into a hug. “Remember, darling, I'm on your side. That means I'm here to help and the first help I'm going to provide is to suggest you work on a few other projects so that I can give your father a couple harmless examples when he asks.”

IIIIIIII

A wave of relief washed through Amelia when she got the final numbers. Hogwarts had lost a professor but it had not lost a single student. It was a minor miracle that none of the children had been lost especially considering the fact that a group of students had been at the vanguard of the counter attack.

“Simms!” she barked. “What's the status of the prisoners?”

“Transferred to the secure holding area, boss,” her aide replied.

Amelia noticed one of her senior forensics techs approaching with a wide grin on her face. “What do you have for me, Fletcher?” she asked eagerly.

“Add at least seven more, boss,” the forensic tech said smugly. “I think I've figured out what those puddles are from.”

“What?” Amelia demanded.

“Potter hit the Death Eaters with a spell that prevented the water in their bodies from going along when the portkeys activated. They'd have been dead the moment they left.”

“Wonder how the bastards on the other end took it when the mummies arrived,” Amelia laughed.

“Probably took it as a warning,” Fletcher said thoughtfully. “Who knows, something to ask the next time we get a prisoner anyway.”

“True,” Amelia agreed. “Report what we've found to the Pinch and the Hogwarts Professors.”

“Why?”

“Cause I'd kill to know how Potter did it,” Amelia said feraly. “Imagine how much fun it would be to hit a group of the bastards with it the next time we caught them torching a family.”

“I'll get right on it, boss,” the tech agreed with a matching grin.

“Martin! I want-” the woman froze, her connection to the wards at the Ministry demanding immediate attention.

“Boss?” the man prompted.

“The Ministry is under attack,” she stated, son of a bitch was trying to take advantage of the fact that the majority of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was all in Hogsmeade. “Gather up what we've got and contact Potter Security and ask for anyone they can spare.”

“Yes, boss.”

IIIIIIII

A look of confusion formed on the Minister's head of security. The wards were informing him of the arrival of dozens of individuals, none of which appeared to have checked their wand at the front desk per policy. His confusion transformed into alarm when the wards began screaming that lethal spells were being cast.

“Perkins! Wilks! Teddybear, I repeat, Teddybear!” he ordered causing the two largest members of the detail to kick open the door to the Minister's office, grab their charge, and activate the escape plan.

“What's going on, Gavin?” the Minister's secretary asked.

“Death eater attack, I'd wager,” he replied cheerfully. “Well, gentlemen, I suppose the time has come to earn our pay. We may not win this fight, but by god they'll know they were in one.”

IIIIIIII

Ms. Jane was sent directly to Philip's office upon her return to the Granger residence. The man was pacing back and fourth in an uncharacteristic display of nervousness.

“Sir?”

“I just received word from our goblin friends that there was an attempt on Hermione's life during the attack on Hogsmeade. Fortunately, it seems that Harry's people were able to handle things quietly. Remind me to send a bonus along with a request to increase security.”

“I will, sir.”

Phillip took a couple deep calming breaths. “How is Hermione holding up?”

“She's doing well, sir, she's throwing herself into her projects to try to keep her mind off what nearly happened.”

Phillip nodded, he was doing similar. “What sort of project was she working on?”

“There were several, sir. Most of them were to try to prevent or better respond to attacks. One was a way to communicate faster, another was a way to move people faster, that sort of thing. She also wished me to remind you of her desire to work on a fusion reactor.”

“Have we gotten a response back from the people we consulted?”

“We have, sir, they see no issues in her desire to work on the subject or to build working models.”

“Good. Hopefully a new project with a correspondingly large budget will keep her occupied and focused until after we can deal with the situation.”

“Regarding that, sir, I would like to be given leave to stay with Hermione to better deal with future security threats.”

Phillip smiled widely. “Granted with my thanks. It'll set my mind at ease to know you're there.”

“Mine as well, sir.”

IIIIIIII

To Flint's surprise, she found her boss propped up in his bed and reading one of his school books in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. She'd expected to find him taking advantage of the enforced down time to catch up on missed sleep.

“Got a minute, chief?” she asked, catching his attention.

“You had a chance to get any rest since the fight?”

Flint grinned. “Planning a bit of downtime after I meet with you, chief. Husband has the night off.”

“Enjoy it. What can I do for you?”

“Just wanted to update you on what happened, chief. We've been flooded with orders, everyone wants security after what happened.”

“Who?”

