

Portrait of a Wizard as a Young Man

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"Sorry to interrupt, but McGonagall sent d-mail asking you to meet with her at Hogwarts."

Harry Potter frowned as he looked down at Hermione's image.

"Is he still there?" he asked.

"Hang on," Hermione replied. Her face was soon replaced by one whose eyes were a bit more out of proportion with the rest of his face.

"Dobby is sorry, Mr. Harry Potter, Sir, Dobby be giving the message to your hand but Headmistress tells Dobby to keep Mr. Harry Potter's, Sir's location quiet."

"No worries, Dobby," Harry said. "She was right to have you deliver the message to the secured location. Did she say when she wanted to meet?"

"Yes, Mr. Harry Potter, Sir...she be wanting to see you right away."

"Okay, Dobby," said Harry, "would you put Hermione back on, please?"

"Oh yes, Dobby can do that. Dobby can't wait to see Mr. Harry Potter, Sir, again."

The image blurred, and then sharpened back around Hermione's face.

"Hey...you and Ron should go as well. I'll need five more minutes or so to wrap up my meeting with Griphook – I'll meet you there."

"Understood. Watch the rotation this time."

The image faded to black.

Harry sighed. While he knew that the chance of any communication being traced or monitored increased with message length, he was still getting used to the economy of Hermione's comments. He pocketed the silver mirror, and reentered one of Gringott's private meeting rooms.

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"So what did you think of that landing, Jim?"

"Well, that over-rotation produced a much bigger splash than you'd expect to see at this level of competition, and I'm sure that will be reflected in the scores."

"And here come those scores now, ladies and gentlemen...5.7...5.4...5.6...Oh!...a 3.1 from Phineas Black, that's going to bring his average way-y down."

"Very funny," said Harry, as he gathered himself up off the floor and shook the cinders out of his hair. He looked towards Ron and Hermione, who had just "announced" his arrival out of the Headmistress's secured floo connection. "Don't quit your day jobs."

That comment brought a few catcalls from the office walls. Harry glanced up at the portraits, most of whom were still holding the white placards that displayed in numeric form their thoughts on Harry's landing.

"That goes for you lot as well."

The hoots and catcalls grew louder with Harry's admonishment.

"Please forgive us," Dumbledore's echo asked, with a twinkle in his eyes, "for seizing upon the opportunity to amuse ourselves. It happens so rarely in these dark days."

"Pay no attention, Mr. Harry Potter, sir," said Dobby, as he popped in and began to mend the burn marks in Harry's robes. "You did much better than last week."

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said with a smile. He turned back to Ron "So what's the tally now?"

Ron walked over to a small piece of parchment attached to one of the office walls and added another mark beneath his name.

"That would be thirteen-nil...better luck next time, mate,"

"Just warming up," said Harry, "Just warming up."

"I'm not surprised, given the number of cinders you carried in with you," teased Hermione.

That retort brought another round of guffaws from the former Headmasters of Hogwarts. Harry let it drop, and allowed Dobby to lead them out of the Headmistress's office.

He could have pointed out that Ron had an eleven-year head-start when it came to floo transport. But Dumbledore's portrait was right; they all needed more opportunities to laugh during these dark days, and if it helped boost Ron's ego a bit that he could do something better than Harry, well, that was fine, too.

The friendly competition was only two months old. Harry would have never predicted that they'd have made thirteen different visits to Hogwarts over that time, but only positive leads that they'd gotten in their horcrux hunt had come from the ghosts that haunted Hogwarts's halls and the elves that worked in Hogwarts's kitchens. They had been surprisingly good sources of information; most remembered Tom Riddle's days as a student, and had been able to fill in some of the gaps within Dumbledore's timeline.

Harry was guessing that McGonagall had uncovered a new lead from her own inquiries into Tom Riddle's exploits; they'd been able to ask for her help on that topic without having to disclose the reason why. They typically met in her office; Harry's curiosity was therefore piqued when Dobby led them down to the ground-level classroom that had been converted for Firenze's use.

They entered the forested classroom and found the Headmistress alone at a table set for lunch. Two things immediately struck Harry's eye. First, McGonagall was unusually underdressed, wearing the kind of robe that was more appropriate for a bath than for a classroom. Secondly, a small potions laboratory had been set up behind the table, with five different cauldrons simmering over small blue flames. A large easel was set up next to the pots, holding a canvas that faced away from them.

The Headmistress looked up from her plate. "Guessing that Mr. Weasley would be joining you, I took the liberty of adding a few plates to the table. Care to join me?"

"Certainly, Professor," exclaimed Ron, who took almost no time at all to dive into a Shepherd's Pie.

"Oh honestly, Ron," exclaimed Hermione, "you would think that you never eat at home."

"Home, yes," replied Ron, in between bites. "Your kitchen, no."

Hermione scowled as she and Harry joined him at the table.

"So what brings us here today, Headmistress?" asked Harry, as he began to fill his plate. "Finally corner The Baron and get him to talk?"

"Not exactly," replied McGonagall. "Something came up unexpectedly, and I thought you might want to exploit the opportunity."

Hermione's eyebrows arched towards her hairline when her gaze strayed from McGonagall's face towards the bubbling cauldrons and stretched canvas.

"Oh my," she said, "do you mean to say that the Master is really here?"

"Yes, indeed, Miss Granger," the Headmistress replied, with a bemused expression. "There was an unexpected opening in his schedule."

"Exactly who are we talking about?" asked Ron warily. He'd been silently trying to find any kind of link between the potions laboratory and McGonagall's attire that didn't involve naughty bits and Snape.

"Master Leonardo Rondino," replied McGonagall.

"Master Who?"

"Oh, Ron," admonished Hermione, "if you ever bothered to read *Hogwarts, A History*, you'd know that Master Rondino is the greatest wizard artist alive, and has been the official portrait artist of Hogwarts for more than a hundred years."

"That's it!" chimed in Harry. "I knew I saw that name somewhere. He painted Dumbledore's portrait, didn't he?"

"He did indeed," McGonagall said. "And as Headmistress it is now my turn to sit for a portrait."

"I can't believe it," Hermione said. "I've read all about him, and saw a retrospective of his work at the Tate two years ago. It was simply smashing."

"At the Tate Gallery?" asked Harry. "Isn't that a Muggle art museum?"

"Of course it is," Hermione said. "Don't you know that over the centuries a good many of the greatest artists were wizards as well? I mean, there's DaVinci, of course, and Picasso, and Kandinsky..."

"What about some of the crazy ones, like Van Gogh?" Harry asked.

"Wizard," Hermione replied simply. "He was, in fact, the prototypical wizard master artist...living on the edge of Muggle society, always broke, a bit touched...the Muggles thought him mad and committed him to an insane asylum. They thought he was hearing voices, when most of the time he was just talking to his familiar. Field mouse, if I recall correctly."

"I've never heard of any of those blokes," said Ron. "Or seen any of their wizard art...Why is that? Why would a wizard artist paint for Muggles?"

"Two main reasons," Hermione replied. "First, because that's where the money is. Sure there are always going to be a few wizard patrons to win commissions from, but there are far more wealthy Muggles than wealthy wizards. Second reason is, well, how should I put this delicately? Wizards in general, and pureblooded wizards in particular, are boring, and not much fun to paint."

"What do you mean, boring?" Ron asked, with a bit of indignation.

"Boring maybe isn't the right word," said Hermione. "Erm...static might be more appropriate. You see, Ron, artists are inspired by conflict, by struggle. Pain and suffering, and the human condition. Through their art they try to comment on the excesses or the needs that exist within societies. There always is going to be ample material in the Muggle world, but wizards? Well, you tell me, Ron...how many starving wizards do you know... how much pain and misery exists within the wizarding world? Now, of course, I'm not saying there isn't any, it's just...well, great art is borne out of change, and the wizard ways have been much more set over the centuries."

"So all of the famous artists were wizards?" asked Harry. "What about that soup can painter guy?"

"Um, no Harry," she replied, "Not all of them. Andy Warhol was one-hundred percent Muggle."

"A splendid primer, Miss Granger," the Headmistress interjected. "Of course, I'd have expected nothing less from you." Her eye catching movement near the doorway, she said, "Ah, here we are...Any luck finding the fresh limpwort, Master Rondino?"

"*Si*, it was exactly where you told us to look Donna McGonagall."

Harry, Ron and Hermione turned to see two men enter the room with dirt-covered tubers in their hands. The Headmistress had obviously been addressing the smaller of the two...a wiry old wizard whose silver beard was as long as Dumbledore's had been. His companion, in contrast, was clean shaven, tall, and curly locked. He also didn't appear that much older than they were.

"Master Rondino, may I introduce to you three of Hogwarts's finest students: Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Ronald Weaver."

"It's an honor to meet you, Master Rondino," Hermione stated.

"Thank you, I am very pleased to meet you all," the old man said, as he shook the Trio's hands. "This is my apprentice, Romeo."

The Master's apprentice gave firm handshakes to Harry and Ron. Hermione's hand, in contrast, was lifted up gracefully to Romeo's lips.

"Che bella fioritura...ti voglio eseguire bene ."

Hermione lifted her hand back as her face turned beet red.

"Oy, what'd you just say to her?" Ron demanded.

"Erm, it was nothing, Ron," replied Hermione hastily. "He just told me that he...he likes to play music."

"Si...Eeguire per la prima volta, no ?"

Hermione's blush deepened.

Harry reached back and took hold of the wand in his back pocket. "Well tell Romeo to mind his manners, before somebody hexes his musical instrument."

"Harry, be nice!"

The assistant turned towards Harry. "A translation isn't necessary, Mr. Potter. As for your request..."

"Come, Romeo," the Master interrupted, "we need to finish preparing the paints."

The assistant turned towards Hermione and stole back her gaze. "*Si*, Master Rondino."

The two men walked over to the potions laboratory, where Romeo began to wash and slice the limpwort root.

After Harry's eyes escorted the handsome assistant away from the table he addressed Headmistress McGonagall. "Professor, may I ask why you wanted to meet with me today?"

"Of course, Mr. Potter," she replied. "This morning's session gave me an unfettered opportunity to mull over our present situation." She paused to take a sip from her glass of iced pumpkin juice, then added, "You know that I've tried to respect your decision not to share what you were doing with Albus on the night he died...I haven't asked since that night."

"Yes, Ma'am, and I appreciate that, and your confidence in me to make those kinds of decisions."

"Not a problem, Harry," the Headmistress replied. "But as I sat over there posing for a slice of immortality, I became concerned over what would happen if the information that you've withheld were to be somehow...well, lost."

"You mean if Harry was killed by Voldemort, more like?" Ron muttered.

"Frankly, yes," she replied. "Now I suspect that Harry has kept you and Hermione informed, but it's true that the three of you often travel together, isn't it?"

"And it's also true that we'll be there when he faces Voldemort again," said Hermione. "I believe I know where this conversation is heading."

"Well I wish you'd tell me," exclaimed Ron, "because I don't see the least thing connecting our 'research' with Romeo."

Hermione turned towards McGonagall. "You want Harry's portrait taken as a sort of insurance policy, don't you?"

Harry's face had turned pale. "You don't think I can beat him, do you?"

"To Hermione yes, and to you, Harry, a resounding no. While I have the utmost confidence in your ability to prevail over Voldemort, having your portrait available to answer questions should the worst happen would indeed be a kind of insurance."

"I don't know," mullered Harry, "to even be thinking about what would happen if I fail..."

"I think you should do it," Hermione chimed in.

"You do?" Harry asked. "Why?"

"Look at it this way, Harry," Hermione said. "Do you think that your parents were planning on dying when they made their will? No, of course not. They made sure they had a will though, just in case...because it would have been irresponsible not to have one given the circumstances."

"But how would it work? What would keep the portrait from falling into the wrong hands, or keep it from blabbing about every single secret?"

"Oh, Harry," Hermione sighed. "The echo preserved in your portrait couldn't do anything that the real you wouldn't do under similar circumstances. Unless, of course, specific instructions are spelled into the canvas, right Headmistress?"

"Yes, Hermione, you are right. For example, Harry, all of the portraits in my office are pledged to provide their full support to the Headmaster or Headmistress, however reluctantly they might have done so if they were there in the flesh. That pledge is bound within the painting as a type of wizard's oath."

"You mean to say that if the Board of Governors elected Voldemort to be Headmaster that Dumbledore's portrait would have to do his bidding?"

"Yes," McGonagall replied simply. "As would mine, once my portrait becomes fully animated."

"Well how does that process work?" Harry asked. "What happens while the person in the portrait is still alive?"

Hermione answered for the Headmistress. "Usually, when a person sits for a magical portrait, the echo that is captured has only the knowledge held by the subject at that time. Master Rondino, however, is one of the few artists in the world whose portrait echoes remain dynamically linked with the subject."

"You mean the portrait always knows what I know, even if I learn something after the painting is completed?"

"Exactly," the Headmistress replied.

"Well, not that I don't trust you, Professor McGonagall, but what would keep you or anyone else from pumping my portrait for information while I was still alive? Where would it be kept?"

"That would be up to you," the Headmistress replied. "The house elves will keep my portrait secured down in the dungeons, until such time as it needs to be...well...hung. You could have them do the same, or keep it someplace you think might be just as secure, yet accessible if need be."

"Well, I guess it would be okay...it's just that..."

Harry was interrupted by the Master's voice. "Donna McGonagall, I think we are ready for you."

"Excellent," was the Headmistress's reply. "But first, will you see if it is possible for you to work with Mr. Potter, as we discussed earlier?"

"Yes, of course, Donna McGonagall," he replied. "One moment, please."

"Professor," asked Ron, "Why wouldn't it be possible for him to paint Harry's portrait?"

"Well," the Headmistress replied, "in order for the Master to capture a fully animated echo within the portrait, he needs to see a fully-formed and stable magical aura about his subject. It's rarely a problem for his more...mature...subjects," she stated, "but a fairly common problem in younger wizards."

"How old do you have to be before your magical aura is stable?" asked Ron.

"That depends on the individual," she replied. "When I discussed the possibility with the Master, he thought that given Harry's advanced training and skills he might be ready now."

"How can he tell?" Harry asked.

With the help of particularly complex potion, Don Potter," replied the Master, who held an empty bottle in one hand. He walked over to the table and looked intently at Harry.

"Yes, Donna McGonagall, his aura is quite strong and well formed. He will work nicely...except..."

The wiry old man walked behind Harry's seat, paused for a few seconds, then returned to face Harry.

"Don Potter, if you please, would you walk over towards the easel? Thank you."

Harry stood up and walked over to the easel. As he turned back to face the group he caught a glimpse of the work in progress out of the corner of his eye. His jaw dropped.

"Yes, and now please, Don Potter, walk back and stand next to your beautiful young friend here."

Harry did as he was asked with a bit of shock lingering on his face.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Erm...nothing," he croaked.

"It is most unusual, Donna McGonagall, but I think it will work. But she will have to pose as well."

"What?" asked Ron.

"His aura, it is...how you say in English...it needs Miss Granger's help?"

"Are you certain, Master Rondino?" McGonagall asked.

"It is the only way."

"Wow," said Hermione. "How interesting...how exciting...what do you think Harry?"

"I don't think that's a very good idea, Hermione."

"Oh c'mon, Harry it's not going to hurt, will it? I mean...it'll be fun to pose together."

"No, Hermione," Harry said. "I *really* don't think it's a good idea."

"Pish posh, Harry Potter," Hermione stated firmly. "We'll do this together. We'll do it for Hogwarts...we'll do it for posterity...we'll..."

"We'll be doing it bare-arsed naked!" Harry shouted.

You could hear crickets chirping in the forest, just before the other lion roared.

"WHAT?" demanded Ron.

He pushed back from the table and ran over to the easel.

"Oh. My. Sweet. Merlin."

He turned back to the others. "Will someone obliviate me... please?"

A stricken-faced Hermione looked at Master Rondino, who simply nodded. She looked at the Headmistress, who nodded as she clutched the lapels of her robe more closely together. She looked at Romeo, whose leering eyes suggested he wanted to clutch something else.

She finally looked at Harry, whom she'd never seen more afraid.

"Gryffindor courage?" she asked in a small voice.

"No, Hermione," Harry replied. "Ogden's. And lots of it."

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"I can't believe that you're going to go through with this," Ron scowled.

Hermione let out a deep sigh, as they strode out the main entrance to Hogwarts. With feet on autopilot, they headed down towards the lake. Hermione gave Ron the squinty-eyed glare that she reserved for those times when she was truly hacked off at one (or both) of her boys.

"Ronald Weasley, go take your teaspoon's worth of maturity and sort through your wizard card collection!"

"Think I will. At least they'll all have their bits covered."

"Is that what this is really about? The fact that I'll have my bits on display for the sake of art and the defeat of Voldemort?"

"You make it sound almost patriotic. Hey I know, let's all go salute Harry's flag!"

"Oh, so that's it," Hermione shot back. "You don't want my bits on display for Harry...or his bits on display for me. Why don't you just admit it?"

"Fine, I will," Ron said, as he stopped and turned to face Hermione. "I'm not at all happy about you being naked in front of Harry, and I certainly don't trust that Romeo character."

Hermione brushed passed him without breaking stride. "Ronald Weasley, just what are you implying?" she demanded. "That you have the right to decide what I do with my body? Or that you'd go even more mental than you already are at the thought of Harry possibly seeing more of me than you ever have?"

"Oh, you are just about at rope's end with that one Hermione," Ron replied, as he ran to catch up with her. "Maybe it's finally time to stop dancing around and decide where you and I stand."

"Fine," retorted Hermione. Having reached water's edge she stopped and turned towards Ron. "Where exactly do you think you stand – by my side, or out in front with a club on your shoulder dragging me along by my hair?"

"What? I don't even own a club."

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed. She paused for just a beat. "Here's where we stand, Ronald. You and I...we are...friends, just friends. Nothing more and nothing less. Just like Harry and I are just friends. Understand?"

Ron's face reddened and his mouth opened and closed wordlessly, like a fish out of water. The intensity of his hue and the frequency of his jaw dropping increased dramatically when Hermione unbuttoned her jeans and pulled down the zipper. She silently but resolutely slid the waistband down towards her ankles, exposing a triangle of periwinkle lace above cream-colored thighs.

"What do you think you're doing!" Ron exclaimed.

"Giving you what you want. You do want to see me starkers, don't you? To see my bits before Harry does? Not that you've ever displayed any interest before."

She kicked her flip-flops off her feet, allowing her to slide her jeans completely off her legs. She then matter-of-factly lifted her shirt over her head, exposing a lace bra that matched the color of her knickers.

"What do you mean?" Ron demanded.

Hermione spread her feet to shoulder-width distance and crossed her arms over her chest in a defiant pose.

"I mean that you've appeared to have fancied me on and off for the past three years, but have never displayed the bollocks to do anything about it. Never shown any passion or possessiveness...until now. So the only reason I can see you being upset about me being naked in front of Harry is your fear that he'll have one more thing that you don't have. So here's your chance, Ronald, to preemptively even the score. Make sure you see enough to soothe your pig-headed pride!"

Hermione ripped open the front clasp of her bra and exposed her breasts. She then violently jammed a thumb into the waistband of her knickers and tugged them down to her ankles. Once her right foot cleared the elastic, Hermione defiantly placed her hands on her hips and challenged Ron to gawk.

With her knickers bunched around her left ankle and her bra hanging loose on her shoulders she looked much more naked than nude.

Ron, who'd been examining his trainers during the last part of Hermione's rant, looked up just long enough to establish that she'd actually done what he thought she was doing. He then quickly dropped his gaze back down to the ground. After a full ten seconds of awkward silence, Ron turned away and headed back towards the castle.