“Hogwarts, the Diagon Alley Merchant Association, the Hogsmeade town council, and four professional quidditch teams,” Flint listed off. “Granger family would like to increase their security as well.”

“That's going to leave us awfully thin,” Harry mused. “What're the latest numbers for our recruiting efforts?”

“Not even close to what we need, chief. Happily, you have a meeting with the goblins this weekend at the Granger residence that may provide a possible solution.”

“Let's hope that it goes better than today's meeting. How bad were our losses?”

“My information's a bit old, chief, but it doesn't look like any students were lost, we've confirmed the death of one professor, three of ours, and an unknown number of townsfolk. Still counting the bastards.”

“Which professor?”

“Sprout, boss. She died protecting a group of students.”

“Hard to think of a better way to go, don't suppose that'll be much comfort.”

Flint reached into her pocket and pulled out a makeup compact. “Ministry's being attacked, chief,” she said calmly. “Bones wants to know if she can take some of ours with her when she hits back.”

“Tell her we'll be down to join her in a couple minutes,” Harry ordered, levering himself out of bed.

Flint sent her reply. “Try to get out of bed and I'll stun you again, chief,” she said conversationally.

Involuntarily, Harry's eyes flicked towards his wand on the bedside table. Flint's wand was in her hand when they flicked back to her. “Nice reflexes.”

“Thank you, chief.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 41

IIIIIIII

Amelia had expected to follow the plan, to fight a rearguard action while the Ministry was evacuated before bringing the building down on the bastards as she departed. It was a good plan, it had a high chance of success, it was a pity none of the clerks followed it. Amelia arrived to a scene of blood and chaos, the clerks, people she'd written off as useless in a fight, people she'd seen as sheep to be protected, had thrown themselves on the death eaters without regard for their own safety and with a viciousness that spoke of a considerable amount of hate. It was one of the most brutal things she'd ever seen, no quarter asked for or given.

“Martin, do what you can to cut them off!” Amelia ordered. The death eaters were in full retreat, looked as if the clerks had followed the plan just long enough to suck the bastards in before they struck. “Why in the bloody hell couldn't they have followed the bloody plan,” she cursed under her breath. They could have gotten them all, Amelia lamented to herself, wiped out every one of the evil sons of bitches at only the cost of a building.

Auror Smyth-Warren cleared her throat. “Got half a dozen of them trapped in the records room, boss. Orders?”

“Bottle them up for now,” Amelia replied.

“Uh, records clerks want to burn them out, boss.”

“What?”

“They heard about Hogsmeade, boss,” Smyth-Warren explained. “They are really unhappy about it.”

Amelia felt a flush of pleasure at the news. “I see.” She considered the matter. “Tell them the same thing we told the townspeople, survivors will be handed over to Potter's pet auditor.”

“Might work, boss,” Smyth-Warren said, sounding unsure. “Their blood's up, hard to talk sense into anyone.”

“Do what you can and try not to get caught up in it.”

“Will do, boss.”

Amelia shook her head, the sheer number of Orders of Merlin they were going to have to pass out threatened to put a measurable dent in the quarterly budget. Whomever held the contract to make the damned things was about to get very busy.

IIIIIIII

Narcissa's knuckles whitened as she listened to the reports coming over the wireless. It was inconceivable, not only was the dark lord losing, he was losing badly. The battles of Hogsmeade and the Ministry were routs. For the first time in years, she began to believe that Lucius had put them on the losing side. Her breath caught at the report of how few prisoners had been taken and the pronouncement that any prisoners would be handed to Potter's pet auditor. This was a disaster, she had to find a way to switch sides before it was too late, had to find a way to save her son.

“Zippy!”

“Yes, mistress?”

“Can you get my husband's files without too much risk to yourself?”

“Zippy thinks so, mistress.”

“Do so and move them somewhere safe and secret from me, don't respond to me or tell anyone where they are unless I'm both free and in the presence of Amelia Bones, Albus Dumbledore, or . . .” She considered some of the rumors that had been swirling around. “Harry Potter. “Do you understand, Zippy?”

“Zippy thinks so,” the house elf agreed.

“If anything happens to me take them to any one of the three and tell them that they're in return for Draco's life.”

“Zippy will do so, mistress.”

Narcissa carefully considered her next move. Probably best to lay low for a bit longer, she decided. The mob had been aroused and were hungry for blood, it would be best to avoid giving them a target until they'd had a chance to vent their fury on someone else.