Hermione watched him walk away with a tear in her eye. It was only after she was certain that Ron wouldn't turn back that she stepped back into her clothes, sat down on the ground facing the lake, and began sobbing.

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Harry's desire to seek Dumbledore's counsel was quelled when he realized that their discussion would have a rather large audience. Having heard enough catcalls for a day, he walked past the Headmistress's office without a glance. After ten minutes of what seemed to be aimless shuffling, Harry looked up and suddenly realized that his feet had carried him within the Fat Lady's field of view.

"Hey look, it's Harry Potter in the flesh. Not as much flesh as he'll soon be showing, but..."

"Word travels that fast amongst the portraits?" Harry asked.

"Only when it involves sex or violence, or both," she replied.

"Great," Harry said, as he conjured a chair and sat down in front of the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.

"Hey, don't look so glum," the Fat Lady said. "You're going to be a Rondino. Can't get much more famous in Portraitland than that."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked. "You're not telling me that there's social status amongst portraits, are you?"

"Of course there is, silly boy," she replied. "So do tell me that your echo is going to hang within Gryffindor Tower...my friends will be so jealous of me."

"Well, don't count your naked wizards before they pose...erm..."

"What's that dear?"

"I'm sorry, but I have to admit...I've been walking by you for the past six years and never bothered to ask your name."

"Oh, Harry, dear, I'm touched," echo replied. "No need to apologize, though, I'm just a portrait and it really is a lot easier to call me Fat Lady instead of Lady Wilhelmina Breckenheimer."

"That's your real name?...I mean, that was the name of the person you echoed?"

"Yes, indeed, my boy...if you want to call me something else, I have been known, at times, as Lady Bee."

"Well, Lady Bee, it is a pleasure to meet you...formally, that is."

The Fat Lady swung her hand down at Harry. "Oh, no need to be formal. After all, we'll be seeing a lot more of each other soon. And I do mean 'a lot more'."

"Yeah, well, like I was saying, I wouldn't be so sure. Haven't decided to do it yet."

"And just why would you want to pass up the opportunity to become a Rondino?"

"Well," Harry replied, "it's kind of complicated. Not just the fact that I'd have to pose in the nude, but, as you probably know, I wouldn't be alone."

"Yes, I heard The Master wants you to pose with Miss Granger...would have been unheard of in my day and age, but some of the younger echoes have told me they did it...there's even rumors of some echoes who were doing more procreating than posing, if you catch my drift."

Harry's ears turned beet red. "Yeah, I do catch your drift, and that's just the problem. I'm terrified of the idea of her and me both being naked...at the same time...in the same room."

"Oh, I see. Would it be a problem if it were some other woman posing with you?"

"I've been asking that myself," Harry replied. "Can't say for sure."

Lady Bee paused for a moment. "And what exactly are you afraid of? That she'll look at you and laugh, or that you'd look at her and lust?"

It was Harry's turn to pause. "I'm not sure...probably both. Well, kind of both...not that I'm afraid that I'd look at a nude Hermione and lust, but that I'd get an...that I'd display an embarrassing reaction."

"Well, Miss Granger is the smartest witch in her generation, isn't she?" Lady Bee asked. "Wouldn't she just consider any...reaction...to be the byproduct of teenage, erm, maleness?"

"But there's the problem," Harry muttered. "I don't think that I could say without hesitation that a...noticeable reaction...could just be attributed to teenage hormones."

"You mean you might have feelings for your friend that go beyond friendship?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "I guess so...I think so, at least. I wish I knew for sure."

"Hmmm," Lady Bee mused. "Tell me, Harry, has there ever been a time when she's induced this kind of reaction when she's been wearing clothes?"

Harry's expression turned rather sheepish, as memories of the Yule Ball, the kiss at King's Cross, and the bear hug at Grimauld Place raced through his mind.

"Yes."

"Well, that says something, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah, it says that I'm a dead man," Harry replied. "She'll take one look and think that our friendship all these years was just a ruse, and that I only see her as a piece of meat, and that will ruin everything."

"Have a little faith, Harry," Lady Bee replied. "There's always the chance that she's wrestling with those exact same fears right now."

"Yeah, well, a lot easier for her, wouldn't it be?" Harry asked. "I mean, she could just chalk her...erm...perkiness...up to a cold draft."

"It sounds to me like you need to sit down with Hermione and sort these things out before you pose," Lady Bee said.

"But I'm afraid to."

"Think that it's going to be any easier to talk when both of your heads would be communicating?"

"Good point," Harry said. "You know, you're pretty smart, for a portrait."

"No," she replied, "just observant. Hard not to be when you've seen teenage angst walking past you for the past three hundred years."

"I guess so," Harry said with a chuckle. "Well, guess I should go find my friends."

"See you later, then, Harry," The Fat Lady replied with grin that slid into a leer. "See a *lot* of you later."

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After a few hours of alone time by the lake, Hermione went back to the Divination classroom for some answers to questions that didn't involve Ron or romance. She was disappointed to find the room empty save for Romeo, who was hard at work behind the easel. Unfortunately, the Muggleborn witch was in no mood to deal with another idiot with sex on the brain.

"Signorina, what a pleasant surprise," Romeo said, when he heard her close the door. "We were afraid that you might not return."

"I'm not scared off so easily," Hermione warily replied. "Where's Master Rondino and Headmistress McGonagall?"

"Your Headmistress, I know not where she is. Master Rondino is taking a rest...the potion, he is made tired by it...only for a few hours at a time he can paint."

"I see," Hermione said, as she approached the young artist. She was surprised to find Romeo painting a still life, and even more surprised when she smelled the objects of his attention.

"Bangers and mash?"

"Si, Signorina," he said with a sigh, as he looked at the plate in front of him. "I am painting what passes for English cuisine. How the British people didn't die from boredom at the dinner table centuries ago I am at a lost to explain."

Hermione looked at the canvas and saw magical images of several plates piled high with food.

"Why, in Merlin's name are you painting plate after plate of potatoes and sausage?"

"Because, Signorina," Romeo patiently explained, "the taste buds of your English echoes are just as easily satisfied as those found within the mouths of their originals."

"You know," Hermione said, "this is exactly why I'm here right now. I've so many questions...Why, for example, do portraits need to eat?"

Romeo shifted his gaze from the canvas to Hermione, squinted his eyes, and sighed.

"Signorina Hermione, I am disappointed that your beauty is not matched by your intelligence...not that we will not enjoy each other's company in bed, but..."

"What?" Hermione exclaimed. She whipped out her wand and pointed it slightly south of Romeo's belt. Romeo reacted by pointing back with what was in hand, but found himself rather outmatched with only a paintbrush for his defense.

"What an outrageous comment...to presume something like that!" Hermione seethed. "I am neither dim-witted nor eager to be bedded by you! *Che faccia di stronzo!*...*Che coglione!* Shall I demonstrate just how smart I am by transfiguring your *cazzone* into calzone?"

"How charmingly vulgar, Signorina," Romeo replied with a smirk. "I think, however, you will find that my *cazzone* ...he will taste better."

Hermione fumed. "Oh...*Che cacasenno* ...to think that I am a *scopate facile* ...if you weren't somehow needed by the Master...tell me Romeo, would you like to be a born-again *castrato*?"

"So many questions, Signorina...perhaps if promist to answer them you would put your wand down?"

Hermione thought for a moment then slowly lowered her wand.

"*Grazie*, Signorina." Romeo said. "I must say, your fighting words, they are most impressive."

"Well, I've had years of practice," Hermione replied, thinking back a few hours.

"And your use of Italian slang? You have learned from a native?"

"No," Hermione said, "I learned because of a native...an idiot named Zabini...thought he'd have it easier insulting me in his native tongue."

"So you learned the language of love...from a lover, perhaps?"

"No, I learned how to say '*Vaffanculo!*' from Google, a few summers back."

"Ah...I see," Romeo replied, with some newfound respect for the English witch in front of him.

"Now you were saying...about portraits and food?"

"Ah, yes, it is quite simple, really. Portraits, they must eat for the same reason you eat."

"You mean," Hermione reasoned, "that the portraits need to eat because they are hungry?"

"Si."

"They need magical energy?"

"Si, si."

"Just as real people need to eat for the energy to walk and talk and breathe?"

"Yes again...but please, Signorina, do not forget making love...it is also something that requires energy."

"No doubt you'd never forget that fact, Romeo," Hermione sneered. "So you are saying that the magical energy bound within your paints isn't enough to keep a portrait acting, well...magical?"

"Oh, Signorina, you kill me with words!" Romeo exclaimed with mock sincerity. "But the sad truth is that what you say is true. Even the magical paints that Master Rondino and I prepare are not strong enough to animate an echo for more than a few hundred years."

Hermione thought for a moment.

"Well, that explains why so many magical portraits seem to have the subject sitting at a dinner table, I guess," she reasoned. "So while you are here painting the Headmistress's portrait you are also replenishing the magical energy of the portraits already completed?"

"Si, Signorina," replied Romeo, "except that it is the Master who paints the portraits, while it is the lowly apprentice who must paint the toads in their holes."

"Part of the price you pay to learn from the Master, no?" Hermione asked.

"Si," Romeo said. "It is what I always must do once Master Rondino has finished his work...so as not to waste the paints that we have prepared."

"Do you need to use that potion Master Rondino swallowed to see magical auras?"

"Certainly not, Signorina," he replied, "There is no potion in the world that would detect anything magical about your bangers and mash."

"But the images of bangers within your paintings...they are magical because of the potion paints that you are using?"

"Si."

"So why," Hermione asked, "are you painting a separate picture of nothing but food? Why not simply paint more food on each portrait?"

"Signorina," Romeo exclaimed, "my canvas...it is a restaurant that does not do home delivery. The portraits, they can walk to the food, no?"

"Ah," Hermione said, "so that explains all of the paintings of food down in the kitchens.... does this also mean that the portraits sleep not to amuse those viewing them, but to conserve their energy?"

"Si, Signorina Hermione...the echoes...they are more like real people than most anyone imagines."

Hermione chewed on that for a moment, while Romeo silently returned to his work.

"Romeo," Hermione finally said, "your magical paints...they aren't entirely magical energy...just like the food that you and I eat isn't completely used by our bodies."

Romeo chuckled. "I'm so sorry, Signorina, for underestimating your intelligence....the answer to your question is yes."

"But I've never seen a magical painting of a loo."

"Is that something you would like hanging on your living room wall?" Romeo asked rhetorically. "Is that something that you would like to see *being used* on your living room wall? They are there...they are just hidden behind the walls of the rooms that you do see."

"I do see," Hermione smiled, in the unique way she always did when she deciphered a difficult puzzle. "You paint in layers....in three dimensions. Just as you must paint your portraits in three dimensions...even if the portrait is facing you and you don't see their back, it still has to be there."

"Si, Signorina," Romeo said, with a grin returning to his face. "We must paint all of an echo...*dalla cioccie alla culo*."

Hermione answered Romeo's coarse chide not with a retort, but with a blushing admission. "Which brings me, I guess, to the more immediate question I came to find an answer for."

"Ah, yes," Romeo said. "Of course. Why do we insist that the subjects of our magical portraits pose in the nude?"

"Well, yes."

Romeo turned his attention back towards his canvas before he answered.

"Because, Signorina," he replied with a grin, "Master Rondino is a *vecchio sporcaccione*, and there is nothing I find more sexually arousing than the sight of a hundred-year-old witch in all of her naked glory."

"That's no doubt true," Hermione said. "But it is also not the correct answer to my question."

Romeo nodded his head as he looked at his subject, looked back at the canvas, and dropped his paintbrush onto the easel's shelf. He then lifted the painting from the easel and propped it up against one side of the potion laboratory's bench.

"Signorina, my still-life is completed. Would you like to eat the original?"

"Erm, no thanks," Hermione said, not willing to give Romeo the satisfaction of knowing that her stomach was growling (and that bangers and mash was comfort foods for her).

"As you wish," Romeo stated. He then shouted "*E lfa -di-casa!*"

A house-elf that Hermione recognized from her visits to Hogwarts's kitchens appeared as Romeo grabbed a scroll from his work desk.

"Yes, Apprentice Romeo?"

Romeo sneered a bit. "Take that plate away from here...there must be a troll somewhere that needs feeding."

Hermione furrowed her eyebrows in anger, but said nothing as the house-elf snapped her fingers and the plate disappeared.

"So now I need...let me see." He sighed as he traced a finger down a list on his unrolled parchment. "Shepherd's pie and Yorkshire pudding...and try to make it smell a little less strong than that other *cacca* you gave me."

The house-elf fidgeted a bit, as if she would have liked to have done nothing more than bathe Romeo in flaming custard, but did as he ordered her to do. The elf then turned towards Hermione.

"Harry Potter's Mione, you's is, aren't you?"

"Erm...yes...I'm sorry, I think we've met before but I don't remember your name."

"Harry Potter's Mione wants to know Dumkie's name? Thank you, thank you, thank you...Harry Potter's Dobby was right about Harry Potter's Mione...she is nice, and not crazy like the other house-elves say."

"Erm...thank you, Dumkie...I guess," Hermione said with some embarrassment.

"Dumkie saw Harry Potter in the kitchens a little while ago," the elf said, as she looked towards Romeo. "Should Dumkie go find Harry Potter to keep Harry Potter's Mione safe?"

"No, thank you," Hermione replied politely. "I'm perfectly safe...I'll find him myself in a little while."

Dumkie looked at Romeo again, then turned back to Hermione and noted that she was holding her wand.

"Smart witch, Harry Potter's Mione is," she said, before she disappeared.

Romeo, who had been holding his breath for the previous few seconds, broke out into laughter as soon as the house-elf vanished.

"So you are Harry Potter's Mione?" he asked. "How charming...and how exciting it is to think that you are an owned woman."

"Watch it Romeo," Hermione said. "And take care to remember that while your wand is flaccidly hidden away that mine is still just a newt's hair away from issuing a hex."

"Oh, Signorina," Romeo shot back, "there is nothing flaccid about my wand when you scold me so."

"Well beat that bad boy back down, Romeo," Hermione threatened, "before I *Reducto* your *belino*."

"I am truly impressed, Signorina...did you know that there are at least 140 more ways to say penis in Italian?" How many more do you know...or better...how many have you *known*?"

"My wand is going to get to know yours just long enough for me to say *Evanesco*, if you keep talking like that, Romeo...not that anyone would likely notice the difference."

"Yes, well..." Romeo replied, "you have given me such a charming segue for telling you why I shall soon see *all* of the woman behind the wand."

Hermione wasn't too angry to be embarrassed, just as Romeo had calculated.

"Well, go on," she stammered out as a reply.

"There are many good reasons," Romeo began, "But for now I will tell you the two most important...When the Master paints a portrait, he must see the magical aura, and he must see all of it."

"Yes, well that's pretty common knowledge, isn't it...so why would clothes get in the way of my magical aura?"

"Because, Signorina, a witch or wizard's aura...it comes out from the body...from every part of the body. And the way it comes out of the body...well...it comes out however it can. With each breath, each bead of sweat, each...how do you say it...each *peta*?"

"Are you suggesting that my farts are magical?"

"I'm sure, Signorina, that your *petas* are not only magical, but musical."

"That's disgusting."

"No, that's magic...it is inside us, and it is how we make magic...well, there is a much better way for you and me to make magic, but..."

"So that's part of the reason why Muggles can say spell incantations without anything happening?" Hermione asked, ignoring the latest come-on.
"The words have to be spoken with magical breath?"

"Si, Signorina, but as you no doubt know, magical breath is not enough...there must be intent as well."

"And intent is just...just another way of saying that a witch is focusing her aura on a subject."

"Exactly, Signorina...it is why wandless magic is so difficult...one must have a very strong and focussed aura not to need the magic that comes out when you exhale."

"So...back to the clothes...you might think with your pants, but I don't breathe with my knickers."

"Ah...signorina, you may not breathe through them...though I certainly would like to...but tell me this. Will your knickers be just as dry when I slip them off you at night as when you put them on in the morning?"

"Like you'll ever know," Hermione replied, a bit too nervously for her liking. "So...so there's magic in sweat...and...other bodily fluids...and clothes capture some of it, and so it dampens this magical aura that the Master needs to paint magical portraits...this seems farfetched. So it's impossible to paint magical portraits of people wearing clothes?"

"Of course not, signorina," Romeo replied. "The Master could paint a portrait with the subject wearing clothes...and depending on the strength of the subject's aura that echo might even think and talk. The amount of magic lost by sweat in the clothes...it is, after all, very small. It is large enough, however, to keep even Master Rondino from making a masterpiece....a portrait that is dynamically linked with its subject."

"Hmph..." Hermione muttered, as she thought for a moment. "You make it sound just weird enough to be magically plausible...and you've certainly given me enough rope to hang you if what you said isn't backed up by what your Master no doubt has told my Headmistress."

"Signorina," Romeo proclaimed, "You dishonor me. I am not a *cacasentenze*."

"Well you are a perv, and that's almost as bad," Hermione replied. "So Romeo," she continued, "you said that there was a second reason?"

"As yes, Signorina," Romeo replied. "The second reason...when a portrait is fully animated, it knows what the subject knew at the time of the painting...unless, of course, it is a dynamic link."

"Yes, go on," Hermione said.

"Well, Signorina, most people would say that this knowledge, these memories...they are mostly stored in the brain, no?"

"Yes, of course."

"But think for a moment, Signorina, and tell me if it is possible that there are things we know and memories that we have collected that are linked not just with the brain, but with other parts of our body."

"What do you mean...like love residing not in the head, but in the heart?"

"Si...although it goes beyond just that. Again, these are subtle differences, but imagine that there is a portrait of, say, a farmer whose hands have been hardened over years of toil in the field. Do you think that the captured echo might be a bit lacking, somehow, if the artist failed to paint the calluses on his hands?"

"Well, perhaps, but..."

"Perhaps a subject closer to your heart, then...what would the echo of Mione's Harry Potter be like if the Master forgot to paint a certain scar?"

"So you're saying that you need to include every part of a subject in the portrait because we are more than what is stored in our heads?"

"Exactly, Signorina."

Hermione thought about that for a moment, while Romeo mixed a few new colors for his next still-life.

"And so, Signorina," he said, "I have enjoyed your company very, very much, but these paints, they will soon harden, and I have a few more plates of swill to check off on my menu."

"Yes, I understand," Hermione replied. "Well, perhaps it is time I go find my Harry Potter....I'll see you tomorrow, I guess."

"Si, Signorina Hermione," Romeo replied with a grin. "I will indeed see you tomorrow."

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Harry heard Ron before he spotted him on the Quidditch pitch.

"Pull! – *Reducto* !" – (Smash!)

"Pull! – *Reducto* !" – (Smash!)

"Pull! – *Reducto* !" – (Smash!)

As he carefully picked his way through a field of broken pottery shards, Harry noticed that both Ron and the magical skeet loader were getting quite a workout. Ron was concentrating so hard on plate smashing that he didn't hear Harry come up on him.

"Pull!" – *Reducto* ! – Bollocks! You made me miss!"

"Sorry," Harry apologized, drawing back the hand that had tapped Ron's shoulder. "You do know Hermione's modified the loader so that it dispenses Death Eater images, don't you Ron?"

Ron used his wand arm to wipe the sweat off of his brow, causing Harry to duck when his wand tip pointed his way. "Yeah, I do," the red-haired wizard replied somewhat breathlessly. "But the sound isn't as satisfying when they fall."

Harry pulled two cold bottles of butterbeer from the bucket of ice that he'd carried out from the castle and handed one to Ron. "Little more of a challenge than in our shooting range back home, huh?"

Ron nodded as the two young wizards walked into the cool shade of the stadium's shadow and plopped down upon the ground, with backs against the short wall that divided pitch from stands. They sat silently for a full minute, nursing their butterbeers.