IIIIIIII

Voldemort considered his numbers, he'd lost his best, his rich, his elite, his most capable. The dark lord smiled, he'd have had to purge them anyway after he attained total control, he'd lost nothing that couldn't be replaced. It was fortunate that common thugs were so easy to come by, he'd rebuild his numbers, he'd overcome these setbacks, he'd teach the populous to fear again. He considered his setbacks, perhaps it was a good thing the people had regained their hope, they'd fall into a deeper despair after he took it from them.

IIIIIIII

Amelia tried to put a smile on her face as she visited the makeshift aid station they'd set up the DMLE break room. Hogwarts, St. Mungoes, every clinic in the country was filled to overflowing. They'd won and were in danger of losing more people in the aftermath than they had in the battle.

One of the wounded men tried to lift his head. He was unrecognizable most of his face was gone, burned off. His other injuries spoke of someone who'd soaked up a massive amount of damage and had kept going until his body had betrayed him.

“That you, Madame Bones?”

She froze in shock. “Popinjay?”

“Surprised one of the Minister's pet peacocks did their duty?” he asked, the remains of his lips trying to curl into a grin.

“Surprised you survived it, Gavin,” she said gently. “I'd heard you were dead.”

“My team?”

“You and Peaks are the only confirmed survivors. I'm sorry, Gavin.”

“Don't be sorry, they died with no wounds on their backs, congratulate me for being privileged with the command of such men.”

“You and your men did good, Gavin, you have my congratulations.”

“Thank you, Madame Bones.” He tried and failed to sit up. “As head of the Minister's security detail, I am formally requesting replacements and

additional Aurors from the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

“You have them, Gavin.”

“Good. Hate for anything to happen to the Minister after everything we went through to keep him safe.”

“I'll do my best to keep him alive, Gavin, my word on it. I will no let you our your people's sacrifice be in vain.”

IIIIIIII

The senior goblin's eyebrow went up a bit when one of his aides showed Shattertooth into the office, a wave of his hand dismissed the junior goblin.

“Sorry for the delay, had to have some things checked before I completed my report,” Shattertooth said cheerfully. “Also got a request I'd like to make.”

“What things?” the senior goblin asked neutrally.

“My suspicions about the Potter and the Granger heiress for one,” Shattertooth explained, seemingly unaffected by his superior's evident displeasure. “Knew no human could do what the Potter did.”

“Explain that.”

“Potter's got non-human blood on both sides, suspect a dryad on his dam's side what with the eyes, haven't proved it yet but I have my people looking. Sire was descended from short nose the ugly fifteen or so generations back, only thing that makes sense is that the Potter is atavistic. Still very impressive for a goblin to do what he's done, but much more understandable.”

“I see. What about the Granger heiress?”

“Much more interesting, you're aware of the fact that her dam is descended from a former Primus Pilus of the Legio XX Valeria?”

“I am.”

“My people have been able to discover that in her many greats uncle was Marcus Rubrius Saturninus.”

The senior goblin frowned. “Why do I know that name?”

“From several of the sagas. He was a praefecti sociorum of the Ala Prima Coboli Lupi Equitantes Miliaria

“The one the stories say spent a good portion of his down time on our side of the Vicus?” the senior goblin asked, trying to remember the saga. “The one responsible for the fact that so many of our forefathers were jokingly called Marci filius?”

“The same.”

“Which side?”

“The sire, it explains quite a bit about the family. We said she was a goblin in human skin, stands to reason we share blood.”

The senior goblin considered what he'd been told for a few moments.
“What is your request?”

“I'd like to recruit a band of volunteers to fight under the Potter's banner. Our treaty with the Ministry allows it so long as we are under nominal command of a human approved of by the Ministry.”

“You just proved that the Potter is one of us.”

“They don't know that.”

IIIIIIII

Fudge seemed resigned when she entered the room, like he knew that there was nothing he could do to dig himself out of the hole he'd found himself in.

“What's it going to be, Amelia?”

“Minister?”

The Minister managed a weak smile. “I realized what was happening when your Aurors replaced my people, I'm not going to make this more difficult than it needs to be.”

“They replaced your people at Gavin's request, Cornelius. There aren't enough of yours to do their jobs after the fight at the Ministry.”

“I see.” The Minister took and released a breath. “I'd prefer not to have been killed in the fighting, the two that brought me here would have to be silenced if that were to happen. A trial would be bad for society with all that's happened, best if I were to top myself.”

For the first time in their association, Amelia felt a trace of respect for the Minister. “I'm not here for that, Cornelius. I'm here to talk with you to see if I can't keep you alive and as Minister.”