"So was the row about the painting?" Harry finally asked.

"Yes...no," Ron replied. "It was...it was about us...well, more like the fact that there is no 'us'."

Harry's eyes narrowed a bit with interest. "Care to be any more specific?"

"No."

Ron threw his empty bottle up in the air, the hexed it into a hundred different pieces. Harry followed suit.

Another ten minutes went by, during which time another two bottles were opened, emptied and *Reducto* 'd. Ron grabbed the last two bottles from the bucket and handed one to Harry.

"She's fancied you for the longest time, you know," Ron said.

"Don't know much about anything when it comes to who fancies whom," Harry replied cautiously. His heart rate was doing a tarantella at the thought he was talking about Hermione, rather than Ginny.

"I've known it for sure since start of Fifth Year."

"Gooooooooooal!" screamed the voice inside Harry's head (for he knew that Ginny's crush had matured long before she had). Struggling to do something or say something noncommittal, he pushed out a belch. "You really think?"

"Yup."

Harry finished off his drink, nonchalantly tossed the bottle into the air, and caught it a foot off the ground using a *Leviosa* .

"Wish it were you instead?" Harry asked.

Ron slowly shook his head. "Not anymore."

Harry nodded.

Ron finished off his bottle, but rather than levitate it merely threw it back into the bucket of ice. He stood up and pocketed his wand. "I'll be at The Burrow if you two need me."

Harry squinted up at Ron. "Why you think we don't need you right now?"

"Third wheel," he simply said. "Think I'll go find out how Luna's summer's been going."

Harry nodded. "Sweet girl...good to have around in a fight...lots of room at Grimmauld, you know."

It was Ron's turn to squint at Harry. "You serious, Mate?"

Harry nodded again, then reached his hand out to Ron. "If that's how it works out."

Ron pulled Harry up to his feet.

"Thanks," he replied. "Word of advice?"

Harry cocked his head in question. "Sure."

"Don't take anything for granted, and don't wait."

Harry silently nodded in recognition of the transition he felt taking place.

"Thanks, mate," he said, "Thanks for everything."

They then wordlessly began to clean up the Quidditch pitch.

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"Hey, I've been looking all over for you," said Harry's mirrored image.

"You could have just called me," Hermione replied.

"Well, yeah, assuming that I would have remembered to use it earlier than I did...almost floo'd home to get the Marauders Map...where have you been? Where are you?"

"Prefect's lavatory."

"Really?" Harry with tease in his voice. "I wondered why you were holding the mirror so tight to your face."

"Yeah, well, don't be getting your hopes up about seeing any skin before tomorrow."

"Hermione, you are kidding, right?"

"What, about the fact that I'm starkers right now, or that you can't wait to see me that way?"

"Erm, the latter...I'm not drooling...if anything, I've got cotton-mouth at the thought of being starkers in front of you."

"Oh, Harry, I was just putting you on," Hermione replied. "Sorry if I sounded a bit edgy...been on a bit of a roll today."

"Hey, no problem...that's why I'd rather talk with you face-to-face, rather than face-to-mirror about all this. Can we get together sometime soon?"

"Erm, sure, Harry, but give me a few minutes...I wasn't kidding about being naked right now."

"What...getting some practice in before tomorrow?"

"No, you prat," Hermione replied. "Just following the Master's orders...remember, no shower in the morning?"

"Yeah, that kind of seemed like a strange request."

"Well, after talking with Romeo I think I know why."

"Sweet talking you in Italian, was he?"

"Yes," Hermione said, "he was using some rather colorful language."

"Oh," said Harry, warily. "Well, how much time do you need?"

"Fifteen minutes?"

"Fine, where do you want to meet?"

"Here's fine," Hermione replied. "Have to make sure you're clean behind the ears, now don't we?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "And just who will be holding the washcloth that makes that a certainty?"

Hermione smiled sweetly. "You should be so lucky, Potter."

She deactivated the mirror off before catching Harry's image saying "I know."

Hermione sighed as she stood up in the bubble-filled basin and tossed the mirror back into the charmed dry box that sat by the water's edge. She pulled her wand from the box, cast an *Accio* on a dry towel from a nearby shelf, and wrapped it around her torso. She then grabbed a witch razor and started to shave her legs.

Once she reached her thighs, Hermione dropped the towel and wondered whether or how she should tame her other mass of brown curly hair.

Unlike Lavender or Parvati, bikini lines had never anywhere near the top of her "To Do" list. But then again she'd never before faced the prospect of standing nude before three different men at the same time.

Hermione was unnerved when she realized that no small part of her decision making process involved the question, "What would Harry like?" He had just talked about *his* apprehension, but it could have been nothing like she was presently feeling, as she judged her legs too short, her hips too wide, and her breasts too asymmetrical (the left hanging just a tad lower than the right).

At one level her fears were silly; there wasn't anyone in the world that she trusted more than Harry, and she was quite sure she could handle anything Romeo threw her way (that was more a question of whether Harry would beat her to the punch). But would Harry treat her differently once he was forced to acknowledge that his best friend had curves with points and creases?

Hermione was glad that Harry wanted to talk beforehand...it might help head-off some of her fears. She was also glad that there was a pretty darn good reason why this all was happening. Deciding against doing anything drastic "down there," she tossed the razor into the dry box.

She was gauging the relative weight of her breasts when a ghost's head burst through the mirror and pulled up nose-to-nose.

"Oooh, spending some quality time with friends, are we?"

"Myrtle, you startled me," Hermione complained, her hands quickly dropping to her side.

Moaning Myrtle pulled herself completely through the mirror and started to slowly float in circles around Hermione.

"That's what ghosts are supposed to do, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, well...why aren't you down in the second floor lav?"

"Not much to do down there, what with the students on hols," Myrtle replied. "So I came looking for some company."

"Company...or someone to spy upon?"

Myrtle answered the question with a question. "It's not spying if it's just us girls, right?"

"I guess," Hermione replied, "so what do you want?"

"Just wanted to see if you were preening as much as Harry Potter," Myrtle replied, having caught Hermione doing a side-view evaluation of her unsupported lift.

"So you know about the painting?"

"Of course," Myrtle replied. "It's the talk of the castle right now."

"Not surprised, I guess," Hermione replied. "Why do you say I'm preening?" she asked hastily. "How do...well, of course I know how you could spy on him...why do you say that Harry is preening?"

Myrtle giggled as she continued to spin around Hermione. "What would you call it when a boy stands naked in front of a mirror and flexes his muscles...and I do mean *all* of his muscles?"

"Oh, I see..." Hermione said quietly. "Did he look at all nervous?"

"Deathly so...just like you."

The ghost lowered the height of her spin and came to a full stop with her head a few inches away from Hermione's pelvis. She smiled broadly, floated back far enough to catch Hermione's eyes, and cooed. "Of course, Harry doesn't have any reason to feel...inadequate."

Hermione involuntarily brought her legs together, reached for her towel, and rewrapped herself. "Why...why do you say that...how do you know?"

"Because," Myrtle giggled loudly, "I've watched wizards play with their wands for decades."

Hermione blushed. "Myrtle, you haven't...you don't...I mean...really?"

"Uh-huh," the ghost replied. "I'm a regular Mr. Ollivander when it comes to the young wizards of Hogwarts."

Hermione sat down on a bench, propped her elbows upon her knees and rested her chin in her hands. "A regular Mr. Ollivander?"

Myrtle lowered the bridge of her ghostly glasses down on the tip of her nose, struck a pose, and did a spot-on imitation of the wandmaker's voice. "I remember every wand I've ever seen, my dear, every one."

Intrigued, Hermione decided to play along. "Really?" she asked, "so if I gave you a wizard's name, like, say...Gilderoy Lockhart...?"

"Five and three-quarters inches, pine...very soft."

Hermione laughed loudly. "Oh, Myrtle, you are terrible...."

"But not too terrible for you to ask again, right?" the ghost asked.

"Maybe." Hermione got a gleam in her eye. "Severus Snape."

"Five and one-half inches, willow...nice and swishy."

Hermione laughed out loud again, then told herself "*in for a penny ...*"

"Fred Weasley."

"Six and one-quarter inches, holly, slight bend to the left."

"George Weasley"

"Six and one-quarter inches, holly, slight bend to the right."

"Really?"

Myrtle nodded solemnly. "I never had any problem telling the two of them apart."

"Viktor Krum."

Myrtle looked at Hermione funny. "You mean you never saw his wand?"

"Of course not."

"That's a pity," Myrtle said with a sigh. "Seven and five-eighths inches, oak, satyr's heartstring."

"So that's larger than normal?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yes!" Myrtle said. "If it was the witch that chose the wand, then his would be a very popular model."

"I see," Hermione replied quietly, as she sat and thought.

"A little curious about Harry?" the ghost asked.

Hermione snapped her head up and threw out a piercing gaze.

"No...erm...definitely not," she said.

"Already stored that information away?"

"No, we're best friends...just best friends."

"And that's why you were wondering if he'll like the size of your baps, right?"

"No...not at all." Hermione said, as she crossed her arms in front of herself.

"So it's the Master's Assistant that makes your insides flutter?"

"Oh, Merlin no!"

"So we're back to Harry," Myrtle said. "It's okay if you're curious, you know...I don't fancy him anymore."

"You mean you did?"

"Oh my, yes...for the longest time...until Draco and *Draco Jr.* started to visit me last year, of course."

"Draco Malfoy?" Hermione asked incredulously. "Draco's named his...erm...wand...Draco Jr.?"

"No," said Myrtle dreamily, "I gave his wand that name...seven inches, very stiff...definitely hardwood..."

"Oh," Hermione said, and with all the nonchalance she could muster asked, "so you were saying...about Harry's wand..."

Myrtle swooped right in close to Hermione. "So you *do* want to know?"

Hermione entire face, neck and upper torso turned beet red. She was too embarrassed to reply, until she remembered that it was Myrtle she was talking with.

"Yes, Myrtle, I do want to know."

"I just knew it," the ghost replied.

"So?" Hermione asked impatiently.

"So," conspired Myrtle, "Mr. Potter's wand is...." She paused for effect.

"Go on, then."

"Harry Potter." Myrtle said matter-of-factly, "Eight and seven-eighths inches, ironwood, horse heartstring."

Hermione choked on a bit of her saliva. "Are you sure?"

"Just verified that measurement today, my Dear."

"Oh," Hermione said, as she slowly realized the implications. "Oh...oh...Oh!"

"That's just what he was saying," Myrtle quipped.

Hermione laughed in spite of herself. "So why horse heartstring?"

"Well he is hung like one, isn't he?"

"I guess," Hermione said. "So, not changing the subject or anything, but the Master's Apprentice...his name is Romeo..."

"I thought you weren't interested in him."

"I'm not," Hermione replied, "but he's so cocky, I'd love to know if he has the, well...you know...to match."

Myrtle giggled. "Guess I've got another observation to make," she said. "I'll see what I can see tonight."

"Erm, thanks Myrtle."

"You're welcome, Hermione," Myrtle replied. "Oh, and Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"You can stop worrying about whether your bits will measure up in Harry's eyes."

"Why do you say that?" Hermione asked.

"Because he got excited when I described your bits for him..."

"You did what?" Hermione exclaimed.

Myrtle ignored her. "Like I said, so excited that just as soon as he thought I had gone, he...well..."

The ghost giggled. "How do you think I confirmed my measurement today?"

"Oh, Merlin!" Hermione exclaimed.

Myrtle started to float towards the basin's piping. Just before she squeezed down one of the tubes she turned towards Hermione.

"Not quite," Myrtle replied. "Just before he came he was saying 'Oh, Hermione!'"

A few minutes later, a very pensive witch was still sitting on the bench, wrapped in her towel. When she heard a knock on the door she looked down at her towel, then looked over at her clothes thrown in a pile alongside the basin.

"Sod it," she said to herself, then called out to Harry to enter.

"Oh, Hermione, I'm sorry," Harry said, casting his gaze down at the tiled floor as he entered. "I thought it was safe for me to come in."

"Of course it's safe," Hermione replied. "It's just me, and I'm wearing a lot more than you'll see me wearing tomorrow."

"Erm...guess so," Harry nervously replied.

"Calm down," Hermione said with a chuckle. "It's only me, right? Not like you're facing Voldemort again."

"That might be easier," Harry replied. "At least I've done that before."

Hermione stood up and walked over to Harry. "You mean you don't know what it's like to be naked in front of a girl?"

"Erm, no..." Harry said, "I mean yes, but only if you count Madame Pomfrey or Moaning Myrtle."

Hermione laughed. "Madame Pomfrey doesn't count," she stated, with a twinkle in her eye, "but tell me about Myrtle."

Harry's face turned red. "Oh, well, Myrtle...let's just say that she's got a bad habit of popping up at just the wrong time."

"So I've been told," Hermione said with a smile. "So...you've never...with Ginny..."

"No," Harry said, quite quickly and emphatically. "Our...erm... relationship...it never went past snogging."

"Really?" Hermione asked. "I mean...it's just that...well, Ginny made it sound like she'd laid down tracks for *The Harry Express* lots of times."

Harry turned a bit pale. "What? That's a complete...we never did anything close to that...Hermione you've got to believe me."

Hermione looked at Harry very closely. "Of course I believe you Harry, why wouldn't I?"

Harry walked over to the bench and sat down. "Well, I didn't want you to think that I didn't care about...well I guess I really do care about....I can't believe that Ginny was saying those things...when?"

"Oh," Hermione replied, "she said a few things right before end of term, but I guess it was at the wedding that she really tried to make a point."

"You mean Bill and Fleur's wedding...the one where I spent all day avoiding her and dancing with you?"

"The very same," Hermione replied.

"That little witch..." Harry muttered.

"So there really isn't anything going on still between you and Ginny?"

"No," Harry said emphatically. "When I broke up with her, I said it was to protect her...but that seems so long ago, and so much has changed since then...even when it's all over with Tom it's still going to be over with her."

"Oh," Hermione said quietly. "So what's changed?"

Harry looked at her intently, trying to pick between the different paths of potential conversation. "Well, certain things haven't changed at all, it's just maybe that I've...I've decided that there are times when we have to choose between what is right and what is easy."

"So tell me, Harry...what is easy?"

Harry bit his lower lip. "My relationship with Ginny was easy."

Hermione caught her breath just a bit, realizing just how close her thigh was next to his as they sat on the bench. "And, what is right?"

Harry looked into Hermione's eyes and prayed that what he saw was hope. Still too scared to find out, though, he looked down on the tiled floor and stayed just this side of evasive.

"The right thing to do is to be honest about the feelings I've held inside for a very long time."

Hermione felt as if Harry had just brought himself up short of a threshold that she knew he wanted to hurdle. She desperately wanted to jump over that barrier and snog him senseless, yet after telling Ron off for not saying how he might have felt towards her...she just had to hold back.

"So Harry, anything more you want to say about those feelings?"

Harry looked at Hermione. He wanted so much to tell her what he'd already confessed to the Fat Lady, but was so, so afraid what might happen if those feelings were reciprocated. And even if they were, what might happen to his friendship with Ron...their friendship with Ron.

It was a lot harder to say you should do the right thing than to actually do it.

"Well," he replied, "erm...you see...erm...oh, we've got a busy day tomorrow, huh?"

The smartest witch in her generation should have drawn out Harry's feelings with some probing questions and understanding empathy. Instead, she went with the tried and not-so-true method of trying to make the boy she fancied jealous (it had worked so well when she went on a date with Cormac McLaggen, right?).

"Yes we do," Hermione said. "I should let you take your bath...and I've got to get ready for my dinner with Romeo tonight."

"What?" Harry asked sharply.

"You know, the Master's apprentice...the elves are making all kinds of English food for us...it was just so sweet when he asked me in Italian."

All Harry could stammer out was, "Oh."

"You are still planning on staying over tonight in the Tower, right?" Hermione asked.

"Erm, yeah," Harry said quietly.

"See you in the morning, then," she replied. She leaned over and pecked Harry on the cheek with her lips, taking what was for her the unprecedented step of ensuring that he had a good view of her cleavage as she bent down in her towel. Hermione then gathered her clothes and left the room.

And left Harry speechless.

After waiting long enough to ensure that the coast was clear, Harry ran to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower to talk with Lady Bee.

Harry, you look so dejected, what happened?"

"Oh, Lady Bee, it's a mess... I took your advice and tried to talk with Hermione to try and sort out some of my feelings for her and my fears of posing with her, but before I could she told me that she had been talking with Romeo and was going to eat dinner with him tonight..."

"So?"

"So?" Harry replied. "So he's dark, handsome, Italian, probably can say all sorts of sweet things to her that I can't understand."

"Harry, I think you're underestimating both your own attractive qualities had her ability to separate wheat from chaff."

"But I'm just...I'm just me," Harry whined. "What could I possibly say that would be romantic?"

"How about telling her how you feel about her...I thought that was the game plan the last time we talked."

"Yes, well, it doesn't seem adequate enough...I tried to tell her but...but my tongue got tied and anything I tried to tell her sounded completely wrong...say, you don't speak Italian, do you?"

"No, I'm sorry, Harry, I don't," Lady Bee replied.

"Do you have any friends that speak Italian?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but...my good friend Lady Vee speaks French, would that do?"

"It's got to be better than the English mush that would be coming out of my mouth,"

"Harry, you underestimate yourself...but if it takes using a different language for you to summon up the courage to tell Hermione how you really feel about her, then *Viva la langue Francaise!*"

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Harry allowed the alarm clock to crudely taunt him once last time (*Seven O'Cock – Time to Free Willie!*) before he grabbed his glasses and swung his legs around side the bed. He hadn't slept much, despite the familiar surroundings of his Gryffindor dormitory room.

There was a box sitting atop his desk with a small handwritten note attached.

Dear Harry,

I suggest that you wear this (and only this) to and from your session with Master Rondino. Trust me when I say it will help compartmentalize any embarrassment or insecurity you may be feeling right now– Headmistress McGonagall

The box contained a red silk bathrobe, trimmed in gold. Harry doubted that his house colors would bolster his courage, but appreciated the thought. He left his pajamas in a ball at his bedside, donned the robe and holstered his wand within a thin pocket that was sewn onto one sleeve.

He found Hermione in the Common Room, dressed in a similar robe and curled up in a chair with a book in her lap. She yawned as she looked up and stretched her arms. Harry couldn't help but notice that her movement caused the hem of her robe to ride high up on her thigh.

"Morning Hermione," he said. "You couldn't sleep either?"

Hermione shook her head wistfully. "I got a bit of sleep, but my alarm clock kept tripping off my adrenaline with the snarkiest little comments."

"I know the feeling...sickles to pickles my clock was channeling Malfoy."

Harry walked over squeezed in next to Hermione. She pivoted around, swung her legs up onto one arm of the chair and lay her head down upon the other. Whether by design or accident, the move also scooted her bum off the seat cushion and up onto Harry's lap, and allowed the hand that Harry had wrapped around her shoulder to fall onto her midriff a few inches south of her navel.

"So," she said with a smile and a bit of squirming, "ready for our big day?"

Harry was quite certain that she was trying to get a rise out of him...literally. The two thin pieces of silk between them...the calculated amount of friction...the short distance between his hand and the delights in either direction. "Hermione," he said, "I do believe that you are going to be the death of me."

Her eyes sparkled. "Well that's what the portrait is to insure against, right?"

Harry shook his head with frustration. "There's something that I have to confess to you."

Hermione's eyes narrowed just a bit, but she maintained her smile. "What's that Harry?"

"Hermione...I'm so afraid that...I'm so sure that...well, that when we pose that I'm going to have a physical reaction that will make you think less of me."

The Muggleborn sighed, a bit tired for the journey, but happy that they'd finally got to that point.