Fudge raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Everyone knows that Potter's only kept me as Minister because he wanted me to fall at the time most convenient to him. This seems to be it.”

“I'm the head of the DMLE, not one of Harry Potter's employees. I promised Gavin that I was going to keep you alive and I intend to keep my promise.”

“My last report stated that Potter commanded nearly twice as many wands as you do, do you think you can stop him?” Fudge shook his head. “We've got one war, Amelia, we don't need another.”

“I think I can convince him to let me handle it,” Amelia stated. “He's reasonable enough to know that he doesn't want the headache of running the Ministry. I say we hire him to provide assistance to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, that combined with a couple laws to make his life easier will hopefully be enough.”

“If you think that will work, Amelia,” Fudge agreed. “I'd convinced myself the best I could hope for was to be permitted to resign so he could place you in my chair.”

“I don't want it,” Amelia said flatly. “Not at all and never that way. History won't be kind to either of us, Cornelius. We'll be remembered as the incompetents that allowed the Dark Lord a second rise, the attack on Hogsmeade, and two attacks on the Ministry. I can live with that.” She grinned. “What I can't live with, what I'll die to prevent is to be remembered as a puppet minister.”

“Thank you, Amelia, it's good to know you're on my side.”

“I'm on the side of the law, Minister. Let's get back to the Ministry, there's work to be done.”

IIIIIIII

The night was half over when Dobby began to speak as no elf would willingly leave work undone, not even to hear something so important. Harry's friend spoke of family, of friendship, of a young girl so loyal to the idea of both that she would willingly become the object of fear and hatred from those she tried to save. In the audience, skepticism transformed into belief and shock into something akin to awe. Great was Harry Potter but good was his Grangy. Dobby spoke of plans, of ideas, of the dream that some day young Potters would sit at the same table with their uncle Dobby. He spoke of hope for a better future and asked those present to help him achieve that future. The response was both unanimous and wildly enthusiastic.

IIIIIIII

Luna cocked her head when Harry entered the engine shed. On the one hand it was good to see him up and about. She didn't like to see her friend hurt and laying in one of the beds in Hogwarts' hospital wing. On

the other, she was well aware of how many incriminating plans and drawings they had out.

“Harry, I don't know if you've been told but you're going with us when we visit my parents this weekend,” Hermione announced, drawing the boy's attention.

Luna took advantage of the situation to shuffle the half formed schematics on their drafting table so that their reactor project was on the top.

“Good to know what my plans are,” Harry said mildly.

Hermione blushed. “Sorry, that sounded horrible, didn't it? Would you please accompany us to my house this weekend?”

“Did something happen?”

“My grandfather died,” Hermione admitted.

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you, Harry.”

“What time should we leave?”

“Either later this afternoon or tomorrow morning,” Hermione replied.

“I presume you're coming too, Luna?”

“I am, thank you for asking,” Luna said cheerfully.

“Good.” He eyed the drafting table for a few uncomfortable moments.

“Was there some reason you came down to talk with us?” Hermione prompted, drawing his attention.

“I came down because I had a couple requests I promised to pass on to you.”

“Oh?”

“Some of the castle elves have asked if they can clean your toys and your mine and all your other stuff.”

“For pay,” Hermione said firmly. “It is an insult to a worker not to get coin for their labor.”

“You hear that, Dobby?”

“Dobby heard, Harry Potter sir,” the little house elf agreed. “Elves will do for one galleon a month per property.”

Hermione's lips pursed.

“Is insult to elvies to ask for more,” Dobby said quickly. “Dobby knows that Harry Potter sir's Grangy is too polite to insult her elf friends.”

The girl snorted. “Fine, you win, Dobby.”

“The other issue is Winky,” Harry continued. “She is not happy as a Hogwarts elf and would like to have a family. Would either of you be willing to accept her into your family?”

Hermione's eyes flicked to Luna.

“I would have to consult with our family's elf before agreeing to another,” Luna stated.

“Your family has a house elf, Luna?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Yes. She's the deputy editor of the Quibbler, Daddy'd been trying to get her to take over as managing editor for ages but she's far too smart to agree.” Luna's smile was blinding. “She also does the rune puzzles.”

Hermione took a moment to digest what she'd just been told. “That's great, Luna.” She turned back towards Harry. “I'd be willing to talk with Winky about joining my family.”

The elf in question made herself seen. “Winky could have a family again?”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. “But I'll want you to have something to wear better than a tea cosy and I will want you to have pay so that you can buy things for yourself.”