"Harry, you don't have to worry, or be embarrassed. It's a natural reaction, particularly for a teen-aged boy...I'm not going to think any less of you if

you get an erection."

"But that's the point," Harry said without realizing his double entendre. "Any bloke with one eye opened and a teaspoon's worth of testosterone would get hard looking at you. I mean...why wouldn't they...you're so beautiful."

"Harry, you are too kind," Hermione said, "and I love you for it."

"But Hermione," Harry said with rising exasperation levels, "I'm not just any bloke; I'm your best friend. And my reaction...it's not natural."

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Erm..." Harry said. "It is natural, but it's more than a physical reaction...its due to more than a physical reaction. I mean, sometimes I get hard just watching you study."

"What?" Hermione asked with surprise. "You get turned-on watching me do homework?"

"What can I say," Harry replied. "Smart is sexy...and you are smart, and Merlin, you are sexy...argh, but that doesn't mean I'd shag any girl just 'cause she sorted Ravenclaw..."

"But," Hermione said with a smile, "you would shag me?"

"Oh, Merlin, I've really stepped in it," Harry lamented. "Hermione, you are my best friend. I value that friendship more than anything else in the world. I need that friendship more than anything else...well, there's air, food and water, but it's a close fourth."

"Harry," Hermione replied, "there is a difference between wants and needs, right? Just because you need air doesn't mean that you fancy it."

"But can't you want and need something...the same thing...at the same time?" he asked. "I mean...what I need is your help, and support, and courage, and brains...but what I want is..."

Harry leaned forward and planted a strong kiss on Hermione's lips. For all of the flirtatious banter, it caught Hermione by surprise, but it didn't take her long to respond, with two hands that grabbed the back of his head and caressed his messy hair.

Hermione let out a content sigh when they finally broke for air. "Harry," she said, "there's something that I need to confess to you as well."

"What's that?" Harry replied.

"I didn't really have a dinner date with Romeo," she replied. "I just said that to make you jealous."

"I know," Harry replied with a smile, "Lady Bee told me last night."

"She did?" Hermione asked. "My, but she was a busy bee...she told me last night that you were taking French lessons. What in Merlin's name for?"

"Oh," Harry said, "no reason. Just want to learn to say a few things in French that I've always found it hard to say in English."

"Like what?" Hermione cooed.

"You'll see," Harry replied, with an enigmatic smile. "Come on, it's time to go."

Reluctantly, the two got up and exited the portrait hole. Their arrival in the hallway was met with the sound of resounding applause and cheers. They looked back over their shoulders, only to find the Fat Lady's portrait filled to the frame with echoes. The Ladies Bee and Vee were surrounded by almost most every portrait echo hung in Hogwarts hallways, and quite a few of the former headmasters as well. Dumbledore's echo stood just behind Lady Bee with a raised goblet in hand.

"Good morning, Harry and Hermione."

"Morning, Sir," Harry replied, reflexively. "Come to see us off on our next great adventure?"

"We have indeed, handsome," Lady Bee replied. "Thought you might need some support."

"And some liquid encouragement, as well," Dumbledore added, before crying out "Dobby!"

Not a second later Dobby and Dumkie popped in front of Harry and Hermione with a pitcher and two goblets, which they filled and handed to them.

"Good morning Harry Potter, Sir," said Dobby.

"Good morning Harry Potter's 'Mione," chimed in Dumkie.

Harry covered his mouth and raised his brow in fake shock as he shot Hermione a playful look. She replied with a slight shake of her head and sparkle in her eyes.

Dumbledore gave a shout out from over their shoulders. "A toast, then," he said, as he raised his glass. "To paraphrase something I said just a few short years ago...it takes a great deal of courage to stand naked before your enemy, but it takes even more courage to stand naked before your best friend."

The other echoes laughed and cheered. Harry and Hermione looked at each other, neither knowing whether to laugh or hyperventilate. They tentatively clinked their goblets together and took a taste of the orange liquid within.

"Oh, this is delicious," Hermione said to Dobby. "What is it?"

"Headmaster told Dobby to make a pitcher of 'Hogwarts Sunrise'," Dobby replied. "Dumkie wasn't sure that Harry Potter and his 'Mione were old enough, but I told her Dobby always listens to Headmaster, even when he's inside a painting."

"Well it certainly is delicious, Dobby," Harry said. "What's in it, though?"

"Dobby used the Hagrid's special recipe...pumpkin juice, fresh cream, nutmeg and Ogden's."

"Really?" Hermione said, as she reached out for a refill from Dumkie. "Is this something he drinks on special occasions, then?"

"Yes, Harry Potter's 'Mione," Dobby replied. "Hagrid says every breakfast is special at Hogwarts."

"Smart man...erm...giant, that Hagrid," Harry said, before letting out a loud belch.

"Mind your magic, Harry," Hermione said with a smile.

A group of ghosts, led by Nearly-Headless Nick and Moaning Myrtle, joined the impromptu send-off.

"Your honor guard has arrived," Nick said with a grin.

"Harry?"

"I asked for their help running interference in case Peeves shows up."

"Oh, great idea," Hermione replied. "Good morning, Myrtle...how did it go last night?"

"It came very quickly," Myrtle giggled. "Three and three-quarters inches, balsa...very soft."

Hermione refused to explain why she was laughing as they started down the Tower's steps and into main hallway.

Though the situation was ripe for Peeves's antics, the poltergeist was nowhere to be found as they walked the halls. In fact, the most interesting thing about their path wasn't along the way, but the destination itself; rather than lead her down towards Firenze's forested classroom, Harry guided her towards the library.

"Harry, why are we stopping here?" Hermione asked.

"Because," Harry said as he opened the doors. The same portable potions laboratory that was downstairs the previous day was set up where the study tables normally sat. An empty canvas rested upon an easel, facing the open stacks of books.

"We're going to pose here?" she asked.

"That's right Hermione...cleared it with Master Rondino last night."

"Why?"

"Well," Harry replied, "I thought you might be more comfortable posing here rather than in the forest...after all, this is your second home, right?"

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "Harry, you are so thoughtful...but I'm not sure that this is a good idea."

"Why is that, Hermione?"

"Well...you were right to think that I'd be more comfortable posing nude here in the library rather than the forest," she replied. "The problem is, though, that I've, erm...imagined...being naked here before."

Harry's eyebrows shot up in ballistic arcs. "Oh my...you've fantasized about being naked in the library?"

"Well, erm...yes. I guess."

"And maybe doing things a tad more athletic than just *being* naked?"

"Erm...yes," she admitted.

"Anything you care to share with me?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Not right now, thank you very much," Hermione said rather sheepishly.

"So you've dreamed about *Shagging in the Stacks*?"

"Maybe..."

Bound Amongst the Leather Bound ?"

"Harry, you're incorrigible."

"*Boinking on the Bookshelves ?*"

"Harry, stop."

"So would you rather pose someplace else?"

"Not on your life, Potter."

At that moment Nick and Myrtle wafted in through the wall to report that Master Rondino and Romeo were about to join them. They hovered above Madame Pince's desk as the two wizards strode into the room with hands full of fresh limpwort. The Master bade them good morning, and said that it would take just a few minutes to finish their paint preparation.

"Harry," Hermione whispered, "why is Nick here?"

"Oh, I asked him to hang around, just in case," Harry whispered back. "So what's the story on Myrtle?"

"Same, I guess," Hermione said somewhat cryptically.

"Good morning, Hermione," said Romeo. "I am happy to see that you have come prepared...or is it, in English, 'prepared to come'?"

"Come one step closer to her, Romeo, and you'd best be prepared for a rather nasty hex," said Harry.

Romeo sneered at Harry. "Oh look, matching robes, how sweet....do you wear the same undergarments as well?"

Hermione laughed as Harry started to get flustered. "Don't mind Romeo," she said. "He's just making up for his shortcomings."

Harry cocked his head. "Was that one word there at the end, or two?"

Hermione giggled. "Both probably...it turns out that the 'Italian Stallion' here is hung more like 'My Little Pony'."

Harry snorted as he looked towards a rather angry Italian, then went saucer-eyed when he realized something.

"But to make that comparison, you'd have to know just how long..."

"Yes, Harry, that's right." Hermione replied with a broad smile. "Myrtle was very observant...both last night *and* yesterday afternoon."

Harry shook his head and turned towards the Master.

"Is there anything we need to do before you start?"

"No, my fine young fellow," Rondino replied, "except remove your robes and stand before the canvas."

Harry turned to face Hermione.

"Are you sure you are ready to do this?" he asked.

Hermione looked right into Harry's eyes, undid her sash, and let her robe drop to the floor. "Not sure at all...how about you?"

Harry smiled a bit as he held eye contact and let his robe join Hermione's. "Same for me."

They stood there, naked before each other in the library, yet neither could have told you that for sure, for neither wanted to break eye contact. Neither wanted to make the other self-conscious with their gaze, and neither wanted to appear more anxious than the other to see what their discarded robes had revealed. They didn't even dare blink. Finally, after twenty seconds or so, Harry broke the spell.

"So at the same time, then?" he asked.

Hermione grinned and agreed. "On three, then....One...Two...Three."

They broke eye contact.

"Merlin, Hermione....you are so...beautiful."

"Merlin, Harry...you are so...big."

They laughed nervously as Romeo stepped out from behind the bubbling cauldrons.

"Merlin, Romeo," he said to himself, "you are so...nauseous."

"Sod off, Romeo," Harry said.

"Oh, what are you going to do about it, Potter?" Romeo?" "I'm not afraid of the only wand you've got within hand's reach."

Harry looked back at Hermione with a question in his eyes. She nodded in response, took one of his hands in hers, then pointed her other towards Romeo.

"*Accio* arsehole's wand!"

Hermione's wandless magic flung Romeo's wand up off the table and into her outreached hand.

"How quaint," a slightly flustered Romeo said, "she does the heavy lifting for him."