“Winky will wear a uniform but Winky will not take pay,” the little elf said firmly. “Family looks after family because they love them. Family does not get paid to look after family.”

“I will agree to that so long as you agree to never hesitate to come to me if you need or want anything no matter how big or how small,” Hermione said firmly. “You're right, family looks after family out of love and I will not have any member of my family want for anything I can give to them.”

Hermione found herself with a sobbing house elf wrapped around her leg. “Winky was so lonely without a family.”

“You must promise that you will come to me if you ever need anything,” Hermione repeated. “If we are starving and there is only one bit to eat you must be the one to have it.” The girl summarized half forgotten lessons. “Just as you have your duty to family, so do I. Your position requires loyalty and service, mine requires loyalty and protection. That's the deal that's always been given, the fact that others may shirk their responsibilities is no justification for me to shirk mine. The fact that others shirk their responsibilities is reason for me to do everything in my power to rescue my family that I have not yet met, it is no justification for me to shirk mine. I will die before I shame my family like that.”

“Winky agrees, Winky agrees mistress, Winky is so happy to be home.”

“Welcome home, Winky,” Hermione hugged the house elf. “Can you come with us this weekend to meet the rest of the family?”

“Winky will be happy to meet the rest of her new family.”

“Every elf in the castle must be here,” Luna said in wonder.

Hermione became aware of the fact that there seemed to be house elves packed on every one of the rafters that held up the roof of the engine shed. The elves watched for a few more seconds before disappearing as a group.

IIIIIIII

Amelia raised an eyebrow when one of her senior Aurors walked into her office without knocking and flopped into the visitor's chair.

“Well?”

“It doesn't make sense, boss.”

“What doesn't make sense?”

“The Potter boy is good, good to the point that I wouldn't want to cross wands with him, but just it doesn't make sense. It's Hogsmead, boss, they think he killed just about all the Death Eaters himself.”

“What?”

“I talked to a dozen people today, each one admits that they may have hexed one or two, but they all insist that they were just taking some of the pressure off Potter and that Potter did all the heavy lifting. Most I can get them to agree to is that Potter may not have walked away without the help he got. I just don't get it, boss.”

“They all know that they threw a curse or two, even know that the people around them threw a curse or two. What they forget is just how many people there were in town that were cursing and not wearing masks. It's a trick of how the mind works, they remember they did it. So that's one. They remember a couple of the people around them helped out. Say another four or five. Six total. Do you think six people can overcome the number of terrorists that carried out the attack?”

“No, boss, but there were a lot more than six people. There were at least a dozen of Potter's armymen and a few of ours that helped out along with Merlin knows how many civilians. Even if you say that one death eater can take three civilians, they still had the bastards outnumbered by a factor of four.”

“True. But they don't know that and we're not going to tell them. We're going to tell them that Harry couldn't have done it without their help, we're going to push the story of those two kids who took out five thanks to that asinine book the Weasley twins put out. We're going to talk about the students who fought their way back to the castle, we're going to talk about Frank and Lessie's boy and his group, and we're going to make damned sure everyone knows that they were trained by Potter last year. Are we clear, Auror?”

“Yes, boss. But why?”

“People on our side can't even say the name of the bastard on the other side. I want to give the other side something that inspires just as much hope in ours, enough to push away all the fear and to let decent people fight back. Remember, Potter showed us the way.”

“Boss?”

“One of our new slogans, kid's going to absolutely hate it. Potter showed us the way, he showed us we could win, die on your feet or live on your knees. Print shop's turning out dozens of posters to put up around the alley.”

IIIIIIII

Chapter 42

IIIIIIII

Harry left the Headmaster's office with an agreement to provide security to the school and the problem of where he was going to find the staff to do it.

“We're going to have to start doing a lot of overtime,” Harry mumbled to himself.

“Right you are, chief,” Flint agreed. “And that's without taking into account the fact we've gotten similar requests from Hogsmead, Diagon, St. Mungoes, several Quidditch teams, etc. Goblins state that they might have a possible solution to you if you're available to talk this weekend.”

“Am I?”

“You are, chief, already set up.”

“Thank you. Anything else I need to do today or should we collect the girls and head to Hermione's house?”

“Wonder of wonders, you're free for the rest of the day, chief. Researchers are going over something you did during the fight so it's likely best to escape before they decide they need you to generate more data.”

“Can't find a better reason to get out now,” Harry agreed.

IIIIIIII

Daphne nodded to her cousin as the fire changed color, the connection was as secure as she could make it. Her cousin nodded back indicating that the room was as secure as the other girl's skills permitted.

“Are you there, father?”

“I'm here,” the man replied. “Tracy, your father is taking care of some business and will not be able to attend this meeting.”

“Please give him my best, uncle.”

“Why did you call for an emergency meeting, father?”

“I want the two of you to do all that you can to build more ties to the Granger family,” the man stated firmly. “See if you can ally our family with theirs if you can, be sure that the two of you and your siblings are under their umbrella if you can't bring in the entire family.”

Tracy's eyes widened in shock. “We're not going to be neutral anymore?”

“I trust that both of you have some idea of what happened at Hogsmeade?”

“We do, father.”

“It was followed by an attack on the Ministry with the same result. People are angry, angry to the point that I'm worried they're going to start forming mobs to take care of anyone not sufficiently against the dark lord. We will declare for the Ministry if we have to, but I think it would be much better to deepen ties with an existing business partner.”

“Especially one with a close personal relationship with Harry Potter,” Tracy said dryly.

“Exactly. Do what you can to deepen ties, try to get me a meeting with the head of the Granger family, and do everything you can to stay safe and to protect your siblings. I've transferred a large amount of galleons to your personal accounts, spend it like water if that's what it takes to keep the family alive.”

“We shall do our best, father.”

“Our word on it, uncle.”

IIIIIIII

The entry hall to the large Granger country house was filled to bursting with servants and security when the trio of Hogwarts students arrived.

“Welcome back, Ms. Hermione,” the butler said with a wide smile. “I trust your time at school has been productive?”

“Yes, thank you,” Hermione replied. The girl nodded thanks as one of the footmen took her and Luna's luggage.

“Allow me to take your bags, Mr. Potter,” another of the footmen stated.

“Harry will be in his usual rooms and Luna will be with me,” Hermione commanded. “You may take them there.”

“Of course, Ms. Hermione,” the footman agreed. The staff had come to approve of the boy after his last visit, that approval had grown when they'd heard what had happened to the bastards who'd sought to harm the young Granger heiress.

The butler cleared his throat. “Your mother wished me to pass on that you are to take an hour to freshen up and then you are to attend her in her rooms. Mr. Potter, she requests that you abstain from this meeting.”

“What about Luna?”

“That is for Ms. Lovegood to decide.”

“I will come with you if you like,” Luna offered.

“Thank you, Luna,” Hermione agreed.

The butler turned to Harry. "Mister Granger requests a bit of time if you feel up to it."

"I do," Harry agreed.

The butler gave a meaningful look to one of the footmen. "Steven will show you the way."

The footman led Harry to the estate's south field where Phil Granger was in the middle of a round of clay shooting.

"Ah, Harry," Phil said with a grin. "Welcome."

"Good to be back," Harry replied. Phil indicated for the boy to select a shotgun.

"See the reports that you're hovering on death's door were were a bit off," Phil observed as Harry selected a shotgun. "You know how to use one of those?"

"I remember what you taught me about them," Harry replied carefully.

“Good enough to not kill either of us,” Phil laughed. “Come on.”

Harry took his mark and promptly missed the first two clays.

“There was a plan to kidnap my wife,” Phil said calmly, taking his mark.

“I see.” Harry waited until the man had fired both his barrels. “Do you have a list of names?”

“What?”

“Isn't that what this meeting is about?” Harry looked honestly confused as he stepped up. “You arrange for a quiet place for us to talk, you tell me that a group of someones have decided to top themselves, you give me their name or names so I can be sure they don't make a mess of things.”

Having heard what had happened from the goblins and knowing that it was no idle boast, Phil couldn't keep the grin off his face. “Thank you, Harry, but that won't be necessary.”

“I disagree.” Harry broke both clays. “Well?”

“As it happens, they were from the non-magic world. Wife's known as a bit of a soft touch when it comes to charity. Some of those charities are loosely connected to groups that like to take a more active hand in things. Some of those groups, in turn, think that they're also entitled to a bit of funding and are not too happy to be told otherwise.”

“I see.” Harry took his mark.

“Brought it up because I wanted to thank you. It was your people that caught them. They tripped some sort of intent based ward when they were doing their scouting.”

Harry broke a clay.

“Well done!” Phil cheered. “Tripping that ward caused the guards to take a closer look.”

“What's to be done with them?” Harry stepped off the mark.