Hermione snorted as Harry reached his free hand and sent a cauldron of water careening towards Romeo. It dumped its contents on his head before clanging down on his skull. Romeo dropped to the ground unconscious.

"Well," she beamed at Harry, "it seems as if all of our wandless practice is starting to pay off."

"It's either the practice or our attire," replied Harry. "We should cast spells naked more often."

"Yes," Hermione cooed, as her eyes softened and her lips pursed. "Perhaps we should."

That statement (or more specifically his physical reaction to that statement,) caused Harry to quickly turn away from Hermione. "Erm, sorry, Hermione."

"Don Potter, please, you must try not to be..or to get so...excited." said Master Rondino, who had been painting at a furious pace ever since the robes had dropped.

"Oh, that's ok," Hermione said sweetly, as she gazed into Harry's eyes. "We're all friends here."

"I'm sorry, but it is not acceptable," the Master replied. "When his blood starts to flow to his *cuzzo*, the magic goes with it."

"Really?" asked Hermione.

"Yes," replied the Master. "His aura is much too unstable right now for me to paint."

Hermione looked at Harry and shook her head.

"You heard the man, Potter, get it under control."

"I'm trying," said Harry, in a desperate attempt to focus his mind someplace other than Hermione's lovely bits.

Umbridge eating saltine crackers... Ear Wax...Bludgers...

"Please, Don Potter, I can not work when all of your aura is going where your blood has already gone."

"Harry?"

Filch cleaning Mrs. Norris's litter box...Neville's socks...Dragon dung...

Master Rondino shook his head in disgust. "This is never a problem with older wizards."

Slughom's cozy...Troll buggers...Dudley's toothbrush

Rondino threw up his hands in disgust, and reached over to the laboratory bench.

"Don Potter," he asked, "Please...take this empty pot and....take care of your excitement."

"What?" Harry demanded. "You want me to wank off and...and catch it for you?"

Hermione looked shocked, but immediately understood the situation. "Harry," she said, "there's magic in everything that comes out of you," she said. "He probably would mix your, erm...release...in with his paints to conserve the magic."

"Donna Hermione, you are a very smart witch," the Master said with a smile. "Now, Don Potter..."

"Forget it," Harry replied. "Nick, a little help please?"

"Right away, Harry," the ghost replied, as he swooped down from his vantage point and straight through Harry's body. The cold and clammy experience tamed Harry's erection instantaneously.

"Don Potter!" the Master replied. "Why did you do that? The ghost, he just took more of your magic from you than your released seed would have!"

"Oh," Harry replied. "Sorry."

Master Rondino shooed them towards their robes, stating that he'd have to wait some time before Harry regained enough aura for him to continue. Lacking anything better to do with his time, and with his assistant still knocked out cold on the floor, the Master began to paint in the background

while Harry and Hermione looked over his shoulder.

"You are very lucky, you know," the Master said. "Usually I have Romeo paint in the background...ah well, this will make the work that much greater, I guess."

"Will the library background be magical as well?" Harry asked.

"Of course," the Master said, with a tinge of indignation. "Just as the forest behind the Headmistress yesterday will really become a forest in every way...animals included."

"And you don't even have to paint all of the animals into the painting, do you?" Hermione asked.

"Correct," replied the Master, "I give the form and intention, and with my magic all of the rest is filled in."

"So the Headmistress's echo will be able to interact with that forest...her animagi form could climb a tree, or tangle with centaurs, or anything," Harry reasoned out.

"Si."

Hermione's eyes brightened "So if the Headmistress's echo can play in the forest, then our echoes will be able to..."

"Play in the library," said Harry. "The complete library...or read, or do research, or study."

"Wow," Hermione said, "and all of the books would be there. It's too bad that they're just echoes, or they could do some of our work for us."

"Why couldn't they?" Harry asked.

"Because they're just echoes," Hermione replied. "They only know as much as the originals...it's not like they could read a book and retain any knowledge, right?"

"I've been thinking about that," Harry replied, "and the only conclusion that I can reach is that conventional wisdom is wrong. A portrait echo can learn things that the original couldn't have known."

"How can you be so sure, Harry?"

"Simple test," Harry replied. "If we went up to the Headmistress's office right now and asked Dumbledore's echo what the score was in my floor landing contest with Ron what would he say?"

"He'd say to give up while you were both behind and on your behind," Hermione giggled before she thought of something. "But that is something that the original Dumbledore would have never have known!."

"Exactly," Harry said. "The echoes can observe, they can report, they can deduce...in short, the echoes can think for themselves."

Hermione looked for confirmation from Master Rondino.

"Donna Hermione, he is quite perceptive," he replied simply. "Shall we try again, now? Donna Hermione, if you would stand behind Don Potter, perhaps he would be less excitable?"

They took his suggestion. Harry sheepishly dropped his robe and faced the canvas. Hermione walked behind him and disrobed out of his eyesight. Master Rondino walked over to the laboratory and swallowed another ladle of potion before returning to his canvas.

"Ahh, thank you, Don Potter, for your cooperation. But now, I think...."

Rondino squinted at the pair intently.

"Donna Hermione," he decided, "you must stand closer to him...his magical aura is still too unstable."

Hermione followed his instructions and stepped up directly behind Harry, so that he could feel her warm breath on the back of his neck.

"You know, Harry," she said, "if it wasn't so important for you to avoid getting stiff I'd compliment your cute bum."

"Not helping, Hermione," Harry replied tersely.

"Right...sorry," she said, in a tone of voice that didn't seem so. "So tell me...what were you planning on saying to me in French?"

"Oh," Harry admitted, "I never really decided. *Je t'aime* sounded a bit corny, if accurate, and anything longer than that sounded like the name of a 70's disco tune."

"Really," she asked, "like what...'*Voulez vous couche avec moi*'?"

"Why Hermione, I thought you'd never ask...of course I would," Harry said, prompted Hermione to swat his *derriere* .

"So were you able to come up with anything more original?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "Just that...just that you're *ma raison d'etre*, *et aussi ma raison de vivre apres Voldemort*."

"Oh," she replied, in a quiet and wondrous voice. She placed a hand on each of Harry's shoulder blades and leaned into Harry...her cheek on the base of his neck...her breast cuddled up against his back...her pelvis spooned up against his bum.. Harry closed his eyes and leaned his head back, savoring the sensations that had every square inch of his body more alive than he could recall. It was only when he began to think about exactly which parts of Hermione he was in contact with that he got in trouble again.

"Don Potter," Master Rondino said, "perhaps it is time to bow to the inevitable?" He reached for the paint pot again.

"Well take care of things, Master Rondino," Hermione said, as she walked over to her robe. After tying her sash she grabbed Harry's robe and threw it at him.

"Let's go, Harry."

"Where are we going?"

"Some place where we can take care of your aura imbalance."

As Harry donned his robe, the Master handed Hermione an empty paint pot. "Make sure he doesn't spill any of his magic on the ground."

"Oh that won't be necessary," Hermione replied sweetly.

"And why is that?"

"Because I have my own container."

The Master's eyes went wide as Hermione turned and grabbed Harry's hand and led him out of the library. "We'll be back in a few minutes," she called out over her shoulder.

Master Rondino was chuckling to himself as a tabby cat came out from its hiding spot. The cat's Cheshire grin remained fixed as the body that surrounded it transformed into Hogwarts's Headmistress.

"Master Rondino," she said with a laugh, "you are a dirty old man."

"Why Donna McGonagall," he replied, "am I the one that has been peeking behind a tree all this time?"

"I have a duty to protect my students, you know," she said with a smile. The Headmistress then looked at him appraisingly. "You really didn't need her to pose with him, did you?"

"No," the Master admitted, "I didn't. With all of their unresolved sexual tension it is actually harder for me. But now...if we see some resolution...I am certain their combined auras will be as strong as I've ever seen."

The Headmistress shook her head with a mischievous smile. "Stronger than even ours?"

The Master's eyes twinkled. "Minerva, I was too enraptured yesterday afternoon to notice."

"Well," the Headmistress replied with a saucy grin, "perhaps I'll give you another chance to compare and contrast."

While the older couple entertained thoughts of coupling, Hermione led Harry downstairs towards the main entrance area.

"Just where are we going?" Harry asked. "What are you planning to do?"

"You heard Master Rondino," Hermione replied. "We have to take care of your little problem." She giggled. "Well, actually, it's not so little right now, is it?"

"Merlin, Hermione, I'm sorry...I've never been so embarrassed."

"Harry, we've already discussed this, remember? You have nothing to be sorry or embarrassed about."

"Why aren't you letting me take care of it?"

"Well, since I caused the problem, I ought to be part of the solution, don't you think?"

"Are you saying what I think you're saying...why didn't you take the paint pot?"

"I told him that I have another container in mind."

Hermione pushed open the doors to the Great Hall and led Harry to the Head's Table, which was set for lunch.

"Hermione, are you sure that you want to do this?"

Hermione spun Harry around, put both of her hands behind his head, and pulled him into a deep, open-mouthed kiss.

"Erm, okay," Harry stammered, "I'll take that as a yes."

She pulled Harry around behind the Head's table, pushed back the Headmistress's chair, and carelessly swept the place setting in front of it to one side.

"Sit," she ordered, as she pointed to the space she'd just cleared.

Harry followed orders. "Hermione, but...whenever I dreamed of this happening, well...I never...I wanted our first time to be special. I wanted *your* first time to be special. Not rushed, or anything."

"Oh, don't worry," Hermione replied with a grin, as she untied Harry's sash and lifted the tented material up and off of what was, at that moment, the very center of his magical core. "You're not getting off the hook so easily. You'll still have the chance to plan for our first time."

"But...erm...I just thought that you said...not needing a container?"

"Harry," Hermione said with a smile, "I've got more than one place for your magic."

Harry nervously looked back over his shoulder towards the rest of the Great Hall and the open doors at the far end.

"Erm, right here?"

Hermione looked up at Harry's face and cooed.

"Why not, Harry? After all, this is the Head Table."

She buried her head in his lap, and began to work her magic on his.