“Police are dealing with them,” Phil replied cheerfully. “Whole thing's attracted a bit of attention. We've had several quiet inquiries about getting similar wards.”

“From whom?”

“Those in the know, many of whom would prefer to remain anonymous for as long as possible.” Phil broke two clays. “What I need to know from you is a timetable. How soon can your people start and how long will each ward take to come up.”

“Will they also need security people to keep an eye on things and to maintain the wards?”

“Quite possibly,” Phil agreed.

“I'll have some numbers sent over shortly,” Harry promised.

“Thank you.” Phil made a show of looking around. “There was another thing I wished to discuss while you're here.”

“Shoot,” Harry replied with a barely suppressed smirk.

“To start with, have you given any thought to where you are going to spend your summer?”

“Not with the Dursleys,” Harry said firmly. “One nice thing about having a number of dangerous individuals working for you is that your refusals carry a bit more weight than they did without the dangerous individuals.”

“True. Any objections to spending the holidays with us?”

“So long as it isn't any sort of bother.”

“No bother at all for us,” Phil said immediately. “My wife was rather hoping you'd say yes so she'd have more opportunities to introduce you to society. She believes it will make it easier to persuade Hermione to agree to attend events if you're along. She also believes you to be our future son in law and wishes to ensure that you're known by all the correct people.”

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. “What?”

“You are the only boy my daughter has ever shown any interest in,” Phil said calmly. “Personally, I believe you all to be at least ten years too young to think of any of these things, but I'm told things often go quicker in the magical world.”

“I . . . I agree with you on that,” Harry stammered. “Being too early.”

“Just a friendly warning,” Phil stated. “Come to me if my wife or Neville's grandmother or anyone else tries to push you into taking things too quickly. I'm afraid they're feeling a bit smug at how well things are going with Neville and my niece and have decided to focus on other targets. The next one is Jim. Be sure not to warn him.”

“Why doesn't he get the same consideration I did,” Harry asked with a bit of humor.

“Well, he's a degenerate cad for one. He's old enough to take care of himself, for two.” Phil signaled for two clays, breaking one. “For three, him producing an heir would make things a bit easier for Hermione in some ways. Finally, and most importantly, the bastard's been stealing my good whiskey for years.”

“Three works for me,” Harry laughed. “Bugger 'im. Any idea who the lucky girl is?”

“Think it's one of Augusta's nieces, some sort of librarian or researcher I think. Feel a bit sorry for the poor girl, but I wish her all the best.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione's uncle did not have to fake a smile as his blind date introduced herself, perhaps getting to know the girl wouldn't be such a chore after all. Granted he'd have to put up with an appalling amount of smugness from his sister if things worked out, hopefully it would be worth it.

“So, what do you do-” she pursed her lips. “-how would you prefer to be addressed?”

The question brought him back to the present. “Please call me Jim,” he stated. “As to your question, I am a man of leisure.”

“Good work if you can get it, I suppose.”

“I'm hoping so,” Jim agreed. “I was in exports until I received my inheritance.”

“I see.”

“Yourself, to both questions?”

“Please call me Ada. As to what I do, I am currently a researcher.”

“What do you research?”

“Unspeakably boring things,” she stated.

The two stared at each other for several silent moments.

“Were you perhaps researching something in Bangkok two years ago?”

“I was gathering research materials in Bangkok two years ago,” she stated calmly. “Dreadfully boring trip.”

“I was quite impressed with how you handled the cobras,” he said dryly.

“Some research materials are more challenging than others,” she explained. “You?”

“Working on a trade deal. Dreadfully boring stuff.”

“Which necessitated stabbing a man in the throat with a pen?”

“It was the only way I could get him to stop talking about his golf game.”

“Understandable.” She regarded him for a few moments. “Care to pencil in a second date? I've since been-” she frowned. “-promoted to a desk job, meaning the days of gathering my own materials are sadly behind me. It's left me with quite a bit of time and an aunt that has been pushing me to settle down.”

“I would be delighted to,” Hermione's uncle stated. “It will be interesting to meet with an attractive woman on my own behalf.”

“Your reputation suggests-”

“For queen, country, and cover,” he interrupted. “Not for myself in quite some time.”

“Of course, forgive the lapse.”

“Nothing to forgive, I've found myself forgetting the difference between myself and my former cover more than once.”

IIIIIIII

Hermione resisted the urge to frown as her mother finished detailing her role in her grandfather's funeral. The girl did not understand why they couldn't just have something private for the family rather than a public spectacle. Wisely, she did not voice her objections for fear of having her mother give a more detailed answer than she wished to hear.

“Are there any questions?” Anne asked.

Luna raised a hand. “What will I have to do?”

“We'll have you seated with the family if you chose to come, dear.”

“My father too?”

“If he wishes to come,” Anne agreed. She turned back to her daughter.
“That out of the way, I understand that you hired a maid?”

“How did you know?”

“I'm your mum, I know everything.”

Hermione sighed. “Winky.”

“You is calling Winky, Miss Hermy?”

“Winky, I would like to introduce you to my mother. Mother, this is Winky, our newest member of the family.”

“Welcome to the family, Winky. I am very pleased to meet you,”
Hermione's mother said with a smile. “Let me introduce you to Ms Valentine, my personal maid.” She raised her voice. “Suzanna, would you come in here, please.”

A petite redhead stepped into the room. “Yes, Mistress Granger.”

“Permit me to introduce you to Winky, she'll be joining the family as Hermione's maid. Winky, Suzanna Valentine.”

“A pleasure,” Suzanna stated. “Do you have time to discuss your new duties?”

“Winky wishes to get to work soon, but Winky understands how important it is to learn first.”

“Wonderful.” Suzanna turned to her employer. “Mistress?”

“Of course, Suzanna, no need to be formal in front of family.”

“Winky, shall we?”

The little elf followed the woman into another room.

“First of all, you are responsible for the welfare of Miss Hermione,” Suzanna began. “Health, safety, appearance. If you have not yet attained the skills to do so, I will arrange for your instruction myself.”

“Winky can cooks and cleans and sews,” the little elf said, hands wringing with distress. “Winky doesn't understand what Valentinnny means with other things.”

The woman paused to consider the mangling of her name. “I am a trained paramedic, I worked for the Metropolitan Police protection command before being offered a place at Mistress Granger's side. My younger brother is a marine commando and is hoping to be offered a chance to become young Miss Hermione's driver after her graduation. I'm the third generation employed by the Granger family and I am by no means unusual among the servants. Can you measure up or do you need me to arrange a bit of training?”

“Winky can protect Mistress Hermione Granger ma'am from baddies,” the little elf agreed. “Winky can do some healing, but needs to learn more.”

“Show me,” Suzanna commanded. The woman immediately found herself immobile. She then became aware of an increasing amount of pressure on one of her limbs, her left arm bent until it snapped with a sicking pop. Teeth clenched, the woman fought to free herself.

“Winky will heal it now,” the house elf stated calmly.

Suzanna's pistol was in her hand the moment she found herself free. The woman worked her left arm for a few moments, it appeared to be undamaged.

“Was Winky good enough or does Valentinny need Winky to demonstrate more?”

“That was sufficient for now,” the woman said, stowing her firearm. “Is there a way to prevent anyone else from being able to do that?”

“Winky only knows that other elfies can stop it,” she offered. “Winky can ask Dobby to ask Harry Potter sir to ask other elfies to protect Grangy family from bad elves if Valentinny wants.”

“Please do so.”

IIIIIIII

The congenial smile dropped off Harry's face the moment Hermione's father was out of sight. “Flint!”

“I'll have a list of names for you by the end of the day, Chief,” Flint stated calmly. “What do you want us to do with it?”

“Do whatever you have to to find out who else is involved,” Harry ordered. “Keep an eye on the ones in police custody and leave them in one piece if it can be done without coming into conflict with my previous order. I want Anguish to have a long talk with anyone unfortunate enough to have escaped arrest.”

“Got it, Chief,” Flint agreed.

“See what you can do about making sure the unsavory sorts know that the Granger family is off limits,” Harry continued. “Let me know if we need to make an example.”

“Dobby can take care of bad muggles, Harry Potter sir,” the little elf announced, making his presence known. “Is no trouble, Dobby can do it like he took care of bad wizards who tried to harm Harry Potter sir's Grangy and Loveygood.”

“When did that happen?” Harry asked intently.

“When Harry Potter sir was dealing with bad wizards at Hogsmeade,” Dobby replied. “Dobby fed bad wizards to pigs and put their things in Harry Potter sir's vault.”

“Thank you, Dobby, be sure to let me know if you have to deal with that sort of thing in the future.”

“Dobby will do,” the house elf agreed. “Dobby will tell other elvies the same.”

“You want me to give the names to him, chief?”

“Give them to me along without whatever else we can find and the three of us will sit down to discuss who does what.”

“Got it, chief.”